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## What are We Watching? What are We Teaching? Preparing Acting Students for the New Golden Age

Posted March 19, 2017

by Welker White

<http://howlround.com/what-are-we-watching-what-are-we-teaching-preparing-acting-students-for-the-new-golden-age>

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Welker White



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“What are you watching?” “The opening episode alone was like a feature.” “It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen.” Who among us predicted we’d be having conversations like these about television? The last ten years have ushered in changes so profound in both how we consume media and the content available to us, that those of us who grew up watching *The Facts of Life* and *Knot’s Landing* can’t seem to stop shaking our heads in wonder. Digital outlets are multiplying at breakneck speed, and television now rivals film, offering a seemingly constant supply of complex characters and innovative stories that we can watch day or night in the palm of our hands. What a time to be an actor.

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**“Professional training programs aren’t training actors; they are training actors for a career in the theatre. This is a problem.”**

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Right now, students at hundreds of MFA and BFA acting programs across the country are rushing from scene class, to voice, movement, and an array of “specialties”: Lecoq, Laban, Suzuki, Grotowski, commedia, kinetics, Fitzmaurice, Alexander, clown, mask, musical comedy, the list goes on. Later tonight they may be performing on stage, putting all that learning into practice in front of an audience. One performance experience most acting students are doing very little of is acting in front of a camera. Professional training programs aren’t training actors; they are training actors for a career in the theatre. This is a problem. A trained actor should be able to face the demands of delivering Hamlet’s soliloquy on a 1,200-seat proscenium stage as well as in an extreme close-up. Acquiring the necessary tools to act across a range of platforms and venues should be the goal of all training programs.

SAG-AFTRA reports over 400 union-sanctioned television shows currently shooting or in production. For decades acting educators granted TV work an uneasy endorsement, despite its promise of a healthy paycheck, as the work was often facile and formulaic. This gave training programs great cover for shortcomings in their curriculum. That was then. Still, the vast majority of BFA and MFA acting programs offer one semester of “Acting for the Camera.” This course typically comes at the tail end of a student’s training and often shares real estate with a “business” or “auditioning” class. This seems at best naive and at worst irresponsible. The few actors who will leave these programs and make a living wage in the profession will do so by working in film and television.

We accept that movies are art, television shows are breaking new ground, and students are arriving at our programs with an inherent understanding of filmed performance and are deeply imbedded in the language of digital media. So why are we essentially leaving them to their own devices (no pun intended) to teach themselves?

I think acting educators are afraid. Afraid of a rapidly changing performance landscape and afraid of being obsolete. We teach what we were taught. Most of us came of age during TV’s vapid wasteland period, and we view it as a medium, but not quite an art. Theatre still holds primacy, and mediated work is an ugly cousin. Perhaps this is because many of us have less involvement and understanding of the medium than our students. A cursory Google search of acting faculty, particularly outside of major metropolitan areas, often turns up bios that contain little meaningful professional engagement in film, TV and, “new media”—even from those teaching the on-camera classes. Without a firm grounding in the production process and language of mediated performance, not only are we out of our depth, we’re not even sure what it is we’re supposed to be doing. We may be suspicious of film and TV scripts, and have trouble understanding the form on the page. We’re used to character and story as expressed through dialogue, and struggle to conjure the visual imagery and camera direction embedded in stage directions we often skim over when reading a play script.

One regrettable reason for sticking to the old plan may simply be bureaucratic. For decades, university film and acting programs have existed side by side (and sometimes just down the hall or on the next floor). Resources, ideas, and curricula that might be shared too often evaporate over departmental fiefdoms and territorial squabbles. There’s the understandable fear of the perceived cost, both economic and personal, of expanding how and why we train actors. While it’s true that cameras, equipment, and additional faculty can inflate a program’s budget, it’s also true that creative solutions can be achieved very inexpensively. The exciting part is that the students are doing it already.



Welker White teaching a class. Photo by Emily Tobey.

I'm often asked by my colleagues in the theatre what it is I actually do in a classroom of actors working in front of a camera. "I mean, you just turn on the camera and then tell them to act, right? Like what's really the difference?" The difference is nothing and everything. The good news: acting is acting is acting. All that stuff they've learned in the other classes? It all helps. In front of the camera actors still have to tell the story, still have to investigate the stakes, have an objective, play an action. Breathe. But there are things they don't have to do, too. They don't have to amplify. They don't have to construct, for the benefit of an audience's understanding, an expanded version of a character's gesture, thought, voice, or emotion. They don't have to guide an audience's focus, the director and editor will do that part. For an actor trained in theatre, this is harder than it sounds.

The theatre audience and the camera are different animals. In the theatre, the audience and the actors have a shared experience. A camera's purpose, however, is to capture a world no one is watching. We often think of stage acting as infinite and film acting as limited, but in reality the inverse is true. A stage performance is limited by what the audience can see and hear. The camera can be across a desert from the actor, along for the ride in a speeding vehicle, at his feet, or peering deep into her eyes. A theatre audience will never get so close as to lose the entire human form. And the intimacy we can achieve on camera is an intimacy we rarely dare to experience even in life. This is both thrilling to explore as well as a practical challenge.

It's not uncommon for the on-camera class to simply consist of taping scenes, with admonishments to "do less." While modifying scale may, at times, be a valid adjustment, it doesn't exactly meet the standard of what a strong program should aspire to. The parameters of filmed performance are at once limitless and tightly bound. To explore this amplitude fully requires help and a lot of practice. Rob Roznowski, on the acting faculty at Michigan State University and author of the article "[Transforming Actor Education in the Digital Age](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/595548/summary)" proposes an interdisciplinary solution: "Vocal training should spend time on the support necessary to fill the theatrical space while also pitching a vocal performance for intimacy and emotional connection filtered through a microphone."

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**"Work in front of a camera is not a 'specialty' like mime or Boal. It is not a training methodology or a school of thought. Just like acting onstage, acting in front of the camera is the education in practice. Both are critical to the actor's development."**

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And so, if acting is acting is acting, why can't a school offer a semester of "on-camera" work and be done with it? Certainly we've seen actors exit theatre training programs and figure out on their own how to apply what they've learned to film and TV. The problem is no program of any merit whatsoever would graduate actors without the experience of performing on a stage (multiple times) in front of an audience. We don't question the value of moving the work out of the classroom and into the closest approximation of what actors will encounter professionally. So why is it acceptable to graduate actors who have gotten next to no experience under an approximation of the on-set conditions they will be working in? Performance is where process and execution meet, and either soars or fails miserably. Work in front of a camera is not a "specialty" like mime or Boal. It is not a training methodology or a school of thought. Just like acting onstage, acting in front of the camera is the education in practice. Both are critical to the actor's development.

So what is it we should be teaching?

- History and analysis: Just as actors should acquire a working knowledge of theatre history by graduation, so too should they have a solid grasp of the trajectory of film and filmed performance.
- How to read a film or TV script: Film scripts are visual blueprints, and rely more on the description of pictures and events than they do on dialogue to tell the story. If an actor understands this, they are aided enormously.
- Genre: What are the conventions, narrative elements, and themes being explored and what is their heritage? Just in television we're looking at single-camera, multi-camera, procedural(s), neo-noir, period drama, episodic, anthology, and many more.
- Preparation: How does one prepare for shooting a story out of order, and without the benefit of a director or even fellow actors?

- The work environment: What does it mean to act in a room full of people—camera crew, writers, director, wardrobe, makeup, grips, sound, a veritable crowd watching your every move, and still perform without an audience?
- The technical aspects: What is the camera doing and how can the actor be fully expressive yet still live truthfully within the confines of its frame?

If one teaches on-camera classes as a necessary afterthought it will always be taught in contrast to theatre acting rather than a skill and a craft that stands on its own, with its own history, language, and pedagogy.

There are programs out there making changes. Some, like Rob Roznowski's at MSU, are finding creative ways to implement digital performance throughout the curriculum. Rob's acting class, for instance, might work on Ibsen scenes, and then explore them in a variety of venues: outdoor amphitheatre, large proscenium space, an arena theatre, the black box on campus, in the classroom, and finally, filmed. **California Institute for the Arts** (<https://www.calarts.edu/>) (CalArts), founded on the principle that an artist's growth is best stimulated by being exposed to a variety of artistic influences, provides acting students opportunities to explore both in front of as well as behind the camera. This spring, NYU's graduate acting program is piloting a **sweeping film, TV, and new media intensive** (<http://tisch.nyu.edu/grad-acting/news/graduate-acting-program-initiates-acting-on-camera-semester-intensive>) for their second year actors. Curriculum maps will be far-reaching; on-camera intensives, film history, and significant engagement with film practitioners—including those on the next floor in the famed film department. NYU's plan for *The Chekhov Film Project*, in particular, seems ripe for exploring ways in which the camera not only magnifies, but potentially elucidates, Chekhov's rich subtext. It is inarguable that students will leave these programs with a deep and varied experience, regardless of whether they ultimately focus their attention on theatre, film, or just as citizens of the world. Perhaps MSU, CalArts, and NYU are simply responding to market forces at work. But it could be something less cynical than that. Perhaps the unique characteristics of filmed performance can teach those of us in the theatre more than we think.



Welker White teaching her Art and Craft of Screen Acting Intensive to NYU's second year graduate acting students. Photo by Yossera Bouchtia.

It's been a long-accepted assumption that the training of actors can, and should, move in only one direction. Theatre first, on-camera tacked on at the end, just as you're out the door. But I've taught this work for awhile now, and in conjunction with my own 25-plus years as an actor, I'm not so convinced anymore. While letting students explore what it feels like to shoot a tracking, master, or dolly shot has its own rewards, I've witnessed discoveries that move well beyond how we film. Students with habitual challenges that might've taken weeks or months to undo making adjustments easily and without self-recrimination. Actors grasping the building blocks of basic acting technique with a logic and clarity I rarely witnessed in traditional scene classes. An actor, observing embellishment in their close-up, comprehending fully for the first time Stanislavski's principle of "public solitude." Amazing things can transpire when actors let go of the urge to gratify an audience, and attempt to live fully in front of a camera's gaze. These moments ultimately transcend cameras, or lights, or screens. They are human and meaningful, and will survive and thrive out in the world, in any venue.



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**Daniel Fine** · 8 months ago

Great article. I just joined the faculty at the University of Iowa in August. I teach digital media for performance with a co-appointment in Theatre and Dance. In the theatre department I am on the design and directing faculty. I also write a blog series here on Howlround for integrating digital media into performance. Anyhoo- just some background on where I am coming from with this perspective. I agree with your thoughts here. We are beginning to address this at Iowa. There has been an acting for the camera course in the acting program for years. We are beginning to explore new avenues that do precisely what you suggest - train the complete actor for different mediums and venues - not just theatre. I teach a Directing and Producing Digital Video course. We collaborated with the acting for the camera course and acting students had a chance, in a classroom setting, to actually work in front of a green screen with digital/animated objects inserted in post. We are looking at more ways to do these types of classroom projects. Additionally, all acting MFA students will have to take my Directing and Producing Digital Video class to learn about the other side of the camera in video production. It will help them gain perspective on the entire video production pipeline, but also they will be able to produce their own work - something Youtube and the web has made much more possible. We are also looking at another course for performers: acting with new technology - teaching performers how to work with things like: cameras and pre-recorded and live video onstage + motion capture and controlling digital avatars and looking ahead to 360 video and AR and VR performance. I think this all is really important steps in acting training. Thanks for the article.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ·



**welker** → Daniel Fine · 8 months ago

Daniel,

This is so exciting to hear. Sounds like U of Iowa is looking at this from a number of vantage points and the students are sure to benefit greatly. Especially exciting to know that actors are being given opportunities and tools to create and film work themselves. Thanks for being part of the conversation.

Welker

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**David Brown** · 8 months ago

thanks Welker, enjoyed your article - you are hitting all the pertinent aspects of actor training for contemporary emerging artists - thanks for your insight and clarity of thought

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ·



**welker** → David Brown · 8 months ago

Thanks for reading, David!

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ·



**Tim Davis-Reed** · 8 months ago

GREAT article ! I have been teaching On-Camera acting in the Syracuse University Drama Department for some time and find it is absolutely a necessary skill. If we are training professional actors it is part of the profession.

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**welker** → Tim Davis-Reed · 8 months ago

Thanks Tim!

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ·

**Jessica Van der Veen** · 8 months ago

As a teacher of both stage and screen acting I agree that many teachers are afraid of digital media. Teaching with the camera is time consuming and you'd be amazed at the number of teachers who don't even use the camera when teaching screen acting! \*eye roll\*. What theatre teachers forget is that theatre departments have what the digital universe is missing: content. Those departments that emphasize devising and creation of material have an automatic link to the digital media world and the most desirable commodity of all: New material. It's not enough to train performers any more. For the sake of all our futures, we train creators and culture makers. - Jessica, Canadian College of Performing Arts, Victoria, BC

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**Daniel Fine** → Jessica Van der Veen · 8 months ago

Amen

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**welker** → Jessica Van der Veen · 8 months ago

So well stated Jessica. I couldn't agree more that just training actors to perform is no longer enough- artists should be given the tools and opportunities to create.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**Valerie Planche** → Jessica Van der Veen · 8 months ago

Yes indeed!

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**Schann Mobley** · 8 months ago

YES to this! Acting for the camera is a skill that has, until very recently, had to be learned by trade, BY DOING, and in order to practice it, you must be cast! This craft, like any other, can only mastered by practice. To prepare students for the profession, a quality training program has a responsibility to their students to include this in their curriculum. I can say, from taking Welker's class myself, that I learned SO MUCH about myself as an actor when I was able to watch my footage right after the takes and make adjustments. Her coaching and auditioning lessons have been invaluable to my approach to acting for the camera professionally.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**welker** → Schann Mobley · 8 months ago

Thanks Schann! Glad you feel the work has been helpful as you move out into the professional world.

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**Denise** · 8 months ago

Screenwise is Australia's leading film and TV school specifically designed to train highly skilled professional screen actors. It was established over 17 years ago. Way ahead of its time. <https://screenwise.com.au>

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**Kip Dooley** · 8 months ago

Ok, so a question for the community from an actor interested in MFA training: in addition to CalArts, NYU and MSU, who else is offering, or at least moving towards, a more integrated film/stage curriculum?

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**Daniel Fine** → Kip Dooley · 8 months ago

The University of Iowa.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**welker** → Kip Dooley · 8 months ago

Good question, Kip. In my research I found very few places really integrating this work in a meaningful way. There are now programs exclusively offering BFA's in Screen Acting (Pace and Chapman come to mind) but this seems, to me, to be the same issue in reverse (in this case graduating actors without any stage experience).

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**Fallon Smyl** · 8 months ago

I completely get this. As a current student I find that my program at University of Indianapolis our department likes to discuss theatre performance, but doesn't like to actually do anything about it. We are lucky enough to have a faculty member who worked in LA for the earlier half of his career, so we're able to discuss the changes that we can make to our acting. But you're right I wish we got that 'on-set' experience that really can't be duplicated within theatre. It's daunting and trying to gain that experience is difficult without a film program at our school.

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**Jane Brody** → Fallon Smyl · 8 months ago

Hope you read my answer posted to this site.

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**Jane Brody** · 8 months ago

Thank you so much for this article, your expertise, and for your arguments that film and TV must be addressed in some depth at actor training programs. You have named the various sides of the problem! Most acting teachers are afraid of the challenge of teaching these skills because most have never

ventured into the world of camera in any meaningful professional way. And when they do attempt to teach such a class, they don't realize how little equipment is needed nor what the differences are among film scripts, tv scripts and commercial copy. To top it off, they have been convinced somehow that acting on camera is vastly different from acting on stage and some seem to disdain it as well. As a former casting director in Chicago, my last ten years were spent in academic settings. During much of that time I managed to continue my work as casting director for film, TV, and commercials.

Currently, I make my living coaching actors for on-camera auditions both live and on Skype, teaching classes in business and career planning, as well as weekly on-camera audition classes. If training centers were doing any of these things well, I would be out of a job,

In the conservatory where I last taught, the on-camera training was relegated to the university's film program. While that decision took this problem off the department's desk, it also neglected to address the special skills needed to teach actors. In the film department our actors were frequently subjected to taunts of teachers and students alike because they were "over the top", and told that theatre training was irrelevant. Neither side understood each other.

As a person who has always made my living in both worlds and worn many hats, I believe that performance teachers at this level need considerable experience on both sides of the camera. Unfortunately most programs hire a few adjuncts, mostly actors, to teach the skills required or give it to a teacher who then must figure out how to teach camera with very little knowledge of such a thing. I have been brought into various training programs to do a weekend workshop and while I appreciate the work, a weekend certainly won't do it.

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see more

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**Renee Rises** · 8 months ago

This article is incredibly fearless in criticizing the current pedagogy in relationship to how we train actors at the university level. Welker White's perception regarding camera work as more significant than it is currently being treated highlights how many actors struggle with personal sustainability as artists. Many training programs WORLDWIDE have such a heavy focus on theater work and techniques, yet we are only given a sample of camera work, which is what most actors will live on to survive and thrive. As actors, we all can relate to wanting and desiring to live off of theater work only, but the reality is that it is quite difficult to name and claim being a theater actor as a full-time gig.

Having taken Welker's class for a semester, the growth I made in only a few months was huge and excitingly surprising. Her efforts to push us to maximize our knowledge, techniques and expand our artistry will support my work in the future. Though I wish we had so much more time with her, the time we spent was rich with challenge and filled with experiences that grounded me into finding myself as an artist and what my relationship to the camera should be and what it potentially can be.

Wonderful writing. Bold thoughts. Truthful work.

Renee

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**welker** → Renee Rises · 8 months ago

Thank you for these thoughts Renee. W.

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**Andre Corday** · 8 months ago

This is a beautifully detailed and researched critique of theater MFA programs, many of which obviously generate tons of revenue from theater students while forsaking any responsibility to teach students how to generate their own revenue once they've graduated. And the case for film and tv on-camera acting being an art form worthy of more study than a tacked-on course is long overdue. But to provide some context, there are many MFA programs in the arts that don't see it as academia's role to function as job-training centers. Should graduate programs in poetry teach the craft of ad copy writing and greeting card creation just because their students can make a living doing that? Academia teaches lots of non-revenue generating subjects in the arts and humanities. I've known PhDs in philosophy who graduated and went to work re-shelving clothes at the GAP. Columbia didn't even offer a theater major until relatively recently (1990s?) because the university viewed craft study--musical instrument classes, acting, sculpting--as the purview of conservatories, not academia. Some people attend higher education to major in accounting; others to major in non-practical endeavors like history or religion or drama. And if arcane, live theater performance traditions aren't being preserved and perpetuated in academia, then where? Hopefully, programs will recognize the art of acting in multiple media(s) and hire Welker White!

^ | v · Reply · Share ·



**Jane Brody** · 8 months ago

Thank you so much for this article, your expertise, and for your arguments that film and TV must be addressed in depth at actor training programs. You are spot on concerning the various sides of the problem!

Most acting teachers are afraid of the challenge of teaching these skills because most have never ventured into the world of camera in any meaningful professional way. And when they do attempt to teach such a class, they don't realize how little equipment is needed nor what the differences are among film scripts, tv scripts and commercial copy. To top it off, they have been convinced somehow that acting on camera is vastly different from acting on stage and some seem to disdain it as well.

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As a person who has always made my living in both worlds and worn many hats, I believe that performance teachers at this level need considerable

experience on both sides of the camera.

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**Moira Driscoll** · 8 months ago

This article is so good. Incredibly insightful, clear, and practical. I've been a theater educator for many years and have come up against this stuff time and again. Welker, your analysis is spot on. As are your recommendations. Bravo. And onward! Moira Driscoll

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) ·



**Kristin Fulton** · 8 months ago

I love this article! Currently an MFA Acting student, Welker raises many questions about the future of training programs. As this is the "golden age" of television, artists should treat it that way and prepare actors to work on screen. Many playwrights are now show runners so it's not as if stage and screen are totally separate. This is also a really great question that many educators may not even be aware of as an issue. I have faculty who are working everywhere and who also make it a point to stay connected with both developed and new artists to ensure they are giving the students the best and most relevant education available.

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**Lisa C** · 8 months ago

Interesting, incisive, and enlightening! I think programs and classes would greatly benefit from reading and following the thoughts and ideas set forward in this article.

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) ·



**Zafiroopoulos Twins** · 8 months ago

Whilst completing my Master's degree in Acting, I had only worked on stage; I hadn't, this far, the opportunity to 'see' myself act. When I first watched a clip of myself, I began to evaluate my work immediately and hence allowed myself to reflect on what I was doing till now: whether I proved to be present and whether I was telling the story or not. Acting on stage is being fully present, and while one knows how he/she looks, it differs drastically to see oneself though the moving image. I saw parts of my personality transform my face in ways I did not know I could; the contraction of minor muscles and the eye-blinking are not quite as evident on stage as on film. A semester with actor and professor Welker helped me comprehend the awareness of movement and facial expression. It showed me "what I look like" on film. And through Welker's guidance I learned how to and how not to do certain things; that either did not flatter my face or did not suit the purpose of the story. And if only we had more time, the freedom of working behind a camera could be discovered in greater depth and all the factors of film mentioned above in the article could be further explored. As Welker very well pointed out, acting on film is just like acting on stage but adapted according to the medium/ the venue. Effortlessness is key either on film or on stage. And knowing how to maneuver within diverse circumstances help achieve ingenuity.

Welker, this is a wonderful article, thank you for sharing! Acting on film needs to be implemented more into the acting curriculum.

Best,  
Jenna

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**welker** → **Zafiroopoulos Twins** · 8 months ago

Wonderful to hear your thoughts on how this work has informed your training, Jenna.

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