

NICK GABRIEL ARRIVE, BREATHE, AND BE STILL

The following is excerpted from the book Arrive, Breathe and Be Still, a compilation of monologues and short plays, written by the students of Downtown High School in collaboration with the American Conservatory Theater and 826 Valencia. Downtown High School is a “last chance” continuation high school for student that have exhausted all other educational options and have no academic recourse. The primary objective of the project, called Acting for Critical Thought (ACT), was to teach students professional acting technique with an emphasis on transferable skills. Transferable skills are those that have a broad application beyond professional acting and include vocal projection, articulation, collaboration, imaginative play, dramaturgical analysis and interpretation, concentration, self-confidence, and empathetic discourse. Most students who study in the program eventually realize the power of their artistry and the importance of developing it. Some decide they wanted to become professional theater-makers, while others discover such a great appreciation for theater that they commit to becoming life-long audience-members. This project was overseen by Nick Gabriel, who served as Lead Teaching Artist, Eunice Nuval, and Dave Eggers, with additional support from Octavio Solis.

On the origins of the title Arrive, Breathe and Be Still

By Nick Gabriel

After our first semester working together, Ms. Nuval recommended I come up with an “actor’s checklist” to help the students remember how to calmly and efficiently approach performing under pressure. Ms. Nuval, like all of the Downtown High School teachers I’ve met, inspires me constantly, and this assignment was noteworthy because it asked me to specifically describe what I do when I walk onstage.

The first thing that occurred to me was that I make an entrance. If I am not really present and fully prepared to commune with an audience, then I’m not fully able to meet the demands of performing. Making an entrance is not as simple as emerging from the wings; an actor must truly arrive. And simply by arriving, an actor signals to the audience a willingness and a desire to commune. When I reach my mark, I almost always have to remind myself to keep breathing, especially when I’m nervous. A breathing actor puts an audience at ease. After all, who wants to watch an actor turn blue for lack of oxygen? And the value of stillness was constantly reinforced in my own actor training. Stillness allows an audience to take in an actor before the actor even begins to speak. Stillness efficiently expresses the actor’s confidence and implicitly expresses the actor’s trustworthiness. An audience *wants* to feel that the actor is trustworthy so that they can fully give over to the experience of enjoying the performance.

Eventually, several more points were added to the actor’s checklist, but the first three: arrive, breathe, and be still, comprise a fleeting and subtle acknowledgement of gratitude from the actor to the audience, a preliminary “Thank you for coming.” When Elizabeth Brodersen, A.C.T.’s Director of Community Programs, told me the the students wanted to title their compilation Arrive, Breathe, and Be Still, I thought it was the perfect tribute to their amazing progress, and to their unmatched generosity. In just one academic year, they have all arrived, breathed, and achieved stillness. And nearly every one of their monologues and plays reveals intimate aspects of their personal experiences; experiences that are not always easy for audiences to take in, but that require tremendous generosity (and courage) to share.

My affiliation with A.C.T. began as a student in the Master of Fine Arts program. After graduating, I worked at some of the nation’s most prestigious theaters with famous collaborators, but wanted more. I eventually became a member of the A.C.T. core faculty, a Resident Artist, performing in and directing a multitude of major A.C.T. productions, and the administrative director of A.C.T.’s largest collegiate program, Studio A.C.T. The collaboration with Downtown High School is among the most gratifying professional experiences I’ve ever had. I feel tremendously privileged to have met such gifted young people so willing to bare their souls every Wednesday morning. I will forever remember all of the many lessons I learned from them. Among them, the importance of sustaining communion with an audience even after the final bow has been taken. And so, to my beloved students: remember to arrive, breathe, be still, and sustain...