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CONFESSIONS OF A CLOSET THESPIAN OR HOW I HAVE MANAGED TO KEEP MY HEAD ABOVE GROUND FOR SO MANY YEARS

Brian Curry

"I could have been a judge, but I never had the Latin for the Judging—never had enough to pass the rigorous judging exams. So I became a miner" These were the immortal words of E. L. Wisty, the late Peter Cooke's alter ego on B.B.C. television for many years and on Broadway in *Beyond the Fringe* and *Good Evening*. For years I empathized with Wisty because I always wanted to be one of the Angry Young Men of British Theatre, alongside Alan Bates, Albert Finney, Peter O'Toole and Richard Harris, but I never believed I had the talent for acting—never had enough to pass the rigorous acting exams. I was also ten years too young. However, unlike Wistey, I did not become a coal miner as an easier option than facing the rigours of my dreamed-of profession.

I worked in amateur and semi-professional theatre from the age of ten with two other future thespians. We started as Titania's elves in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One of my friends went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and the other to the Drama Department at the University of Hull, while I, believing I had limitations, went to St. Luke's Teacher Training College at Exeter University. Five years after graduation, neither of my friends was on the boards: one was working front of house, and the other was working as a stage manager. Twenty-five years after graduation, one has his own computer company, and the other works for him. I am the only one who has been and still is paid to perform.

At colleges with a reputation for good teaching, we teachers put on a series of one-act plays in two fourteen-week seasons. Like acting, teaching is a craft that has to be worked at continually. Lines have to be learned and, more importantly, understood. The first edition of the script I use was written by Henry Gray in 1858, and was based on the original ideas of Galen, da Vinci and Vesalius. It has been rewritten many times since then by the leading anatomists of the twentieth century. But as much as we follow a script, we are also involved in improvisational theatre. We have to be able to respond to the questions, the mood, and the background of the audience and alter the performance accordingly.

Why is one's performance so important? Because the quality of the performance determines the relationship that is developed with the audience, and that relationship determines the degree to which the audience pays attention to the words. This is especially true when the audience is in the theatre somewhat reluctantly, like those students who want to enter a health care profession but are upset to find that they

have to sit through a pre-clinical sequence of biology, chemistry, anatomy and physiology courses before they can even begin to contemplate making patients feel better. The importance of one's subject can be conveyed at all levels by the quality of the performance and by the enthusiasm with which one delivers one's lines. However, great care must be taken to ensure that the strength of the performance does not overshadow the underlying message of the play.

For me there are three keys to being successful in the lecture room or laboratory that go far beyond learning one's lines and being able to improvise. Most important, you have to love to teach, to look forward to going out in front of each audience. When teaching becomes onerous, the performance will suffer, and the audience will sense it. Second, you have to respect the members of the audience, or a relationship cannot be established. There is more to college teaching than simply "putting bums on seats," as Olivier proclaimed in *The Entertainer*. Third, you have to be your own harshest critic. Analysis of each performance is essential. What worked and what didn't? Are you a stock character actor who gives the same performance each time, or are you willing to consider that there might be a better way to communicate to the audience? If a performance did not go well, what were the reasons?

Yet there are still occasions when I finish a lecture that I believe was one of my better ones, only to find that the concept under discussion was not shared properly with the students. Conversely, I have apologized to students after what I consider to be a poor lecture, only to have them inform me that it was one of the more lucid presentations they had heard recently. Which goes to show that the essence of a good performance can be extremely elusive. All we can do is continue striving to deliver that good performance day after day after day. However, that is becoming increasingly more difficult as demands on the faculty which are unrelated to performing continue to increase. We are required to be more and more responsible for front of house and backstage duties in addition to performing.

I consider myself fortunate in that I have an alternative if things become too rigorous. Although I would miss the daily interaction with the audience very much, I can always follow dear old Wisty down to a real coal face as opposed to digging at a symbolic one. Fortunately, three things have kept me from going underground. First, the students in my many audiences over the years. To all of you, wherever you may be now, my thanks for the opportunity to inform and entertain, and for the pleasure you have afforded me. Second, my colleagues, in what I consider to be one of the finest undergraduate anatomy programs in the Midwest: Tim Strickler and Phil Walcott. We have put on some remarkable performances over the years. May we put on many more in our new theatre in Padnos Hall! Third, always something new to learn about the human body. Just when you think you have learned your lines, someone comes up with a rewrite of the script. Only two days before the submission of this article, two anatomists at Johns Hopkins claimed to have discovered a new muscle, the sphenomandibularis. As I write this final paragraph, Tim, desperate to avoid disorder in his world, is scouring the texts for a phylogenetic explanation that will obviate the need to rewrite any scenes; and Phil, ever the pragmatist, is preparing the dissection tools. The show must go on.