Michael Howard has been active professionally as an actor, director, and teacher for more than [fifty] years.

Mr. Howard has directed on Broadway for the Theatre Guild, among other producers, and was a pioneer of the off-Broadway movement. He directed in Atlanta for four years and was the founder of the Alliance Theatre, in which capacity he directed the landmark production of King Arthur, the Dryden-Purcell Masque, which opened the Atlanta Cultural Center in 1968.

Mr. Howard taught and directed at the Juilliard School drama division for eight years, at the Yale School of Drama with Robert Brustein, and at Boston University, where he was a visiting associate professor.

He is a graduate of the Neighborhood Playhouse, is a member of the Ensemble Studio Theatre, and has been a member of The Actors Studio since its inception. Married to the voice teacher Betty Howard, he has two sons in the entertainment industry.

How did you get started in teaching acting?

I started as an actor and supported myself, as all actors must, with various jobs as my children were growing up. I was performing in a summer stock company and was asked to come back the following year as a director. That was in Woodstock, New York. Very soon after that some actor friends, several of whom were from the Neighborhood Playhouse, where I had been a student, suggested we form a class, and I was asked to lead it. I really enjoyed it. It was small at first – seven, eight people.

At about the same time the High School of Performing Arts was organized by some dedicated educators at the Board of Education. They invited some professionals – Sidney Lumet and myself among them – to help form the program and teach there part-time. It was, and probably still is, a good part-time job for actors. Good for the kids, too.

All the while you were still pursuing a career as an actor?
Yes. I was both acting and directing in regional theaters, summer stock, off Broadway… places like the Greenwich Mews Theatre and New Stages. This was in the mid-1950s. The Greenwich Mews was a very influential off-Broadway theater. It was one of the very first theaters to cast interracially – without regard to color. Also, in 1954 I directed Land Beyond the River by Lofton Mitchell, the first play in New York by a black writer to deal with the civil rights movement.

Even earlier, New Stages was organized by a large group of actors and directors, each of whom contributed $100, I think, to buy an abandoned movie house on Bleecker Street and turn it into a theater. It’s now the Circle in the Square Theatre. We did some first productions of Sartre plays in this country – plays like The Victors, The Respectful Prostitute – and first productions of plays of Barrie Stavis. It was a very good theater.

In what ways has your early training influenced your teaching?

Well, you see, I kept on training all during the early years of my teaching. I am an early member of The Actors Studio and I studied with Lee privately. He was a great influence on me, as was Sandy Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse.

All my training was influential. Even before Lee and Sandy there was a wonderful man – David Danzig, I think his name was. I was only fourteen years old, but I still remember him. He was a member of The Group Theatre and had a job as a counselor in a camp I went to. He gave us some exercises from his work with The Group Theatre.

You knew you were interested in acting when you were fourteen years old?

Yes. That was the summer that I knew absolutely, clearly and unequivocally. David gave me a gibberish improvisation and I heard my own “voice” for the first time. When I threw away the real words and used gibberish, I was able to speak to another person, a young woman, clearly, deeply, personally and openly for the first time – on or off stage. It was a startling experience. From then on I began to pursue acting actively, so that I was working professionally by the time I was seventeen.

Do you use gibberish as an exercise in your classes?

Yes, I do indeed. I use all the things that I found valuable in my own acting and directing life. Gibberish is a wonderful way to help an actor become more expressive, to communicate using all of himself. For example, in a scene an actor might find it easy to say “I love you” because the words do it for him. But if he can only use nonsense sounds, it forces him to use his body more expressively and his voice becomes more colorful in his attempt to make his feelings clear and to communicate with his partner. It also forces the actors to tune into each other more carefully since they can’t rely on words but have to look for meaning in sounds and body language.

Is there anything from your early training that you have discarded, that you have come, through experience, to feel is not useful?

No. There are things that I use less because I think they are less important or have been overemphasized. Occasionally I will get an actor who would benefit from a particular exercise, let’s say an Affective Memory Exercise, which I do not give everyone. I can give it individually if I feel it will be useful to a specific actor. There are exercises that I may not use for years at a time which suddenly seem most useful to solve a particular acting problem.

You mentioned that you have discarded nothing from your early training but that there are some techniques you emphasize more than others. What are they?
Techniques to develop muscular relaxation, enhance the ability to concentrate, and extend the imaginative capabilities are all techniques that I emphasize. For instance, many actors lack a developed imagination. Their sense of reality is often very flat or earthbound… limited. Actors working for long periods of time in soap operas, for example, will use only a certain part of themselves, a certain melodramatic reality with which they have become comfortable. In soap operas, the unexpected and illuminating imaginative leap is not encouraged. How could it be, with practically no rehearsal, the day-after-day repetition, and the mechanical problems? So the good professional actor, in most of today’s theater and television, has never had much stretching of the imaginative vocabulary.

Naturally, there are innumerable exercises to help solve this technical problem – for instance, what’s called the metaphor exercise – that is, an exercise in which a simile or metaphor is treated literally. Instead of giving an actor the sensory problem of height, he is given the simile “I feel and if I’m on top of the world.” Then, instead of looking for a feeling, he begins to develop that experience literally – the slight curve under his feet, the rush of air, the visual things, the acrophobia perhaps, the danger certainly, a sense of power. So out of a nonliteral, nonrealistic experience, the actor develops physical and emotional behavior. Unexpected feelings emerge. An acceptance of the reality of the place occurs.

**How do you begin to work with a student?**

When a new person comes to work with me, even when I’ve seen him or her work professionally, I always have that student start with a prepared monologue, after which I lead the actor through some muscular relaxation exercises. I don’t think you can learn very much about an actor in a short monologue, so the rest of the ten or fifteen minutes we work together is for me to begin to discover… to find out as much as I can about this person with whom I am going to work. I begin by helping the actor exist in the moment without cover, without involuntary movement – to be aware of how his body is responding, to be conscious of his breathing, and to try to be conscious of muscular tension as it becomes evident. To take in, to receive and send no message – in a word, to be neutral. It’s not easy. We have so much involuntary body language. We send messages: “I’m OK,” “This is fun,” “You can’t intimidate me,” “I hate this.” It can be quite revealing, the ease or difficulty with which an actor accomplishes this exercise.

The next part of this first work varies. I might have him sing and skip around the room, sometimes dance – that is, I want to hear musical sound produced and I want to see the body move through space. Sometimes I will ask the actor to transform himself slowly into an animal, sometimes into himself as a child. I ask him to repeat the text with different kinds of adjustments that I suggest to him. Sometimes I ask for another monologue that might be more useful to work with. Sometimes I ask him to sing the monologue instead of speaking it. I’m learning about him. I don’t believe I have anything to teach the actor until I know him.

If I wonder about the actor’s expressiveness, his range, I might ask him to do the monologue as a nineteenth-century actor in a large theater. I might ask another actor to make the adjustment that he is a stand-up comic and that the monologue text is his routine. I give him an entrance, I announce him, I ask the class to take part. I want to know about his sense of humor. I remind him that these are games, and that he shouldn’t take himself too seriously. These exercises can be very exhilarating and sometimes very painful for an actor who is covered or protected. The simple act of holding out his arms to the class can make all the defenses drop away. So when it’s over I know a great deal more about this person, and the actor is on the way to being integrated into the class.

**How do you help an actor experience more of the moment-to-moment life of a character?**
Most of my work with the actor, in the early stages at any rate, is involved with that particular problem – helping the actor deepen the experience of the here and now. I see it as a beginning, an essential base for the actor’s work.

First the actor must see the value of being in danger. It is the opposite of comfortable, the opposite of safe. The actors must have something at stake, something on the line. Risk and danger are the lifeblood of the theater. The actor must say, “Let me put myself out there in front of them with no shield, no security blanket.”

For this I do what’s called an unrehearsed scene exercise. It’s structured as follows:

Two actors choose a scene – and that’s the last they see of each other or talk to each other until they move onto the stage in class. No discussion, no plan – nothing to make it easier, not even little things like “Which side are you entering from?” or “Will you bring the prop?” Each learns the scene by rote – no choices, no character decisions, rote. When they arrive I give them the set of the previous scene to work on. Now this is very difficult to describe. It’s actually a very structured exercise. One wants, as always in the theater, freedom within structure. First, they must be reminded of the large number of specific realities that surround the actor – the reality of the stage set, the brightness of the lights, the traffic going by, the colleagues watching, the text itself, and, most important, the discomfort, the games, the provocative behavior of the other actor. Each of these realities must be explored at any one moment and become the whole focus of the scene, pursued until it no longer interests. The text continues and sometimes the text itself is the strongest reality.

The actors are often confused until they actually begin and I help them moment to moment to explore all the realities. Then it usually is a very liberating, creative experience.

**Do you do this unrehearsed scene as the character or as yourself?**

No. You do not use the character’s given circumstances, only the most basic element of relationship – let’s say a mother and son – and only the most basic circumstances of the situation: a mother who has summoned her son to her bedchamber. No other choices, no other elements coming from the play.

There is another exercise, an improvisation that in a different way encourages the actor’s responsiveness – in this case, to the partner. In this improvisation I send one actor out of the room and the other actor is given a full set of circumstances, including a strong objective. The other actor, having heard none of the situation, enters relaxed, available, and with no circumstances – an empty vessel ready to be filled. He is neither old nor young, neither male nor female, neither eighteenth nor twentieth century, neither human nor animal. He will discover everything from the other actor – from what he says and how he says it, from how he relates physically to him, from how the actor has arranged the set, even from the amount of clothes he has taken off or put on. The work is not passive. Tests, probes should be made. By relating physically in an overt way, by speaking in a very formal or familiar manner, one gets back information as to the appropriateness of the behavior.

The moment the actor receives some sense of his gender or relationship or the place he’s in, he begins immediately to act on it (male or female, old or young, and so forth). If he discovers a moment later that he was wrong, the actor drops what he has begun to create and works on what now, in fact, seems true. Questions are not allowed: How did I get here? When did I call you? All of the evaluating is done internally – no living off the self-consciousness, the not knowing.

Little by little he drops and picks up, drops and picks up, until he finds that he is on the right track, developing the character, relationship, the situation as the evidence becomes clear to him. When the actor feels he has all the circumstances he is free to resolve the situation in any way that seems logical.
In this exercise the connection between the two actors becomes very focused. They are connected in ways that are not only verbal. They understand things without knowing where the understanding came from. They suddenly know, and they are never quite sure how they found out. I’ll ask, “What made you realize you were nine years old and a girl in this improvisation?” And the actor will say, “I don’t know exactly. Maybe it was the way he touched my hair and spoke about my friends.” It’s important to point out that the actor who does know the circumstances does not consciously either help or hinder his partner. He simply behaves logically within the circumstances.

**What about character work? What techniques do you give your students to develop a character who is very different from themselves? How do you have them start?**

All the work of the actor is character work. Creating a character starts with the self. The work begins internally and grows outward. Those good actors who find it useful to start externally – with a moustache of a piece of cotton in the upper lip – I believe simply know themselves well enough to say “I work better behind a mask. Let me have this little disguise that changes me visually, and then the inner reality will flourish.”

It is foolish to say to an actor, “Use yourself in this part,” or, for that matter, “Don’t use yourself in this part.” Which self are they speaking of? I know there are many Michael Howards and, of course, some of them are very public and in use 70 or 80% of the time. But there are many others, some right below the surface and some deeply buried. The work of the actor is to become familiar with all the Michaels. To know where they hide, and to have them available is one of the roads of actor training. So the actor has to be selective about which self he brings to work on the play.

As the early rehearsals develop, the actor sometimes may confront elements of the character, either physical or emotional, that he cannot find in himself. It’s at that point that the actor must have tools to continue to develop elements of character. For instance, the use of an animal in developing character behavior can be extremely valuable, particularly for the actor who has done animal exercises. It’s useful for the actor to go to the zoo, choose an animal suited to his character, and study it in every detail, muscularly. The actor then can make choices as to what elements of the behavior of the animal will be useful.

Sensory work, the creation of a particular event by trying to re-experience specific sensory detail, can radically alter the way a character performs simple tasks. To sit in an anteroom as if you were being rained on, to walk as if there were ten-pound weights on your shoes, creates specific behavior.

Michael Chekhov’s work with psychological gestures is useful, and so is work with physical centers, body language, and so on. Specific ways of adjusting to objects create character. One woman will handle a sable coat as if it’s an old woolen blanket, another woman will handle a woolen blanket as if it’s a silk shawl. Charlie Chaplin playing a bank teller in *Monsieur Verdoux* turns the pages of the phone book the way he counts in his teller’s cage.

**Are there specific exercises you do to help actors prepare for film and TV?**

If a new student tells me he or she is only interested in film or TV, I dissuade that person from taking my class. I am only interested in helping to develop actors who are interested in all mediums.

Is it different? My opinion is that what can be learned in a class about the differences between film, TV, and stage acting are inconsequential. The mechanical things that a good actor has to learn about camera, sound, and movement are minor and are learnable by a well-trained actor who knows his instrument in a very short time. And then there are things that the great
movie actors have learned over a period of many years in front of the camera that are not teachable.

Are there any techniques or approaches to acting that you feel are destructive?
I think any approach can be destructive because it’s not what is taught, but how it’s taught. Of course, there are some techniques that are silly or useless, but in the main I think what is dangerous is people who don’t know what they are doing. They could teach anything and it would be dangerous.

There are teachers who use so-called psychological techniques and encourage actors to reveal their personal lives in the name of their art. Do you see that as useful?
Reveal literally? No. That can be destructive. Actors have to choose very carefully with whom they work. I think that the line between an acting class and psychotherapy is very delicate. It is very important that a teacher recognize that line.

I am told therapy, especially Gestalt, has taken a great deal from experimentation in acting classes. Certainly it’s the other way around as well. Acting exercises to expand and develop the emotional vocabulary of the actor, to put him in touch with his feelings, are an important part of the work in an acting class.

How do you recommend that actors work with directors?
I tell them that they have to prepare themselves to work with dreadful directors, and that they should assume there will be times when they will get no help. They have to develop a way of working that leaves them open, available, and responsive to good directors and, at the same time, able to work on their own with bad ones.

An actor must have the tools to create whatever is demanded of him, either by a director or himself, and he must not abandon his own artistic integrity by abdicating responsibility for the final work. The actor who complains that “the director made me do it – I hate it” is not doing his job.

How do you advise beginning actors to start working on a script?
I would say there is no way for everybody to begin the work on a play. I believe that. I am against training actors to do it in one particular way. Perhaps we should give them three or four days to begin work and let them choose. But I am not against the following because, of course, young actors need the security of knowing they have a way to begin. Of course, in five years they’ll find their own way.

The script should be read three times. The first time as if you were reading a novel. It should be read for pleasure, for the story line. The second time for relationships: who likes who, who is hinting at what, who needs whom. It’s important that you not stop when your character shows up. Forget who you’re playing. If anything, be more attentive to the other people. You want the play to reach the intuitive response the way a good story does when you have nothing at stake. You want the play to influence you unconsciously and establish roots in you that are not intellectual. So, just read it. Don’t stop. Don’t try to be professional. Don’t try to be an actor. Connections will be made that you are not aware of.

Now read it again. Make two lists: one of what all of the other characters say about you, and the other what you say about yourself. Make accurate notes on given circumstances other than dramatic reality. The objective reality at this stage is more important: the time of day, month, hot, cold. The author consciously and unconsciously buries all kinds of raw material in the body of the play on which the actor will base all of the later work.
Then I suggest that you don’t do too much homework before you meet with the other actors and begin to rehearse. Whatever thoughts and ideas you have formed from your reading, allow them to lie there. Just begin to live off and take from what is happening with the other actors. It’s at this point that choices of objective and of physical action are made. The first thing I remember Sandy Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse saying is “Acting is doing.” That’s still the best definition.

What do you feel is the most common problem facing actors today?
Lack of work. Getting seen. Getting an agent. The 3,000 miles that separate Los Angeles and New York. The same problems that have existed for the last fifty years. And then there’s the problem of fads – fashion in acting styles. I suppose that it’s inevitable that actors, anxious to work, find themselves, perhaps unwittingly, “acting in the style of” whoever is most successful in the movies or on television. What is less acceptable are the teachers who spring up espousing this current method or that current method. I think it’s a danger because creative work becomes swamped with concern for methodology. Actors are therefore cut off and not open to the joyfulness and sense of creativity in acting or the potential in themselves as actors. They are looking for a strong rule: teach me so that I can have a sense of security about how I should do it.

Do today’s actors approach their work differently from their predecessors?
In my generation I would say that when you were done studying at, for instance, the Neighborhood Playhouse, that was the end of your training. Now actors recognize that that’s a beginning. There has been a stronger sense of the need to go on training and developing, like a singer or dancer. Actors are more prone to see their work in a professional class as a necessary complement to their work for an audience. They recognize now that it’s a question of continuing their development. After all, there are children who can act wonderfully, with spontaneity and freshness, but it takes a very long time to fulfill your potential, to master the art of acting.

Do you want to mention some of the people who have trained with you?
If you mean some of the famous ones, some who have been fortunate enough to become stars – I don’t. I know that it’s interesting and makes good reading, but it’s really not relevant to what I do. There are actors who have studied with me in companies spread across the country, off Broadway and on Broadway and in the movies. There are also a goodly number who, sadly, gave up – and then, of course, there are those who haven’t and should have.

What do you feel has been your main contribution as a teacher?
Myself. My person. My love of actors. My unwillingness to let them violate themselves. My rage when they use themselves badly and my passion when they use themselves well. That translates itself into technical things like demanding that I not be satisfied with small realities. I want an actor who can do Shakespeare and Odets. I don’t believe that it has to be one or the other. I encourage the actor to take chances, live dangerously, make the effort, and be willing to fall on his face. That’s very exciting and I think I encourage that stretch, that reaching.

What are your feelings about English actors?
I’m bored, frankly, with elements of the theater community crying out against English actors taking jobs from American actors on the one hand, and other elements of the theater community weeping that the English do it better, and that we can’t do it at all. Odious! It’s the kind of generalizing that is only useful at cocktail parties. English actors are not better than American actors and vice versa. Just because there’s some truth in the idea that our culture has at times been more spontaneous, more immediate, more alive, and the English culture more
responsive to words, to text, to the past, to history, doesn’t mean we can’t use words or they lack spontaneity. Good actors can do both and there are wonderful actors on both sides. And I want to see them all working here! I want our people to work there in the classics so the English will find out how wonderfully we can do them.

**What advice would you give to someone who is just starting out in his or her career?**

Well, I tell you, I’m an enthusiast. I love the theater. I have two sons and I encouraged them to consider a career in the theater. I have friends who left the theater to pursue other careers, and most have regretted it.

I think actors are extraordinarily generous people. And when they are committed and accomplished, what they give is themselves. What actors are about is sharing. They are saying to an audience, “This is a piece of me. I hope you’ll find it illuminating. Through this character you are getting me.” It’s a generous act and it’s very dangerous. Most people say, in one way or another, “I’m not going to let you see me because I don’t trust you. You can’t have it. I’m hiding it.”

When the work of a painter, composer, or writer is finally evaluated by the public, the artist can be off somewhere having a beer or taking a walk in the woods. The performer is out there every night. It’s an act of such courage. It’s life-affirming to say, “I’m going to risk it again.”

When I’m asked by an actor whether he or she should continue in the struggle, or by a young person whether he should begin a career, I tell that person what everybody else says who’s been around for a while: how hard it is, how difficult it is to make a living, how little recognition he or she can expect – all the verities. And then I tell that person that if he or she can grow to enjoy the danger, relish the combat that is the day-to-day life of the actor, and most of all develop deep personal satisfaction in the art of acting – the exhilaration of solving an intractable craft problem, the astonishment of two actors suddenly released from themselves and totally in tune with each other, riding the same wave – if the actor can develop an obsession for those technical moments of fulfillment, and put recognition and applause on a back burner with a low flame, where they belong – then I say, have at it.