

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE
ANNUAL MEETING 2016

Keynote Address

Craft: Reinvigorating the Development of Expertise

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It seems only right while speaking to a group of theatre makers to open with a quote from Warren Buffet:

“Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.”

I love this idea. I love that the theatre and the art of storytelling has been alive since the beginning of civilization. It makes me as an artist feel part of a bigger legacy and history. But lately I’ve been thinking a lot about how exactly I came to feel a part of that and worrying about how to pass that on especially to a generation so led by accessibility and immediate gratification.

It scares me that one of the most prominent things I’ve seen of recent years in my teaching and rehearsal rooms is the belief from young artists, that they can get it “right,” and that they can get it “right” on the first try. *That is not craft, that is just instinct, and instinct isn’t repeatable & shows a week.* Instinct is certainly a necessary tool for an artist, but it can’t end there.

After rehearsing a scene, one of the first things these actors will say is, “was that right? Is that what you wanted?” to which they are met with a blank stare from me. Right?? What is RIGHT? When I ask them to talk about a specific choice they had made I frequently hear in response, “that’s just how I felt.” There is no rigor—there is no depth to the choices. But I am aware (and this is where I’m just going to sound old): this is a new generation. One that we are all facing together, that I have watched grow over the 8 years that I taught at Northwestern’s precollege program, and over the 4 years I have spent back in Louisville now teaching and mentoring inside Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Apprentice/Intern company. Here is what we know:

1. Because of technology, they are the first generation to have an unlimited amount of platforms on which to express themselves.
2. They are the first generation to have never known a world without the internet and cell phones and all the “connection” it brings (yes, I am putting “connection” in quotes intentionally).

3. This is a generation that as children were largely rewarded for participating, not for winning, and so now they expect constant feedback and praise. There's no long term slow build of knowledge. It's like checking off boxes for a to-do list.
4. This is a generation that has known standardized testing their whole education. They have been taught by the system that there IS a right answer.
5. They want the path to be straight. They want to learn just what they need to know to get the job.

I would posit that what seems lacking here is a sense of curiosity.

I am here to encourage us to reinvigorate the development of expertise in the arts. To work deeply not broadly, through a rigorous delving into craft, with a boundless sense of that curiosity, all aiming to fuel the development of one's process and unique point of view.

As this generation of millennials comes forth, and as so many of them are rewarded for their entrepreneurial spirits, how can we in the arts inspire our students to go deeper on a lifelong quest for knowledge and skills?

Young Artists

I think there is real danger in going broader rather than deeper in a myriad of ways. Let's start with connections. I think most of us in this room would say that our connections and our networks are some of the most important tools in getting us where we are today. But I'm not sure many of us would be referring to our "connections" on Facebook, LinkedIn, or Instagram. I see this all the time with my interns now—what I would call "overfriending and underconnecting." We in fact had to make a rule with our Apprentice/Intern company that they can not "friend" a visiting artist until they have had more than three meaningful conversations. It has been an important learning curve for them to understand that developing relationships is not synonymous with accumulating friends. My network is enhanced with the ease of social media, but it is far from defined by it. It goes much deeper than that and has taken me over 20 years to cultivate.

Art is about human connection and immersion. You have to show up and be present for it.

"Liking" 100 photos on Instagram does not compete with 45 seconds in the Tate Modern in London surrounded by the new Cy Twombly installation. Wikipedia is not synonymous with an encyclopedia, but basically a group blog, and a 10-minute YouTube clip is not experiencing the Ballet Trockadero.

Now I don't mean to oversimplify the idea that *liking* something is bad, I just think the definition has been mangled. As a young artist it is important initially to do something because you like it. When I chose to direct my first musical, it was truly and simply because I loved it. Tony Award winning director Anna Shapiro talks about how crucial it can be as a young artist to experience this: *the moment when your instincts feel met*.

Doing that work can confirm you, and we all know that feeling of connectedness is what initially drew us to this art in the first place. So I am not slamming liking. I'm just reminding us that to love something is NOT the same thing as to understand it.

And this lack of curiosity about understanding is again what I'm going to return to the need to reinvigorate. As we train artists to move into the professional world we need to demand that they examine more than just what they are feeling. And that is where craft and process come into play. You shouldn't have a process when you're 18, but you should be curious about how to start making one. I think it's my job as a director and teacher to encourage and challenge that all the time—in every room I lead.

Craft

Before we go further, let me be more articulate about what I mean by “craft.” As one of my mentors, Jon Jory who was the long-time artistic director of ATL and one of our country's great acting teachers defines it: *craft is a delivery system for the mind and the heart*. It's a technique that provides concrete knowledge and skills for actors to fully express their imaginations. I truly believe that the theatre is not a commodity; it's a craft, like any other. And one that a young artist must study—learning the history of the shoulders of artists this culture and others have been built on.

Craft is composed of dozens of learnable and even mechanical skills that make manifest the imagination and reveal the text. Here are just a few examples:

- Rhythm: How does one use it to deconstruct the script and sustain interest?
- Builds: What is one and why does one use it?
- Emphasis: When do you throw away one line to give extra value to the next?
- Pace and variety: What are their values and limits?
- And my favorite question: What exactly is a double take and why should you care?

Until the 1980s, these techniques were learned by young actors being in rehearsal and performance with vastly more experienced older actors. But then a shift began in the culture of training: as resident companies and professional stock companies began to decline, the young actors moved to training programs where they were working mainly with other young actors of shared *inexperience*.

Focus shifted and now training explored methods that addressed some part of the voice or body or psychology while craft was deemed less and less important (and as we all know sometimes even disdained). Craft is repetition and this repetition is necessary. We can feel cheap sometimes, “just nailing a rhythm,” and yes, craft without an actor's emotional and psychological pillars is terrible. This idea of craft believes that it's not just doing it "right" that teaches us, it's the ability to do it "right" over and over again. It's a roadmap to making artistic choices.

- Actors need to examine the situation before they can act it.
- Emotion must be partnered with craft in order to avoid indulgence.

- Psychology needs craft to be understood. It's a discipline.

Now do not get me wrong, I am fine (and usually thrilled) when I see an artist who does all of the work, only to take that knowledge and throw it out the window to build their own art. These are our bravest pioneers. Look at Anne Bogart. Robert Lepage. Peter Sellars to name a very few. They threw out the establishment to make their own. But they sure did know what they were pushing against. Only once they had entrenched themselves in that analysis and craft, could they begin to find their own vocabulary and create their own methods of thinking and seeing. How thankful I am for them as now our field is so much more theatrically rich because of the influence of those unique points of view. But again, Anne Bogart didn't just Google "duration." She watched it, studied it, and immersed herself in that language because she was *curious*.

Wanting to get something "right" is in direct contrast to the act of exploration—the unknown part where our work really begins. That place where anything is possible and you need to dig in and begin to discover and uncover *to develop your own point of view*.

*As an entrance into a discussion of point of view, I'm going to talk about a method of text analysis that I learned from Jon Jory called **three deep**. As an important side note, I also have to say that for me, the study of text analysis as it applies to the artist and not the academic is lacking today. What I'm referring to is an analysis for CONTEXT and point of view, and I believe deeply that it's a heart, not a head exercise (and I say this for actor, director, dramaturg and designer alike). I believe active text analysis should deepen your:*

- Pool of interest in the character, the moment, the scene and ultimately the play.
- Sense of Personalization. It's analysis that's asking you to have a point of view.
- Ultimately it's a way to get really curious about a moment and to begin to create a deeper richness in the lives of the characters and worlds that make up our plays.

In Jon's method of Three Deep, breaking open a moment in a scene works like this.

List the Given Circumstances of the scene. The factual ones, not the suppositions. From that sentence, ask three questions. Questions that get your mind thinking and your blood pumping. Then answer those questions based on what you know to be true from the play, but also what YOU BELIEVE. Then ask three more questions of each of those questions and answer them. Yeah. It is HOMEWORK. I tell my students all the time that it's their job to find a way to make it fun and exciting for themselves, because this is part of the work, of the craft, that they have to practice for years to begin to understand instinctually. I use it all the time as a director to break open the play's major moments.

INSERT CHEKHOV EXAMPLE: Tuzenbach is going into town.

1. Does he think Irena knows?
2. Does he believe he stands a chance against Solony (who we know to be a really good shot)?
3. And if so, then why is he going???

Those questions are what excite *me* most about that moment, so therefore what I am interested in pursuing. As I begin to take the time to answer these for myself, my lake of knowledge fills up. And then when I return to the room, I have a more facile base on which to play.

One of my favorite moments is in a directing class in grad school at UCSD, where my then teacher and now boss at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Les Waters, took this analysis to a staging level. We were working on a scene from *The Homecoming* (all five directors were doing the same scene) with Teddy and Ruth when she asks him for the keys. The first time we brought the scene into class, we each had her do exactly that and he gave them to her. Les paused and then said we were all missing a huge opportunity. What's really going on with the status and power in that moment? We each went away and broke open that beat for ourselves and returned with much more vibrant and specific choices—in one he dropped the keys and made her get them. One he threw them. One he shook them and made her come like a dog. It was fascinating.

Because again, what this analysis is asking you to do:

- Go deeper.
- Have a point of view.
- Be curious.

I reiterate these points because these are the traits I see most lacking in young artists as I encounter them in the professional world. We recently had auditions for one of our Humana Festival plays and had to see over 30 young actors for a single role. 30. And it wasn't because the director was wishy-washy. It was because no one came in the room having employed any sense of text analysis. There was a ton of heart, there was a ton of instinct and there was a ton of feeling, but none of it illuminated the text in any way. Their choices sat on top of the text rather than deepening it.

I also had a project last summer (I'm just giving you all my good gossip now) where I had worked a great deal with one of the actors in the audition room. I pushed in a variety of directions to see what facility he had for change. We tried the side four different ways and stopped because I had seen enough to know he was the best choice—not because that last version was suddenly somehow “right.” Yet that was clearly not how he saw it, as the first read through with the full cast rolled around a month later and he replayed that final version with all his might. It didn't matter what his other actors were doing, he had an idea of what he was “supposed to do.” And it was a hard rehearsal process for him and me because of that.

It wasn't just stubbornness, it was fear. Fear of listening and fear of the unknown possibility. I'm generous towards that, but not towards the gold star acting where an artist thinks the end goal is to give me what I want.

Hence, I truly believe it is our job as a teacher and director to inspire a depth of curiosity and point of view. It's a brave act.

I hope this hasn't all sounded like it's only for actors—it's not. In this current moment in time, with our nearly unlimited access to information, going deeper not broader is a challenge for *all* artists.

Owning a point of view is hard. But starting the continual process of cultivating one is crucial. And I don't think that can only come from your Pinterest page.

It is knowledge and skills and the development of expertise. Man, that sounds boring. But the good news is: we are some of the blessed few who are lucky enough to pursue for a living a deeper understanding of what makes us human. Of the art of storytelling and how we can change lives and culture. We are influencers. We are one of the only ways in this current moment that people can actually come together with strangers and share a live event. We may always be poor or feel poor, but we are rich with imagination. I never, never take that calling for granted.

Yes, it's a discipline, but it is also a joy. It's a huge responsibility, this art we do. Yet as we all know art in a vacuum is just indulgence. It also needs context.

Context is everything in creating art. Context of the world you are making. Context of the current moment we are living in. We have to know the context before we can begin to go deeper—before we can begin to get curious.

(*Note:* This is also the part where it may seem like I am starting to shun technology. That's not my intent, I just think the massive accessibility has led to shallow searching. But as I make that statement, I want to be aware that I'm not oversimplifying in a shallow way myself, so I continue....)

I think context can get really tricky when we are doing everything online. The internet is a great starting point, but it is not the answer.

Right now, Google filters make the context *you*. There is no stumbling, there is no surprise discovery. The internet, in fact thwarts your curiosity with an algorithm they have made up just for you. They want you to know what they think you will want. They think they know what information you want and how you want to consume it and that's all they will give you. You never asked for this, they just created it over time. In many ways, Google wants to make your world view myopic. Yes, you can go down a wormhole, but that path was created just for you: it has a point of view so you don't have to.

I read a story a few years ago about a CNN correspondent who was reporting on Syria, but found that he was only seeing articles with a liberal point of view. Google and Facebook were filtering his feed so he could only see what they thought he wanted. Yet what he actually wanted was to see the arguments—to read a range of opinions. So as an experiment he walked into his local coffee shop and asked everyone there to Google “Syria” and then went to each computer to write down their top links. And you know what? They were all different. The woman who was planning a vacation was sent to a travel site. The chef was sent to a food site. There were terrorist links, liberal and

conservative links—it ran the gamut. He was able to read dissenting opinions, but only through the help of his fellow coffee drinkers.

And this was a CNN reporter who knew he needed differing inputs! I would posit that that is so dangerous for a young artist. Hell, really for all of us, but at least most of us can remember the good ole days when we went to libraries (gasp!) and perused the aisles—when you thought you wanted a book on the history of Germany only to stumble and surprise! discover The Weimar Republic and Dadaism and Cabaret right in the same stack. When going to check out a chapter on landscapes ended up with me checking out every single book of Ansel Adams early black and white work. There was discovery and context in every library stack. It was unfiltered so you could find what you never knew you were looking for.

Now don't get me wrong, I've found some cool stuff on Pinterest. But a set designer emailing me a link to the board they created cannot be the end of our process. So many times I get images emailed to me (what happened to printing I'll never know) from young designers and when I ask who the artist is they have no idea. They found it online and *liked* it. That's not enough.

I think there is real danger in design that is pursuing keywords, not context or artists. I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I first discovered the work of photographer Tim Walker on Pinterest. It's a beautiful picture of lit up dresses in a huge oak tree. It opened up the way I thought about a design for Midsummer. So Pinterest isn't bad.

But look—let's do this experiment: Pull out your phones. Google “dilapidated living rooms.” We will all get mostly the same images, some of which we may find compelling for our upcoming production of *Buried Child*. But can anyone tell me who is the photographer or the architect of this first room we are all looking at? Probably not. It's context free.

And if I hadn't spent the time to figure out who Tim Walker was (and it was not easy), then I wouldn't have found the artist Gregory Crewdson, who ultimately became *my* inspiration for *Buried Child*. I started with Shakespeare and I got to Sam Shepard. That's the kind of wormhole I stand in defense of. Again, it's just about going DEEPER. Asking more questions. And the JOYS of getting lost, not just “accomplishing the task.”

We are a tactile craft. We need to see things in three dimensions. On my recent production of *Peter and the Starcatcher* my scenic designer, William Boles would bring in multiple models and tear them apart and move them around with glee. There was a child-like sense of discovery and play to the PROCESS from the first moment, and that spirit lived and fueled the final product. We need to tear apart models and move them around because no, they weren't “right” the first time and that's just fine.

I also think it's about questioning and how to encourage not only our students but ourselves as well to slow down and spend time with *themselves and their growing artistry*, not by themselves *with their Instagram and Snapchatting*. Don't text me the images

you're finding, but instead sit by yourself and absorb and process the work of these great artists in front of you. Where do the dots start to connect for you? That's where process begins, when we can truly start to see.

It's a visual form we work in, and we have to be in the work and with the work and surrounded by the work to begin to connect these dots. Again, I'm talking about DEPTH and the bravery that comes with owning your own point of view.

Young Directors

This is one of the biggest problems I see with young directors that I am mentoring. The relationship of point of view to fear. And of course as a director I teach them that having a point of view is not dictatorial and likely means that we will give up those ideas for someone else's better proposal in the room. But it is our job as leaders to come into that room with a strong and elastic point of view.

So then how do we in this moment of students up-speaking, "where everything they say sounds like a question?" help them? I mean, they are afraid to finish sentences, so how will they actually gain ownership in a room? The biggest thing I observe in rehearsals with these young directors is after every run through the first question they ask the actors is "how did that feel?" and I immediately say to them "why are you asking *that*?" I have come to learn that they think "collaboration" is group consensus and confuse it with camaraderie—even though everyone in this room knows that most of the best theatre comes from collision. We need to train young artists to have a point of view that is personal and subjective. They need to be reminded that their creativity can help activate others' minds as well.

I think curiosity is just the beginning of art. Wonder about the murky, gray "hard" parts. There's no one way out or up in the theatre. When I was younger I sure wished there was. All of my friends from undergrad at Northwestern were on a clear path with their multiple job offers after they got their MBA. As I think most of us know, getting an MFA does not come with recruiters. So, I started on my own path of curious study.

Because ultimately we have to learn (and learn to love) that it is a process and not a product. I tell actors all the time in rehearsal that I don't have answers, I have a process. And my process is ever-evolving. I remember when I got to UCSD for graduate school and thought that I had this "process" thing in the bag—I mean, I had been studying with Jon for three years at ATL, and felt my textual toolbox was good to go. I was owning my craft and ready to PRODUCE. So I jumped in my first year, taking on not only my assisting assignments and my new play workshops but filling all of my spare time with other side projects—I was a "product" machine. I was going wide, but was certainly out of time to go very deep. After all that I accomplished that first year I was ready for my gold star. Yet when I sat down in my meeting with Les, this is how it went: he asked how many art books I owned that were not Keith Haring (who is my well-known favorite artist). I thought and answered, "none." He sat and looked at me silently (he's British so he's very

comfortable in awkward silence, which makes my New Jersey energy insane), and then said, “Yeah. It’s evident in everything that you do.”

Sure, I had done and done all the product, but I hadn’t been curious about how to expand my thoughts or depth of knowledge around it.

Process is not immediate gratification. Process is frustrating and illuminating and grueling and mean and joyful and collaborative and lonely. But really a dedication to it is all that’s going to keep us afloat.

Bradley Whitford, star of stage and screen, talked about this once in a way that has stuck with me for many years: the way to make it in a professional world is to fall in love with the process and the results will follow. You have to want to *do* whatever you want to *do* more than you want to *be* whatever you want to *be*. And he’s right—life is too challenging for external rewards to sustain us. You have to find joy in the journey. You have to find joy in the discipline that is the creative process. You have to find satisfaction in hard work. What may start out as trying to please your teachers has to turn into the joy of finding surprises in genuine, honest self-discovery.

*“Someone is sitting in the shade today because
someone planted a tree a long time ago.”*

I just encourage all of us to go deeper. To demand more, even when accessibility makes short cuts seem sexy. I believe hard work is the antidote to apathy and cynicism and despair. Infuse your life with the practice of curiosity as we reinvigorate the development of expertise together. Thank you.