

# Leaping

AN INTERVIEW WITH MONICA MACLEAN

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Monica Maclean has been a professional actor for 27 years, and is now the Conservatory Director at the Hillbarn Theatre in Foster City, California. She was the founder of the San Carlos Children's Theater in 1990, and served as their Artistic Director for ten years. A member of all the professional performing unions, Monica has performed in all mediums including theatre, television, and film. She was awarded a scholarship to study with Lee Strasberg in Los Angeles in 1972, studied in Master classes with Whynn Handman and Terry Schrieber in New York, was part of Lonny Chapman's Group Repertory Theater for five years, and also performed with The L. A. Actors Theatre. She has just completed directing her first all adult production in many years at Hillbarn, *Letice and Lovage*, a comedy by Peter Schaffer.

**WHJ:** You've been changing kids' lives for years with theater...how so?

**MONICA:** Well first of all, it's always interesting to see which kids turn up. People usually think it's just the outgoing kids, but a lot of very, very shy kids are attracted to theater. So you have a wide range of personalities coming through. For instance, your real outgoing, strong-dramatic-instinct kids come to class and my job is to help them learn how to work as an ensemble and share the stage with other kids and get focussed with that very creative energy and juice that they have, and not always have to be "on" all the time.

And then the shy kids slowly just come up and watch what the other kids are doing and try it, and the next thing you know they are just blossoming. And the best thing as far as their own personalities emerging is that they find they don't always have to have the "right" answer in theater. They can



trust themselves, and they begin to feel more confident and that reflects in everything they do: being able to give a school report, or just a desire to do more and have more of an outgoing life.

So lives get changed because theater permits kids to have this sense of themselves that many other lock-step systems in school don't. They get to jump in and be whatever they want to be, and that appeals to them. They might get a sense of, "Oh look I have a comedic flare, I can make kids laugh." And then also, when they do a production, it's huge to have 250 people clapping for you, in terms of self-esteem.

**WHJ:** A lot of kids get to stand in front of 250 people at school assembly programs—their parents come in, they read a little poem, everyone claps....how is what you do different? You can stick any kid in front of an audience and get applause.

# POSSIBLE: ON CHILDREN'S THEATER



**MONICA:** The difference is in the nature of the training, which is really understanding how the craft works. When kids first come in, there's a built-in anonymity so everyone can participate without feeling on the spot—using group theater games, or ice-breakers. And then it's a matter of letting them unfold according to their *own* time plan, so they can take on more responsibility, more lines, when they *want* to, not because they *have* to. And that's a huge difference. In a school assembly, it's like "Okay kids, the whole 6th grade is doing this" and so the shy child feels traumatized and tries to do as little as possible and the tension level is huge. But the basis of any good actor is relaxation. And that's probably the most difficult thing to achieve: to stand up on a stage in a simple, natural way, as if it's perfectly normal for you to be facing hundreds of people and be at ease.



**WHJ:** How do you get a culture of hyperactive kids on Ritalin to be relaxed?

**MONICA:** Well, if they're on too much Ritalin they get overdrugged and they're like zombies. I've had kids like that and it's kind of sad, so I usually talk to their parents to have them decrease the medication to get them back to who they are. Also, I'm real strict as a teacher, because boundaries are important for the craft of acting. I myself was a child with a strong dramatic instinct and that type of personality is always pushing the envelope and exploring where the boundaries are, and the more I had to know where I was going and focus, the more comfortable I was.

So real high-energy kids need a lot of help in terms of just being there with them and letting them know that they can't spill over the edge and get crazy and wild, that the craft demands their focus and attention. When they start to understand that, they give their energy more appropriately. If it's a story, they stay with the story instead of going off in six different directions. Then when it comes to a funny part, they let themselves go wild, so they have a release for that energy, which is really important. Because there's no place for "acting out" in the real world, which is another key thing about theater with kids—you get to act out, you get to let your imagination fly.

There's a great statement from Glenda Jackson about acting: "You don't really build up a bank balance that you just simply draw upon." Everything is always new, everything is possible. You can forget your lines, you can trip over the table, you can forget to get your prop set up, there are so many things to think of that you're really never bored. So it appeals to people with a low boredom threshold, which is certainly true of a lot of kids.

**WHJ:** Do you think any of that translates into life? The ability to improvise, and trip over the tables of your life and keep the scene going?

**MONICA:** I think it all has to do with life. If you don't have a creative edge in your life, you're like a person with one leg. You're stumbling along in a car without much gas left in the tank. And if you learn to trust your creativity when you're young, you may drop acting and go into some other field, but it gives you the ability to leap into the possible,



## *That is all theater is— it's being, all being!*



whereas before there were always these road signs: “Can’t Do It. Can’t Do It. Can’t Do It.” And you can do it!

**WHJ:** On the other hand, actors need to be able to handle a lot of rejection—do you work on that with kids?

**MONICA:** No. I don’t try to make any child into a mini-actor. I hate video-taping or filming kids, because that takes them right out of the process of trusting themselves into watching themselves, and that’s totally against the grain of what I’m trying to do.

**WHJ:** What has any of this have to do with spirituality, if anything?

**MONICA:** It has to do with wholeness. Art and spirituality are pretty much the same thing. When you’re truly connected to an art form, you’re connected to your inner being in a very intimate and full way. So you’re fed. I think artists are mediums. In fact, a spiritual teacher I had said once, “If you’re a healer you’re like a loosely-woven fabric”—things can pass easily in and out of you and through you, and I think that’s what artists are too. I’ve always sort of pictured this cheesecloth with a bunch of holes in it. Things just go in and out. That’s why there’s so much self-destruction with artists, too, because you’re hit a lot. If you don’t have a strong aura and if you haven’t built up a sense of your spiritual center, you can get easily hit by all the depressing things in the world. So it’s a double-edge—you have a gift, but you have to learn to protect it and use it.

**WHJ:** From working with hundreds of kids over the years, do you think everyone has that gift?

**MONICA:** Absolutely. No doubt about it. But there are different levels of availability—we’ve all been damaged to some degree. The problem is that we’re all me-oriented—especially artists—how else are you going to share yourself? Well, “me me me me” doesn’t work, when you’re doing *anything*. I’ve said to kids on stage, “If you’re just wanting to make everyone laugh and be the center of attention, then you’re cheating yourself out of learning the craft of acting.” If you go up there just to look good and be brilliant, that egocentricity limits your ability to create, because you have only one mind-set—to show off.

**WHJ:** I could say that about every situation that I enter everyday.

**MONICA:** Definitely. A lot of us come from a place of feeling starved as children and we need attention. And even if we don’t share that craving, there is still in all of us a desire to connect to a sense of ourselves beyond the limits of personality. So it is not necessary to be miserable to be an actor—but it is an art form that does allow you to feel a sense of wholeness which we are all looking for.

I’m a perfect example of the first type—you know, bigger than life. Or maybe I was given that kind of personality because I *am* a performer and teacher and I need that energy to translate what I’m doing. But there can be a shift—I can be doing my work out of a need to feel appreciated, but that’s a limited way of working as an actor and a limited way of sharing with children how to be creative. Or, I can come through my own spiritual path to a place where I only *choose* to be out there when it’s important to give, rather than be driven by a need to be seen. The more open I become to inner change, the more available I am to the process of letting kids come into their own, without my need to even direct them, or have them do it this way or that way. I’m more available to listening, being present and being positive with them.

When you find your work in life, that you love, whatever it is, you will sense a great shift. You know that old Gertrude Stein piece about Picasso: “And he works and he works and he works to work because the work is good and he works some more” because he knew that if he worked he was alive and full.

**WHJ:** How is that different from workaholics who are finding their identity solely through their work?

**MONICA:** The workaholic is somebody who is trying to achieve something for themselves—fame, fortune, getting ahead. They are not *in* themselves in their work, they are *ahead* of themselves, projecting that something outside of themselves is going to help them. The person that’s working artistically, spiritually, from a passion from within, is contacting their core and releasing it and giving it out and being fulfilled in that way. And it’s extremely important to convey that to children.

Basically, I do theater because it’s a blast and I get paid to play! We make funny faces, jump up and down, act out different animals, pretend we are deliriously happy, or sad, or angry, we get to be free of society’s restraints and jump into something with our bodies, minds, hearts, souls and imaginations. That is all theater is—it’s being, all being! \*