



## Coaching Actors for the Long Term

By Daniel Lehman

"The worst quote in the world is, 'Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach,'" contends Lisina Stoneburner, the founder and co-owner of Atlanta's The Company Acting Studio. "Because even though you can book a job and you can work doesn't necessarily mean that you can pass on that information and inspire somebody else to do it."

Since 1996, Stoneburner and The Company Acting Studio have been teaching and coaching—and inspiring—children and adults to act in theatre, film, and television with a remarkable rate of success. Her students have been cast in projects in Atlanta and throughout the Southeast, as well as Hollywood and Broadway.

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Growing up in New York, Stoneburner had show business in her blood. Her aunt, Dinah Manoff, won a Tony Award for Neil Simon's *I Ought to Be in Pictures* on Broadway and later starred in the television series *Empty Nest*. Her grandfather was a Hollywood writer who had been blacklisted during the Communist witch hunts; her grandmother, also a writer, was friends with Stella Adler.

That family connection allowed Stoneburner to enroll in the Stella Adler Conservatory at age 12, in what she calls "the only teen class that Stella allowed to exist."

Stoneburner attended New York's High School of Performing Arts and Boston University's School of Theatre Arts, then worked in theatre in Seattle before moving to Los Angeles to work on the set of *Empty Nest* with Manoff. Once there, she discovered an exciting new career path: acting coach.

"At the School of Performing Arts, everybody coached everybody else," Stoneburner says. "It was part of the way you learned. You were always left with each other to work that stuff out, so your peers were your coaches."

"When I went to L.A., I would find myself on the set, and somebody would need me. It wasn't really a paid job, as much as it was that I was there and it was a necessity."

After a couple of years, though, Stoneburner realized that she hated L.A. and "ran screaming" to Atlanta, which she intended as just another stop on her way back to New York. Instead, she has stayed there for a decade and a half.

"At some point," says Stoneburner, "it clicked that you could go crazy just trying to pay the rent so you can try to live and work in a city where there's a million of you—because you're trying to be in the spotlight in

L.A. or New York—or, you could do what you love in a smaller community, where there are not that many of you, if any of you at all."

Stoneburner decided that she'd rather be a big fish in a small pond, and found a welcoming creative environment in Atlanta.

"I started making my living teaching. I knew I could do it, and I knew I had something to offer. There was a need for me here [in Atlanta]."

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Stella Adler might not be known for teaching children, but Stoneburner has made it her focus. She began in 1993 in a small rented space, and by 1996 her classes had grown enough for her to open The Company Acting Studio in an old warehouse, which she converted into classrooms and a small theatre space.

Stoneburner focused on children, while another actor taught adult classes. Even though today The Company Acting Studio has about 150 students, nearly half of them adults, Stoneburner still seems to be doing it for the kids.

"It was supported in me that I had the ability to know, as a child, something I could be really good at and have a passion about," Stoneburner says. "People had respect for me when I was younger. They listened to what I had to say. So that respect that I have for children and their abilities is probably what makes that connection between me and them strong."

Drawing from her formative years in New York City, Stoneburner says that her goal is to train actors, not to create young celebrities.

The conservatory-style approach of the school mirrors the curriculum of the School of Performing Arts, but instead of a four-year intensive program, the individual classes and audition-based programs are designed as after-school, weekend, or summer sessions. Stoneburner uses her unique blend of experiences in New York, Los Angeles, and regional theatre to offer a wide array of training, including foundational acting techniques, audition tips, script analysis, and individual coaching—not only for theatre, but also for film and television. She believes that sets The Company Acting Studio apart.

Stoneburner also uses the school as a form of outreach, serving not only her students but the entire Atlanta acting community. Last fall, The Company Acting Studio opened an annex location in Georgia's Gwinnett County, and a third location will open in January.

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Even though Stoneburner claims that her goal is not simply to get her students work, their success has attracted the attention of managers and agents across the country.

Joy Pervis, founder of the Atlanta-based Hot Shot Kids teen talent agency and now a talent scout for the Osbrink Talent Agency in L.A., says that she recommends The Company Acting Studio to actors and other agents because of Stoneburner's ability to prepare her students "to compete at all levels and in all arenas," from local community theatre to high-profile Hollywood films.

Pervis began her career as an agent around the same time that Stoneburner began teaching in Atlanta, and says that she can rely on Stoneburner to "go above and beyond" for her clients. A few years ago, Pervis was

representing a young actor who had to fly to Hollywood for a last-minute screen test. Stoneburner got in the car with the actor and his mother and drove with them to the airport to squeeze in as much additional coaching time as she could.

"It was so important to me as an agent that this particular young talent work with her before he went," Pervis says. "But there was no time. So they're standing at the check-in counter at the airport, and she's running lines, and working with him, and giving him as much information as he could handle before he got on that plane to go out for a screen test. Because of that, I know I can depend on her for anything."

Pervis has also represented teen actor Justin Martin since he was eight years old. As Martin and his parents prepared to fly to Hollywood to audition for his first pilot season in 2003, she suggested he enroll in a class Stoneburner offered, to prepare young actors and their families for their first trip to L.A. Martin and his parents say that The Company Acting Studio made them better prepared for his L.A. auditions than they could have imagined. Even though they only planned to be in Hollywood for three weeks, the family ended up staying for six months—because Martin kept getting cast in new projects.

Since he started training with Stoneburner, Martin has landed roles in episodes of TV series like *Malcolm in the Middle* and *The Bernie Mac Show*, as well as films such as the Emmy-nominated *A Raisin in the Sun* and the upcoming *The Soloist* and *High School Musical 3: Senior Year*. Martin even spent a year on Broadway, as Young Simba in Disney's *The Lion King*.

Now 14, Martin says that Stoneburner has coached him for every project he's ever been cast in. The vast majority of that coaching has been done over the phone, however, while Martin is in Hollywood or New York or on a set somewhere, and Stoneburner is at home in Atlanta.

"She's known me for so long, and she coached me for so long face-to-face," Martin says, "that when I'm gone and we do it over the phone, she knows me so well and she knows what goes through my mind when I look at a script, so she can just pick up on that and take it from there.

"Honestly, I don't know how she does it."

"There is a huge level of trust between Lisina and Justin," says Justin Martin's mother Trina. "He knows if he needs to go somewhere in a scene emotionally, he feels comfortable going there with her. Lisina recommended other coaches [in the L.A. area] that we would work with sometimes. But for the heavy stuff, the stuff where Justin really needs to be with someone he trusts, we always work with Lisina."

Martin recognizes that Stoneburner is preparing him not only for each individual role, but for his entire career.

"Instead of just looking at the script one way," he says, "she made me look deeper into the script, and deeper into the character, than just what was written on the page itself.

"So I think she's not just coaching me to book the job, but coaching me for the long term. She's definitely a coach that coaches to build your craft, not just to book the job and add another thing to your resume."

For more information, visit [www.thecompanyactingstudio.com](http://www.thecompanyactingstudio.com).

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