



The HB Studio Story ...in the words of Uta Hagen

The HB Studio is dedicated to those artists who may actively contribute to a theatre of national character. It was founded in 1945 by Herbert Berghof with the dream of helping to establish a theatre of experimentation based on classic tradition. Conceived as a workplace, an artist's home, it offers an outlet for practice and growth for theatre professionals and the opportunity for the young to establish roots in their intended craft. The Studio's guiding principle remains that of its founder: creative freedom—which has as its logical consequence responsibility to a noble art.

The Studio is situated at 120 and 122 Bank Street and houses over one hundred classes for the theater in any given term. 122 Bank Street is also home to The HB Playwrights Foundation. The Theatre of the Foundation is next door at 124 Bank Street. These three buildings are the tangible representation of our efforts and dreams. Whether one is entering one of these doors for the first or thousandth time, the philosophy that underlies their existence should be acknowledged and remembered.

When Herbert Berghof arrived in America in 1939 as a refugee from Hitler's Europe, a shining young "star" of the German-speaking theatre, he was faced with an actor's nightmare—a new language. He managed to find work in plays on radio and on Broadway (ironically often as a "Nazi"), and as a teacher at The New School, The Neighborhood Playhouse, and The American Theatre Wing, but he sorely missed the continuity of performing indigenous to European theatre. Consequently, he decided to create an independent practice ground for himself and his new friends, a home base for the footloose professionals (as prevalent then as today), as well as for

beginning actors. And so, in 1945, Herbert began to exercise his ideas in a rented space on West 16th Street. The Herbert Berghof Evening Acting Classes were inaugurated.

When I joined him in 1947, classes were in full swing and Studio productions of Thornton Wilder, Lynn Riggs, Lorca, Pirandello, Horton Foote and Brecht were being done with actors such as Maureen Stapleton, Eli Wallach, Lee Grant, E.G. Marshall, George Mathews, Elizabeth Dillon, and Jo Van Fleet. Workspace was limited, and the necessity of paying rent by the hour was constricting. In 1950, we found an empty loft on 23rd Street and Sixth Avenue at a reasonable monthly rent. It was four steep flights up and very crude, but it was ours, and work could take place around the clock. Young actors such as Charles Grodin, Geraldine Page, Dina Merrill, Barbara Barrie, Harvey Korman, Charles Nelson Reilly, Orson Bean, Jason Robards, Steve McQueen, Jack Lemmon, Jack Albertson, George Segal, Anne Meara and Jerry Stiller joined our ranks. As we expanded, we were able to repair the roof, cover floorboards that had let us peek into the loft below, fix plaster and plumbing, even to buy fresh paint. With some of the worst problems solved, the work improved and enrollment grew. New teachers joined us: Eli Wallach, Mildred Dunnock, Mira Rostova, Jo Van Fleet, Lee Grant, and Betty Field among others. Some of the actors we had trained became assistant teachers and gradually opened classes of their own.

We continued to develop in an atmosphere of freedom and cooperation without rigid rules, remaining a laboratory for experimentation with new techniques. In spite of the growth in enrollment, we were continuously out of funds and often had trouble managing the rent. The entire operation was in the hands of well-meaning but inexperienced students. Whoever happened to be around for a few hours was the “secretary” and took charge of collecting the \$3 fee per student and of giving out misinformation. They often didn’t know to whom to give the collected money, took it home, and got it mixed up with their grocery money. Sometimes a student studied for months without paying, without having been asked to pay. Maintenance of the loft was equally haphazard, and when chairs collapsed, bureau drawers fell on the actors’ feet or curtains on their heads, Herbert shouted and I wept. We called meetings to delegate and organize the various tasks, but temporary order was always short-lived because there was no “boss.”

In 1954, a Managing Director was enlisted who soon brought the order that allowed creative freedom to grow. Money was collected with regularity and made available for repairs, new chairs, even an adding machine. Brochures were devised and a few ads purchased. Production of plays increased and we gave regular weekend performances for our friends and theatre people. Much of the work was remarkable considering the circumstances. Alternating not only several plays for many months, but the casts as well, we performed Beckett, Rilke, Giraudoux, Fry, Gogol, Chekhov, Strindberg, Ibsen, Norman Rosten, Brecht. Among the actors playing with us were Zero Mostel, Sam Jaffe, Jules Munshin, Boris Tumarin, Mildred Dunnock, James Broderick, Olga Bellin, E.G. Marshall, Jerry Stiller, Anne Meara, Charles Nelson Reilly, Joe Chaikin, David Hedison, Zohra Lampert, Barbara Lester, Maureen Stapleton and Bill Hickey. The productions were then, as they are now on Bank Street, all for love. No one was paid to do them and no one paid to see them.

When Herbert fantasized our future development to house the classes, a small experimental theatre, and a larger one in which skilled performers could serve up feasts for hungry souls, it was a theatre in the Village as spacious, lean and workable as the Museum of Modern Art. Every empty lot provoked wild speculation. We looked at stables, garages, tenements and factories. In April 1958, a student informed us about an interesting three-story building—a former stable, then a garage, on Bank Street. It seemed nice enough, large enough, workable, but financially out of reach.

Our community was strong, however. Informed of the sizable gap that separated us from a truly workable physical home, students stepped up to the plate. They met on successive nights, recruited other students and feasted on love and ideals. The Building Fund was in full operation. Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy sent us a beautiful letter with a check for 1% of the total, hoping we could find 99 others to do the same. It wasn't that simple, but as Herbert and I remained glued to the phone and our desk for weeks, our courage never flagged. Our attorney maneuvered a refinancing of the first mortgage to help us pay for some of the reconstruction. More student meetings were held to update developments, and on July 28, 1958, still short of our financial goal, Herbert signed the contracts, initialed endless riders and paled as the import of his actions sank in. We made a down payment of \$4,000 and staggered to a bar to celebrate. The building was ours.

Fundraising continued until September when the sudden influx of returning students brought us beyond the monetary goal. Construction began toward the end of October and in March we began to teach in our new home in the heart of Greenwich Village. The grand opening party took place on April 18, 1959, and will forever be remembered by all 2,000 who attended. We had invited all those who had sponsored the building and the registered students, begging them not to bring others, since we couldn't imagine supplying refreshments for more than 750 people. But celebrities appeared in droves, and the kids could not resist bringing along friends and relations to show off this new wonder. All floors thumped with merriment, dancing, singing and guitars. Geoffrey Holder performed with an entire calypso group, Shelley Berman had us shrieking with laughter and Theo Bikel got us to join him in his folksongs. The police came with a warning to make less noise but stayed to join the fun. Toward daybreak people drifted out onto the roof, where candles flickered among strung-up ivy, or onto the stairs, which were lined with congratulatory plants, flowers and telegrams. At 6:00 a.m., we locked the door.

During the summer before we moved in, word of the new Studio had spread, and a new playwrights department had evolved: Gil Pearlman, Norman Rosten, Horton Foote and William David Roberts joined the faculty. Anna Sokolow opened a new department on movement for the theatre, J.C. McCord opened ballet and jazz classes, a fencing master opened sessions, and Kathe Berl came to teach make-up and costumes. The speech department under the aegis of Alice Hermes and Michael Rado expanded once again. Now there seemed to be room for all of them. But, new responsibilities reared their ugly heads: insurance, liability coverage, increased maintenance, high heating and light bills, and an enlarged staff in the office. We were frightened not only that we'd bitten off more than we could chew, but that there was less time and space for the production of plays, which was supposed to be at the very heart of the venture. The debt hung heavily over our heads. Gradually, we zoomed back into action, presenting performances in the main floor studio which ranged from Goethe to Salinger, from Kafka to deMontherlant, and, of course, material coming right out of the new playwrights' class. Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* was presented in a fine adaptation by Sydney Sloan and later moved Off-Broadway with Sydney and Paul Roebeling.

Our active faculty increased to 50, then to 60; the enrollment grew to 1,500, then to 2,000 in the Seventies and Eighties. Classes were scheduled on all four floors from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. daily, and the Studio was dark only on Saturday and Sunday evenings. Since 1945, the fees had only increased from \$3 to \$5 per class, which was extremely difficult to manage with inflation and a growing office staff.

In the early '60s, thanks to eight month's work on the film *Cleopatra*, Herbert bought the one-story garage at 124 Bank Street, which we converted into a small, functioning theatre seating 80 people. A few years later we added the house between the Studio and the Theatre to provide rehearsal and dressing rooms, playwrights' headquarters and space for seminars.

In 1965, we formed The HB Playwrights Foundation. On our Board were Boris Aronson, Saul Bellow, Herbert Berghof, Leonard Bernstein, Uta Hagen, Paul Porter and Fritz Weaver. When some of them went to heaven they were replaced by other distinguished people such as Horton Foote and Professor David Haber. We received a non-profit charter from the State of New York. Production budgets were ridiculously low because we made as much as possible by hand so that the main expenses were for materials. Only the Foundation's managing director was on salary. The work of the playwrights, directors, actors, designers, lighting people, crew, ushers and clerical people was volunteered.

We have presented more than a hundred full productions, countless staged readings and experimental readings of previously untested material. Student/actors together with the finest established actors played together in the works of new playwrights and those of Robert Lowell, Saul Bellow, Eric Bentley, Calder Willingham, Romulus Linney, Peter Handke, Tennessee Williams, Norman Rosten, Horton Foote, Donna deMatteo, Louis Auchincloss, Mark Medoff, James Purdy, William Styron, Vincent Canby, Nicholas Wright, etc. Among the lighting, scenic and costume designers who have participated are: Mina Albergo, Anna Hill Johnstone, Lester Polakov, Tom Skelton, and Jennifer Tipton. Directors have included Herbert Berghof, Horton Foote, Helen Gallagher, Austin Pendleton, Charles Nelson Reilly, Marjorie Sigley and Anna Sokolow. Each production played 12 performances for a non-paying, standing-room only, standby audience. After attending a play, Brooks Atkinson once wrote that we had again proven that the finest work seemed to be achieved for love rather than for money.

At Herbert's death, I suddenly realized that, from the time I had joined the Studio in 1947 until the present, I had been supportive, taught, aired my views, acted in our theatre and occasionally directed a project, but that I had little knowledge of how it actually functioned. What I had long since guessed was soon confirmed by the accountants: that for years we had been operating on a deficit, spending more than was coming in. I immediately raised the fees: the tuition from \$5 to \$7, and the annual registration from \$10 to \$35. Strangely enough, at the last accounting, this seems to have solved that problem. Herbert would probably not have approved of the increases. Let me explain once and for all why the low fees were such an essential part of his philosophy. He was a socialist, in the truest sense of the word, with a strong sense of responsibility for his fellow man. He abhorred exploitation of others and waste of any kind, whether of talent or material goods. He believed in a cooperative, shared enterprise that should be of value to others. Whatever profits might accrue along the way should be plowed under to enrich the soil for the benefit of others. The cost to a student should not exceed the cost of the maintenance or improvement of the workspace if it was to remain a "home" for the artist. He never accepted the facts of a soaring inflation. He suffered over the cost of the new and proper dance floor on the second floor which amounted to \$10,000. When the new speech room on the top floor was constructed in the mid-'80s, costing twice as much as the original building and its renovation combined, he wept. He never forgot how many students had to pay and be taught to cover such expenses, and in which way this slowed the progress of the Foundation and its presentations, which were always supposed to be at the heart of the venture.

Over the years many, many teachers have come and gone. Herbert always sought out colleagues that he felt were established artists in their own fields who wished to pass on their knowledge to the less experienced. He was never interested in those (actors, directors and playwrights in particular) who were primarily interested in teaching for a living; in other words, to support themselves solely on the backs of the inexperienced. In his mind, under our roof, that was exploitation. The 50% share of the tuition garnered from their students should, he believed, be sufficient compensation so that, in essence, their teaching remained a service.

Herbert believed, and I believe, that it is our obligation to inspire the young, not only with our skills but with an understanding of our shared principles. The very fact that we are all together under the same roof should be our giant strength and we mustn't let anyone forget it. Then the Studio will stand on its own feet no matter who leaves us—or dies. And many have died, leaving us with a profound sense of grief and loss. I am grateful for the opportunity to pay tribute to those who served their students and the Studio so magnificently - with their gifts, their understanding and incredible love.

—Uta Hagen, New York, 1995

...and in the words of Herbert Berghof

For all of you who were not privileged to know him or work with Herbert, I can think of no better way to provide insight into his philosophy than by quoting an excerpt from an address he made to the Austrian Academy of Arts in April of 1981, at a conference entitled "Theatre Crisis."

"It has been the hope of our Studio to shape the mind and character of young people in order to change, with their help, the intolerable conditions in today's theatre, including the lack of respect and dignity for the artists of the nation, to bring it to a more responsible service.

If we truly want a theatre which is more than a commodity, we must omit the buying and selling and function as free artists. And, if we agree that freedom can't be bought, we must face that it is based on responsibility to our fellow man.

While I am grateful for what I've earned in the commercial world of theatre, film and television, I am most proud of having used these earnings to liberate myself from its stranglehold. In 1945, the HB Studio was begun with this goal in mind. We wanted a place to escape from all the dictatorship of money and power, to regain some of our self-determination. It is a place where actors, directors, writers, and designers are evaluated only for the nature of their philosophy and the expression of their needs. It is an educational program for the seasoned, distinguished members of our profession who repeatedly voice a desire for it, as well as being a practice ground for the young.

To avoid a misunderstanding, let me say that I'm not only grateful for the life I was allowed to live in Vienna from 1909 to 1939—especially for my twelve glorious years in the Austrian and German theatre—but also for the shelter the United States has given me. And for the shelter they have allowed me to build inside their shelter—in spite of my dissident ideas about the Broadway scene and my bitterness at the mismanagement of theatre. It is Samuel Beckett who tells me that only he who retains a clear eyesight for all the flaws of his beloved, loves truly. So let's wait a little longer for Godot.

—Herbert Berghof, Graz, Austria 1981