

MICHAEL ARMSTRONG

BY DAVID MORRISON

You could say I was not born for the stage... and you'd be correct. On those dreaded school occasions when thrust under the glare of super troupers in the name of drama, I assure you the drama was all mine. Untimely wardrobe malfunctions, nervous giggle fits, dialogue freezes and general clumsiness all conspired, sometimes at once, to trash many a scene in productions ranging from Nativity plays to *Lord of the Flies*. Of course, my diffidence and acute fear of public speaking never overly helped matters, either.

And so it is that my admiration for those in the acting profession knows no bounds. Whether in local am-dram or on the silver screens of the world, I'm one who deeply appreciates the challenges of the craft.

One actor I'm particularly in awe of is the brilliant Philip Seymour Hoffman, recipient of almost fifty acting awards including the ultimate, an Oscar in 2006 for his mesmerizing portrayal of Truman Capote. I mention Hoffman, however, as the perfect example of a famous actor whose ties to his acting roots remain unbroken. As performer and director, he continues to hone his skills in the theatre, pontificating at every turn as to the importance of doing so. "Do plays!" he recommends, also imploring budding actors to "find all the good teachers and study with them." Indeed: talent you may have, but putting it into effective practice takes solid guidance.

Hoffman's advice will be music to the ears of Deep Bay's Michael Armstrong. An

acclaimed theatre actor, director and playwright of over thirty-five years standing, he is currently hosting workshops at The Old School House Arts Centre in Qualicum Beach, aimed at introducing beginners and the relatively inexperienced to acting and directing for the stage. Yet these disciplines were the furthest thing from Armstrong's mind as a young man; he had his eyes fixed on the stars, rather than entertaining any thoughts of trying to become one.

"I didn't dream of acting," he told me recently. "I wanted to be an astrophysicist, seriously! And I dreamed of writing sci-fi novels. I took some acting in high school and did the odd play, and that kind of piqued my interest. In my first year of university I joined MUSSOC: UBC's Musical Theatre Society. We did *No No Nanette*: a week on the road in Victoria at the McPherson Playhouse, then three weeks at home at UBC. That did it – I dropped out of physics!"

Running from 1:00-4:00pm on March 28, April 4 and 11, Armstrong's three-part *An Introduction to Acting for the Stage*



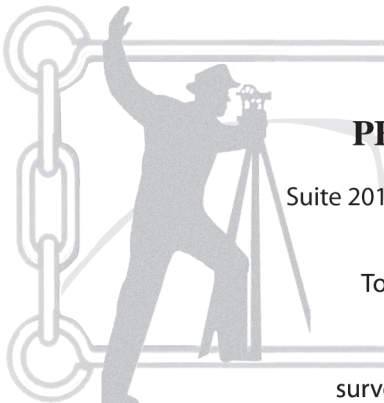
Michael Armstrong

workshop promises exactly that. While the course may set some enrollees on the path he followed after the acting bug bit him in that classic 1920s musical comedy, Armstrong fully appreciates that his chosen craft is something that does not come naturally or easily to everyone.

"For some, the work is very foreign and very hard and the director may go crazy trying to get them to some place of relative competency," he acknowledged. In light of my own catalogue of theatrical calamity, that'll be the likes of me he's referring to!

"There are natural actors," he continued in a more positive direction, "people who just understand how to get into someone's skin and live there – but (as Hoffman preaches) they still benefit from learning craft. Each actor in my classes presents a new challenge, a new set of obstacles, and speaks a new

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language that I have to learn in order to teach him or her effectively. It keeps me on my toes.”

A member of Theatre BC’s Talent Bank, aside from acting and directing Armstrong is a noted playwright, including for radio. One of his plays – *In Their Nightgowns, Dancing* – bagged a Governor General Award nomination in 2005, and of his areas of interest it is producing works for the stage that gives him most pleasure.

“I probably get the most personal satisfaction from my writing,” he told me, revealing he’s been pretty busy with this of late. “Two (more) of them are percolating away. One is a noir detective mystery set in Vancouver in 1955, amid the Mulligan scandal that led to the sudden departure of the police chief from both his job and the country. The other is more personal: a look at my mother and father’s romance leading up to their marriage.”

A man of seemingly limitless talents in his creative arena, Armstrong’s resumé also boasts experience in set design, theatre administration and spoken word performance. Furthermore, his popular workshops have been held in Nanaimo, Kamloops, Vernon, Revelstoke, Terrace, Sicamous and many other communities throughout our province. Now it is Oceanside’s turn to benefit from Armstrong’s vast experience in the theatres of British Columbia, his latest workshop available to anyone from the age of fifteen up for the bargain fee of just \$105.

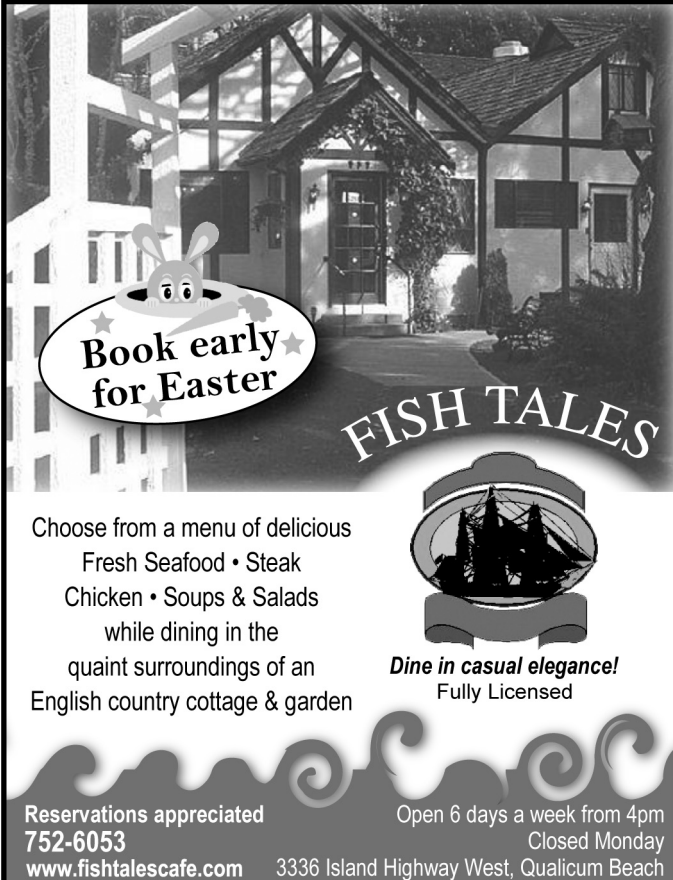
And acting for the stage is of course so very different from acting for the screen. “The stage demands an actor to become large enough to carry the entire audience in his hands as he takes them on a journey,” stated Armstrong with authority. “It is both a physical and an emotional expansion. Film requires the actor to be intimate enough to be examined very closely for clues to emotional reactions. The work required on the stage often looks buffoonish on the screen, unless you’re making some grand epic or a Hollywood musical.”

Nonetheless, as predictable an inquiry as it is, I was intrigued as to the movie stars and directors that have inspired Armstrong as a man of the theatre. A fan of the directing prowess of Clint Eastwood, Woody Allen and the Coen brothers, Armstrong appreciates certain of my own favoured stars, it seems.

“Lots of actors have lots of different qualities,” he began. “Katherine Hepburn: presence. Humphrey Bogart: presence and an effortless truth. Meryl Streep: for her it is not presence; she possibly possesses more craft than most everyone in the business today. It’s an absolute pleasure to watch her work. Lynn Redgrave: mostly a stage actress, but watch her little turn at the end of *Kinsey*...wow! There are so many more, some for their presence, that indefinable something that draws our eyes to them, on stage or on the screen; some for their ability to just be real, like Robert Duvall in *Tender Mercies* or Tommy Lee Jones in *No Country for Old Men*. These actors don’t hit a homerun every time - but when the right picture comes along, watch out!”

Can you imagine, one day, your name appearing amongst such a cast of legends, referenced as an inspiration by a respected figure like Michael Armstrong? Well, take one of his workshops and, if the bug bites, you could be well on your way! Please forgive me if I don’t join you, however, as I really was not born for the stage. ~

For more information on Michael Armstrong’s An Introduction to Acting for the Stage workshop, contact The Old School House Arts Centre, 122 Fern Rd West, Qualicum Beach: (250)-752-6133 / gbtosh@shaw.ca / www.theoldschoolhouse.org



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