

Regional

Cocuzza teaches students how to be actors

A career in acting can appear very glamorous, particularly when we see those who make it big in movies or on Broadway. Yet, many good actors spend years of hard training before they make it to the big time – if they make it at all. Peter Cocuzza, a professor in the department of theater and dance at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, works with students who aspire to careers on stage or in front of the camera.

Cocuzza was born in Perth Amboy, N.J., about 40 minutes from New York City. He obtained his bachelor's degree in chemistry from Westminister College in Pennsylvania and bachelor's and master's degrees in fine arts from Ohio University. He said that one of the first things he does when he begins working with a new acting student is to assess whether he believes that they will make it. And making it in acting, Cocuzza said, is a lot about believing in oneself.

"I can teach you the formulas, the rules and the techniques, but if theater is not in your heart and if there is no natural ability, then the teaching becomes superficial," he said. "I can tell you where to stand, I can show you where to go, I can tell you how to write letters, but the heart and soul of the performance has to come from the student." Of course, in addition to having the desire to act there must be a level of natural talent.

"Most of it is talent," Cocuzza said. "The training part is like learning the rules of playing basketball or golf. I don't think that you can just have the natural talent and not have the training, but if I were going to put some percentages on it, I would say that it has to be 75 percent talent and 25 percent training." Some actors, he said, also learn by watching other actors.

"Hundreds of years ago before we had schools of theater and training programs and the neighborhood playhouse in New York and all these fantastic places where actors go to train, that is how you learned



Photo by Otis Sweezey

Professor Peter Cocuzza directing one of his students.

the profession – by watching," Cocuzza said. "And it is still a very viable way to become better."

One of the areas he teaches is comedy, which, for many, is the most difficult genre to master, he said. "I suppose that if you are a natural comedian then it is not hard. I think the reason people say that is because you are still saying

words, you still have intentions," he said. "There are still those acting tenets that we all follow and teach students, but there is something a little more interesting about comedy. It usually comes in aligned delivery, timing, under coding, and there is a number of comic premises that we teach the students to use when they are in these situations so they can

pick the one they want."

Part of what he teaches his students is how to use body language and how to look at other actors in their eyes while on stage. One tool that he uses to teach these abilities is an acting mask.

"A neutral mask is a mask that has no expression," Cocuzza explained. "It is a white mask and the expression that

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

comes through the mask is what the actors do with their bodies. Once you put on a neutral mask, the way you hold your body is clearly sending a message through the mask and giving the mask life. We use the mask to make students more aware of how they are using their bodies and what kinds of information they are giving off."

When asked about the major difference between acting for a camera or on a stage, Cocuzza was very clear. "The biggest difference is that the camera puts you in a small box or in some cases the big screen when you are in a movie, but because of the numbers of close-ups and tight shots or mid shots, you rarely see the whole person's body. So there is less opportunity to move in big ways and there are a lot of close-ups. Camera actors need to not tone down their work, but rather understand that too much movement is going to destroy what the audience sees," he said. "On the stage you are on an open space, people are 500 or 150 feet away and you have to gesture big."

Cocuzza, who is an actor himself by training, is now a director as well. There are many cases of actors becoming directors and directors becoming actors. But, is that an easy transition? "I think so," he said. "I think directors and actors can sometimes be interchangeable. Good actors know how to direct themselves and a good director knows when to let an actor be an actor."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.