

Toronto Actors: How to Choose the Best Acting Teachers or Coaches Part II: The Importance of Proper Training

To illustrate the sacred relationship between student and teacher, I think of a moment in the 1962 Academy Award-Winning film, *The Miracle Worker*. It is the story of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller's struggle as teacher and student. Helen, deaf, mute and blind from infancy, is forced by Annie to learn letters from the Manual Alphabet for the Deaf. However Helen doesn't understand that these letters form words and that these words have meanings. At the climax, Helen realizes that there is a word for everything. As she manically puts out her hand to know the word of the object she is touching, Helen suddenly stops and pats Annie. Annie responds by signing that her name is 'Teacher'.

This fundamental struggle between teacher and student points to what we need to look for in teachers – consistency and strength of will. I was lucky in my training. I experienced many teachers and was exposed to their greatness and their flaws. These early exposures are essential to my teaching. After interviewing prospective actors I frequently accept people who have never trained before. I do this because even though there are some wonderful teachers out there, I often have to help actors “untangle” themselves from training that resulted in self-doubt, paralysis, over-intellectualizing and over-analyzing.

There are many excellent programs throughout North America and Europe – but they are expensive and time consuming. They can also present their own challenges. Sometimes there could be teacher politics to contend with; at times you don't know who the teachers will actually be, and your teachers might not be communicating about your progress so that they can have a unified plan for your growth.

I often tell actors that they can “put together their own program” by finding excellent voice and movement classes and other short-term workshops. It's great to study many techniques and approaches, but is also valuable to find one teacher who can see you through; someone you can study with for a good span of time and then keep going back to over the years – who knows your acting instrument thoroughly.

I will sign off with stellar director Elia Kazan's famous vow. It is applicable to all arts, including the *art of teaching*:

The Actor's Vow

By Elia Kazan

*I will take my rightful place on the stage
And I will be myself.
I am not a cosmic orphan
I have no reason to be timid.
I will respond as I feel; awkwardly, vulgarly,
But respond.
I will have my throat open.
I will have my heart open.
I will be vulnerable.
I may have anything or everything the world
Has to offer, but the thing
I need most, and want most, is to be myself.
I will admit rejection, admit pain, admit
Frustration, admit even pettiness, admit
Shame, admit outrage, admit anything and
Everything that happens to me.
The best and most human parts of me are
Those I have inhabited and hidden from
The world.
I will work on it.
I will raise my voice.
I will be heard.*