



David Humber

Photo at left: Rex Knowles (right), executive director of the Professional Actor Training Program at Chattanooga State Community College, says the workshop presented by Stephen Wagh (left) was “an exquisite creative experience. What I take back to my students is confirmation that everything that happens within and to the student in an improvisational scene – every judgment of their work (“Am I doing this right?” “This scene is going nowhere.”), every random thought (“I need to get gas for my car.” “I’ve got to see Jurassic Park in 3-D again!”), every feeling (“I’m nervous.” “I’m scared.”) – is relevant and not wrong, unimportant, out of character or outside the scene.”

Stephen Wagh Shares Strategies for Unleashing Creativity

by Dawn Larsen

In a workshop room at the 2013 SETC Convention, participants twist and turn. Then they balance, face down, on their fingertips and toes while attempting to undulate their bodies forward and backward in a wave-like progression. Though each student begins the same way, the exercise progresses according to what the student is experiencing at the time – through a progression of kicks, undulations and hip rotations, headstands, shoulder stands, handstands, forward rolls and a tiger leap. Demonstrating, then facilitating their arduous progression through the exercise, is master teacher Stephen Wagh, who uses seemingly impossible physical exercises, like “the cat” above, to bring out physicalized emotions.

Wagh, the featured guest artist at the 2013 SETC Convention, shared his knowledge in two master classes and a presentation. He has spent his professional career practicing and adapting legendary theorist/director Jerzy Grotowski’s methods. He also is a playwright (associate writer of *The Laramie Project*), author (*An Acrobat of the Heart*) and retired professor (Experimen-

tal School at New York University, Naropa University and Emerson College).

Wagh’s emphasis in his master classes is on movement as a basis for discovering emotions on stage. In an interview, he described how he uses – as Grotowski did – the *plastiques* exercises, of which “the cat” is an example, as a tool for questioning and discovering. “It’s not about the movement, it’s a way of asking questions,” he said. Wagh also notes that “being afraid [to attempt the difficult maneuvers] is okay because it’s not about the completion of the exercise, it’s about the *doing* of it.” By giving your ego something to do that is so difficult, keeping it busy, you free your body to access, and then express, emotions that the ego would otherwise stifle.

He has recently applied this theory to the art of teaching. In his new book, *The Heart of Teaching*, he questions traditional arts teaching techniques and offers alternative methods. He believes the teacher’s job is “un-teaching things that get in the way” of the creative process, in order to make a “safe space where people can rediscover what is there.” Academia is linear, with rules and curriculums. The arts are not.

The crux of Grotowski’s methods, or as

he called it, the *via negativa*, is to remove resistance and obstacles that get in the way of an actor’s creative task. Wagh applies the same techniques to teaching students in the arts. He thinks that academic rules and fostering creativity are often at odds. He believes what actors need is “not the learning of a brand new skill. What they need is to unlearn an inhibition to a skill they’ve always had.” What we traditionally, as teachers, consider a *mistake* is actually what is interesting and workable, he says.

His principal goal is to “turn everything into something useful.” In his book, he describes how to accomplish that by:

- **Listening to students.** Foster an environment where students give themselves permission to make a mistake. By listening, you will know what environment each student needs.
- **Listening to space.** Bodies *listen* on an emotional level as they move through space. Encourage students to listen to the space their bodies are in.
- **Listening to bodies.** By careful observation (listening), teachers can discover where a student is blocked and suggest ways to unblock the area.

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Wangh

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He raises a significant question in his book. Considering how few actors actually make a living doing stage work, why are we teaching skills that performance students may never use? His responses, as well as being thought-provoking, provide more ammunition for us to utilize in defense of arts programs in these days of dwindling budgets. He notes two key reasons. First,

in teaching through questioning, we are nurturing transferable skills that apply not only to other vocations, but also to life: listening, working with space and finding conflict and the emotion to deal with it. Second, we can foster *meta-lessons*, “not values as concepts or commandments [traditional teaching], but practical ways of living and working,” such as living in the moment, and balancing safety and risk-taking.

Interested in learning Wangh’s methods? He plans to offer a two-week intensive physical training workshop in Grotowski’s methods August 5-18, 2013 in New York. More info: www.acrobatoftheheart.com. ■



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