

Local actor shares his techniques at Oakland University, film festival in Birmingham

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By SAM LOGAN KHALEGHI
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In front of a classroom of students, Steve Blackwood says, "I trained in New York City with Uta Hagen. As a student admitted on scholarship, I got to watch the master."

Blackwood, 50, of Beverly Hills, is teaching a workshop of strategy to students at Oakland University. Blackwood himself is a graduate of the school and although strategy is often a term that is best left to docents of marketing and finance, this particular on-camera acting course seemingly steers in a slightly similar direction of business for the moment. The audience asks questions: "How do I get an agent, and who are the agents in this town?"

Blackwood responds that people need to learn how to "administrate their talent" and he continues by quoting "90 percent of this business is getting along with people and talent is 10 percent."

Blackwood knows the game from personal experience. Born in Detroit, he left Michigan for the East Coast soon after college and immediately began performing on off-Broadway shows. He returned to Michigan just last year like many actors who sprung back home because of the film incentive program. He lives with his wife and daughter who have artistic endeavors of their own. Blackwood's wife is a professional oil painter.

Being a successful actor often requires campaigning like a politician. Having a unique voice alongside unique looks won't help actors if they don't know how to use them.

"Do you know what your type is?" Blackwood asks his students; his goal may point out that almost no actors hold tenure over their popularity due to a given role or set of roles, but if they understand their "type," they may be able to keep working and adapt to a changing environment.

Teaching acting style

Blackwood's workshops aren't all focused on business, as he also discusses the personalization of roles. More specifically, Blackwood reflects with his students on how personalization gave him a career when he gave a comic edge to one of his characters that was written in the script in that way.

Blackwood most recently had a featured role in the Marc Forster film "Machine Gun Preacher" and has had roles in episodes of TV shows such as "Quantum Leap" and "Judging Amy." His biggest claim to fame is his decade on the daytime soap opera "Days of Our Lives" as the character Bart Beiderbecke from 1997-2007.

"The character of Bart on 'Days of Our Lives' wasn't originally written in the comic way that I provided," says Blackwood, who worked closely with the directors and writers of the show to present a version of the role that he discovered for himself as an actor.

“The idea for my teaching is that we need these actors to personalize roles,” he says.

In order to do that, Blackwood’s students are encouraged to ask themselves, ‘What would I do if I was in this situation?’

“Sometimes it may help to find something that sensory in the moment, like a smell something that reminds you of a past relationship. Make it immediate, ‘What can send me there right now?’ ” says Blackwood.

When asked about his experiences with Uta Hagen, a three-time Tony Award-winning actress who was an influential mentor in acting technique. Blackwood comments, “She taught me the basics, learning how to ask ‘what’s my obstacle?’ She could tell if you only rehearsed once or twice or three times in a week. She could tell how much work you put in. You can’t just wing this thing. You have to dig deep.”

Upcoming projects

Just as he passes along the acting methods he’s learned in his career to students, he will be sharing his knowledge with attendees of this first Elmore Leonard Film Festival in Birmingham.

Running Nov. 11-13 at The Community House in Birmingham, Blackwood will be participating in a panel discussion titled “How to get into the Film Industry in Michigan” on the festival’s opening night. It will follow the Short Film Award Presentation which begins at 7 p.m. There is no cost to attend, but space is limited.

Those interested in finding out more about Blackwood’s workshops can do so at www.steveblackwood.com.