



Bruce Glikas/FilmMagic

William Esper

## **Sanford Meisner was his mentor, and his students included Paul Sorvino, William Hurt, Sam Rockwell, Tracee Ellis Ross, Kim Basinger and Mary Steenburgen.**

William Esper, the influential acting teacher and Sanford Meisner disciple who lent his expertise to Kim Basinger, John Malkovich, Jeff Goldblum, Sam Rockwell, Tracee Ellis Ross and countless others, has died. He was 86.

Esper, who launched his William Esper Studio in 1965, died Saturday of complications from Lewy body disease at his home in New York City, his son, Michael Esper, told *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Esper's students also included Paul Sorvino, Mary Steenburgen, Jennifer Beals, Kristin Davis, William Hurt, Kim Delaney, Wendy Malik, Dule Hill, Calista Flockhart, Peter Gallagher,

Patricia Heaton, Aaron Eckhart, Christine Lahti, Gretchen Mol, Larry David, Amy Schumer, David Morse, Michele Shay, Patricia Wettig, Richard Schiff and Timothy Olyphant.

In a 2014 interview for *Backstage*, Esper said his actors were "drilled on how to create and craft spontaneity. Meisner said that acting without spontaneity is like soup without salt — it's stale, flat and totally unprofitable." Esper's method helped his students create characters with compelling inner lives.

Esper graduated from Western Reserve University in Cleveland and then was trained as an actor by Meisner at his famed Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theater in New York. Meisner's "reality of doing" was the foundation of his students' approach.

In 1962, Esper began training as a teacher and director with Meisner and worked closely with him for the next 15 years. He was on the staff of the Playhouse from 1965-77 and associate director of its acting department from 1974-77.

Esper also founded the BFA and MFA professional actor training programs at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts in 1977 and led the department until 2004.

Esper and a former student, Damon DiMarco, co-wrote the 2008 book *The Actor's Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique*.

In the foreword to the book, Heaton wrote: "Bill Esper was able to impart to me, as no other teacher could, the step-by-step process of internalizing the tools needed to successfully execute a character, explore a scene and harness control and utilize emotion. I credit him with the success I have today. He is one of our country's most valuable resources for actors and theater arts."

With his wife, Suzanne, Esper conducted numerous workshops throughout Europe, most notably at the National Film School of Denmark, the National Theater School of Norway and the State Theater of Mannheim. In 2008, they introduced Meisner's work to Russia at the St. Petersburg State Academy of Theater.

He worked extensively off-Broadway and was a member of the Ensemble Studio Theater in New York, and SAG honored him with a certificate of achievement for his service to acting.

In addition to his wife and son, survivors include his daughter, Shannon, and her husband, Jake; and grandson Otis.