

The Sharpe Academy Way

by Daniel Sharpe

Over the past few years I have developed many ways of building a child's confidence levels and improving on their own unique skills. I also try my very best to make sure each child understands what needs to be accomplished and why decisions are made as this not only improves my own working relationship with each student by building a trust, but also allows each student to move forwards learning through experience.

Each child joins Sharpe Academy with their own personality. This means we must treat each child as an individual. From a parents perspective they see how their child interacts and works on a daily basis in the home and in familiar surroundings. A teacher sees the other side of a child and how they cope in a more formal environment communicating with other people. There have been many occasions where I as a teacher have decided a child is not ready to take the next step, but the child's parent has questioned why not, as in their eyes their child is either more than ready or they believe their child to be at a higher stage of development.

I have therefore put this information together on exactly what I wish to teach each student at Sharpe Academy, and what I look for when I am deciding who plays soloist or featured roles. The skills Sharpe Academy can teach can be used in all walks of life whether a child opts to pursue a career in the Arts or completely different profession.

My aim is for Sharpe Academy to be a nationally recognised theatre school where children attend weekly lessons and take part in regular theatre productions. These will improve their skills in the hope that one day they will become a professional performer. Our syllabus is therefore geared towards this goal.

What do you need to become a professional performer?

TALENT • DETERMINATION • EXPERIENCE • LOOKS • CONTACTS

From my experience in the profession you need to have at least three of the above to make a living out of Performing Arts, which encompasses Dance, Singing, Drama, Musicals, Comedy, Stage, TV and Film, Modelling and Presenting. All five will give you a much better chance of a long career, but with three you will easily be able to work in the industry.

Sharpe Academy concentrates our classes and performances on the following three:

TALENT • DETERMINATION • EXPERIENCE

Looks

We do not concentrate on looks because they are very subjective and almost every look in the world can have a career in the arts should they wish to pursue one. I have heard many horror stories of dance schools and colleges that place a large emphasis on looks and especially weight. This is a practise I strongly disagree with. Whilst a healthy lifestyle should always be encouraged, Sharpe Academy believes every student should be who they want to be rather than turning into a model replica of a standard performer.

Contacts

We do not concentrate on contacts because this is something that follows experience. Unless you are born into a very influential family you will build your own contacts as you go through life. Sharpe Academy does however have a variety of teachers who can be classed as contacts and I actively help all my students who wish to pursue a career in the Arts. The Academy is therefore a valuable contact for each student.

1. Talent

Talent can sometimes be very subjective, with one person having a different opinion to another. Skill however is rarely subjective and in Sharpe Academy we aim to teach all our students the following skills which in turn improve their own individual talents:

Voice

To use the voice correctly takes a lot of skill. Clarity and diction are incredibly important when speaking and singing. Many people underestimate how important a speaking voice is on first impressions. Certain accents can be strong and in some cases distract the listener from what the speaker is actually saying. Many people have what is commonly referred to as a 'telephone voice'. This is used in most cases so the listener on the other end of the line can understand. This voice is also used in interviews, meetings, speeches and auditions. At Sharpe Academy we teach students as soon as they join us aged 3, all the way up to our students aged 18, the vital importance of speaking clearly. As students progress through the classes they learn the art of audibility, projection, articulation, accents and vocal characterisation. This is done through drama, LAMDA, singing and audition technique. Once a student has the confidence to use these skills, whilst using additional breath control using their diaphragm and voice box, they have everything needed to be a competent singer and speaker. Some students pick these skills up faster than their peers and once we feel they are ready we will take the next step which is to test them with a small featured role in a performance. This may be anything from a solo/duo line up to a principal role in a musical. After the student has shown they are ready for a larger role we will do all we can to make sure this is achieved. Our large productions are specifically chosen to complement our current students who we feel are ready for a principal role. Our other students play as ensemble in these productions until they have reached soloist level.

Body

There is nothing more noticeable than somebody moving when fellow performers are still. The audience immediately look to that person as a distraction. In an interview the way you sit and movements you make give indications of the type of person you are. It is widely known in the gambling profession when somebody has a 'tell' or a sign which shows they are bluffing. This may be a slow blink, a move of the head or look in the eyes. The movements we make in performing arts are vital when we become characters. In LAMDA exams students are assessed on their technique of how they become a character. Children learn the art of becoming characters from a very young age when it becomes clear to them mummy and daddy will be more likely to give them what they desire if they act in a certain way. The term 'puppy dog eyes' is a classic example. At Sharpe Academy, students are taught how to use their own imagination to invent characters and situations. Students are also taught how to behave whilst public speaking or performing on a stage. We develop skills to focus, concentrate, engage with the imaginary and use physical freedom to transform into a character. In our older groups we also work on movement and dance to a high level, teaching students dance as an additional skill. Once a student is ready we do make sure they have the opportunities to perform using their skills in front of audiences in our productions. This may take the form of an acting monologue, dance solo or principal role in one of our productions.

Aim

Whilst we do endeavour to push all our students to the highest level of performance, it is important parents understand that pushing a student into a principal role before they are ready can have a negative effect. A student may well have a great singing voice, but if they are not skilled in the art of performance they will be unable to stand on the stage in a professional way to perform their song. Students do compare themselves to their peers and should we push a child too early this will break their confidence rather than build it. We do have a specific aims and objectives policy to follow to make sure children are never pushed until they are ready. I am always happy to discuss with parents what level I believe your child is currently at and my reasons why. This policy can be downloaded from our website www.SharpeAcademy.co.uk. The best way to improve skills out of the classroom is on the stage. Please do allow your child to take part in our productions so they do not miss this vital component of their training.

2. Determination

Determination is sometimes not valued as much as it should be. To have ambition in life is something very special and should be encouraged. I am a firm believer that no matter where you originate from or how wealthy your family are, you should be allowed to be whatever you want to be in life. This does sometimes mean making sacrifices along the way and each family must decide on their own path. Determination to make it in performing arts is vital. Following a career which can cause disappointment on a regular basis requires you to have an inner strength like no other, but with a strong determination you can wake up each day knowing that it is a new opportunity to prove you can make it.

Goals

Being realistic is extremely important in any career. You would never apply to be a surgeon if you had never had any experience training in the operating theatre. This same concept applies to being a performer. You should never assume you can be a pop star without experience in a recording studio. You cannot expect to be a West End performer without having a solid knowledge of musicals, with many years of performing experience. No director would want to work with a professional who did not know the basics of theatre language. Using the same idea, many people may not apply for jobs just because they misunderstand theatre terminology. An example of this is the position of swing in West End musicals. Goals are rarely achieved overnight and in performing arts there is a lot of competition. Colleges receive hundreds of applications to study there every year and offer a very limited amount of places. Each student therefore needs to be able to cope with the stress of auditions, going up against the very best talent the UK has to offer. They do this through their determination to succeed. Sharpe Academy works in depth with our Act 4 class on audition technique to prepare them for these situations.

Support

It goes without saying that somebody who is fully supported will have a much better chance of succeeding. As students start to discover who they are in their early teens, this is the most crucial time to receive support. Determination quickly vanishes when there is nobody to support you through the hard days. Sharpe Academy do organise workshops to help with information and teachers are always on hand should students wish to ask for advice or with help preparing for auditions and exams. I have regular talks with students individually once they reach the age of 16 to discuss all options open to them and can advise which college they would be best suited to. Most colleges are specific to certain subjects so those students who are more interested in drama must be shown the correct way forwards rather than auditioning for musical theatre colleges. It is vital students attend the correct college if they wish to have a successful career. Casting Directors rarely look beyond colleges on your CV and if you have trained in the wrong place then this will go against you.

Career

In general the average performer will be out of work for up to half of the year and they will perform for the other half. Whilst out of work, performers get part time jobs working in bars, restaurants, temp agencies and theatres. Performers also make excellent telephone sales team members and every time you are stopped on the street by somebody asking if you would like to donate any money you are more than likely talking to a performer. There is no denying this is an aspect of being a professional performer, however I must stress this is a choice to do these jobs. There are plenty of performing jobs in the world, but the majority will take people overseas to work as part of an entertainment team in a hotel or on a cruise. West End musicals are considered the goal by most musical theatre performers and to audition for these you must be based in London. This is why people are willing to take non performing jobs to give themselves more time in London to audition for the big shows. If however you are happy performing anywhere after graduating from college, you will easily find work performing all year round. The suggestion that there are too many performers for very little work is a myth. There is plenty of work, but it is normally those with a determination to succeed that turn the smaller jobs down and hold out for a bigger contract. I do however always advise students to obtain at least 3 years professional experience around the world before you attempt to audition for the larger shows.

3. Experience

When applying for university, students normally choose courses which they have studied in a more basic way during A-Levels or GCSEs. It is standard practice for universities to offer conditional places to students providing they obtain a certain level of grades in their final school examinations. Drama and Musical Theatre colleges do adopt the same style principles. You will be officially auditioned to show you have the correct skills, and interviewed to talk about your previous experience.

Productions

People can sometimes underestimate the importance of a production if a student is not playing a lead role. It is through these productions however that students learn about the stage, lights, sound, auditorium, vocal projection, fire procedures, backstage regulations and operating procedures. In order to audition for colleges you must already have a good knowledge of these areas. The more stage productions a student takes part in, the better knowledge they have about the performing arts profession. It is also through taking part in a show as ensemble that a student can prove they are ready to move into more featured roles. There is no substitute to being on a real stage in front of a paying audience. The reason I say paying audience is there is a large difference between an invited audience and a paying one. Invited audiences watch presentations to support somebody in a show. These presentations are great performance practice, usually in small venues, and at Sharpe Academy we run regular presentations for our younger students at the end of each term. Paying audiences however are paying to watch a production and not a presentation. It is vital for each producer to provide a show which is varied and shows a high amount of skill. At Sharpe Academy we produce two large scale productions each year and these shows are aimed at our audiences. A show can only be a success if somebody is entertained and enjoys it despite knowing nobody in the cast. This is simply because a paying audience member is unbiased. In Sharpe Academy musicals only around 25% of tickets are sold to those who know somebody in the cast. The remaining sales are general public who wish to see a great performance. The experience our students gain from these large performances is second to none. Live bands, professional theatre teams, lights, sound, sets, costumes and props all add to the experience.

The most important person on the stage

In every industry around the world there is some form of mechanism that, in order to work correctly, requires all the parts to be running in perfect harmony. A car engine cannot start without the ignition key, an oven cannot heat up without some form of fuel or power, and a production cannot be complete without all its cast and crew working together. There is a famous teaching line which drama teachers around the country use – 'I am the most important person on the stage'. Every single member of the company should think this about themselves because it is true. You cannot sing a harmony on your own and there is no better harmony line to sing as each line is needed in order for the harmony to work. At Sharpe Academy we first teach the art of being in the ensemble as for all our shows the ensemble is vital for each production. Students can sometimes question why they are not progressing into soloist roles, but if they have not mastered the basics of the ensemble then moving them into the soloist roles will not be of benefit to them in the long run and will not benefit our productions. It is common practice that the older students take the leading roles. This is simply because they have done their time in the ensemble and it is now their turn to put their years of experience to the test and lead the shows. At Sharpe Academy I do make the promise that once you reach the age of 16, I will guarantee you a featured role in our productions. This may not mean taking the lead role, but all students are considered at length before roles are given out to make sure each student is being pushed with their unique abilities in mind. We do also make sure that if a student is ready they too are not held back by their age. Our standard criteria for our musicals is you must be good enough to turn professional tomorrow if you wish to take a principal role, or have the ability to perform to an extremely high standard should you wish to take a featured role. It is my personal aim at Sharpe Academy to make sure all our students reach these standards, but this does take time to teach the skills needed and I ask for support from both parents and students to achieve this. Working in partnership with our students and parents, Sharpe Academy of Theatre Arts really can give each student the very best possible training to improve their skills, determination and experience.