

President's Address
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE
ANNUAL MEETING
March 28, 2008

**Theatre People:
Makers of the Sublime and the Silly**

Carole Brandt
President, NAST
Dean Emeritus, Meadows School of the Arts
Southern Methodist University

When I was a senior at the University of Illinois, Dr. Kenneth Burns, my methods class supervisor, told our clan of seven would-be high school teachers of theatre that for myriad reasons, we needed to do professional service: because we were a fledgling discipline that would require an army of workers; because we needed a network of people who did what we did, with whom we shared both the sublime and the silly; because we, as the discipline, needed to determine professional values, affirm professional ethics, and endorse professional standards.

As a young woman of the fifties, I did what I was told by my professor. Then and still. For half a century. With the leadership role in the Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival, the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, the College of Fellows of the American Theatre, the National Theatre Conference, and through tomorrow, the National Association of Schools of Theatre, I have tried to serve and play hard in theatre in higher education. Because this meeting is my last chance to serve and play officially, I decided to take the prerogative of speaking to you in a very personal way about the profession and you.

To begin with, you individually and collectively are the profession. You must be the seers, the truth-tellers, the pied pipers, the guardians, the river boat gamblers, the warriors. You must share your ideas, your insight, your imagination, your anger, your love, your muscle. You cannot settle, evade, or escape. What happens in our discipline depends in large measure on what you do and don't do in the decades immediately ahead, as it did in the generations that fought the battles of academic credit for theatre courses, creation of degree programs, and definitions of terminal degrees.

You will refine, perhaps redefine, the very aesthetic of theatre and its place in the fabric of both higher education and the world in which we live. You will explore not just the history of world theatre but the liveness of theatre in Africa, Indonesia, Australia, Brazil, China, Ireland – because you and your students will go there, study there, perform there in real time and virtual space – with artists and teachers in cultures that challenge and extend our own.

You will rethink and redesign curricula that have new meaning and gravitas that may not yet even be imagined. You will assess and reconfigure production seasons, techniques, and structures that will excite, provoke, and move generations to come. You will have to slay current and future federal dragons who know best and more than those in the discipline. You will continue to serve and play and transform the field because there is no one—except you—to do it.

I challenge each of you personally, if you are going to dance with this bear, you can't get tired or discouraged. You must be the fearless canaries in the academic and aesthetic caves. You must serve and play and transform the field uniquely and tenaciously, fiercely and honorably. You must celebrate the power of the makers of theatre and the provocateurs of young imaginations and hearts as an inevitable force for which you are the designated steward. You must embrace the power and possibilities of doing it together and recognize the futility and impossibility of doing it alone. You must join the crusades as academic and artistic soul mates.

And, you must do it with attitude, but never arrogance. Your mission is essential in the DNA of our art and humanity. That gives you enormous responsibility and that currently dirty word, accountability. Your optimism must be unflinching; your moxie without limits; you must be audacious without being brazen; adventurous without being foolish.

The field is experiencing an enormously important generational change among its faculties. We are cross fading from the Mickey and Judy and the barn gang to the me-first kids. That is neither critical nor judgmental, neither good nor bad. It just is. In my judgment, the me-first gang will have a much harder job than we did in the Mickey and Judy club because it has to bring colleagues and students into a bigger than myself movement.

Unquestionably, you are going to change theatre in higher education. How will you change it? What will be your legacy? How will your professional service be measured in twenty-five years? How much of a qualitative difference will you make personally and professionally?

And what does any of this have to do with theatre people as makers of the sublime and the silly? Metaphorically speaking, you as thinker cause and create the most grand, most noble, most majestic, most profound to happen in classrooms and onstage; you as dreamer appreciate and celebrate the place of the irrational, innocent, frivolous, and even goofy. In a January *New York Times* article entitled "The Joy of Silly," the caption under a lovely photograph of a young girl rolling a hula-hoop in grass reads: "I play, therefore I am. Roll it, toss it, whirl it on your hips. Sometimes pointlessness is the point." Theatre embodies and embraces both the sublime and the silly. It helps balance the world and its people; it exposes human frailties and potency; it is both life and treasure. You, ladies and gentlemen, are in charge. And as Hedda would say, you must "do it beautifully."

I'd like to thank you all for the privilege of serving and playing as President of NAST these last three years. It has been both sublime and silly. I congratulate and salute Alan MacVey as I pass the hula-hoop – since we have no gavel.