

James Dean Palmer  
Teaching Statement

My passion and joy as a theatre director and educator is freeing an artist's authentic voice. I was raised in extreme poverty and couldn't imagine a world outside of the one I knew. Practicing the craft of theatre taught me that I have a voice in this world that I can use to reimagine and rewrite my story. My entire professional life has been spent sharing that gift across the country with actors, directors, designers, students, public speakers, managers, shopkeepers, scientists; people from all walks of life who want to free their authentic voice. It is my mission to inspire students to live a life they love. And the theatre is an exercise for living that life. I teach students to work/live with abandon, freedom, beauty, and clarity.

Having trained as an actor and a director, I understand the importance of teaching with simple, concrete methods. Learning to act well can feel confusing and insurmountable and any method that only further complicates the process is not helpful. Everyone has the ability to access their authentic voice no matter what's blocking them. I teach the fundamentals of breath support, action, event, rhythm, and dynamics. Tools designed to unblock the body and voice. Once my student has mastered these tools they will have the freedom to make a critical artistic leap. The endgame is not a transfer of knowledge from myself to the student. I make sure the methods are direct and approachable so the student will have the skills to continue the practice long after I am out of their lives.

My pedagogical approach has been shaped by three experiences: as the artistic director of a diverse ensemble theatre company in Chicago, my education at Brown University/Trinity Rep, and my professional work as a director. As the leader of an ensemble, you learn that no person is an island. We are all working on the show together and it requires the work of everyone. As a student at Brown University/Trinity Rep, I was reminded that you get out of the work as much as you put in. As a professional director working across the country with both professional and non-professional actors, I am reminded of the breadth and diversity of the artists the field and the need to have an expansive collection of tools at your disposal. To that end I've trained in the classic approaches to acting: Stanislavsky, Meisner, Adler. I've also trained in the less traditional approaches: Viewpoints, Suzuki, Grotowski, Michael Chekhov. I've worked with analytic approaches to script analysis: Brecht, Clurman, Hodge. And I often employ the less literal approaches to script analysis: Eleanor Fuchs, Katie Michell, Anne Bogart, Liz Lerman. Having worked extensively with each of these approaches I can quickly diagnose a student's needs and offer tools that are singularly tailored.

Creating space for my students' authentic voice means that the space in which we work must be intercultural and intersectional. It is my ongoing practice to ensure an open and welcoming environment for students. There are many voices that have historically been marginalized and care must be given to allow those voices to speak and be heard. To be a better artist and to be a more complete human we must constantly check our biases and be responsible for the space we take up.

Not every student I work with will pursue a career in the arts. But I know that the skills I've taught will support them on any path they choose. My mentor Martha Lavey once said: "This is the central conviction of the theatre - that by listening to the lives of others, we will know ourselves more fully, and locate ourselves in a more generous world." So whether or not my students go on to win Tony awards or become managers at financial institutions, I know that they will carry with them a stronger sense of empathy and articulation. It is my way of making the world a more generous one.