In theater education, the subject, ultimately, is the student.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” technique to approaching theater – every actor, director, and playwright has his or her own personal technique, either drawn largely (though almost never exclusively) from one school of thought, or cobbled together from many different schools of theater. Ideally, theater students spend their training encountering, engaging and testing various methods, tools and techniques – then identifying, embracing, and personalizing the approaches that best match their unique intellectual and emotional composition.

As a teacher, I see myself first and foremost as a collaborator with each individual student in this process of self-discovery.

As the student’s partner in exploring and constructing their own personal approach to the theater, there are two primary contributions that I look to make: to demystify the process of creating theater and to instill in the student the values that will serve him or her throughout his or her career.

DEMYSTIFICATION
Ironically, often what brings people to the study of theater is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of theater. Prior to formal training, many young actors, directors, and playwrights regard theater as something amorphous and unknowable – something governed entirely by the mysteries of “talent.” In formal training, it is incumbent upon the teacher to provide students with the exposure to – and the opportunity (and obligation) to fully explore – an assortment of the established tools designed to find in each scene, play, and character the truth that talent alone stumbles upon only occasionally.

Ultimately, a teacher of the theater arts must be a student of the student – taking as his course of study the peculiar constellation of intellectual and emotional triggers that define each member of his class. The teacher must let each student encounter techniques and approaches on his or her own terms – then observe, making the effort to keep a careful barometer of the unique (and often surprising) ways in which that student’s instrument responds (and, in some cases, does not respond) to the technique being explored. Armed with this insight, the teacher can guide the student to new levels of clarity using precise, surgical, and individualized critiques, adjustments, and exercises with an expediency and lucidity that the blunt force of lecture cannot achieve.

It is also critically important that the teacher remember that the student is the senior partner in the collaboration. Whatever the student and teacher build over the course of their time together, it is the student who will take it with him to continue to develop and to use in his work and continued education. The student must have ownership of the process. As Lao Tzu said “…of a good leader, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, the people will say, ‘We did this ourselves.’” This is the kind of leadership that a teacher of theater must provide to his students. The best teacher is discovery. The best instructors will lead a student to the brink of the epiphany that advance the student to the next level of proficiency – but they will allow the student to make that final, critical discovery themselves.

VALUES
In the collaborative art of theater, the first and most important lesson that student artists must learn is that – beyond becoming the kind of talent that people want to work with – they must also become the kind of person that people want to work with. At the age that most students pursue a theater education, they are still at that critical stage where they are becoming the people who will be behind the adult artists. The values that they develop during these years will stay with them for a lifetime. A successful instructor will help to instill in them those values that will serve them best in a lifetime spent in the theater, including:

• Value a broad base of knowledge – Embrace the non-theater portion of the curriculum. Become a critical thinker. The characters that you will play, write, and direct will not necessarily know more than most people, but they will know different things than most people. Get a head start. Know everything about something and something about everything.

• Value the opportunity to engage the world around you – The great danger of intensive theater training is that it can create artists with a vast array of skills... and nothing to say. All art has a point of view, and all artists should have one, too.
• **Value critical skills** – Often, the best way to hone your own skills as an artist, both as a student and throughout your career, is to evaluate the work of others – to identify what makes a piece or performance work and how small (or large) changes in execution would effect the rest of the product. And, of course, all artists can benefit from the ability to turn a well-trained critical eye on their own work at pivotal points in the process.

• **Value the skills for research and how it can enrich your work** – No matter how broad your base of knowledge, there will always be more to learn about the particular world of a play. An actor, director, or playwright can never have too much information to work with – they should know where to get it and why they should always want more.

• **Value organization** – Time and resources are always at a premium in the theater. A theater artist should know how to make the best use of both.

• **Value clarity** – Before beauty, style, and even substance, clarity is, above all else, the primary responsibility of any storyteller.

• **Value dissent and failure** – Embrace them as opportunities to learn. Remain the eternal student. There is no shame in making mistakes – only in repeating them.

• **Value collaboration** – Actors, directors, designers, and playwrights are allies, not enemies. Artists thrive in an environment and culture of trust and creativity where everyone feels free and encouraged to make the product and the process better – and it is up to the artists involved to create and support that environment. The best shows are never “my show.” They are always “our show.”

• **Value opportunities to work across disciplines** – Actors should direct. Directors should write. Writers should act. Everyone should know how to hang a light. Looking at your chosen discipline from the perspective of a collaborator will make you better at what you do. And approaching your work with an appreciation for the process of your colleagues and the challenges they face will make you a more effective (and often much appreciated) collaborator.

• **Value the process** – If you focus your attention on making the process of creating the play the best one possible for everyone involved – on making the process a learning experience for each person (including yourself) – the product will always be better for it.

• **Value exploration** – There is never, ever one “right” way to approach a scene or execute a play. Play. Challenge. Experiment. Risk. Try the unexpected. Find the things in rehearsal that surprise even you. It is what makes doing theater worthwhile.