

It's Acting, **MAMET!**

Guastaferrero **Says...**

An interview with Daniel Student, Education Assistant



Vincent Guastaferrero is a Hollywood resident and veteran actor who has appeared in a number of plays and films written and/or directed by David Mamet, whom he considers a close friend. You might also recognize Mr. Guastaferrero from his work on *NYPD Blue*, and films by Woody Allen and Barry Levinson. Here, he shares some of what he has learned about the actor's craft, approaching a Mamet text, and the importance of a well-rounded education.

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Daniel Student: How did you get into acting?

Vincent Guastaferrero: I have an older brother who was also into acting and I was exposed to it at a young age. I started seeing plays in my early teens, but I didn't know that it was for me until I had actually done it.

I started late; I was an art major in college first. My scholarship was to work in the costume department, and I was asked to audition for a *commedia dell'arte* play because I was very physical and people thought I was funny. And I thought, *I don't know what this is!* I ended up doing the lead in that play, and from that point on I was hooked.

DS: What did you learn in your acting education that still affects you today? Would you recommend college and/or graduate school?

VG: What I did learn early on that's still with me is this basic thing: the word *acting*, the first three letters of it are *act*, and it's all based in *action*. The whole thing about acting is finding out something to do. If you can find something in the script that gives you something to do that's direct, humanly recognizable, and active, then you're on track. I learned that early on.

When you really want to start acquiring *skills*, I believe you have to do that in the formalized atmosphere. I've lived in Hollywood long enough to know that there are plenty of untrained actors who are extremely skilled and very talented. What I find to be the fault of untrained actors is that they are not well read, not literate enough. You can't speak to them about certain things and have them have a reference point for establishing that common ground of a language, a theater language. That's something you get through your education.

Undergrad school was also a very improvisation-focused program, and I think that the value of having an improvisational background in acting, especially today, is immeasurable—all of the skills of listening, and reacting honestly and spontaneously are involved in improvisation. If you are not doing those things you're lying, you're not telling the truth.

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CS: Is there a particular acting mentor or theorist who has inspired you? What did you learn from this person?

VG: The book that I hold as my Bible is the first Uta Hagen book, *Respect for Acting*. I like it simply because it deals with fundamentals—I'm a real basic actor. At its best, acting should look and be easy. And she presents that in her book *very* well.

DS: How did your parents feel about you becoming an actor?

VG: This is a good question for me because I am the youngest in a big family, and my parents were first generation Italian immigrants. When my older brother got into acting, they thought "What's he doing that for, is he ever gonna get a job?" When I got into it, it was pretty much, "Well, he's following his brother's footsteps." They never questioned it either way; they didn't say, "Are you doing something that's good, are you doing something that's not good?" They never hit me, fortunately, with the practicality thing, like "How are you going to get a job?" They just wanted to know if I was doing something that I loved and enjoyed, and I made sure they knew that.

DS: What is particularly challenging about performing in a show written by David Mamet?

VG: It is demanding on two major levels. One is that the language is a challenge, and you have to have a really good ear for it. Which leads me to why it's challenging on the second level: the very basis of my whole acting strategy is to identify clear-cut actions and stuff to do. Dave doesn't provide you that. So I would say the big challenge with doing Mamet is finding behavior, finding things to make the people real, because bad Mamet acting, there's nothing like it. When it's even medium, it really stinks! When I see beginning actors who only adhere to what they think Mamet is, I see robots, *stiff* robots. His plays are often accused of presenting characters that are talking heads, and guys that exist only in the mouth, and that is so not true. But if you're an unschooled actor or a beginning actor—without a well-rounded basis of yourself that you bring to it—it can become difficult.

DS: If there was one actor working today that you recommend aspiring actors to watch, who would it be and why?

VG: Off the top of my head, I would say Sean Penn. Him and Meryl Streep. Not a moment of falseness in Sean Penn's performances. He's a master at telling the truth and owning the material. He knows how to take any script, any genre, anything, and make it his. Meryl Streep, because she is the quintessential master technician. I don't think there's a better actor on the planet frankly.



Sean Penn in *I Am Sam*



Meryl Streep in *The Hours*

DS: If you had one snippet of advice to impart to young actors, what would it be?

VG: Remember that, in acting, you are the instrument. There's not another vehicle, there's not another go-between. It is you, your words, your performance, and it is completed by touching the audience. The most important thing you can do as an actor is *be*. Be whole. Be well rounded. Be good to yourself. Stay in physical shape. Be responsible to your voice. Read and get

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smart. Have confidence, because standing up in front of people takes big *cojones*. And if you're up there and you reek of insecurity, they will get that and that interferes with the play. I would say the key phrase is “Be responsible and good to yourself. You are the instrument.” ■