

# Back to School—A Note to Theatre Students

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Dear theatre students:

My name is Chris, and I am a theatre professor. Though I may not be YOUR theatre professor, and though I don't mean to imply that I speak for ALL theatre professors, I wanted to reach out before the new school year begins and share some thoughts and wise words with you. I hope you'll find this useful whether this is your first year as a theatre student, or your 50th.

## **Attitude**

The most important thing that you can bring to your education as a theatre artist/scholar is a good attitude. If you make a concerted effort to be positive, even when you are tired, scared, overwhelmed, irritated, stressed, bored, or homesick, you will absolutely feel better than you would if you responded only to those other feelings. Many of you are actors...so you will quickly learn (or be reminded) that playing actions (instead of states of being) will make you connect with your character and their emotions. Guess what? The same goes in your actual life. If you play the actions of a negative person—skulking around, whining, complaining, being late, and all of those other things that negative people DO—then you will feel negative. On the contrary, if you do the things that POSITIVE people do—smile, laugh, support each other, show up on time—then you will literally feel better. If you don't believe me, try it. Those of you who are in your 2nd, 3rd, 4th, (5th?) year, model this behavior for incoming students. You ARE their role models, whether you think so or not.

## **Be On Time**

There is an adage in the theatre that if you are early you are on time, and if you are “on time” you are late. This is absolutely true. This goes for rehearsals, for performances, and for classes (even your theatre history class—heck, even your math class). There's a good reason for this. Have you ever tried to go on stage, or begin an audition, without taking that moment to prepare? It is almost always a disaster—you are distracted, you are in your head, and you are weak. Instead, every beginning acting class will teach you to take just a short moment before you “act” to breathe, to get in character, to concentrate, and to claim your physical and emotional space. Guess what? This works for rehearsals and performances too. If you are early enough to take a moment to separate from your day, to leave the worries and details and homework and exams and romantic troubles (or successes), you will be far more focused...and focused actors (and directors, SMs, technicians, etc.) are efficient actors

(et al.). If I don't have to take time to refocus you, we can work faster, and much more effectively. Getting focused is YOUR job.

The same thing goes for your coursework. If you are on time for class (meaning early), you can take that little moment to get focused. Close your eyes, take a deep breath or two, put your phone AWAY, and decide that for the next 50 minutes (or 75, or 90, or 3 hours) you are all in and fully committed. That's right, it's a conscious decision. Classes are why you are here—whether here is college, high school, grad school, or whatever. So do it. Make the decision—even for your “least favorite class EVAR” (see section on attitude)—that you are going to commit 100%. Then follow through.

Being late is a choice. There is no such thing as someone who is “perpetually late”—being late is NOT a state of being, it is an action. Furthermore, it is a choice—an action—that is built on disrespect...for your instructors, for your fellow students (or actors, or directors), and for the process itself. As a good director will tell you when you play the wrong action...make a different choice.

## **Take Care Of Yourself**

If you are an actor, your body is your instrument. Bodies need care in order to work well. The most important thing you can do for your body is to get an appropriate amount of rest. You cannot effectively move with a tired body. Your voice needs rest in order to recuperate. Your brain, too, is a muscle—and needs rest. Obviously you are going to be tempted to stay up all night cramming for exams, playing video games, socializing, studying your lines, etc. FIGHT THAT TEMPTATION. You will do much better work in every area of your life if you are properly rested. You will retain more for your exam if you sleep, and plan other time to study. You will kill WAY more dragons on Skyrim if your brain has rested enough to focus. You will get off book much more quickly if you connect your lines and your actions, and do so on a good night's rest.

Drink water. Oh, I know (and model) that we all NEED our caffeine...but caffeinate in moderation. Try not to drink soda (or pop, or Coke, depending on where you live), as carbonation and sugary syrup isn't great for your voice. Tea is a good choice (sweet tea less so), but water is kind of amazing. Water will help you fend off the crud, keep you hydrated, and will actually help you lose weight and feel better. Always have a bottle of water with you in class, in rehearsal, backstage. You'll be glad you did.

Develop a meditation habit. Last school year, when things got really crazy, I started meditating for 30 minutes every morning. I set an alarm so I didn't have to think about time,

turned on a cool (instrumental) playlist—totally unrelated to the show I was directing—and sat with my eyes closed. I like to do this immediately after my morning caffeine—which takes about 25 minutes to kick in anyway. Once or twice, I’ll admit, I fell asleep, but mostly I just sat, forced my mind to be clear of any worry, work, or stress, and I concentrated on feeling positive, powerful, and energized. For me it helped to picture a door—a portal, really—that I could go through, inside of which was allowed nothing of the outside world. Just me and the music and the energy and the power. 30 minutes. Then it was time to work. I know, you’ll say that you are too busy for this...I always thought I was too. But the amount of better is made me feel was astonishing. And you are never too busy to feel astonishingly better!

Speaking of feeling astonishingly better...STOP SMOKING. Did I mention that your body is your instrument? If you played concert violin, would you hold your Stradivarius in front of your car’s tailpipe for an hour every day? Of course you wouldn’t. It always amazes and saddens me when I see actors who smoke. I understand the addiction, I understand the effects that nicotine has on your nerves, I do...but I am much more concerned about the effect of tar on your body. Smoking affects your ability to project, to manipulate your voice to convey emotion or age, to move aerobically, and to avoid upsetting costume designers; stage managers and directors who have to wait for you; and other actors who probably don’t want to smell you. Stop hurting your instrument.

## **Think Outside The Box**

Finally, I suggest you look for ways to get involved in all aspects of the theatre-making experience. If you are in an acting conservatory program, you may be of the mind that technical work is “beneath you.” You are wrong. In fact, students who specialize in technical theatre or stage management are far more likely to make their living in the theatre industry than actors. If you are paying for a degree in theatre, you owe it to yourself to get as much experience in as many different things as you possibly can (and are allowed). Crew a show. Learn how to hang and focus lights. Learn how to build a flat, sew a costume, build a prop, control a light board, engineer sound, or paint a tree. Come to EVERY build day (if you are allowed—and ASK to come if you are not invited). Learn to play the piano...and accompany other actors. Learn to draw. Take a business class (or 6). All of these things will make you more employable once you graduate, and will be good for you even if you are one of the lucky few who make it really really big. Recognize the expertise and artistry in everyone around you—even if they do a thing in theatre that you don’t do. The BEST theatre artist is the well-rounded theatre artist.

I wish you all a wonderful new school year.