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Keynote Address

An Independent Study

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It seems traditional to open a lot of keynote addresses with a quote, usually a poem on the secrets of the universe. Maybe Shakespeare. I'm going to quote a restaurant owner. And I'm not even going to give him the dignity of an exact quote. I'm paraphrasing. Danny Meyer is the owner of Union Square Cafe, Shake Shack, many other restaurants, and one of the most successful hospitality consulting firms the world has ever known. A lot of publishers came after him to write the definitive book on hospitality management. He said—and here's the pseudo quote—*I can't just write down some secret formula. But I'm willing to tell you the story of my life, the choices I made, what happened because of those choices, and if anything in there inspires someone to change their business approach to be more successful, then that's pretty cool.* And that's what he did. The book is called *Setting the Table*, and I highly recommend it. It'll change your approach to all management situations, and you'll never look at eating in a restaurant the same way again.

But this is theater. Lunch is later.

When I was asked about speaking to a gathering of the greatest theater educators in our country, I thought, "What the hell are they thinking?" But my experience in college was unique. And what I do with it—how I view the world because of it—is also unique. So I'm going to take Danny's advice and just tell you what I did in my educational life, and what I do on a day-to-day basis, and see if there aren't some interesting takeaways for you in how to evolve theater training. So basically, I'm just going to stand here for the next while and talk about myself.

I started playing the piano at a very young age by lifting whole Broadway cast albums by ear. I was first hired to conduct a musical at age 17. And what I wanted to do was compose for musical theater. So I entered the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) as a composition major. But in the two weeks leading up to classes—orientation, registration, etc.—I happened upon the auditions for the first main stage musical of the year, which was *Evita*. Now, of course I had lifted by ear every note of that score when the recording came out. So I asked one of the young ladies waiting in the hall what she was singing for her audition. She said "Rainbow High." I said, "Can I play your audition?" She replied, "They have a pianist." I said, "I know, but what if we duck into a practice room and run it. If you don't like the way it feels, then use their guy, but if you do, then you will have had the benefit of rehearsing with me and walking in with your own accompanist." So we did. And we did. And she told two friends, and they told two

friends. And by the fifth time I'm walking into the audition room to take over the piano, the music director says, "Okay, who are you, and will you be the rehearsal pianist and play in the pit?"

So from before day one of classes, I'm straddling two very different departments. Between taking music theory and history of western music, I'm also playing rehearsals as well as half of the musical theater voice lessons, because I know the repertoire.

Now at the same time, I'm maintaining a separate but equal career as a music director for various productions around town—from civic theaters to small professional half and half houses. I'm also beginning to conduct summer stock gigs, which, of course, begin casting and preproduction in late winter. I'm also a guest teacher and music director at Northern Kentucky University, just across the river. And this was all before iPhone Calendar. All the while, I made it clear that what I really wanted to do—what I was actually doing in my spare time—was to write for musical theater.

By my second year, the head of the Opera, Drama, and Musical Theater Department—the guilty party is right there, Terrell Finney—gets together with the head of the Musical Theater Department and proposes an idea. They tell me that only a few years before, a student named Stephen Flaherty had gone through the school struggling exactly the same way in finding to which department he actually belonged. What if CCM started a new degree program called "Composition for Musical Theater"? They suggested that by combining various courses in both the musical theater curriculum and the composition curriculum, they might be able to come up with something that, down the road, would attract future young Stephen Flaherty's. I would be the guinea pig. So we began this experiment.

For a whole year, I took various music theory and orchestration courses, along with audition techniques, history of musical theater (*The Black Crook*, anyone?), and a freshman acting class. About mid-winter of that year, I had grown frustrated by the complaining of the composition department that they didn't have my full attention. Of course they didn't. They actually didn't know who Stephen Sondheim was. And one day in my acting class, the head of the Drama Department, along with the grand dame of the acting professors (every school has one), sat in on a scene work presentation. I did my prepared scene with my partner. After class, they both took me aside and said, basically, "Why don't you stop serving two masters and just study acting full time?" They explained it this way: There was nothing the Music Department was teaching me that I wasn't already doing professionally outside of school. However, the industry is full of conductors and writers who stand in front of a company of actors and tell them what to do—and how—without being able to do it themselves. Don't be that guy, they said. Be the guy who can speak the language. Be the composer who can go head to head with an actor about the merits of Michael Chekhov technique as opposed to Eric Morris. If you want to write for actors, they said, you better know what actors want and need. Know their process. Be the guy who writes with the first three Meisner questions in mind at all times: "What do I want? Why do I want it? And why must I have it now?" They said they would waive the required audition and application process, and even cast me in a new work being presented downtown in conjunction with a small equity house. But there would be one catch—my first official year would begin with the incoming fall class, and I would have to commit to the full four-year program, starting as a so-called freshman.

No cutting in line, no transfer status. Just like Maria, you start at the very beginning—it's a very good place to start. That would mean a 6-year total commitment to a single BFA. I agreed, and that was the last anyone ever heard of CCM's Composition for Musical Theater degree.

I want to be clear about the wisdom of these educators. Even though I was immediately on stage in a play, and would subsequently be on stage quite a bit and have my equity card before graduating, there was never any pretense that I was going to go out into the world after four years and become a professional actor. Yes, I was absolutely obligated to take all the required courses, and yes, I would have to live or die by the biannual juries—we called them "boards" and we had a cut policy, something I'm sad to hear has fallen out of favor. But because we all understood—me more than any of them—that my life, my bank account, my happiness, would not depend on standing in lines, resume in hand for audition after audition, because we understood that it wasn't the end of the world if I didn't get cast in the main stage production—or even the workshop production—I was free. I was absolutely liberated to take each moment as it came. I could appreciate the actual education itself on its own terms. In the classroom or rehearsal hall I had the freedom to fail or to succeed with equal reward. Of course one of the most valuable lessons that comes from experiencing this freedom is, when knowing you don't absolutely need something, things often come your way. It's a subtle thing—and it's not 100% foolproof—but if you have no problem walking away from something, people seem to want to work with you even more. Conversely, if you walk into a situation consumed with need, people smell that on you, that desperation, and it can sabotage a potential working relationship. Now, to be clear, approaching a dramatic situation without desperate need is certain death. Trust me, I've written a few.

The more I absorbed in class, the more I wanted to experience things in depth for myself in ways that weren't really in the structure of the coursework. And because I had this understanding with my teachers, I could start to push some boundaries. For example, we talked about the naturalist revolution with Brando and the Stanislavsky "Method" actors. We did exercises in class, but when it came to the full rehearsal process for any particular production, I didn't see the time and resources going toward a complete "Method" approach for an entire company so that everyone would have the experience of a unified style. Once again, the faculty came through with allowing me to make my own rules. I found a play that I felt would lend itself to this experience—Puig's original *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. I chose to present the play in a basement rehearsal hall in one of the oldest buildings on campus. It was a cement room, which, if configured properly, was a prison. So the exercise was to present the play with utter realism. A cell would be built in one corner of the room. As actors, that meant that from the time the audience entered the space to the time they left, we would be confined to the cell. That also meant that all props, food, gas burning makeshift stoves, candles, toiletries, or whatever else was used had to be absolutely accurate to text and fully functioning. It was an exercise in complete realism, which included all aspects of sexuality—and complete control over one's intake of liquid on the day of a performance. For a few months, we spent hours imprisoned in this cell after classes and usually well into the early hours of the morning. We improvised moments that were referenced in the text as memories. We built from the ground up an actual complete history of shared imprisonment. It was Shia LaBeouf before Shia LaBeouf. The end result was rather unlike anything

the school had ever seen. Mostly because of its intimacy and realism, but also because of the new relationship it created between the students who were truly committed to new avenues of study and the faculty who were learning to facilitate it.

So after this *Spider Woman* thing, I thought, could we do an exploration of environmental theater? The faculty let me take an odd play called *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*, which I felt was really a screenplay in disguise, and present it in this same underground bunker. We defined a few specific areas of play, arranged pockets of seating in a mostly circular configuration, and cleared runways and pathways through and around it all so that the audience was surrounded by the action. They would be free to look wherever we directed their attention, but also where we didn't. That would mean even if a scene in one room was over in the traditional sense and focus had moved to a different location—on the other side of the hall—those characters remaining in their room would have to continue living, being, pushing the narrative forward in their own way, but silently, naturally, and without pulling focus. It became an incredible Rubik's Cube of staging to move actors from one place to another with real intent and perfect timing so that the action of the play as indicated by the text would continue to unfold at breakneck pace by simply lighting the area of the space that required the focus at the moment. The end result was, in many ways, a primitive theatrical rendering of what we now call virtual reality content.

I want to stress that I don't intend this to be a trip through my college underground hits. The point is this: by taking on a project like any one of these, I was doing more than learning to act. I was learning to produce, to direct, to negotiate, to schedule, to advertise, to design, and to teach.

So after several more of these extracurricular “rebel alliance” experiments, the faculty asked me to compose the score to the main stage production of *The Trojan Women*. When we began the process, we thought it would be a matter of underscoring. But once I started the research, I found that the Greeks had originally presented much of the original verse in song—it was sung. It was basically musical theater. Take that, *Black Crook*. I found amazing material on the musical instruments played at the time and the actual compositional rules that were followed. They understood the power of harmonics on the human body. They understood how music affected moods down to the emotional responses to various intervals—open fifths, tri-tones, or fourths. It turns out that this was common knowledge. I remember reading a research paper on the reports of fainting at performances of *Medea*—maybe you've read similar accounts—but this one analyzed the use of music in the original and proposed quite convincingly that the reason was not just the machinations of the plot, but the use of music, the carefully selected keys, intervals, rhythms, the timbres of the instruments, the volumes at which the cues were played—and of course its perfect timing with the dramatic climaxes. P.S., I found all this without Google. Dewey Decimal System, anyone?

So I proposed that we approach the composing of the score for *The Trojan Women* in the same way: let's set the verses that were originally sung—as far as we could determine—to song. Let's compose an almost constant underscore that works in perfect concert with the text and dramatic beats. And so I did. Which meant that now a predominantly non-singing drama department was

suddenly producing, at the very least, a simultaneously progressive and regressive musical and, at most, a full-scale opera. P.S., all in the same building as one of the best musical theater departments in the country. So that meant that I had to create an entire program of workshops and training courses in addition to the rehearsal schedule that would not only train the acting company in the required singing techniques, but also fully understand and embody this unique approach to using music. I have to stress what incredible trust the faculty had in me. I was allowed to have hours with the company doing exercises of my own invention that would introduce them to these concepts that allowed a truthful idea or moment of intention to be translated into multiple mediums or disciplines simultaneously: speech, movement, pitch, intonation. Now, to most of you, that just sounds like the basics of musical theater—and yes, in essence, it is. However, this was stylistically something more primitive and ineffable. It was both heightened and grounded at the same time. Similar to what Julie Taymor was doing with the puppetry and mask work in *The Lion King*. Yes, it's a puppet show. You could say that. But it's more than that, and the observer is aware of this the minute he sees just how many different cultural traditions she's combining.

One tremendous gift I got by approaching my whole education like this was I was constantly aware of context, of the big picture. The Oprah "Aha!" moment my teachers gave me by allowing me to work in all these disciplines was that they all come from the same impulse of truth. And here's the amazing thing: acting is being, right? Acting is truth in the imaginary circumstance. We teach our students to become other people, to imagine their interior lives, to create back stories—to go live those back stories if you're "method"—and yet when it comes to imagining a life or a career or an aspect of the industry that affects their success or failure, they are somehow at a loss. If you want to know what goes into a successful audition, what casting people really want—how to actually book the job—then why are you not spending time auditioning people? If you ever wondered if your 16-bar cut is effective, or if your outfit is flattering, or if you should shake the individual hands of those sitting behind the table, well, why not sit behind a table for five hours and watch a parade of poor choices, and when the last person of the day comes in, sings those 16 bars, wearing that outfit, and moving in to shake everyone's hand, I bet you'll have your answer.

Our job as actors is to understand context. We should be developing a subconscious ability to pull the camera back further and further to see the moments, the years, the lives lived leading up to any specific dramatic encounter. We ask, "Why?" What do you want, why do you want it, and why must you have it now? Are we applying that technique to the education itself? Are we constantly pulling the camera back to understand the big picture, or are we solely focused on if those two actors had a "moment" locking eyes for the first time? If they understand that the same impulse and honesty required to effectively "lock eyes" with a scene partner can be expressed in equally fulfilling measure by writing a solo monologue, or producing a performance art piece in a parking lot, or building an environmental walk-thru attraction like *Sleep No More*, then these would be very fulfilled artists indeed. We do exercises like embodying an inanimate object or a dog or an ice cream cone so that we understand the power of imagination to express truth through various mediums—to give meaning and life to otherwise inanimate objects and concepts like time, space, ethics, or death. Or the death of ethics as is the current state of politics.

We want to free young students from the falsehood that spoken language on a stage is the only means of acting. Are we always reminding them of that context? I mean, Mr. Karp was absolutely on to something. I hate to say it, but Morales really did learn nothing. Look, I'm glad she got the gig in the end, but I'm not going to hire her to play Lady Macbeth anytime soon.

If we are constantly reminding our students of context and the fact that the core principles of the craft of acting are the same core principles to all good art making, then we open their eyes to the possibility of a self-made and self-fulfilling career. They can write their own rules. And I don't just mean being a YouTube star. Yes, YouTube and iMovie have put in the hands of everyone the tech tools to create content and the platforms to distribute it. But that won't make it good. Applying the craft of communicating truth will make it good. There are many new successful films and TV shows out now created by artists that just got tired of waiting for someone else to give them a job so they wrote one for themselves. But here's the thing to remind your students of before they skip arrogantly out into assumed Netflix stardom. For every one of those independent success stories, there are hundreds of independent failures. The ones that made it did so because the craft in all production elements was good. From the story, the writing, the production concept, the filming, and of course the acting, it's all really good. The artists that have succeeded in this new arena have pulled their own cameras back to see—and then master—an incredibly big picture. They've learned to contribute and collaborate by using the principles of empathizing with another person—absorbing the character, understanding it—so that you can see from any point of view. Putting yourself into another person's shoes is the central tenant of acting.

Another valuable lesson I learned from this educational freedom was that artists want to work with people they know. When deciding who I wanted to do *Spider Woman* with or *Unidentified Human Remains*, I didn't hold auditions. I just asked the people who I knew would be right for the part, but more importantly right for the project—who would get it, who would be the right energy in the room to achieve what it was we wanted to achieve, which, as I've already stated, wasn't necessarily the end product. Now, that's not to say auditions aren't a crucial aspect of the industry. But when push comes to shove, it turns out that auditions are not the most important. Relationships are the most important. Being the person people speak about as a good hang. Being a joy to have in the room. I saw that in the most real world way when casting *Bandstand*. How many of us are pulling the camera back for our students to see that truth? Are we being honest with them about their interpersonal working relationships? Are we guiding them to see themselves as they appear to others? By granting me the opportunity to function in all these other artistic capacities and roles, the faculty gave me the gift of knowing what those other roles need in an actor or collaborator. Want your students to know how to successfully network—and not just on Facebook and Instagram, but person-to-person in the lobby of another artist's opening night? Make them do it. Even if it's done as an acting exercise—make them give you truth in the imaginary circumstance of having coffee with a friend of a friend who's a junior casting agent at Telsey. Are we teaching the fundamentals of a long run? Are we applying the craft of acting to the actual execution of performing the same show 8 times a week for a year, or two, or three? Have we told them to pull the camera back and create an imaginary circumstance for the performance itself? Make it opening night. Make it the closing night. Make it the night

that Steven Spielberg is in the house. Or a well-known politician. That ought to energize the performance.

Those six years prepared me very well for the real world. When I became the first American conductor hired by Cirque Du Soleil, it was my comprehensive approach to the show as a whole and an intimate understanding of all the production elements that allowed them to trust me enough to grant me access and a voice at some of the highest levels of creation for the two projects on which I worked. And, keep in mind, I joined Cirque Du Soleil in 1998—when it was really cool to even know what Cirque Du Soleil was. Now, of course, it's really cool to pretend you don't like Cirque du Soleil. To which I say, that's fine. And then I go conduct my \$165 million production that makes a 75-ton monolith float and spin in midair with people walking at a 90-degree angle on it. And yeah, I'll have fries with that. I use the craft of acting every second of the 10 shows a week I conduct for them now. I am the scene partner of a gargantuan hybrid of humanity and technology. I listen to it and respond to it. It moves suddenly, and I move with it. I call to it, and it answers back. It rises up from the depths of a bottomless fire pit, and I provide the roar.

I'd like to do one more quick thing, just by way of practical illustration. (Music Cue.) Who can tell me who this composer is? Or from which very obscure opera it comes? As a hint, the year is 1926.

It's not Gershwin—it's me. It's from this new adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* that will premiere in Tokyo in May and go on a Japanese national tour over the course of the year.

This is an example of using the craft of acting through composition. All the questions are answered: Who am I? Gershwin. What do I want? To create a new melody that expresses the loneliness and longing and ambition of a character in this new novel *The Great Gatsby*. So you see, there is a double layer of character identity. Why do I want it? I want the listener to connect with the character through a contemporary vocabulary—remember the time period of the character—that they recognize as timely and yet timeless in its emotional resonance. The specific becomes the universal. Why do I want it now? I'm on a deadline.

But look at the research that goes into this creation. Know the vocabulary of the time period. Know the compositional methods, the structures, the chords that were common and the ones that were considered boundary pushing. Assume the mindset of the character. Create the working habits of the character—the behavior, the temperament. And then perform the task as the character, which just happens to be to compose a piece of music for another character.

Now many of you may have in your classes right now young composers who aspire to write for the musical theater. And I hope that you are doing all you can to encourage them and provide the resources and opportunities for them to practice their craft symbiotically within your given programs. But I would also bet—and this is Vegas after all—that many, if not most, of these young composers sound an awful lot like Jason Robert Brown, or Pasek and Paul, or, and give it a year, Lin-Manuel Miranda. And that is fine in one way because that is what they listen to and are inspired by. But I urge you to ask the hard questions of these young artists. Is that their voice? Or is that the voice of the character? The ideal answer is of course "both." But I submit that,

particularly for a composer aspiring to a dramatic or dramaturgical medium, the onus must be on the voice of the character. If the character is a pseudo-sophisticated but marginally neurotic twenty-something in urban America circa 2017, then by all means, rip off Mr. Brown, Mr. Pasek, and Mr. Paul until the cows come home. But if the character is a sisterwife in 1952 who is having a crisis of faith while living in a fundamentalist Mormon compound, or a German Parliamentarian in 1932 trying to navigate rapidly shifting political tides, then get thee to an acting class and figure out how these people think, how these people speak, what music they listen to, how they dress, what they eat, whom they love, what they read, what they fear. Every glorious detail that the actor derives such pleasure from discovering is essential in creating the material—musical or otherwise—through which that character expresses him or herself.

Think about the how many career paths and callings could benefit from the actor's education. Think about how rich and fulfilled people's lives would be if they approached even the mundane from the actor's viewpoint. Think about how different our teaching would be if we constantly pulled back our camera and approached the craft as a philosophy for moving through life itself. Meisner's first three questions: What do I want? Why do I want it? And why must I have it now?

Thank you.