

Toronto Actors: How to Choose the Best Acting Teachers or Coaches - Part I

3 Points For Your Consideration

Finding a great acting teacher or coach is a quest in itself.

It doesn't matter whether you are in Toronto or another city, all of the best acting classes share similar traits. In the 30 years that I've been teaching, I've noticed 3 points that differentiate a B-level from an A-level acting class. These points will help you achieve the artistic standards you need in today's competitive industry.

Most actors and people who want to be actors recognize the fact that they have to put in the time – the hours it takes to become a true artist. At any level, it is important that you are getting your money's worth– you should be given a range of techniques and exposure to material that specifically confront your challenges as an actor.

Find teachers or coaches who:

1. Are Still in the Game

This means that they have an education and experience both in the art and 'business' aspects of the acting world. Good acting teachers and coaches continually challenge themselves and inspire the actors they train. They know what you need for your craft – and when you need it.

They have a life, a sense of humour, and are teaching because they love doing it and love anyone who has the urge to express their creativity in this art form. Teachers and coaches should ignite constant commitment in the actors they train and lead by example. They should know that no one teacher or technique is 'it' and that they themselves are still learning.

The best acting teachers or coaches can 'cast' an actor in scene study or film/television roles that help them grow; this is because they have a vast knowledge of both historical and current material. They provide a range of in-depth, ongoing instrument stretching of mind, body, voice and soul.

2. Establish an Experimental Environment

A worthwhile teacher or coach creates a nurturing but challenging environment and gives meaningful feedback. They are honest and kind but also tough and brave – they are original in their communication. Each individual is told what they need to work on, but are not put down; actors, however, need to understand that at times coaches must instill their will into the actor in order to push them past a block. Coaching needs to be powerful, honest and ruthlessly helpful to get the actor to where both coach and actor have agreed the actor needs to go. A teacher who continually praises, coddles and builds false expectations is not really being helpful.

Each actor is given equal time and attention; over time, scenes are worked on with various tasks and repeated – time is spent experimenting. In on-camera classes it is

more valuable to be coached while being filmed so that when you watch your play backs in private you can see the differences that your coach's adjustments make. This allows you to track your growth and saves precious class time.

A good teacher knows that, as in all artistic mediums, acting is therapeutic; but that they are not therapists. They build up what is in each actor; they don't break you down to 'build you up' again. Self-investigation is encouraged and undermining confidence is avoided. A good teacher inspires through timeless artistic, cultural and historical references and avoids trendy, inane references to self-help and 'creativity' books.

When actors are working on scenes a silent and fully focused atmosphere is insisted upon. Class members are not permitted to critique classmates' work in a free-for-all. Rather the coach encourages actors to reflect on what they witnessed and what it means to their exploration.

A good teacher does not allow auditors of any kind – prospective students who might disrupt and take attention away from experimentation or people from the 'business' whose presence can be intimidating. When auditors are present, it can prevent actors from taking chances and growing. Teachers or studios who are also agencies or claim to have connections with people from the 'business' risk setting up false expectations.

3. Maintain a Professional Distance

First-class coaches try not to talk about themselves too much and if they do their stories have a point regarding the actor to whom they are giving notes, or the class in general.

They are involved with the growth of the actors, but try not to become enmeshed in their personal lives. They welcome your questions and even challenges with grace. They know when it is time to say 'off you go' to experience something else. They tell actors when they are really ready to face the professional world. They are not threatened when someone tries out another teacher; they embrace their willingness to grow.

"I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit."

John Steinbeck