

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE
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Oral Report of the Executive Director

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.¹

Although these words penned by Charles Dickens speak of a time over 200 years ago, and of cities miles from our shores, they ring ever true today. Their poignant relevance is palpable. An example is the frenetic jockeying now taking place in our country for position, power, money, and influence, and in the wake of this jockeying, the erosion of trust and cooperation.

Having willingly assumed the responsibility to educate our students to the highest level of expertise, there is no doubt that each of us here today faces a set of opportunities and challenges. In this regard, yesterday is no different from today, and today will be no different from tomorrow. The existence and daily presentation of opportunities and challenges, the juxtaposition of best and worst times, is a reality. It is our reality. We are obliged to recognize and accept this reality, for it is enduring, regardless of the breath or depth of resources, time, energy, or theory deployed to effect its change. We are cognizant that we cannot alter the constant. But we also know, being ever-watchful of the evolving context created by the constant, that its acceptance frees us to focus on what we can and must do—making decisions that are critical to our lasting success.

Understanding this context provides an advantage that assists us to operate within the context. But this understanding alone is not sufficient. Each of our jobs involves finding the antidotes that will assist us to neutralize the epidemics often inherent in the constant, and those present in our own environments—antidotes so powerful that they enable us to maximize, rather than squander opportunities; and address, rather than be swallowed by challenges. For us, theatre is our fundamental antidote, and its lessons and principles are the bases for finding other antidotes—for in words offered by Eli Broad, “Civilizations are not remembered by their business people, their bankers or lawyers. They’re remembered by the arts.”²

¹Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1859).

²Orden, Erica. Conversation with Eli Broad. “Broad Solutions for the Arts,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2010.

We know this to be true—we understand the importance of theatre and theatre study. We have seen first hand and know of its effects. But we as educators, administrators, and professional theatre-makers are also aware that we, and possibly we alone, hold the responsibility to ensure and protect the legacy of theatre as an art form, and theatre as a discipline of study. We work diligently and unceasingly to expand our knowledge and use our minds individually and collectively to think deeply and critically about issues, proposals, and events. We unleash our imaginations as we consider scenarios and contemplate possibilities. We are fortunate. Our capacity to think, to imagine, and to consider the issues of importance to our discipline are constrained only by the bounds and limits of our creative thoughts, desires, and levels of participation—which to date have known no boundaries and no limits.

We are grateful that these gifts and our efforts have served our purposes well, and in this regard, have assisted us to advance our discipline. But again, such noble efforts alone are no longer sufficient. The pressures on the academy at this time are daunting. For example, in the larger context in which we work, several current proposals and initiatives exhibit disregard for the very concepts, principles, and legal frameworks that serve as the bedrock of our nation's foundation, principles that have also been central to the success of American higher education. There is no question that problems exist and that there is always room for improvement, but overall, our system of higher education is a sterling system that offers willing individuals the opportunity to learn the subject matter knowledge of their choice, and while doing so, to exercise their freedoms to question, consider, conceive, and create. Too many individuals, who are beneficiaries of this system, now use their academy-enhanced wherewithal to spin the conversation away from learning, and the tangible and intangible natures and benefits of the entire enterprise. Instead, they characterize the enterprise as nothing more than a factory, which produces a commodity. Success is narrowly defined in terms of bottom lines and how brightly they are embellished by dollar signs.

We and many of our colleagues, and concerned citizens, understand that the collegiate experience is merely a brief period of time devoted to expanding the artistic and intellectual capacities of the individual, so that upon departing from the academy this individual is ready to take his or her place in society, ready to contribute to and carry on our civilization. In too many forums, this realistic view is at best minimized and at worst discarded as irrelevant.

Anticipating that uncertain times are ahead, and that protection of our discipline is our responsibility, we must venture beyond our discipline, perhaps more now than ever before. To be actively engaged in the conversation, we must follow and understand the conversation thoroughly with the greatest sophistication we can develop. To be ready when called upon to assist; to explain, defend, or correct, we must develop an awareness of the issues; understand the relationship(s) between and among them; and be able to imagine the consequences that proposals or pending actions may have on the academy, and therefore on our discipline and all its constituent parts. This responsibility belongs to each of us individually; it belongs to all of us collectively.

This is not an easy task. It is difficult to stay abreast of all current events and issues given daily responsibilities, and to sort through burgeoning amounts of information. As well, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, and therefore to ascertain and understand clearly the intricacies and nuisances of events and issues, and therefore to project any anticipated outcome or risk. However, it is critically important to do so. It is also critically important to follow events and study possible scenarios asking ‘what if’ questions all the while. We must do this, we must do this well, and we must never cease our efforts in this regard. If we were to fail, the decisions crucial to our existence will be relinquished to others. Our fate would rest in the hands of the far less qualified, and our destiny would be guided by those who have little interest in the substance of what we do and thus by those unwilling or unable to ensure that our art form and the professional preparation of our students remain paramount.

We have developed many kinds of expertise. I suggest that we add the ‘study of scenarios’ to our arsenal, or if already there, polish it brightly. To illustrate the importance of this suggestion, let us consider three scenarios. Each is based in fact. Each presents a real policy issue, a real prospect, a real potential for unintended consequences if realized. I ask you to use your well-honed imaginations as you consider these ‘what if’ possibilities. One caution and one reminder are offered. In these times, it would be unwise to discount any possibility no matter how far fetched it may seem. As well, as scholars of history, we know that historical events provide valuable insight when considering current and future issues.

Scenario One: Imagine that a law, written to prevent any federal agency from setting and enforcing expectations with regard to student achievement standards, is repealed. Imagine if the setting of student achievement standards were to become the responsibility of a federal agency intent on defining success and relevance in terms of personal earning power. Which curricular programs would stay, which would go? What effect would this have on the richness and diversity of college curricula, on our nation’s base of expertise? What impact would this have on our lives, on our children’s lives, and on their children’s lives?

Scenario Two: Imagine the idea of combining all non-discipline-specific institutional accrediting bodies, the regionals for example, into one single national body. Such a suggestion may appear to offer economies of scale and therefore raise little concern. At the same time, imagine the idea of creating a streamlined process for institutions to report directly to a federal agency regarding academic matters and practices. Such a suggestion may create the impression of welcome relief from the requirements of multiple agencies to which an institution must report. Upon first hearing, these two proposals standing alone seemingly without connection may appear harmless enough. However, we must use our imaginations to see beyond the face value. Imagine if these two proposals were aligned and caused the current process of peer review to be replaced by a single process of federalized regulation. If such proposals were to prevail, would institutions retain their autonomy and diversity with respect to academic matters? Would those possessing valuable local knowledge remain able to use this knowledge to inform decision-making? Would you and other local experts maintain the responsibility and authority for making decisions related to curricular offerings and content, faculty expertise and

assignment, and futures planning as examples, or would such decision-making be relinquished to a politically appointed federal body?

Scenario Three: Imagine an article published which alleges certain inappropriate actions or activities of a single entity, an institution, or an accrediting organization. Imagine that the actions and activities are extrapolated and, whether true or false, it is alleged or implied that the actions or activities are present in all entities of the same type. Imagine that the conclusion of such an article is based on the supposition that the alleged act of the one now renders the entire group of entities culpable, at fault, irredeemable, and that the article further insists that the enterprise as a whole is failing or has failed. Such a statement can have a devastating effect once penned, even if later found to be inconclusive or incorrect, especially if the conclusion has been repeated many times. As often attributed to Winston Churchill, “A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.”³ What harm can be done? What confusions can be sown among students and parents, not to mention policy makers? What unnecessary or harmful policies can be created, implemented, and applied to all? What effect could such policies have on institutions?

There are countless scenarios to be considered; there are countless scenarios that will develop in the days, months, and years ahead. This therefore represents yet another constant of which we must be aware, an important element of the larger constant we spoke of earlier. Of importance at this time is the need to follow unfolding events; to develop, hone, and perfect the ability to imagine the inherent risks and dangers in any initiative or prospect; and to become savvy in connecting initiatives and events, drawing informed conclusions, and anticipating possible results, especially long-term results. And once this is accomplished, to articulate fact and reason as the basis for policy discussion, action, and decision.

The impact of individual work cannot be underestimated in this regard. But rarely does overall success with regard to main-theme issues rest solely on the shoulders of the one who goes it alone; or the one who suggests that a single voice is representative of the collective body; or the one, who as noted above, has benefitted from the very system that he or she now works to discount so that a singular and possibly self-serving result can be realized. The power of theatre, whether we are making, teaching, or administering, is never so evident as when we as individuals come together to collectively, willingly, and unselfishly share our knowledge and combine our wisdom for the benefit of all; when we serve the purpose of developing a collective result; and in the case of policy, when we develop a voice which offers cogent, decisive, and well-proportioned ideas and responses. Personal experiences with the power of this soul-stirring force applied to performance may be what drew us to theatre in the first place. We live by and in the honor of our discipline. We are duty bound to carry forward centuries of accomplishments, to create the new, to allow the past and the present to collide creatively and productively, and to project and plan for the future, all the while remembering the realities inherent in the constant of opportunity and challenge; the contexts in which we work; the necessity for careful, analytical decision making; and the importance of working both individually and collectively.

³Ralph Keyes, *The Quote Verifier* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), p. 121.

Historically and currently, NAST remains concerned about, and committed to studying, distilling, and working on the issues outlined above, and with many other similar matters as well. This means doing what it can within its means and mission to offer assistance to you as you consider scenarios, contemplate outcomes, and make decisions critical to the ongoing success of theatre in higher education.

Thank you for your efforts and your achievements. However great or small you may think each may be, each contribution matters, each makes a difference, and each strengthens the aggregate effort. The aggregate result of your work is astounding when one takes the opportunity to pause and marvel at its effect. Thank you for the work that you have done and the work that is yet to be accomplished.

Upon leaving this Annual Meeting, hopefully renewed in spirit, challenged in mind, and spurred to imagine, we look forward with enthusiasm to completing another successful academic year. I extend to each of you my deepest appreciation for your ceaseless efforts on behalf of theatre in higher education. Staff members and I are humbled and honored to have the opportunity to work with individuals who care so deeply, give of themselves so selflessly, and who are touched so purely by the beauty of theatre.

Thank you for being here. Please let us know how and when we may be of assistance. We offer all good wishes for a productive year, and look forward to seeing you next year in Nevada.

Thank you.