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Keynote Address
Changing Modes of Cultural Authority—and the Implications for Training

Ben Cameron
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

Thank you so much for that lovely introduction, and the opportunity to be here with you.

I'd actually—given both the 50th Anniversary opportunity and the wonderful recollections just now from your president—would like for us all to stop a moment and remember the teachers that brought us here.

In my own case, that would include Mrs. Cummings, my first grade teacher at Jack and Jill Elementary School, who cast me as the caboose in *The Little Engine that Could*—a performance that certain pundits in High Point, North Carolina, still describe as "definitive."

Tom Haas, who taught me survival skills through including me in his summer stock company where we produced 13 shows in 8 weeks and performed them in rotating repertory, who set my theatrical imagination on fire, and who taught me everything I know about Shakespeare (including where Othello finds the knife in Act V) before setting me on the path to Yale.

Milly Barranger, who had the audacity to hire me for my first college teaching job and to put me in an auditorium to teach a dramatic literature survey course to almost a thousand non-major per semester, and Don Drapeau, who entrusted his majors to me for intensive explorations of text in seminars, and who taught me that optimism, eternal good cheer and humor is never a bad idea.

And to my granddaddy James Stephen Brown, a teacher in a different way—an Appalachian country doctor, briefly in Ripley's Believe It or Not for delivering his 6,427th baby on his 92nd birthday, who scraped together every nickel, dime and quarter to send his daughter (my mother) to the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music to study opera in the 1920's, and who—by virtue of his long standing habit of dealing less in cash than in bushels of corn, sides of ham, and the honor of having babies named for him by people who couldn't afford to pay—taught me that a life of service, independent of monetary gain, is a noble calling.

These and so many others—including those who you honor in your memories—live in one of my favorite poems "To Be of Use" when Marge Piercy writes:

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

Every day, these people and you yourselves are harnessed to the cart to do what has to be done again and again, all to, as she later writes, "engage in the work that is real." And for that, my deepest thanks.

My mission today, as I see it, is to be both advocate and provocateur—to both report on what we see afoot in the professional theatre field, and to pose questions about what this may imply for the work you do in colleges and Universities. While I hope to hearten you at times, I feel certain that I am likely to say things that will disturb or even enflame some of you. Nevertheless I hope that in our time together we can pursue and embody the pathway of creativity as described by Angeles Arrien: "showing up—really showing up—listening deeply, speaking the truth, and letting go of predetermined results."

At the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, where I work, our late benefactress charged us in her will with the care of "actors, singers, dancers and musicians in the presentation and performance of their work"—a directive that, in intersection with her life-long passions, has led us to dedicate our resources to professional artists working in jazz, contemporary dance, and theatre (thanks to those actors), and the organizations who nurture, present and produce them.

In order to define our grants strategy, we periodically convene artists, managers, administrators and board members from those fields to ask, in essence, "What keeps you up at night?"—conversations that reveal that we live today in confounding, depressing, disorienting, thrilling, exhilarating times.

We have heard three kinds of issues in these conversations. We have heard idiosyncratic issues—issues particular to one field but not to others—issues of career transition for dancers, who in many cases forego college and even high school in order to train and at the age of 35 find themselves with knees failing, backs going out, at the end of the careers, facing the rest of their adult lives unable to do the one thing they have been trained to do—an enormously challenging issue in dance, but one that does not resonate in theatre, where directors and designers work well into 80's or 90's and where actors perform well into their 70's until they become too old to learn the lines—at which point they migrate to television and *Downton Abbey*. In this idiosyncratic realm, theatre professionals talked about the challenges of overcoming spoken language barriers in an increasingly multi-lingual America and an increasingly global age—as well as our too limited awareness of the wealth of work being written and produced in other countries, excepting perhaps Britain.

In a different realm, we hear chronic issues—issues of under-capitalization as shockingly few American performing arts organizations, including theatres, have significant reserves, much less endowments, with the fields now operating with aggregate negative working

capital, and the majority living on the proverbial razor's edge, struggling to meet current obligations—and of under-compensation, not only of artists but of managers, technicians, and administrators as well. In fact, when we discuss organized philanthropy—when we talk about foundation giving, government giving, individual and corporate giving, we should acknowledge that the biggest charitable giving sector of all is the artists, managers and technicians on whose lives the work is made by virtue of inadequate compensation, paucity of benefits, lack of pensions or retirement assets and more. We call these issues Chronic, not to suggest they were unimportant or not worth addressing, but because our industry—much to our shame—is predicated on discounted labor and because those of us in our 60's, like I am, heard these same issues 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago, and more.

But we heard four issues that we would not heard 10 years ago—or at least not with the same urgency as today—issues I'll call "issues of the new millennium."

First, we heard concerns about the increasing dysfunctionality of the 501(c)3 model—the breakdown of old fundraising strategies, the difficulties of managing boards, and the hunger for new models, as arts leaders, increasingly overwhelmed said, "I went into this business, not from desire to manage a large organization, but because of a love for the arts. Now my life is about fundraising, board cultivation, school board policy, advocacy and the like. Weeks go by without my setting foot in a rehearsal hall, artists come and go in our building whose names I don't even know. Something is wrong with this picture: isn't there another way for us to finance and support the work we are called to do?"

Second, we heard about an impending generational transfer of leadership, as a founding and/or presiding generation of leaders retires or moves on. A Meyers Foundation report in 2006 predicted that 75% of all not-for-profit chief executives—including but not limited to those in the arts—would have leave their jobs by 2012, citing burnout from fundraising and exhaustion from working with their boards as their top two reasons. While this has not happened—due in no small part to an economic downturn, the lack of viable alternative employment and the diminished retirement portfolios to the now too proverbial 201(k)—the transfer is coming. For decades, we in the arts have wondered, "Where in the arts will we find the young people who want the long hours, the bad pay, the lives of social and financial masochism with which we contented ourselves?" but in these conversations, we heard a very different response from the youngest participants. "There are more than enough of us willing and ready to lead," they said, "But we don't want to be the mere custodians of that thing you made. Unless we are given the power and autonomy to shape and change your organizations, we won't be interested"—a perspective that means the issue is not the identity of an heir apparent, the real issue is organizational capacity for flexibility and change.

Third, we heard about disorienting shifts in audience composition and behavior. We in the US are moving rapidly to a non-majority country—as California and Texas, two of our largest states, for example have already done. And while this shift offers us fantastic new opportunities in new aesthetic, new collaborations, new forms of cultural expressions, it

challenges an assumed allegiance to and understanding of traditional Eurocentric forms of expression and social customs. And retaining the more traditional audience of the past is increasingly perplexing: single ticket sales are down, subscriptions are down, aggregate attendance is down. Even a decade ago, 42% of men and 58% of women said, "I am too tired to do the things I want to do" and the number one answer to a poll asking what people most eagerly anticipated on a free evening was no longer going to a play, attending a movie or even dinner with friends, but was instead "I want a good night's sleep." After decades of growth, our audiences are shrinking and our own financial needs, driven in many cases by escalating fixed costs of facilities, insurance, health care and more, in tandem with flat or negative shifts in corporate, foundation and often government funding, mean escalating ticket prices that threaten to place attendance beyond so many in our communities we wish to reach and serve.

Finally, we heard about the mystifying impact of technology on the performing arts—impact felt on at least three levels:

1. As competition. While we initially saw the internet as a great ally in marketing, it has now emerged as our biggest competitor for time and attention. Now, depending on whom you read, in order to gain attention, theatres must compete with between four and six thousand different marketing messages a typical American sees every single day. Leisure time internet consumption has increased more than 50% in the last three years alone, and according to the *New York Times*, by the time she graduates from college, a senior will have spent 20,000 hours on line and an additional 10,000 hours playing computer games—a reminder we now operate in a cultural context where computer games outsell music and movie recordings combined and are reviewed in the "Arts and Culture" section of the *New York Times*.

2. As shaper of consumer expectation. Thanks to the internet, we believe we can get anything we want any time we want it, shopping at 4 o'clock in the afternoon or 3 o'clock in the morning, ordering jeans tailor made to our own bodies, delivered to our front doorsteps—expectations of personalization, customization and convenience, that the live theatre, which has set curtains, set venues, attendance inconveniences of travel, parking and the like, simply cannot meet.

3. And as determinant of cultural economics. What will it mean when we ask a young person to pay $50, $75, $100 for a theatre ticket, when that young person is used to downloading culture on demand 24/7 for $1.29 a song or for free?

These are huge, seismic issues. But however particular these issues feel to us in the arts, we are not alone: we are essentially in the midst of a realignment of cultural expression and communication—a realignment that is shaking the newspaper and television network industries, that is redefining and challenging higher education with the rise of online Universities, MOOC's and Certificate programs; and (in an indication of what may be yet to come) has led to the collapse of Borders Books, Blockbuster Video and Tower Records.

Surely we see ourselves in the words of poet Adrienne Rich in *The Dream of a Common Language XIII*: "We're out in a country that has no language, no laws...Whatever we do together is pure invention. The maps they gave us were out of date by years…."

And aren't you glad you invited me here to brighten your day?

As an occasional student of history, I was struck by a question at the ISPA conference in 2009, when, in considering this stress, an audience member asked, "What if we are in the equivalent of the Religious Reformation of the 15th Century? Could it be we are in the early days of an Arts Reformation?"

This question resonated deeply on several levels.

Both reformations have been spurred by technological breakthrough—the invention of the printing press meant anyone could own a Bible, tracts nailed on a door in one town could be reproduced en masse and appear across a country in a matter of days—and God knows we are in the midst of a technological revolution and a mass redistribution of knowledge.

The Reformation obliterated old business models. As Russell Willis Taylor, former CEO of National Arts Strategies has observed, "The Reformation was a great time to be a land buyer and a rotten time to be a monastery"—a reminder that we need to at least examine the question of whether the classical repertory company, for example, might be the monastery of today.

But at its heart, the Reformation challenged the notion of intermediation—"Why do a I need a priest to intercede for me with God?"—a question that is finding a direct parallel today as more and more people question the necessity of a professional artist to have a creative, artistic experience.

Just as the religious Reformation reconceived and broadened the universe of how religion would operate, when and where it would operate, who would be empowered to act, giving rise to new denominations, new religious rituals, new opportunities both for clergy to practice in radically new ways and for the common lay person to assume responsibility for her own spiritual experience, we are witnessing an explosion of new practices and challenges to old assumptions.

We are seeing the emergence of the hybrid artist: avocational artists doing work at a professional level—a group dubbed elsewhere as the Pro-Ams—a group whose work populates YouTube, Film festivals, dance competitions and more at one end of the spectrum, and, at the other, professional artists who choose to work outside of the traditionally hermetic arts environment, not from financial necessity but because the work they feel called to do cannot be accomplished in the narrow confines of the gallery, the concert hall or the theatre at the other. These professionals especially engage in what Michael Rohd calls civic practice—artists who, rather than create from a personal artistic impulse and then try to find an audience, instead work with a community that defines its

own needs and then together determine how to best use the gifts and talents the artist has to offer. These hybrid artists at both ends are expanding our sense of aesthetic possibilities—even as they assault our traditional notions of cultural authority and undermine the presumed ability of traditional arts organizations to set the cultural agenda.

Moreover, changes are being made on the other side of the traditional proscenium as well. Alan Brown, on behalf of the Irvine Foundation, has actually redefined audience interaction as a five band spectrum of possibility—the performance, that product to which many of us have dedicated our lives, and which represents the focus of many of your programs, culminating in productions often embracing the classical theatre as well as the contemporary and the musical; the expanded performance, i.e., the addition of program notes, talk backs with actors, meet the artists session with the director, and more—essentially ancillary materials and experiences designed to enhance the performance but in which the "artists create, audiences consume" is maintained.

But then a bright line of sorts is crossed—one in which the relative power of audience and artist begins to shift. First we have co-curated arts events, where the audience has an active say in the choice of work to be presented. The Classical Theatre of Harlem recently offered five staged readings, and then asked the audience to vote on which play should be fully produced in the subsequent season, and a number of theatres have given audience choices for a particular slot—e.g., which of the following three Shakespeare plays would you most want to see—in determining its schedule.

One further step to the right, we find co-created arts events, where the audience has an active role in the creation of the work itself. Cornerstone Theatre in Los Angeles has long been a leader in creates new interpretations of classic texts using community citizens as lead actors and the professional actors in supporting roles, or of mounting community stories under the guidance of professional playwrights. Roadside Theatre in Kentucky convenes story circles from which plays then spring, and the Civilians, in preparing their "Tales from My Parent's Divorce" asked an online audience to share the stories of what had happened to them as children when their parents separated as an integral part of their background research.

And finally, we have surrender of space and resources—the flash mob, the surrender of public plaza to dozens of performance pieces at the Yerba Buena Center attended by more than 3,000 people while 250 watched the sold out performances of Young Jean Lee's Feminist show inside, or Donna Walker Kuhn's famous story of working with an immigrant population in New York, only to discover that, rather than attending productions at the Public Theatre, what they really wanted was access to the stage for their own children and neighbors to perform in talent shows—powerful reminders that sometimes providing an environment where things can unfold produces the most remarkable loyalty and allegiance of all. Marc Bamuthi Joseph now disavows the term "audience" altogether in favor of "intentional community design"—a notion that sometimes the artist needs a community of co-creators to dance with, sometimes a

community of gamers working across consoles, yes sometimes a group in a more traditional setting watching a more traditional performance—a broader sense of "audience" and "communities" that is leading to bold experiments at the Yerba Buena Center in San Francisco, where the degrees to which an institution and serve both civic and social artists is being tested in bold new ways.

This spectrum may not be for everyone and it is indeed a challenge: with every step to the right, the interpretive and curatorial control of the audience grows, and the control exercised by the arts professional diminishes. But it is an invitation as well, noting that with those same steps, public participation and numbers grow. And so forward groups are asking: "Where in this spectrum can I find value? Where can I offer value? And how do I move more fluently back and forth through the spectrum as opportunity and occasion warrant?"

Many of you may have heard in all of this a death knell for traditional theatre practice, so let me be clear: the Religious Reformation did not obliterate the Catholic Church. Just as 500 years later, many people around the world still find deep meaning in high mass and formal religious institutions, I for one believe that the historic institutions that we have funded to date at their best will continue to be worthy of our investment. They currently and will represent the best opportunities for lives of economic dignity for many artists, and the logical place where artists who need and deserve to work at a certain scale can find an appropriate home. Whatever we do as a community, we must continue to nurture and sustain these groups, and especially support their efforts to adapt and change to the larger world.

But with the passage of time, there are likely to be fewer and fewer of these major institutions, commanding less and less of the lion's share of philanthropic resources, and offering fewer and fewer employment prospects to the graduates or the future—a challenge powerfully argued in *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class* by Scott Timberg.

Therefore, it is time for every department to at least ask: what if the mission of the theatre of the future is no only in producing plays, but in social orchestration, in which the performance is a piece but only a piece of what we are called to do? What it audiences will be less interested in products to be consumed than in experiences that will serve as springboards to their own creativity? What would we do differently if we though of ourselves less as theatre departments and more as platforms designed to aggregate live narrative energies?

It is in this environment of expanded opportunity, shifting formats, recalibrating value and redefined roles that you are being asked to train your students and the professionals of the future. It is a time for each of us to plant a flag for our vision of the theatre of the future, to be intentional, deliberate, to define our value and fearlessly articulate our curricula to fulfill our vision of the future, to reaffirm or redefine as we must, rather than to accept mutely the curricula of the past, however valuable to us it has been.

Regardless of mission or aesthetic, forward thinking departments must at least consider the following questions: what if the true mission of theatre is not producing plays but social orchestration in which the production is a piece, but only a piece, of what we are called to do? What if the future will be less interested in products to consume than in experiences that serve as springboards to their own creativity? What would we do differently if we thought of ourselves less as theatre departments and more as platforms designed to aggregate live narrative energy?

Some of you will choose reaffirmation—and God bless you for it. Existing theatres are already desperate for new leaders at every level, new administrators poised to lead capital and endowment campaigns, new actors that can understand subtext and social realism as well as free verse, and new directors that can stage broad epic battles and intimate domestic interplay. We need and will continue to need the conservatory mission, dedicated to honing and refining expertise, craft and dramatic skill to its highest level.

But just as today's major theatres were for the most part begun by people in their 20's and 30's who forged paths and roads where none had existed before—people like Gordon Davidson at the Mark Taper Forum, or Robert Brustein at Yale Rep, or Zelda Fichandler, who started the Arena Stage fresh out of graduate school at Catholic University as a for-profit theatre, selling shares to finance seasons and never running a deficit until she became a nonprofit—our arts landscape is at a comparable moment of evolution now—a moment in which a new generation of pioneers will be responsible for creating yet new paths and new ways of behavior, where none have existed before, responding to new conditions that reflect the new ways in which we all live.

These future artists and administrators will need a very different set of skills. Emphasis on voter registration methods and moveon.org may be more relevant to their future than Subscribe Now (with all due respect and affection to the late and great Danny Newman). The pop-up or ephemeral organization may be more relevant than the permanent institution; mis-capitalization, viability and adaptability may be more appropriate lenses than under-capitalization, sustainability and stability. At the very least, inter-cultural fluency, technological facility, policy articulation, grasp of political process, donor psychology, and community organizing will be baseline skills only in the management of organizations, but potentially in artistic practice, especially for the civically inclined artist.

Teaching these new skills, embracing them in the curriculum will be enormously challenging. It will require that we cultivate an appetite for life-long learning in students who now too typically believe that the need for training ends with a degree. It will beg the question, not of what we will add, but of what we will let go of, what we will STOP requiring to give space, time and energy to the study and development of these new essential skills.

So where do we begin? In this journey, we must begin by asking: why must we exist today? Because we have a building is no longer good enough. Because we have a staff and board is no longer good enough. Because we have a history of critical reviews and awards

is no longer good enough. What is it in the world that mandates that we continue forward and flourish today?

Every department must begin by asking itself five questions:

1. What is the value of theatre (not of my theatre department) for our communities—communities of students, faculty, town and nation?

2. What is the value theatre alone has or that theatre offers better than anything else?

3. How would our communities be damaged if we closed our doors and went away tomorrow?

4. What would greatness mean for my department—and if achieved, what difference would it make?

5. And how might my department be optimally structured, poised and focused to be my communities' best conduit to theatre? A question that invites us not to jettison all we do, but to keep what is most central and viable, to expand to embrace the new possibilities we may not have seen, and to discard past behaviors that do not and will not serve us in the future.

If we can answer these questions, if we can think about the needs of our multiple communities and be intentional in our place, not only within our colleges or universities but in an aggregated landscape of training, we will move from this Arts Reformation into an Arts Renaissance, a renegotiation of old ideas to flower and flourish in new ways in these new and often mystifying times in which we live.

I am deeply optimistic about the future of theatre in the academy and in this country, no matter how much I may not have sounded so until this moment.

I am cheered that, as live arts attendance erodes, arts participation—not only people accessing the arts through technology, but people writing their own songs, creating their own dances, making their own movies—is exploding at an exponential rate—and that (as Arts MidWest is finding through their work on Public Will building) the most passionate advocates for our work are people under 40 and people of color.

I am cheered by the eloquence of the Harvard Task Force on the Arts in its cry that the arts enable students to become citizens of the world, prepared to apprehend what at first may seem only strange and participate in a human creativity that is not hemmed in by fear and suspicion or tightly bound by time and space—a cry that has led Harvard to announce its first arts major sequences for Undergraduates, beginning next year.

I am cheered by the explosion of interest that is seen in the ever growing numbers of students—almost 120,000 last year alone—who graduate with arts degrees and the 30% increase in those numbers every decade.

I am cheered by the expanded relevance and role theatre is playing in many universities. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (my alma mater), the Law School and the University presenter partnered on a multi-week symposium on capital punishment—a symposium that featured legal experts, psychologists, and sociologists, and that culminated in performances of *The Exonerated*, the theatre piece crafted from interviews with prisoners on Death Row. At Dartmouth College, the Hopkins Center engaged playwright/performer Anne Galjour to interview Hanover-area citizens losing their homes to rising taxes and gentrification as part of a campus wide, year long symposium on class and money, while in Cambrige, the American Repertory Theatre has embarked on a multi-year partnership with the peace and human rights center in the wake of *Witnessing Uganda*, an original piece performed by Ugandan refugees—efforts that have repositioned the arts on those campuses as legitimate, rigorous forms of research.

Indeed, while we have engaged in the STEM vs. STEAM debate—one that recognizes the arts as a discrete discipline worthy of its own study—there is increasing appreciation for what I would call (STEM)2—STEM raised to the Arts power—learning transformed through the animating power of the arts—whether through placing musicians at the University of Michigan medical school to teach young doctors how to listen differently, using choreographers at Wesleyan to team-teach global warming with scientists, or placing Anna Deveare Smith at the NYU law school to teach both listening and narrative—efforts that are transforming pedagogy, transforming interest in the arts, transforming public conviction that the arts are increasingly essential in these difficult times.

I am cheered by the great University presidents, like Michael Roth at Wesleyan (whose *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* I highly recommend) who work to protect and expand the arts, and by former Tulane President Scott Cowen, who fearlessly and courageously led extraordinary change.

Two years ago, I heard President Cowen share his experience on returning to a devastated New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina—a city decimated physically, socially, spiritually. His University—long a leader in higher education in general and in theatre in particular—longed to reunite, to reconnect to its past, to re-form, and move forward in its long standing mission of being a center for learning and reflection. At the same time, he realized, nothing in that mission required Tulane to go beyond its own walls, to reach out to its surrounding community, to roll up its sleeves, get its arms dirty, to strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward, to "do what has to be done, again and again," as Marge Piercy would say.

And so Cowen chose to ignore the mission—to require without debate every student, every course, every department and facet of the university to add a public service component to rebuild the City. In the face of significant resistance from a highly tenured faculty and uncertainty from the students themselves, Cowen called on the community to respond at its most creative and spiritually committed levels. Business students counseled start-ups and entrepreneurs, engineers tackled construction, philosophy majors worked to rebuild education, recognizing their ability to debate complex ideas to start debate

clubs in every surrounding high school. Some resistant faculty moved on, others frankly were marginalized, but in the wake of this new purpose, applications grew, retention rates grew, graduation rates grew, contributions grew, the sense of community grew—the reward of (again to cite Piercy) engaging in the work that is real.

I have been pondering Peter Coleman's *The Five Percent*, a book about how we find ourselves stuck in tough problems, whether the impasse in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine, or here closer to home the abortion rights debate, or perhaps even redefining tax codes and economic structures. Coleman suggests that these seemingly intractable problems share three common qualities: the emphasis placed on a win/lose/winner take all dynamic, the oversimplification of issues especially in a sound bite age, and the tendency of participants to surround themselves with self-reinforcing feedback loops, reinforcing their perspectives—as apt a description of the Congress of the United States as any I have heard.

The arts in general—and theatre in particular—offer us an alternative to intractability. Instead of competition, we promote cooperation; in the face of over simplification, we promote nuance, shades of meaning and substance. And especially now when we are encouraged by ways both overt and subtle to view one another with hostility and fear and suspicion and in the face of reinforcing feedback loops, we assemble audiences to gather with people unlike themselves to consider their fellow human being with generosity and curiosity. God knows if we have ever needed that capacity in human history, we need it now.

Like Scott Cowen's New Orleans, we face today a moment of physical, social, and spiritual upheaval and distress—and the world is begging us to roll up our sleeves.

Whether you choose to shape the future through cultivation of delight and imagination through traditional theatrical practice or move into this emerging social practice realm even as it struggles to define itself, I salute you, as social activists, pledged as you are to a world of tolerance, compassion, empathy and hope.

I promise you the hand of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation remains outstretched to theatre both now and for years to come.

As Tony Kushner says in *Angels in America*, "You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work Begins."

Thank you for your kindness and generosity in listening to me this afternoon. Thank you and God speed.