

Have Courage and Be Kind

*“Have courage and be kind.”*¹ These beautiful words spoken by Cinderella’s mother in Disney’s live-action feature reflect what I want my acting students to take away from my classroom when they leave. I want them to realize that the best acting comes from an empathetic, compassionate connection to other human beings, and from a courageous willingness to commit to their imaginations and to try new things.

As a coach and judge in the Mexican Debate Circuit, I kept hearing young judges rip the debaters apart, telling them the debate had been a massive failure, or that they had never been so bored in their lives. After that, I don’t believe those debaters were in a place to receive any feedback at all. They were probably not in a place to learn from their mistakes and improve. Many of them might not have wanted to debate again. This experience solidified my personal view on teaching, especially since much of acting is about attempting a monologue or a scene, receiving feedback, and trying again. I want to do the opposite of what those judges did. I want to acknowledge the student’s efforts (without offering empty praise), and give them constructive feedback and encouragement so that they will want to keep trying, and keep growing. I had a student who, throughout her first semester debating, would start hyperventilating any time she spoke at the podium. She had fantastic ideas and a keen sense for argumentative structure, but she could not get the words out. Slowly, however, after giving her the space to go through her speeches no matter how choppy they were, after encouraging her to try it once, and again, and again, she improved. Having been offered that space and encouragement, and seeing that her peers cheered for and with her as she got better, she became one of the best debaters in the circuit. That is what I want for my students. A recognition that acting can be challenging, but it does not mean we stop trying, on the contrary, we grow stronger and bolder every time we do it. Coincidentally, I believe having this philosophy is the only way to maintain a career as a professional actor, otherwise the constant rejection would become too heavy a burden.

I wish to encourage curiosity and thoughtful discussion, opening the space up to different, even opposing ideas. Questioning themselves, myself, and the books we read will make the students more critical thinkers and more engaged members of society. That critical thought will also trickle into their art, hopefully helping develop artists who will have a strong point of view, and who will express it creatively. I also believe in expecting excellence. By this I mean expecting full commitment in their own work and a genuine desire to learn. I believe that having high expectations pushes students to become the best they can be. Always remaining open to flexibility for students who are struggling, keeping kindness and enthusiasm at the heart of my teaching.

¹ *Cinderella*, directed by Kenneth Branagh (2015; Burbank, CA:Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures), Starz.