TEACHING PHILOSOPHY FOR LEYLA MODIRZADEH

Coming from a mixed background of Muslim Iranian, Irish Catholic, and Russian Jewish heritage has contributed to my thinking more broadly about inclusion in the classroom and how I think about race and its construction. The experience of teaching deeply conservative students in West Texas to racially divided students in Mississippi developed in me a certain individualized respect and consideration for my students’ various identities including but not limited to class, gender, and race. Teaching diverse immigrant student populations, primarily Asian and South Asian, at UC Berkeley and teaching the predominantly Black and Latinx students at San Jose City College helped me develop specific pedagogical strategies to remain inclusive. For example, when I directed *Love and Information*, I wanted to find a way to challenge English language dominance, especially for my students who were from outside the US. Throughout the performance, two interpreters translated from the sides of the stage while the ESL student actors spoke in Spanish and Bulgarian respectively, highlighting themes of miscommunication already present in the script and affording the students a chance to act in their mother tongues.

In terms of content, I choose scenes based on the embodied experiences of the students themselves. For example, the playwright Tanika Gupta wrote an Indian version of *A Doll’s House* dealing with issues of colonialism as well as sexism and marriage. When I offer scenes from this play to my South Asian students, they show great enthusiasm at the opportunity to share their heritage  and embody the characters in a personally meaningful way. To de-colonize the syllabus and dismantle structural racism, I also offer BIPOC authored methodology texts in addition to and as alternatives to classic white authored acting techniques and perspectives as well (*Black Acting Methods*, by Sharrell Luckett, *Mythic Imagination and the Actor* by Marissa Chibas, Anna Deavere Smith’s *Letters to a Young Artist*, and Tadashi Suzuki’s *The Way of Acting: The Theater Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, to name a few).

In terms of pedagogical style, I strive to create a fair and balanced student centered classroom. I encourage my students to see their class as an ensemble, take whatever is at hand and build on it, and when necessary, dare to fail gloriously.

Creating an open and playful environment in class also means that students build relationships with each other more easily. Feeling close and connected encourages more risk taking, more experimentation, and more mistakes, which in turn provides confidence and experiential learning. This is one reason why I make sure we laugh together first before tackling the scarier challenges of high-pressure performance situations. Laughing together as a class not only builds trust but also releases tensions around difficult subjects, creating a more receptive atmosphere for the introduction of controversial ideas.

I encourage students to position their creative work on a historical trajectory, taking into account creative movements that have shaped and informed our present. I can then ask students to be aware of how their work engages with their own present time and place, how their work functions in conversation with current artistic movements and our present racial reckoning. Educating theatre students for the future has a built-in moral imperative to address current issues through the work itself and I hope my choice of texts and classroom style reflect this.