

Betty Buckley on understanding your creative path



October 12, 2017 - Betty Buckley is an American stage, film, and television actress, and singer. Her breakout role was that of Ms. Collins, the sympathetic gym teacher, in Brian De Palma's 1976 horror film, *Carrie*, which led to starring on the ABC series *Eight is Enough* from 1977 to 1981. Buckley won the 1983 Tony Award for Best Featured Actress in a Musical for her role as Grizabella in the original Broadway production of *Cats*. Her other musical roles include playing Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* from 1994 to 1996, in both London and New York, for which she received an Olivier Award nomination. She is also a 2012 American Theater Hall of Fame inductee. Last year the 70 year-old actress appeared in M. Night Shyamalan's *Split* and this year she will celebrate the release of a new album with a series of live dates while also stepping into a recurring role on the CW's *Supergirl*. In addition to her work on stage and screen, Buckley has spent the past 45 years teaching aspiring performers how to sing, act, and tell their stories.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2417 words.

Tags: [Acting](#), [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Adversity](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#).

You have a string of performances coming up, a new record, a new recurring role on a TV series, plus you are teaching workshops. Do you find that all of these activities inform each other in some way?

Oh, yeah. Also, I'm still just a working girl, you know? I've been a teacher for over 45 years and I tell my students that they need to be really flexible, that show business is a weird phenomenon and there's many skill sets that they can perfect or become an expert at so that they're ready for whatever comes their way, as opposed to narrowing their perspective. It's like when I was a young musical theater person, my first show was the musical *1776* and I worked with these phenomenal actors who could sing, but they were actors first and foremost. These older actors kind of took me under their wing. I was only 21. They said, "This is what you're good at but you need to learn this, this, and this," and they sent me to the right schools and the right teachers to learn. Since then I've just been a perpetual student. I had this idea of the kind of musical theater artist that I wanted to become, but I also wanted to be able to do really authentic work as an actress. My role models were [Kim Stanley](#) and [Geraldine Page](#) and, later on, [Gena Rowlands](#). I wanted to be that kind of authentic, emotionally raw actor who could also bring that kind of realism and truth-telling to musical theater.

So I set about on a path to really learn that. I studied really, really hard for a number of years in New York and was lucky that I continued to work in the business and could pay for my acting classes and my voice lessons and my psychologist, so I could always continue to grow as a person. I still see my brilliant voice teachers and I still train religiously and see a brilliant psychologist. I'm still involved in the same growth process. I think that is so important.

I tell my students—and I think this is absolutely true—that the work comes relative to your readiness for it. As a professional actor, singer, storyteller, you maintain a state of readiness for whatever opportunity presents itself. It's a process that never stops. There is always more to learn, more to do.

Are your students easily discouraged? This industry is notoriously competitive, plus the arts are under attack more than ever these days.

Some young actors were telling me just last night how deflated they feel right now, how they feel irrelevant as artists, how they're made to feel foolish because of their aspirations to be artists. I was like, "Just because the politics of our time is telling you wrong information, or giving you completely false news, it doesn't mean

you should lose your grace or your ambition. In fact, we're more important than ever before."

What do you think are the most valuable skills or resources that young artists—particularly aspiring actors and performers—really need?

I teach my students how to meditate and I also teach them a universal spiritual philosophy that is all about learning how to focus the mind and then *listening* to the mind. It's about sitting with yourself and observing how the mind gives you negative feedback and critical commentary and how we all suffer from that in this industry because the culture is so self-flagellating.

You're never good enough. You're either too fat or too thin or too young or too old or too pretty or not pretty enough—it just goes on and on. Last night my students were sharing all this with me and I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah and that's the way things are."

You know that movie *Babe*? About the little pig that wanted to herd sheep? I tell all my students they have to watch that film. *Babe* the pig knew he could communicate with sheep and he knew he could be a good herd pig but the world was like, "No, pigs don't herd sheep." Still, he believed and so did the border collies that listened to him and so, ultimately, his owner did. Remember the mice in the movie? They would appear in the corner of the screen with a little slogan that said "The way things are." That was this little slogan to help the audience understand what the rule was that you're observing about the culture. That movie is an accurate analogy for real life. I love it so much. So I'm like, "Those critical voices, that's the mice talking, telling you the way things are."

So yes, it's necessary to know the way things are so that you can navigate *around* the way things are. And when you meet people in the business that are programmed to believe that the way things are is the *only* way it is, you must have compassion and an ability to communicate with those people and not try to talk them out of their silly rules, while also holding close inside to your own sense of value. That's what meditation and spiritual philosophy can really do, is to help you grow into a person who respects themselves and holds to their own truth and understands that value has merit and there's a place for you.

Then, when you walk into the audition, you don't question your worth. You're not there to convince anybody. You're there because you're the answer to their problem and you know that. And their problem is casting the part. Now the problem with casting is that you never know what these people want. Most of the time, they don't even know what they want. That's another thing that I've learned. So perhaps they need you to show them. Also, there are some things you can't control and you can't overcome that may have nothing at all to do with you. Maybe you remind them somehow of the aunt that they didn't like when they were five. There's nothing you can do about that.

So it's a funny balance. You have to be without expectations but at the same time be in your center and invite them in to know what you have to share. You also have to let the results go and when the part's yours, it's gonna be yours and nobody else's. I think there's a big illusion about competition, that we're all competitive in this business when we're actually not. Each person's path is their path and their path alone. And every path is different. So this categorical thinking, this comparative, competitive thinking, it's not conducive and it doesn't help. However, it is the way things are, so you have to know about that and navigate around it.

Everybody's career has peaks and valleys—times when you're working a lot, times when the work disappears. You've obviously had many peaks in your career, but how did you survive the valleys?

Well, I've gone through several of them. I remember one of the worst ones I went through went on for about three or four years. I was just starting to come out the other side when my brother, who's also a meditator and a very successful television director in Hollywood, called me and read me this spiritual quote. I'm paraphrasing, but he said something like, "Betty Lynn, when every thing in the universe is giving you a reflection of something that you know you're not and it's challenging your own esteem and belief system and what you know to be true about yourself, the truth is that you're about to step into a higher plain."

So if you're a committed meditator and you're working really hard on your own spiritual growth, and you're trying

to live a life of compassionate and loving consciousness *AND* you know you're sincere in that and you're working really hard on that and yourself and *STILL* the world is just constantly saying no to you? Well, you just have to know that your sadhana—your spiritual path—is going very well. And I remember when he said this to me, I started laughing really hard. And he started laughing. I said, "Well then, Norman, I'm about to hit Nirvana, it's just around the corner. 'Cause it can't get a whole lot worse than this."

But he was right. Sure enough, it was just a very short period of time after that, that my career just blossomed again. I went from this really dark period of constant rejection, which felt like the world just inviting you to capitulate to the fact of your own worthlessness and give in, to something really wonderful. I went up to Williamstown to do a play and I felt like I'd moved into another realm of sweetness. I came out of that experience and I got *Sunset Boulevard* in London and went into what were two of the greatest years of my life. You just persevere. There are time periods where people think you're terrific and then time periods where they don't want to take your calls, but you haven't changed, you know? It happens.

The other thing I try to tell my students is that this world is a school. I think you're here to learn and to grow and to work off the debts of old karma that are still clinging to your consciousness and to experience the merits of the good stuff that you put out into the world. I also think that you're actually fundamentally meant to have a really good time and to experience joy, so if you just keep your focus on that and keep going because you love the craft, then things will be OK. You do it because you love it, not because you're trying to be famous. You can't want to sack it all in because you don't have your first TV show by the time you're 24. It's like, *come on*.

Another thing I was fortunate to kind of know when I was a kid, which has been a real blessing in my life, was that my best work was going to come later in life. I always felt that. I just had to remain committed and stay on the path of commitment to growth and keep studying because of the joy of the craft itself and the joy of learning and the joy of growth. Now see, the joke about that is that I woke up last year to realize, "Oh, this is later in life." Still, I think my best work is coming up.

It's refreshing to hear someone say that because so much of the narrative put forward, particularly for actors, is that the clock is ticking and that after a certain age, no one's gonna want you and your options basically evaporate.

But that's just a thought process, right? It's a whole set of concepts. Who made that shit up? Why should we choose to believe that if that's not what we feel? Why should we choose that? It's just bullshit. And you know, I really take them through a process, where I teach them, you know, human beings made up language. We made up words. Some poor dude somewhere one day looked at this creature walking by and said, "Aardvark," and everybody went, "Oh, yeah, that's an aardvark." Then that animal was an aardvark forever. That's how this shit starts. Someone says, "Well, we're not as pretty when we're older as we were when we were younger." Who said that? Who says you have to believe that? It's crazy. Humanity is humanity and every single race, color, creed, age, quality of human being is a part of humanity so those are the stories we're gonna tell. There are stories for everybody. There's space and room for everybody. You just need to be open and ready.

I'm thinking of Liza Minelli singing "Yes" from Liza with a Z. Maybe that really is the answer—try everything, be open to whatever comes your way, say yes as much as possible.

Yes! Follow your creative vision and your impulse and follow your heart—that's it. The form of it doesn't matter. The stories that we tell as artists, whatever the form is—painting, dance, music, singing, musical theater, straight theater, film, television—it's not different. We're always just telling stories to serve humanity or enlighten humanity or help humanity play and take it all more lightly. Everything, whether we realize it or not, comes out of the tradition of the healing arts, the goal is to help heal the culture and keep the culture on the path of compassion and love. That's our job.

Betty Buckley Recommends:

Okay, we'll start with Babe. Everyone needs to see *Babe*. It's a brilliant movie. Also, if you've never read it, go

check out The Last Unicorn. I love that book. I also always recommend The Alchemist and The Night Circus. Wonderful, brilliant books.

The music of Keith Jarrett. When I know he's doing a solo concert, I'll fly where he is. I'm one of those people. He's an improvisational pianist and he's done all kinds of music. He's absolutely a genius. My ex-husband, Peter Flood, made me sit down one evening and listen to his entire album, Bremen/Lausanne. He gave me a great dinner and then he sat me down and he said, "Just be quiet and listen to this." And we listened to it from start to finish without talking and that was it, my life was changed after that.

There's a brilliant Brazilian singer named Dori Caymmi that I love, as well as another brilliant Brazilian composer named Egberto Gismonti. His music really that stirs my soul. I also love Michael McDonald. I've been in love with him all my life. When I was younger, I desperately wanted to marry him. He's got a new album out, I'm so excited about that. Also, Steely Dan always.

Oh, Joni Mitchell. There's a new biography about Joni Mitchell called Reckless Daughter. I love all of her albums and her poetry. Joni forever.

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Vocation

Actress, Singer, Performer

Fact

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