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Content

## ActHER | EducatHER | CreatHER

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### The Relentless Pursuit of Truth: A Teaching Philosophy

Content

The current dual pandemics we face as a society has inspired the writer to reflect deeply on everything that has existed before this moment. It has meant taking a long hard look at the mission and artistic statements and adopted teaching philosophy. Thus, here is where it begins—a Black Female actor, educator, director, producer, curator, and art-visit. No matter the role or position, I enter every room grounded in my Blackness and affirmed in Woman-ness, offering a unique perspective on the world we wish to create. These aspects of my identity are invaluable assets that endow me with an innate ability to hear the voiceless, see the invisible, and hold space for those most vulnerable in our society.

As theater makers, we have the unique ability to change lives through the art of storytelling. It is a powerful force, and with power comes great responsibility. Theatre is the core of all great stories, and here lies the truth. As the artist, our job is to first find it within ourselves, access it, name it, reclaim it, own it, then reflect it to the world. If an artist is not grounded in their truth, way of working, and unique perspective on the world, one could find themselves desolate and depleted of all value: essentially a scary place. This thought is basis on which I have built my teaching pedagogy: The relentless pursuit of Truth through Responsible Storytelling.

As an educator, I have an all-in approach. Once a student and I engage in an educational process, I am as much committed to their growth as if it were my own. I believe all theater training is ultimately learned by the on your feet doing of it! I aim to guide all my students through the process of finding and nurturing their truths. This can often be discovered through extensive text analysis, exploration of honest impulse, and truthful behavior. As a working industry professional, all my teaching practices have been shaped by my real-world experiences, albeit my triumphs or my mistakes. Through the years, I have learned the foundational work required when teaching any young artist must involve the stripping away of years of conditioning usually wrapped in fear, self-doubt, self-judgment, guilt, shame, and lack of self-worth, to name a few. It is only by releasing these things can an artist be reconnected to their center of truth. Then and only then can they begin to tap into natural impulses, find their artistic voice, and explore the real depth of their expression. This lesson is one I had to learn while making my way in the industry, not in the safety net of an educational setting, so it is now a fundamental element of my pedagogy.

My priority in every classroom, studio, or rehearsal space is the creation of a safe environment. I use the Maslow hierarchy of needs theory as my primary source of motivation in creating this environment. To reach their highest potential, I know the students must have a combination of physiological and psychological needs met in my studio or classroom. So, in every class, I carve out time to engage in activities that foster a sense of

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I strive to decrease the focus on all the things that separate us by illuminating the many ways in which we are all connected. When I build this interconnected mutual investment, students begin to see each other as equal contributors to learning and growth for the entire cohort. Over time, this safe space frees the artist to explore with much less inhibition and fear.

All theater-making comes from self; thus, our most important instrument is ourselves. This includes having full access to our voices and bodies. My students are encouraged to commit to a regiment of conditioning to preserve both. They are expected to be as dedicated to voice and movement work as scene study and performance. The rigor of my acting classes demands it. Though I have yet to teach a voice or movement course, I always find that the work students produce in my class is often aligned with both the movement and voice curricula of my fellow faculty members.

I am of the belief that the educator's job is not to lock students into codified ways to work yet to equip them with an array of tools providing the freedom to practice different ways of working. When training future working theatre professionals, we must prepare them for a lifestyle of learning and relearning, shaping, and reshaping to remain a viable commodity in an ever-changing industry. In my career, I have had the opportunity to teach a myriad of subjects. My training and diverse professional portfolio allow me to traverse a wide range, including Contemporary and Classical Acting, Devised Work, Directing, Professional Development for the Emerging Artist, Screen Acting, Audition 101, and a host of theirs.

I am trained in many methods and have studied different techniques when it comes to the craft of acting. When teaching, I pull from all that are relevant while leaning heavily on various tools and exercises based on Meisner and Stanislavsky techniques. I utilize texts like the *Practical Handbook for the Actor*, *the Actor's Thesaurus*, *Cohen's Acting Power* to support my curriculum. When building a character, I encourage students to apply an inside out approach versus outside in. I ask them to be courageous enough to release preconceived notions about their characters or ideas about the story or images of what the art is "supposed" to look like to reach their highest potential of personal truth. In a class one might hear the following: find the hero, what's the need, do not play states of being, play to win, fight out of playing the victim, Don't think Do, it's not about Being Right it's about Being Real.

With Shakespeare and other heightened text, I lead with extensive text analysis to unlock the characters' truth. This text-centric approach may seem in direct conflict with my contemporary approach, but we must start with the truth in all things. I find that the text serves as the best road map for unearthing any given character's humanity and locating their honest impulses. Whereas in a contemporary class, it is about stripping an actor of any facade, the relentless investigation of classical text has the same effect. It enables us to strip down the grandiose presentation of the language to access the moment's simple raw truth. There, we can find the character's primal need and fight for it. In all acting courses, my goal is to train actors to plant their feet firmly on the ground and fight for a need or want as if their life depended on it.

In devised and directing classes, I encourage creating with a deep sense of play and exploration fueled by the clarity of intention. I focus on building a wealth of knowledge about theatre history, traditional theatrical conventions, and the exploration of genres and aesthetics. The goal is for



I aim to equip students with the skills to make informed yet creative choices and to own their space in every room. I instruct students on the how and if we would like to utilize them. My artistic spirit has never enjoyed creating just for the sake of creating, and I hold my students to this same standard. Every piece does not have to have a message, but every piece must have meaning. Great directors and theater-makers not only know how to tell good stories, but they also answer important questions: Why me or us? And Why Now?

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business aspect; how to market yourself and use things like type to your advantage. In these courses, students benefit from my recent real-world industry experience. Life as a theater practitioner is one that requires tough skin and the ability to adapt. The best way I can be of service to aspiring industry professionals is by providing a transparent industry perspective. In these classes or workshops, I often mention that anytime you are listening to someone who has had even a modicum of success in this business, pull out a pen and write it all down. These professions are unconventional; there is no road map included, which means you never know what you may hear from someone that could fundamentally change your trajectory.

There are a few other things I try to promote in every educational setting. Luke 12:48 says to whom much is given, much is required. This compels me always to find a way to serve. I have spent much time in artistic institutions being the only Black woman in the room. In the realm of higher education, students of color often seek me out for counsel or support. I welcome this type of mentorship and consider it a personal obligation. I also enjoy being of service to my fellow faculty members. I thrive in environments where faculty engage in cross course conversation, discussing students' progress and various struggles. In my experience, this dialogue has only enhanced my ability to meet students where they are.

The training I received in my undergrad and graduate institutions has allowed me to sustain and navigate a complicated industry and thrive. So, I leap at every opportunity to give such a precious gift to others. I hope to continue to contribute to the theater education community. In the summer of 2019, I presented at the Black Theatre Network to propose a nation accredited Black Theatre curriculum. During my time in residence at the O'Neill, I have gathered notes from over seven years to compile the different acting techniques and methods I have merged to create a beneficial process for the young actor. Most young actors in training are just trying to grow into whole human beings, let alone actors. This process identifies the duality of young actors' work, labeling real-life work—Reality 1 and the on-stage work as Reality 2. I have developed a curriculum that is intentional about nurturing and feeding them both while illustrating how one can and will always inform the other. I am excited about authoring a book or guide that captures this work in the future.

I am a multi-hyphen theater practitioner, and I have learned that my education approach is no different from how I approach all things theater, art, and expression. I am 100 percent present, I give 100 percent effort, and I am rooted in the relentless pursuit of truth, which always begins with self. If I am honest, my foundational training and my uncompromising commitment to truth is the reason why I remain viable today. In an industry that ebbs and

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