

# Building artists from the inside out

## Actor's Center for Transformation is thriving in new home

BY JULIE MACLELLAN, THE RECORD    JANUARY 19, 2011



Building artists: From left, Omari Newton, Patrick Sabongui and Kyra Zagorsky are with ACT - the Actor's Center for Transformation, an on-camera acting school that recently opened its new premises on Carnarvon Street.

**Photograph by:** Larry Wright, THE RECORD

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Bodhi is three. His big sister, Ashé, is five. They're too small to know it, but there's something about their presence at the ACT Vancouver studio in downtown New Westminister that embodies the spirit of the place.

ACT - the Actor's Center for Transformation - is an on-camera acting school that recently moved to its own new premises on Carnarvon Street.

The school is the life's dream of the husband-and-wife team of Patrick Sabongui and Kyra Zagorsky, refugees from the hustle and bustle of Los Angeles who moved to New Westminister in 2008 in search of a place to raise their family and still pursue their professional acting careers.

They found it.

Walking in to their new premises, it doesn't take long to realize how happy they are. It's a large, high-ceilinged room with hardwood floors and mirrored walls, made warm and inviting by rich velvet curtains that separate the main studio from the small lounge - or green room, if you prefer the theatre term -

beyond.

Their two children, a pair of engaging, dark-eyed bundles of energy, make themselves happily at home, shedding snowboots and snowsuits by the door as they come in with Mom on a cold winter's morning before dashing to the office space upstairs to watch a movie while their parents chat.

Both tykes have already benefited from the school: Ashé recently booked a role alongside her mom in a TV movie starring Faye Dunaway, and Bodhi just got hired as one of the Gerber babies in a new TV commercial campaign.

But it isn't their budding success on the screen that makes it worthwhile for their parents.

It's the knowing that here, they're building a life that gives them time together as a family and a chance to do what they love.

"This particular location is the heart of it all," Sabongui says, looking around the space with a smile.

The school has been open since the fall of 2008. It originally shared a space with Ammara Dance Studio on Sixth Street. But, as registration grew and the demand for classes increased, Sabongui and Zagorsky realized it was time to strike out on their own.

Finding a central location was key, since, as Zagorsky puts it, "We're bringing Vancouver here."

They wanted something close to SkyTrain - the New Westminster station is just around the corner - so that they could draw people from all over the region.

It's worked: they have students coming from North Vancouver and Vancouver, as well as from New Westminster, Burnaby, the Tri-Cities and Maple Ridge.

The school's growth, Sabongui admits, has rather amazed him. Over the last couple years, when headline after headline has been about small businesses shutting down in the face of a stumbling economy, they've seen quite the opposite.

"For some reason, this segment just keeps expanding," he says. "In these tough economic times, people still want to invest in themselves. ... They want to explore this creative aspect."

Finding their own space has allowed them to offer more classes and workshops for everyone - from five- and six-year-olds up to retirees, from absolute beginners to experienced professionals who want a hand getting ready for an audition or learning a particular dialect or accent.

"The cross-section of people that come through our doors is fascinating to me," Sabongui says. "You get seasoned veterans, and you get retired parents who've wanted to do this their whole life."

The school's focus, first and foremost, is on acting.

Everyone who comes to the school, regardless of experience, must first take a four-week introductory class. From there, the instructors can gauge which class would be most beneficial to them next. All classes are kept small, and they hand-pick the students for each class.

"We're very particular of creating a positive and well-balanced class dynamic," Sabongui says.

Both Sabongui and Zagorsky are quick to say they're not trying to create stars.

"That's not something you can train for," Sabongui points out. "We're training artists. ... I think you're going to create actors with a more sustainable career if you build them from the inside out. Just being creative should be the reward."

Which doesn't mean they won't help students get work. In fact, it's a big part of their mission to deal with the business side of acting too - holding workshops with casting directors and agents, helping people book and prepare for auditions, and the like. Many of their students do get professional work, but, for some, acting is more about personal development.

"Right now it's about cultivating creativity, and getting people to become artists with it," Zagorsky says.

That's particularly true for youth, she notes: You won't catch any one of them promising an eager stage mother that their child is going to become the next Hannah Montana. Rather, under the leadership of Omari Newton - a professional actor who works in stage, TV and film - the kids have a chance to immerse themselves in the world of acting, starting with games and improvisation and working their way to advanced acting techniques.

"It's more about raising creativity and imagination," Newton says.

What helps the school's teaching to stand apart, Zagorsky said, is the fact that they're all not only working actors, but they all have university backgrounds in acting - both Zagorsky and Sabongui have master's degrees in drama from the University of California. With the extensive training they've all done, they've been able to pull together the best of the techniques they've learned in order to create their own teaching system.

But they're also quick to say it's not just about the classes.

They also want to create a supportive place where their students can work on their own projects - shooting their own films, staging their own plays.

At the same time, the two have also been able to work on their own projects. Last year, for instance, Zagorsky wrote and starred in a short film, which Sabongui produced and directed, and many of their students were able to gain experience helping out in a variety of jobs for the two-day shoot.

"It's really trying to cultivate a sense of community," he said.

As a testament to the network they've already built, Sabongui points out that, when they started on renovations, they had large team of helpers - students lent their time and talents to tear out the old ceiling, to fit drywall, to patch holes, to lay a new floor, to deliver materials and furniture.

"We've created a community," Sabongui says with a smile. "It's not just a revolving door of come in, book a job, go out."

Zagorsky notes that building the community around them has been especially important to them because they don't have family nearby - and raising two young children while working in the film industry can be quite a juggling act.

"You never know what's going to happen day to day," she points out.

And there's the inevitable fact that, as an actor, rejection and disappointment are part of daily life.

"As an actor, you're going to hear 'no' a lot more than 'yes,'" she notes.

Which is why Sabongui says he's not in a hurry to see either Bodhi or Ashé take up the same career.

"If they want to do anything other than get into this industry, I would be so happy," he says. "It's very difficult, it's very unpredictable."

He and Zagorsky, mind you, have no plans to change their own careers.

"Now we're hooked," Sabongui says with a laugh.

But, with all the uncertainty and disappointment that can come along with being an actor, they're glad they have the school to turn to.

"Having something real like this, something positive, something that gives back, it grounds us," Sabongui says.

Adult classes are already underway for winter, and a new set of children's classes begins Feb. 1. Check out [www.actvancouver.ca](http://www.actvancouver.ca).