

Training for Leading Roles
from The New York Times

July 10, 2010
by Patricia Cohen

“Tap the skin,” Kristin Linklater tells the two dozen or so students who face her on the stage of the Miller Theater at Columbia University. “Now tap your leg. Walk. Tap. Walk. Tap.”

“Now tap your own buttocks,” she instructs, and ripples of laughter spread across the stage. “Remember what I said earlier: tension in your buttocks makes you stupid.”

“Oh come on, do it!” she urges the most reluctant tappers. “Don’t be self-conscious.”

But being self-conscious was precisely the point for some of the 50 fellows at the World Economic Forum who came to New York this week to explore how theater and the arts can help them, say, someday run an international conglomerate or a finance ministry.

“It gets you out of your comfort zone,” Arthur Wasunna, one of the global leaders in training, said of the class.

Over five days at Columbia’s campus in New York, the fellows have taken courses on voice, breathing, rhetoric and improvisation as part of a novel collaboration between Columbia and the forum, an international foundation probably best known for sponsoring an annual gathering of movers and shakers (the political, rather than the physical, kind) in Davos, Switzerland.

The three-year fellowship program is based in Geneva and combines work and studies. It has been operating since 2005, but this is the first time an arts component has been part of the curriculum.

The Columbia sojourn is the result of a meeting in Davos between Gilbert Probst, the managing director and dean of the fellowship program, and Carol Becker, dean of Columbia’s School of the

Arts. The idea was to teach the fellows — who hail from 40 countries and range in age from 26 to 36 — the techniques that actors employ to hold an audience's attention.

“Leaders shape followers' perceptions,” Mr. Probst said. “That is what actors do. And what is it that great actors have? A presence.”

A second aspect of the week's activities, Ms. Becker said, is to “see art and culture as a vital force for social change.”

Ms. Linklater, a theater arts professor at Columbia who helped arrange the schedule, said that the idea of “taking the stage, owning the stage and sharing the stage was a metaphor for playing the game of life.”

“These are very brainy people,” she said after her class. Her aim is to get them to use the entire body and not just words to express themselves. “Embodied speaking and thinking is very potent,” she said.

Compared with her regular roster of students, the forum fellows had “enormous inhibitions,” Ms. Linklater said. “‘You mean I have to shake my actual butt?’ ” she said. “It's not very intellectual.”

Ultimately, she added, they were all very curious and willing. During a brief lunch break, Mr. Wasunna, a tall, thin Kenyan who works on combating corporate corruption worldwide, said: “I found it very valuable. You have to project yourself in public.”

In a classroom across the street from the Miller Theater, a second group of fellows similarly let go of their inhibitions with Andrea Haring, a vocal coach. Grunting and stretching, students were arranged in circles, throwing imaginary colored objects at one another: an orange baseball, a jagged fire-engine red boulder, a hot pink feather.

Colors bring out emotional expressiveness, Ms. Haring explained; each color connects to a different vowel sound. “Zoouoooo,” she rumbled in a deep voice, originates in the pelvis and legs and is

a dark, earthy brown. “He-uh,” leafy green, comes through the mouth, and expresses searching curiosity. “Reeee,” delivered in a silly, high-pitched trill, is white and pours from the top of the head like confetti.

In the next class, Ms. Haring said, she planned to relate that day’s lesson to Shakespeare’s text.

A student, Arturo Franco, a Mexican who tracks developments in Latin America, acknowledged that “this is not the norm in our fellowship program.” (On Sunday the group is scheduled to travel to Philadelphia to take classes at the Wharton School of Business.)

“If there are two sides to the brain,” Mr. Franco added, “we tend to be left-sided — economists, engineers. This allows you to explore the other side, the other self.”

Politics surfaced during another class, taught by Brent Blair, in a way that some members of the World Economic Forum, which is primarily supported by large corporations, might not have anticipated. Mr. Blair, the founding director of the Applied Theater Arts program at the University of Southern California, trained with Augusto Boal, the Brazilian director who created Theater of the Oppressed, an international movement, based on the work of the radical Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire, that seeks to empower poor and oppressed people through socially conscious theatre.

“Theater of the Oppressed holds a mirror up to nature and then invites the audience to take a hammer and break the mirror and come up and replace the action onstage,” Mr. Blair explained to his class. In doing so, “they are rewriting their lives.”

Eliot Lee, a fellow from South Korea who networks with businesses and other organizations in Asia, asked about the danger of instigating “change purely for the sake of change.”

Mr. Blair, referring to Freire’s philosophy, replied that liberation must be directly connected to critical thinking, not blind action, adding, “In Theater of the Oppressed, the answers are far less im-

portant than the questions.”

At one point he asked the class to move about and fill a space without leaving open any path for him to walk through. When the group members started plotting their movements, Mr. Blair laughed. “I’ve been teaching this for 15 years, and this is the first time a group has tried to plan out a strategy,” he said.

Later he asked the students to take on the role of an oppressed person or an oppressor, and to improvise a dialogue. Ms. Linklater watched from an orchestra seat.

“Yes, it’s political, but it’s also hugely theatrical and transformative,” she said, “It makes you think. I felt we needed provocation.”

After class, Mr. Lee said the exercises “opened a little room in myself to think about the intentions of other people,” to understand what may be motivating them.

“I don’t think the politics were the issue,” he added. “It’s about understanding ourselves and expressing our thoughts.”

Matthew Miller, an American who deals with public and private partnerships in the Middle East, agreed. “I might not necessarily celebrate his politics,” he said of Boal, “but I think I could check that at the door to learn something.”

Or as Ms. Haring might say, “He-uh!”