

# LIFE'S A STAGE

WITH NO SHORTAGE OF SPIRIT OR PASSION, JANE BRODY SHARES HER TECHNIQUES AND EXPERIENCES FROM HOLLYWOOD PRODUCTIONS TO THE DEPAUL CLASSROOM

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Although she was raised in a non-religious household, Jane Brody recalls being captivated by church windows as a child.

"When I was 10, I would go to empty places in Milwaukee with beautiful glass windows. I was drawn to grand gestures and the beauty of light and the awesomeness of it," said Brody. "I think that is the thing that keeps me in the theater, just the awe of life."

At 66 years old, Brody has found plenty in life to marvel at. Now a professor of graduate and undergraduate acting at DePaul University, she has previously worked as an actress, director, acting coach and casting director for Hollywood films such as "Fargo" and "Groundhog Day." She has founded her own theater company – Immediate Theatre – and has cast and directed plays throughout the Midwest, as well as various films, television shows, and commercials. Her students, past and present, appear in film, television and theatre. The catalyst for such an expansive and multifaceted career, though, was a performance of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" she witnessed when she was 14.

"Everything that actors do are things that I normally liked to do: watch people, wear costumes, read," she said. "I think we focus on the things that come naturally to us. But there is a spiritual part of it – the awe I felt when I saw that man do 'Hamlet' ... Theater is a spiritual practice and actors are spiritual beings."

Brody certainly has no shortage of spirit and no deficiency in passion for the things she is interested in. She is a small woman with a loud, sonorous voice that travels effortlessly, barely contained within her quaint, cluttered office. She sits with a round, beaming face amidst total chaos – shelves of books and stacks of papers surround her. It seems her mind is not unlike her office, stuffed to the brim with more facts and ideas than anyone else would know what to do with, but to her, all of them are perfectly organized and purposeful. She keeps a book by Constantin Stanislavski, no doubt one of several, close at hand, indicative of his huge influence on her life and work.

"Stanislavski is still, without a doubt, the final arbiter, the Bible, if you will," she said, thumbing through the pages indexed with Post It notes. Stanislavski, a Russian actor and theater theorist, was among the first to examine the scientific aspects of acting in a way that can be applied in practice. Brody is one of many modern professors who are still expanding on his groundbreaking research nearly a century

after it was published. In this way, she is following in his footsteps as equal parts artist and scientist.

"Stanislavski is still the gold standard because human nature is human nature," she explained. "There is no new acting, only a sharpening of the ideas and techniques that Stanislavski originated. And now a lot of neuroscience is supporting his work."

One piece of modern psychological research that falls in line with Stanislavski's theories is the concept of mirror neurons, or specific parts of the brain that display activity in tandem with another person's brain. PET scans in humans have proven that when one mind executes a physical action, and another mind witnesses that action, the same mirror neurons fire in both of these brains, explaining why we feel emotional or even physical pain upon witnessing another person's plight.

Her credits as casting director for big-name Hollywood films such as "Fargo" and "Groundhog Day" mean Brody is often questioned on her relationships with famous actors in these films, like Bill Murray or William H. Macy. She tires of these questions, though, because they reflect a misunderstanding of her role in those productions.

"As a casting director, you're what's called a 'pre-pro,' so you come into the project often after the stars have been set, so you don't even meet them most of the time," she said. She is more focused on maintaining relationships with her current students, but does still keep in contact with many former ones, although she admits, "It's a strange relationship. A lot of my students have gone on to be TV stars, or in movies, but to me they're still my students ... They're moving in a different world than you are and it's difficult to straddle."

Some of her former students, only a year removed and still in the midst of their undergraduate studies, have begun to make a foray into television and film acting. Max Stewart, a second-year actor, already has credits as an extra in TV shows such as "Mob Doctor," "Boss" and "Underemployed." He also has a role in "Tasmanian Tiger," a feature length film in development by independent Chicago studio Mobius Films, who has ambitions to screen the movie at film festivals around the world.

"I think we all have a new perspective on acting now," said Stewart, in reference to Brody's influence on him and his classmates. "She approaches her directing in a very scientific and humanistic way, and is very relatable." One particular aspect of her method that Stewart cited as very influential is her approach to character development and analysis.

"She doesn't believe in the idea of



COURTESY OF THE THEATRE SCHOOL

Performance professor at The Theatre School, Jane Brody.

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JANE BRODY, acting professor

character because it means you can't change. We are portraying real people, so we must actually become that person in the play," he said.

Noah Laufer, also a second-year actor, spoke well of this style of directing.

"It's an incredible way to relate to the character and get into their mindset," he said. "It has helped me immensely as far as advancing technically."

Brody has earned great praise from her fellow faculty members as well. Although he has not collaborated with her directly, John Jenkins, head of undergraduate acting, has seen her work and commented on his impressions of her.

"I have visited her beginning acting classes before and was very impressed with the results," he said in an email. "Jane is a very experienced and effective acting teacher. She communicates with the

students extremely well and is able to lead them very quickly into the heart of their work."

Outside of her profession, Brody leads a life filled with discovery, never ceasing to lose sight of the awe in the world. She is a genealogy fanatic, offering her investigative services to anyone who has a few minutes to spare.

"It's not different from journalism," she said. "You go places and explore and find people. It gives you a sense that 'I am a result of all that,' instead of just being here, hanging out."

For Brody, theater is the gift that keeps on giving. Her unceasing drive and commitment to the study of her craft is a rare phenomenon among professors in other fields, perhaps because she continues to learn more and do more, even as she approaches retirement. To her, the study of acting is not and never will be a bore; in fact, she sees it as essential to human development.

"I think if everyone were trained to be an actor, we would have a really great population," she confided, as if revealing a grand secret. "It's a combination of intellectual curiosity, humility, and joy."

Through teaching, directing and learning about life's intricacies, Brody is able to hold on to that same feeling of intrigue, that same sense of wonder she felt gazing upon those church windows in Milwaukee, and it shines through in all her work.

"It was my absolute bent to do this," she said confidently. "It wasn't so much that I wanted to, but that I needed to."