

What I learned from one of the greatest actors of my generation.

In 1999 while packing to move to NYC, I watched Happiness & Flawless.

Coincidentally both films starred a guy named Philip Seymour Hoffman. I was blown away by how real his emotions felt in every moment and how he was able to transform himself in such different roles. Then I started classes at Circle in the Square. My teacher Alan Langdon instructed us to see True West starring John C. Reilly and (his former student) Philip Seymour Hoffman. The two actors switch roles every few performances. I must've seen it 10 times and each time was brilliant and unique. I met Phil after a performance and over time he became a mentor and friend. I was fortunate enough to get a glimpse into his process by helping him with his Canadian accent for his role in Owing Mahoney; and while running lines with him for various other roles. Here's what I learned:

FIND THE HUMANITY IN EVEN THE MOST FLAWED CHARACTER

Not only could he find a part of himself in every character, he was brave enough to go to those dark places and show his vulnerabilities; which allowed us to empathize with his characters' weaknesses. As our teacher Alan would say, he had the ability to "be private in public". He didn't play it safe.

HAVE A STRONG PERSONALIZATION

In order to identify with a characters circumstances & relationships, he had personalizations for every moment and scribbled on the pages of his scripts. He'd also carry pictures or objects with him to keep him connected to those personal moments and his character.

HONOR THE CRAFT

He believed that anyone who was satisfied “phoning it in” at an audition or performance, should work in another industry. He took truthful storytelling as a responsibility and never took his career for granted. He encouraged me to keep doing theatre, continue in classes and create my own opportunities for work. There was no excuse for not working.

STAY HUMBLE

Even at the height of his career, he was generous with his time, and made the effort to help others. It is because of his kindness that I feel a responsibility to make sure he is remembered for the talented actor and generous human being he was.