

Musings from the Black Box Theatre
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“Honor and shame from no condition rise;
Act well your part: there all the honor lies.”

This was written by 18th century poet Alexander Pope: *An Essay on Man*. It is said that Alexander Pope is the third most often quoted writer in the Oxford Dictionary after William Shakespeare. He is known for his translations of Homer and his use of the heroic couplet.

Our school year began in the Introduction to Theatre 1 course with the acting and directing module. Not unusual, classes were delving into the choosing monologues without benefit of larger context. Theatre artists and designers take great amounts of time identifying thoughts (beats or units), sub thoughts, sponsoring thoughts, answering questions as they relate to character analysis, story analysis, arcs: the minute to overreaching, motivation, framework of action, intentions, objectives, and so forth. The more that can be identified, the richer the product will be.

Discovering and determining how best to answer all the questions means having the discipline to take time to discover the questions, especially when they are not evident or obvious. (Rilke comes to mind here.) In auditions an actor has one minute to present a story, out of context, back story may or may not be available. After the initial work has been done, then the out loud on your feet repetition is the discipline. One of my speech students took issue with “fake it until you make it.” She offered instead: “Rehearse it until you believe it.” That is the tumbler in the lock.

Whatever the truth is to that story being told, it is rehearsed, questioned, adjusted to serve, and rehearsed again until the habit becomes something organic. Eventually, the habit transforms into what we call “truth in theatre.”

The artists and designers do all they can to keep that space focused on the truth of the story and the production elements that support it. Students often hear me say: “Park your personal drama at the door. We are at the business of theatre.” Drama happens to be a vocabulary word: the story of human conflict told by means of speech and action from a stage to an audience.

So, back to serendipity: Simultaneously with our acting and directing module was the witnessing of all students signing the pledge in our chapel. Each week we recite the mission of Webb students at The Webb School. Yes, it is the school’s mission, but each student has to do their best to be that Webb student. As International Thespian Society members, we have a Thespian Pledge: “... I am a student of theatre and excellence is my ideal. I promise to perform my part as well as I can; to accept praise and criticism with grace, to cooperate with my fellow thespians and work for the good of the troupe; and to share my love of theatre.” I will add a concept brought to me by Mrs. Linton that seems a most useful mantra to keep in mind as we are tempted to direct our fellow actors. We strive to do all of this while “driving in our own lane.” I love that.

The Alexander Pope quote and the Thespian Pledge are proudly displayed this year in the Black Box Studio where we will perform *You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown*. It so happens the Thespian colors are royal blue and gold! How fitting!

Webb Thespians pledge twice and are held to quite a disciplined process and excellence is expected for class credit. Each day we, as Webb Thespians, must make a conscious choice to determine and do the thing that serves best. To be sure, this is a tall order. The great teacher Constantin Stanislavski said it best: “The greatest wisdom is to realize one’s lack of it. ... Spit before you enter the theatre.”