Burning Issues

As in years past, the New York conference including time devoted to discussion groups focused on “Burning Issues” shared by members of our profession. The following are summaries of three of those discussions.

Integration of Voice & Movement

Several practical suggestions were made to facilitate the integration of voice/movement/acting for students:

Master Class - regular group workshops throughout the semester involving teachers from all disciplines. These could be used to work on different elements of production, or on scenes.

Classroom situation - sharing of exercises between the disciplines.

Monologue work - same monologue with each of the three teachers.

Greek Chorus - a regular timetabled class on (for example) Greek Chorus which would be led by a teacher from a different discipline each week.

Team teaching is rarely a practical solution, because of the restrictions of university structures. However, it is possible where the instructors have strong experience in all areas.

There was a strongly perceived need to encourage movement teachers to develop a higher understanding of the voice. It was considered that voice teachers are more likely to undertake movement training than the other way around.

It was suggested that a healthy approach would be to reinforce throughout all the teaching staff in a department:

• that all are actually working on the same thing.
• that the source of all three disciplines is Breath.
• that a shared vocabulary is possible and desirable.

The possibility was raised that the underlying Burning Issue for this, and potentially all the various focus groups, was the need to raise the Profile of Voice, not just within university departments and colleges, but throughout society. When the sounds that we make are considered worthy of the same respect as the words we use, the interpretation we give them and the image we create while doing so, the case for making time to integrate voice with movement and acting skills may receive a decent hearing.

Heightened Text

Can Heightened Text be Trained and Honesty Maintained?

The concern is that voice training is sometimes viewed as detrimental to talent and spontaneity. There is perhaps some validity to this claim as many trained actors do the work they are trained to do, but are not acting. Can we train and still maintain authenticity? How do you encourage actors to make interesting compelling choices?

This problem takes several forms: being heard when intimate, being truthful in heightened moments. In addition there is a perceived split between film acting and stage acting, one is real, one is not. Directors often like to work intimately and the move from rehearsal to performance space can be harrowing.

Possible strategies were offered based on the following philosophic points:

• Physical and vocal training, as the foundation, expand the option for expressing the truth. We as trainers must foster a trust in the full arch of growth. The concern is that voice training is sometimes viewed as detrimental to talent and spontaneity. There is perhaps some validity to this claim as many trained actors do the work they are trained to do, but are not acting. Can we train and still maintain authenticity? How do you encourage actors to make interesting compelling choices?

Part of this problem is systemic. We (speaking here of actors, though true for all) work too hard to find the “right answer.” True impulses are blocked or suppressed. In addition, the love of text is not introduced early enough in our educational sequence.
We need to think of ourselves as encouragers; when actors don’t feel judged, truth is released. We need to give them permission to explore, even fail, in both training and rehearsing. Often we act as mediators, soothing and reassuring directors.

Techniques for working with actors to find a balance between heightened work and truth:

- Encourage actors to go way over the top, one coach calls this the “Bad Acting Exercise.” Through the release of going too far, they find a nugget of truth.
- “Showings.” Each student is given five minutes to explore, in their own words, any subject that they are impassioned about. Then they are challenged to find a piece of classic text that deals with the same issue.
  - Monologue performed three completely different ways.
  - Rehearsed improvisation from the character’s point of view. The improv must include some song, dance, chant, extended physicality. From the improv they move onto the text.
  - Lamenting or wailing, then on to text.
  - In preparation for Greek drama, students make half-masks of their own design out of halved paper plates. They are put in groups of 4 and asked to create a Greek chorus using choreography, repetition, levels, sounds etc. They go out on the lawn to perform, encouraged to explore “how big and how far.”
  - Physical speed through.
- “Clap & freeze.” Actors begin the scene, on a clap from the coach they freeze, hold and enrich the moment until they hear another clap which releases them to go on.
- “Exchanging Valentines.” To encourage actors to share their thoughts, feelings, and observations about the work, they are asked to write feedback about a scene on a sheet of paper. Each actor receives all the written feedback on his/her performance.
After brainstorming about the areas for discussion, the following ideas emerged:

- Fees?
- How can VASTA be more supportive of non-academic coaches?
- Clientele? Marketing?
- How to approach producers/actors of film and TV about dialect, text, line interpretation?
- Voice and Speech Trainers vs Speech Pathologists?
- Credentials vs. experiences?
- Focus on actors?
- How do we get into the rehearsal structure?

An informal discussion about fees yielded the following results:

One person charges $75 an hour, $60 an hour for two hours paid in advance, $50 an hour for three or more hours paid in advance. For production coaching, $1000 for the production and $750 for four weeks off-off-Broadway. This trainer asks for parity with the highest paid designer with no limit on her time. She recommends staying in touch with the Stage Manager, Production Manager and Director to see what their needs are.

In LA, one coach charges $350 an hour for private coaching. Another coach in LA charges $75 an hour, but is working towards $100 an hour.

The general consensus was that fees will differ with the area of the country in which you are working and the situations. You need to determine what the market will bear.

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- There are guidelines that listed on the web. ASHA and NETS has come up with a joint statement that also lists training.
- It is the clients job to do the research to find a qualified coach
- One other idea was to give the client an informed consent form what says; this is what I do, this is what you can expect. It should be like a contract which also has a cancellation policy. Good to use the word “assessment”.

MARKETING:
Recommended: reading private practice sections of the first two issues of the VASTA Journal.

Some ideas that were shared:

- Make a WEB page, this will become your brochure
- Get listed on the VASTA index
- Find a Center of Teaching Excellence and organize a workshop for teaching professional teachers
- Hand out your business cards
- Write articles and get them into the paper
- Hire a publicist – should run around $500 depending on the area.

One final question this group addressed was:

How do you get people to value what you do and what value do you put on what you do?

This issue came up because one coach had had an actor who felt he didn’t need the coaching, but the director felt he did. The coach came up with a wonderful solution for the actor. She said, “You don’t have to believe in this method or process- just act as if you do for the duration of our time together and see what happens”.

(Rena Cook, Floyd Kennedy, and Judi Lehrhaupt contributed to this report.)