Peter Holland’s Notes to Academics

Dear AFTLS Residency Coordinator:

Many of you are old hands with our residencies and I don’t want to waste your time by saying over again what you already know. Still, some general guidelines may be useful so that you can get the most mileage out of having your/our actors in your classrooms.

The crucial requirement for successful classes is that both the actor and, especially, the instructor be as flexible as possible. Bad classes are often the result of instructors trying, often unwittingly, to turn an actor into a professor-lecturer-reader or trying to shoehorn that actor into a tightly controlled schedule. There’s no point asking for an actor to come only if s/he is prepared to teach *Troilus and Cressida*, 2.2, just because the instructor, long before thinking about AFTLS, had decided that that’s the item in the course outline written in stone for that day. Rigidity can be self-defeating.

In dealing with colleagues in literature departments (I’ll not comment on acting-directing-theatre classes), there are a series of common fallacies or pitfalls:

1. **Bring an actor to my class to read x (fiction, poetry, essays) in a beautiful British voice.** Such a class hour can be entertaining (and mellifluous) but is usually a waste of the actor’s training. If an actor has a special interest in Yeats or Dylan Thomas or x, s/he could indeed contribute something valuable to a non-drama class. But some very talented U.K. actors are not university trained and therefore in such a class are being asked to do the equivalent of a musician sight reading a passage. They are experts on play scripts, not all texts—and will be best used when dealing with play scripts with which they have had some direct experience (most notably, the play for this residency). Students won’t take away anything more than the memory of a good voice where we all want the event of having an actor in class to be much more potent than that. What’s more, actors want to make the class active, get your students up on their feet reading, doing, and not just be passive consumers of the actors’ skills.

2. **Actors being actors are familiar with all plays and can whip off a performance of x scene on a moment’s notice.** Now it’s certainly true that many (most?) British actors are often familiar with more classical plays than their U.S. counterparts. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that a given actor may have had no experience with Moliere or Restoration comedy or medieval drama or whatever. If an instructor is willing to provide some lead time, a copy of the text, and other help, the actor may in turn be willing to deal with a scene as a problem (‘how would I go about doing this?’), but faculty expectations should be realistic. Instructors may also be surprised: yes, the odd AFTLS actor has learned about Noh theatre from working with Japanese actors. But don’t expect such wonderful possibilities.

3. **An actor (or any other visitor) who comes to my class will be another version of me (perhaps with a better reading voice – but probably not).** The actors are not in competition with the instructor, especially on matters scholarly-historical-cultural but should build upon their own expertise. As a result, they will sometimes not fit snugly into someone else’s lesson plan or neatly pick up the line of argument carefully nurtured in a particular class. A history professor who wants a focus upon Shakespeare’s English kings may get something very different — not a lecture but a scene or beat from *Richard II* or *Henry V* or whatever play the actor feels comfortable with.

4. **Actors doing a Shakespeare play are therefore experts on all subjects Shakespearean or Elizabethan (or medieval-Restoration or whatever).** Quite the contrary. On most “academic” matters, the instructor is the expert, the actor the amateur. The best results emerge when actors play from their theatrical strength and are not asked to pose as authorities on issues outside their realm. Whatever training in historical periods they may have received may be no better than instructors have already given their classes. But they are experts at getting texts from page into performance and that’s the distinctive skill they can show, teach, and make happen in the classroom. They also know how to turn critical interpretation into performance and how to find thirty different ways of playing a scene and they can make students aware of the text’s openness to interpretation in ways and to an extent the rest of us can only dream of.
In noting such potential pitfalls, I am not implying that any requests not linked directly to the play are out of bounds, but academic planners should be wary about faculty notions that carry with them unrealistic expectations. Obviously, the actors are well prepared for requests dealing with your residency’s production and probably with a lot of other classic and modern play scripts, whether Sophocles or Jonson or Pinter (look closely at their CVs for specifics). However, asking specifically for a class on Aphra Behn or Mrs. Warren’s Profession may be a stretch (so here some negotiation with the actor assigned is definitely needed – you may find they have been in productions of other Restoration plays or Shaw, but not quite the one you want). Teachers should be particularly flexible about the specific texts.

It is crucial to the success of the class that all of the instructors teaching courses that the actors will be visiting attend the Monday meeting (if they cannot attend then they should be in contact with the actor visiting their class PRIOR to the visit). A lot of potential problems can and should be ironed out between actor and instructor at the Monday meeting. To overstate the obvious, the greatest asset of putting skilled actors in a traditional non-theatre or English department classroom is that they bring to the same words very different skills, questions, and approaches to problem-solving. That they are very unlike the typical English or History or Poli Sci professor (myself very much included) is an enormous asset and can be a major source of insights and in-class electricity. An actor last tour made my class understand more about Don John in Much Ado about Nothing than I could ever have hoped to achieve and I am sure the students will remember that wonderful session when the rest of the course is barely a vague memory. In contrast, what we all wish to avoid is asking an actor to do the equivalent of a musician sight-reading a passage. They are experts on play scripts, not all texts — and will be best used when dealing with play scripts with which they have had some direct experience. If an instructor needs something specific and can give an actor enough lead time and assistance (a copy, for instance) then it may work. But just think what it would be like if you were asked (on very short notice) to teach a class on Noh drama (or nuclear physics)?

In making such comments, let me emphasize that I am not saying that all literature (or non-theatre-oriented) classes must be devoted to your residency’s play or even Shakespeare, but rather I am encouraging your colleagues to make best use of the actors’ distinctive skills and not ask them to pose as lecturers or be merely a “voice.”

Good luck with your residency. Let us know if we can help out in any way. The more information you get from your instructors early and can ask us about, the easier it will be for the fit between instructors and actors to work the magic in the class-room that is always our aim and so often our achievement.

And remember that all instructors will find that their students respond even more powerfully if they have been to or are going to the AFTLS production!

Best wishes,

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and Academic Director of Actors from the London Stage