

sound
MIND

Acting classes a creative outlet — and stress relief

By M. SHARON BAKER
STAFF WRITER

Richard Hesik, an industrial real estate broker, joined the board of the Freehold Theatre Lab Studio Inc. five years ago but quit because he didn't understand it.

Feeling guilty, he signed up for a class at the Capitol Hill facility.

"I sucked my gut up, signed up for a class and was just terrified," said Hesik, 56. "The teacher got us into some exercises and before I knew it, it was three years later. I just love it.

"It's a big risk," he added. "There's no place to hide. No necktie or fancy suit to hide behind. It's kind of like walking a tightrope, but I like that feeling — after I'm done."

Hesik, now back on Freehold's board as president, is just one of a growing number of amateur actors who are finding a way to creatively express themselves after their day jobs.

Local studios offer classes for beginners as well as professionals looking to sharpen their skills.

And since the Seattle area ranks among the highest number of theaters per capita, there are plenty of places for moonlighters to practice their craft.

Many begin by classes at either Freehold or the Northwest Actors Studio, both located on Capitol Hill. Both offer a range of night classes for beginners as well as for established professionals looking to sharpen their skills. In addition to acting classes, both offer a program for playwrights.

Freehold is the bigger of the two acting schools, founded in 1991 when the Pasqualini-Smith Studio and the Mark Jenkins Actors' Workshop merged.

"We're a theater training and research and development center," said Jerry Diercks, executive director. "The range of our constituents is really quite remarkable. I'm willing to bet that about 75 percent of the people that partake in the studio's classes don't consider themselves on a path to become a professional actor but want to engage their creative selves and enjoy doing it."

Freehold has about 75 classes a year that attract more than 850 students, he said. That's up from just 300 students when the facility first started. About 30 instructors hold classes, with several of them doing so on a contractual basis, Diercks said. Classes range from \$250 to as much as \$450, and the spring quarter starts April 5.

Freehold has a 99-seat theater for its productions, three rehearsal studios for rent and a Theatre Lab where actors can develop new material with the support of some 30 professionals and an audience.

Interest in classes is picking up, Diercks said.

"This last quarter we had three introductory classes and all of them had waiting lists of at least six people," he said.

Since many are repeat students, that's bound to continue.

Dr. Tom Heller, a primary care internist with the Pike Place Market Medical Clinic, isn't taking classes right now, but it's likely he'll take more in the future.

"Sometimes it's a difficult thing to squeeze in," said Heller, 50. "But I feel so alive when I'm doing it. The classes I've taken just stretch you. I work in such a narrow range that with acting I can bust it wide open and be involved in something very creative. It makes the stress of work and day-to-day life more bearable."

The Northwest Actors Studio is located within blocks of Freehold. It's an older but smaller actors school that offers a broad range of techniques and classes.

Northwest Actors Studio hosts about 70 students a quarter, and 10-week classes run from \$200 to about \$400. The faculty consists of about 25 full- and part-time instructors.

Said Ann Graham, founder and artistic director for Northwest Actors, "Some (students) are looking for nothing more than a creative outlet and then they get hooked. Others have made the choice that this is going to be their career and they've decided they're finally going to get started."

Northwest Actors has a staff of three full-time workers and a budget of about \$180,000. It too has a 99-seat theater and a cabaret stage that doubles as a classroom and rehearsal stage.

After taking classes — or not — actors can typically audition for parts at any number of non-union theaters throughout the area. An actor's audition hotline lists available parts and auditions. From 5 p.m. to 8 a.m., call 425-637-7373 for the latest openings and auditions.

Many find work at the Tacoma Little Theatre, the Driftwood Players in North Seattle, the Taproot Theatre, and the Renton Civic Theatre, among others.

Managers and employees not looking for a creative outlet but a way to deal with a potentially explosive or awkward situation can find help in a different kind of acting class offered by the Seattle Public Theater.

"Our mission is theater for change," said Lauren Marshall, producing acting director. "We put on plays and workshops dealing with social issues and our aim is to embrace justice, encourage dialog and promote involvement."

The theater has dealt with issues such as the timber controversy, homelessness, racial strife and even water quality. It has a professional touring group that presents its plays to area schools.

"We use theater games and improve as a tool for community building, conflict resolution and leadership training," said Marshall.

The next class starts April 13, she said. "Those classes are very popular with teachers, counselors, social workers, even managers, anyone who has to deal with interpersonal issues in their work," she said.



FREEHOLD THEATRE LAB STUDIO PHOTO/RICK WONG
Freehold's artistic director Robin Lynn Smith (left) works with acting students.

★ ★ ★

Presidents

★ ★ ★


Day Sale

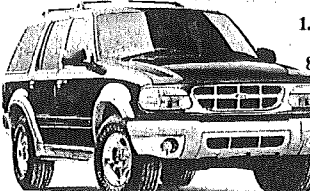
from

BILL PIERRE

FLEETDIRECT®

'99
Expeditions






1.9% APR
Up to
86 mos.*

'99
Explorers

'99
Taurus



0.9% APR
Up to
48 mos.*

★ ★ ★

Save by buying from

The Fleet Department

★ ★ ★

206-297-4059
fax 206-297-4064
www.pierreford.com/fleet

* Subject to credit approval