Acting according to Paul

Film veteran helps Mt. Holyoke actors find emotions within

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SOUTH HADLEY — Teaching a master acting class at Mount Holyoke College this week, actor Paul Servino directed a student to draw pictures of Mickey Mouse as if her life depended on it.

"Draw Mickey Mouse 15 times, you have to do this or you’ll die," said Servino, throwing a piece of paper in front of student Darya Turner as she sat on the college’s Black Box stage. She was in the midst of performing for Servino’s one-week-only class.

Turner attempted to ask a question.

"Shut up," Servino barked, then smiled, before a chuckling audience of about 50 Five College students, faculty and staff and area residents — who came to see the veteran actor teach his craft. "I don’t work like other teachers," he said. "Draw Mickey Mouse like this at the moment, but later you’ll like it.

"Servino, who has appeared in movies that include "Goodfellas," "Nine" and "Bulworth," used unconventional methods to extract an emotional performance from two Mount Holyoke College actors doing a scene from "Some Velour," a 1991 movie about a schizophrenic and the relationship he attempts to forge.

"In the scene, Turner played a "trough cookie" at a bar being pursued by a friendly and lonely schizophrenic of his medication.

Both roles were played by women. They were barely able to finish their scene before Servino announced his displeasure with the performance.

"The women in the scene were acting, he complained. Instead, he wanted them to react to each other with everyday emotion.

To show her character’s distraction, Servino instructed Turner to draw while student Jane Bradley, playing the schizophrenic, desperately tried to capture Turner’s attention with personal questions and odd compliments. Bradley is constructed to pretend as if she had been on an island for three years with no one to talk to. If she

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Servino speaks with Mount Holyoke College student Johanna Haerk during his acting class Monday at the college.

Servino challenges Valley actors at Mount Holyoke workshop

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couldn’t get Turner’s attention, she’d be back on the island. As the women began the scene again, Servino interjected words of encouragement and directions to stop acting — and start reacting to each other.

"Isn’t she creeping you out, Red?" Servino asked of the red-headed Turner. He got up from his seat in the front row and advanced on Turner. "Hey Red, can I touch you? What are you doing? Let me get near you," he said in a hushed voice, approaching Turner. The actor recoiled in her seat as Servino leaned, leaning over her desk and fixing his gaze on her face.

"See how much more interesting that is?" asked Servino, turning to the audience without having touched Turner. "It’s always more interesting to see how people are affected by each other. I don’t want to see an idea of what you’re doing, be your- self, give genuine emotion."

Giving back

At the heart of Servino’s lesson was a word passed on to him by noted acting coach Sanford Meisner: "Give yourself the pinch to get the job we need."

Servino was in the Pioneer Valley this past weekend to participate in a staged reading of "Stella in the Bois de Boulogne." He stayed on to teach a class Monday at the request of Ron Nino, husband of Vanessa James, who chairs the Mount Holyoke College theater department.

"He’s a gifted actor and a generous man," James said after the class. "I think the kids got a serious lesson today."

After the class, at the reception in the Room Theatre lobby, Servino stood at the head of a long receiving line of fans. He said he taught the class because he enjoys "giving back to young people."

The actor said he wants them to leave with "knowledge, you know, something that showed them the truth, not the normal way of doing things, but a way to get the truth."

Servino, who has performed for 53 years, inspired actors to use their imaginations to transform difficult roles into something believable. To do this, Servino related a story about his work with Warren Beatty in "Bulworth," a 1998 film about a politician influenced by hip-hop to be honest. In the film, Servino played a gay life insurance salesman who gave Beatty’s character a $10 million policy, not because he wanted to, but because he was in love with Beatty.

"There’s no way I can look at Warren Beatty or Brad Pitt or any guy and be in love," Servino said with a chuckle. "I was struggling."

After seven attempts at a scene, Servino said he had to trick himself into believing Beatty was a woman in disguise.

He imagined Beatty as very attractive, but obscured by prosthetics.

"I made him a woman and I could do it," said Servino. "Sometimes, that’s what you have to do, too."

Servino’s methods appeared to work with the students. In the final scene of the night, he transformed a confusing monologue into a gripping seduction. The woman went from her first performance, in which she uttered lines like a teacher reading to a classroom, to climbing onto her partner’s chair, grabbing his shoulders, searching his eyes and speaking directly to him.

The audience’s applause drowned out Servino’s own words.

I’d rather live one day as a lion than 1,100 as a lamb," Servino said later. "That is a glimpse of what being an artist is."