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Remarks by Samuel Hope

On the occasion of his last meeting as NAST Executive Director

Working Room

Back in the early 1980s when the National Office staff started to work with members and officers of NAST, several questions arose. We asked ourselves: What are the fundamental requirements for success, not primarily in terms of the Association, but rather in terms of member institutions and the work that engages them? How can the Association do two things at the same time: work collectively, and best serve each member institution? What concepts provide transcendent guidance for decision-making over the long term? Today, I would like to share a few thoughts about one of those concepts, the concept of working room, and particularly its relationship to what we do individually and together as artists, scholars, and teachers.

The term “working room” suggests both effort and space. It suggests that effort and space are in a symbiotic relationship. It resonates with images of freedom.

Working room means a place to build a set, or hold acting classes, or conduct research. But there is far more. Working room also involves time, resources, and scope. Working room has philosophical, psychological, propositional, and spiritual dimensions. Working room is influenced by realities and perceptions thereof. It is shaped by natural and artificial limitations. It is at the heart of most political battles. It is one of the great themes of literary and theatrical art.

In our own professional and personal lives, we want to be or remain free. But we can be free in one or more dimensions and still have insufficient working room. Both freedom and working room are needed because working room provides the resources and conditions that enable us to do something with the freedom that we have. The relationship between working room and freedom is a continuing existential question in our individual and corporate lives.

All of us want working room for ourselves. We see sufficient working room as a necessary condition for realizing our potential, fulfilling our responsibilities, and doing our best work day by day. But we are not in the world by ourselves. What about working room for others? How is our working room related to theirs? These questions inform our quest to live as individuals and in community. Individuals and groups organize themselves differently with respect to these questions. These differences produce the need for mechanisms of negotiation and protection, particularly in times of deep turbulence and high anxiety such as our own.

How do we proceed? Let us go back to square one and work our way to another basic concept central to working room.

Theatre is a creative art form. Beyond basic level, creative fields deal with problems that do not have single answers. They glory in the new solution, the unique, the individual, the time-specific. Of course, some aspects of theatre do have single answers: vocabularies with their specific definitions; math- and science-based elements of theatre technology, and lines of text in a particular script, for example. We are producing either *King Lear* or *Oklahoma!* However, in theatre, the single-answer issues and problems are usually encompassed in a larger project where there are multiple good answers. Each one of these good answers is developed by an individual or group that is free to do so. And, to realize the specific solution their freedom enables, they must have both conceptual and operational working room. This is true whether they decide to perform *King Lear* or *Oklahoma!*

Their choice of what to perform sets a framework for creative action.

The concept of frameworks for creative action is central to work in the arts. It is central to how we proceed, particularly with respect to creation, performance, scholarship, and teaching at advanced levels. It is a basic concept central to freedom and thus to working room.

In architecture, a framework is the superstructure that allows the building to stand. The framework enables the detail. It is essential for stability and sustainability. Often it is invisible. The principle is the same in theatre and all the arts. The framework is a large-scale structure that enables creative action by establishing reasonable and reasoned limits. Chosen limits. Workable limits. Essential limits. Time-specific limits. One cannot do everything each time or all the time. When a director decides to do one play and not another, he or she is establishing a framework for a particular period of production. The decision to produce *King Lear* does not preclude a later decision to produce *Oklahoma!* Freedom diminishes in the context of a particular production as artistic choices are made at ever-more detailed levels as opening night approaches. But there are many opening nights of the same play. The framework is the same, but the results are different, because concepts are different. Excellence does not have a single answer. One thought does not fit all.

We have now considered working room, freedom, and frameworks. We have reminded ourselves that the framework concept is central to theatre and to other professional action associated with theatre. We now come to a fundamental and perennial question for theatre and all the other art forms. How do we develop relationships among freedom, working room, and frameworks to fulfill various necessary responsibilities? One of those responsibilities is teaching theatre, including the education and training of theatre professionals. This responsibility engages you and your counterparts in programs throughout higher education.

You carry out your educational responsibility in a world with individuals whose perspectives, interests, and knowledge do not necessarily coincide with your own.

Collisions of multiple interests influence the various contexts in which you live and work. In this larger context with multiple perspectives and interests in dynamic interaction, it is important to establish positions, conditions, and support systems that protect the relationship between freedom and working room in terms of what you do in your institution. Consistent with a fundamental of arts-based action, it is important to have certain kinds of frameworks that enable you to establish and preserve the relationship you need among common agreement, individual freedom, and working room, and thus to establish and preserve a basis for evolution and change that is effective because it is both realistic and wise.

The development and evolution of just such frameworks are a fundamental reason for NAST. It is a fundamental reason underlying the American accreditation system as a whole, based as it is on principles central to the American experiment in government.

In this concept, democratically developed common frameworks are built to enable, control, and defend all at the same time. They are created to provide a superstructure of common understandings that by their design and application enable virtually infinite creativity.

Even though they set certain limits, the frameworks are intended fundamentally to provide working room, not restrict it.

The framework approach recognizes that the most control does and should reside at individual and local levels. It focuses on helping individuals and groups gain power in things or power to do things for themselves.

The relationship of NAST to theatre in higher education is a perfect example. The organization was founded by and is owned by its member institutions. Through discussion, debate, continuous effort, and membership vote, the Association produced and continues to refine a consensus-based framework. The NAST Standards for Accreditation are one such framework within which member institutions create and operate their own specific programs. The standards framework is composed of common agreements about the fundamental elements and characteristics of degree programs, the preparation needs for various specializations, and the operational requirements at various levels of size, scope, and program choice. The standards tell our colleagues, administrators, and funders what is necessary and important. They establish boundaries, but they also protect us and provide a tremendous force for building and preserving local working room.

It is important to be clear. I am describing the principles and operating philosophy of NAST, and by extension, that of the other arts accrediting organizations. I am describing concepts, principles, and ways of working within accreditation that are indigenous to theatre and the other arts, and that are shared by those in other fields who understand the nature of complexity, the impossibility of centrally controlling complex situations, and the limited expertise held by any one individual or group.

All of us are surely aware that today there are strongly held and widely promoted views about what should be done in and to higher education, views that present a radical contrast to the freedom-framework-working room concepts we have been considering.

Together we face a regulatory agenda based on dangerous illusions. Proposals, requirements, and actions reflect beliefs that all complexities can be reduced to simplicities, that complexities reduced to simplicities can be controlled in great detail on the largest scale, that content expertise can be bypassed by standardized evaluation systems, and that local knowledge, professional judgment, and independent decision-making are outmoded. Utopian plans and promises derived from these beliefs are presented without respite, justified by negative after negative after negative about higher education, professors, administrators, accreditation, and so forth. In this value system, the frameworks concept is to be rejected for a regulatory one. The adverse impact on freedom and working room can be tremendous.

It is important here to make a distinction. A certain amount of regulation is essential. A society without laws, regulations, standards, and protocols will not work. We are not in the presence of an either/or situation, but rather two distinctly different approaches.

One approach places the concept of regulations within the framework of ordered liberty that we have been considering. It seeks to understand and work with the limits of regulation. It places regulations, laws, standards, and so forth in relationship to a larger whole. It recognizes the primary role of individual and local responsibility and action. Those affected have a say, and a vote.

The regulatory approach takes an opposite view. It believes that the way to improvement is through ever-increasing regulatory control from some centralized source. In this view, there can never be too many rules. At its extreme, the concept of local or individual decision-making is an anathema. Ultimately, everything and every moment must have the thumbprint of the centralized power. Those affected may or may not be able to comment, but they have no vote, no say in either forming or applying the rules.

It is easy to see that the elements of evaluation or accreditation can be operational mechanisms in either the framework or the regulatory approach. The way these mechanisms are developed and used is quite different, however, depending on the choice that is made.

Here is a quick contrast. The framework approach is exemplified by the NAST membership's work to develop and evolve standards that include basic principles for transfer of credit that leave specific policies and individual decisions to each institution. The regulatory approach is exemplified by federal efforts to legislate or regulate through Washington detailed standard requirements for all credit transfers for use in all individual cases, for all institutions.

Over the last 30 years, educational policy discussion, legislative action, and operational orientations have been moved toward the regulatory model by an unusual combination of think tanks, government bureaucrats, and elected officials of both parties. Each step has been relatively small, and the effort has received some tactical defeats, but over time, a significant distance has been traveled. The sequence seems to be outcomes, assessment, accountability, accounting, bureaucratization, standardization, centralized control. Evidence is everywhere. We see states standardizing the first two years of college for all institutions. We see education commoditized, in part so that it can be regulated purely as a market item. The forces producing these results seem to deny that the student, him or herself, is responsible for well over half of his or her own results. If there is failure, it is the institution and the teacher's fault, and only their fault. Failure is defined in strangely simplistic ways. There are proposals in Washington and elsewhere to evaluate and pay P-12 teachers based on how their students perform and earn in the workplace years after they leave elementary and secondary school. And there is bipartisan support in Washington and in many states to link graduates' salaries back to colleges and majors in a massive national database, ostensibly to help prospective students decide where to apply and what major to pursue.

In the course of studying and producing theatre over many years, I'm sure that many of you have thought deeply about questions of power distribution. Perhaps you would agree that the framework model is about serving distributed power, or power and responsibility distributed among individuals and organizations in a free society. The regulatory approach is about concentrating power and decision-making to the few. The framework approach recognizes the

need for cooperation in order to preserve working room for individual and local institutional action. The regulatory approach is about compliance with ever-proliferating requirements and reporting systems. The framework approach aims for low time taxes. Individuals, institutions, and organizations are left to spend most of their time doing work and producing in their field. In the regulatory regime, time is increasingly taxed away from work to respond, report, and keep up with frequently changing regulations. In other words, the framework approach is about responsibility; the regulatory approach, about accountability. The framework approach is about oversight; the regulatory approach, scrutiny. The framework approach encompasses and contains and works with regulation, but the regulatory approach opposes and tries to defeat the concept and existence of multiple independent frameworks. It erodes and corrodes working room.

It helps to stand back and look at what is actually happening rather than what we are constantly being told is happening. In just a few decades, the United States built and still enjoys the benefit of a great opportunity-based system of higher education. Many would say it remains the best in the world. This system was built using the framework concept. Framework-oriented accreditation was central to that achievement. It provided and still provides the rule-by-consensus function and a self-regulatory oversight function with respect to standards conceived as frameworks for individual thought and action. So having built a great system of higher education on the framework approach, and having obvious results to show for it, why would anyone think that a destruction of the framework system in favor of a centralized regulatory system could make things better? Regulatory proponents mention bad actors, proprietary educational corporations, and others that are abusing federal and state grant systems. But it doesn't stop there. The list of bad actors keeps expanding. To some regulatory proponents, it includes everyone in this room and all of our colleagues at home.

These conditions and questions are extremely vexing and interesting to those of us in the arts, because we know what happens in heavily regulated regimes. We understand the consequences of what author James C. Scott calls "authoritarian high modernism."¹ My paraphrased summary is: (1) an idea for centralized control decision-making, (2) justified by scientific sounding rationales, (3) enabled by available technology, (4) supported by data collection, and (5) instituted and enforced by governmental or other centralized powers. One thought, one size, one system fits all. The Czech novelists and playwrights use their wonderful mordent wit and their powerful belief in freedom to lay bare the failures of authoritarian, high-modernist regulatory regimes. One of the most destructive consequences of living under such a regime is the psychological effect of hating the regime, while having to appear to embrace it simply in order to survive. Permanent guilt and total accountability are regular features of such regimes. Not much working room there.

The conditions I am describing in American education are observable. Two interacting movements are in play. The first is the one I have been describing, the movement from the framework-of-ordered-liberty approach to the regulatory approach. The second is a change in the public purpose of education from learning to getting a job. The second change is providing justification for the first. While a focus on learning supports getting a job, a focus on getting a job does not always support learning, especially of the comprehensive kind that is important in maintaining democratic societies.

So what should we do? What resources do we have?

¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998).

Of course the first resource is the theatre itself in all of its artistic, analytical, and educational power. But there are other resources, of which NAST is one. What roles should the Association play? Continuing to advance the relationship among freedom, working room, and frameworks in higher theatre education is a fundamental responsibility.

Here are 11 sets of values and knowledge we already have that can help us.

1. Theatre, NAST, and its member institutions naturally embrace evaluation and assessment, but not the secular religion of assessmentism. Brian Greene has a wonderful phrase: "Assessing an artist's creative talent by requiring that she work from a paint-by-number kit."²
2. We work with complexity everyday as we make, study, teach, and support theatre. We do not try to deny complexity, rather, we engage it, use it, and exemplify it. The theatre is one of our greatest instructors about the nature of complexity in human affairs. Having the benefit of that instruction, we are not so foolish as to think we can control complexity through legal and technical systems; rather, we learn how to manage it and its various component parts and features toward an artistic, scholarly, educational, or other productive result.
3. We do not deny the necessity of specialized expertise, but rather, have daily experience of what happens when various types of expertise are deeply respected, brought together, relied upon, and integrated for a particular purpose at a particular time. Cooperation and negotiation work.
4. We see evaluation as a servant not a master in our art, scholarship, and teaching, and in accreditation.
5. Through our study of history, psychology, literature, scripts, and the elements of production, we are deeply familiar with issues of change. We make decisions all the time about how much change, when, and for what purpose. We can work with change in terms of causes, balances, and effects. We are wiser than to think that change is always good, or that most decisions about it are easy.
6. We also understand about propaganda, the social effects of technology, the cost of ignorance even among the most highly educated. We understand the dangers of orthopraxy and over-regulation in our art form and beyond. We set our own limits as the basis for creativity.
7. We are acquainted with the ebb and flow of movements and ideologies, their collisions of aspirations, their strengths and weaknesses, and the tragedy that occurs when they narrow vision to the point where it is easy to be blindsided, fooled, or conquered.
8. We are experts in the features of environments where various elements swirl, interact, and collide because we understand how those environments are created on stage.
9. We know about impasses where there are many exchanges of position but little dialogue or will to understanding or cooperation.

² Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (2010).

10. We understand the impact of financial stress on the human psyche. This will be useful, because, unless there are technological or resource breakthroughs, we and our younger colleagues almost surely will live in a time where financial pressures in our system rise to levels that we have not known before.

11. And finally, we know what creativity really is.

All these and other things we know place us in a position to keep perspective, find wisdom, act judiciously, and preserve working room. All these are important because theatre in higher education plays a critical role.

I expect we all agree that there will be a future for theatre in the United States as far in the future as we can see or project. The question is not survival but rather health and scope. What happens to theatre in higher education will have a tremendous impact one way or another on the health and scope of theatrical knowledge, understanding, production, and support in the United States. We may have to live with growing regulation to a certain extent, but we don't have to invest our minds and spirits in it; we don't have to help it. We have to preserve working room in as many dimensions as possible.

NAST has been built by its member institutions to play a role in developing the working room needed to continue building the capabilities of theatre through advanced higher education. Our independent studio schools, our colleges, our universities, and all the students, teachers, and administrators within them are a tremendous resource, a tremendous cultural asset for our country and for the world. Without working room for each, the aggregate result suffers. Participating in NAST is participating in an effort to address continuously the challenges of working room. Participation is an investment in the cultivation of individual, local, and field-wide working room.

Your Board has made a wise decision to appoint Karen P. Moynahan as your next executive director. I have seen her exemplify the values and principles we have been considering together on a daily basis as she has worked to help institutions and programs. She has made this investment along with you.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity that you have given me to participate with you in your working room-based effort for over 30 years. You and your predecessors have welcomed me and other members of the National Office staff. For those of us not schooled in theatre, you have enabled us to learn enough about your field, your habits of mind, and your ways of working to be able to assist you. We know more about how you make us think in the dark. The Association has grown about nine-fold over the last thirty years. It will continue to grow, particularly if it maintains the framework approach. For myself, I do not regard growth in numbers as a major indicator of success. I see success in terms of how well we are serving each individual institution, how careful we are with each other, how much we respect each other's goals and objectives, how much we understand that programs are in different stages of development, how large our vision is for the whole enterprise, and our understanding of the connections we all share with each other. It seems to me that the framework approach of NAST has enabled success in all of these areas, and seems to be a reason why institutions wish to join us.

I have every confidence that this organization will thrive under the fundamental values, principles, and operational approaches established by the members over the years. It cannot do otherwise and remain consistent with the nature of theatre. If we want freedom and working

room, we must help others achieve it, even as we work for it in our own endeavors. We must do this in whatever conditions we find ourselves. I am reminded of G.K. Chesterton's comment: "A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it."³ Theatre and its people are alive, creatively so, powerfully so. This life as manifested in NAST has made contributions to students, faculties, programs, and theatre that are beyond counting. I have had the great privilege to see what you have accomplished. It is awe-inspiring, an incredible advance achieved quietly.

Looking back, I see the Association laying a deep foundation over the past 30 years. This foundation is just the beginning of the work that can be done. Not to glorify and build up NAST, but rather to work the issues inherent in the combination of artistic action, working room, freedom, complexity, teaching, learning, and communication. Together, we serve individual institutions in developing the means for engaging this interaction under a basic framework of commonality that serves that interaction. Continuing this service not only grows the field of theatre and its connections, it grows our contribution to civilization writ large, and thus to individual minds and spirits.

If we are successful at doing all these things, NAST will thrive and prosper in its appropriate service-oriented role. I have spoken for a few minutes now and covered many topics. I have tried to contrast two basic approaches or ways of thinking. I have warned about the replacement of systems of human relations with technical systems and regulatory hubris. But my fundamental message is that somehow we in theatre in higher education must find our way to transcend the negatives that are constantly rearranging themselves into new and more troubling forms. We must create our own way forward more effectively than ever before. I think we can take a great deal of courage from the fact that somehow theatre has always done this. Theatre has always found the working room to continue through conditions much worse than our own, even if that working room was only of the spirit. Theatre remains long after regimes and empires have gone. Theatre is transcendent because it speaks constantly to transcendent things. I look forward to seeing how you will pursue and continue this essential relationship with transcendence, how you will continue to pursue working room, develop frameworks, and maintain freedom.

Hear French analyst Jacques Ellul: "Kierkegaard tells us from another angle that the problem changes in accordance with the one who solves it...Courage increases the danger and surmounts it. Generosity leaves injustice to its filth and regards it from above. Patience makes the burden heavier and carries it, while gentleness makes it lighter and bears it lightly. The free man changes the situation itself, although we so often think that it is man who changes at the whim of circumstances."⁴

And so, be free, think freedom, use frameworks, protect working room.

Despite all of these things that are in our reality, and all of the challenges we face, I believe the future is full of promise, that the next third of a century will see greater work, deeper engagement, higher levels of creativity, scholarship, and teaching. As I have indicated today, NAST and its members already hold the conceptual keys. It is essential to hold on to them, to develop them, to use them and share them, and to not let anyone or anything take them away.

³ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (1925).

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (1976).