

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE  
ANNUAL MEETING 2018**

**Oral Report of the Executive Director**

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Thank you once again for attending this, the 53rd Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Theatre. It is an honor and a privilege to be here, and to work with so many colleagues who have come together to consider issues of great importance to the field of theatre, and to the education and training of tens of thousands of students, each deeply committed to theatre study. It is also an honor and a privilege to have the opportunity to serve and assist the many accredited institutional members of NAST, as well as aspiring and non-members, who seek the assistance NAST can provide. I extend to you on behalf of the staff deepest appreciation for this opportunity to serve.

This is a special meeting. We gather together annually to share the bounty of our collective work, and that accomplished by our predecessors. But there's much more. We are here to take full advantage of our opportunities to connect, learn, grow, and celebrate. These opportunities provide vital resources for the ongoing development of theatre executives charged with the responsibility for leading collegiate theatre programs.

Our presence here allows us to connect and reconnect with our peers; to reengage in conversations already begun; and to pick up where we left off, so that the work already begun may continue without pause or hesitation.

The richness of the conversations and depth of expertise shared by individuals who kindly give of their time, offer their reflections, and present their ideas for our consideration enables us to learn, and through learning, to expand our individual and collective understandings, and develop curiosities about future possibilities.

Our willingness to participate, to listen, to share, to search for answers, to seek compromise, and to come to consensus as a deliberative body allows us to grow more deeply in our resolve as we fulfill our roles and responsibilities as administrators, and as guardians and protectors of theatre in various situations and settings.

And our accomplishments, our astounding individual and collective accomplishments which have had and will continue to have immeasurable impact on the field of theatre, theatre in higher education, higher education, and the lives of countless students who have benefitted from our collective work over these many years, bestow upon us a permission—a permission to celebrate, to revel in the moment, to be pride-filled in the grand historic sweep of our overall success, and to contemplate tomorrow's possibilities enthusiastically.

These meetings have another benefit. They offer a time for us to replenish our thoughts, our wills, and our hearts, so that we return home with renewed hope, reignited passions, and a hunger for the next challenge regardless of its character or disposition.

But there is “something” more. There is “something” more here. There is “something” more to NAST. There is “something” more we share, “something” powerful that binds us together. There is “something” that enables us to so easily connect, learn, grow, and celebrate. We sense it intuitively; we feel it when we enter this space; we are aware of its presence. But what is it, from where does it emanate, what is its importance, and what role does it play in how NAST works and serves, and in all that we do as theatre executives?

It may be worth the effort to take a moment to consider these questions together. To dig a bit deeper. To ponder possibilities. To attempt to find a few answers.

As is often the case, it may be that a review of the past will offer some insight into the present, and if we are willing to think broadly, a glimpse into the future. It may be that such an exercise will bring us to a place of deeper understanding, of knowing; a place that offers an articulated confirmation of our “something.” To this end, allow me please to offer two vignettes—wonderful testaments to aspects of our country’s success.

**Vignette Number One:** In 1961, the United States embarked upon the Apollo space program. On the afternoon of April 11, 1970, Apollo 13, the seventh manned mission in the program, and the anticipated third moon-landing mission, was launched from Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Intentions were clear – conduct a successful lunar landing and explore the Fra Mauro Highlands. However, 56 hours into the mission due to the loss of cryogenic oxygen in the service module, and the subsequent loss of the capability to generate electrical power, and to provide oxygen and produce water, the mission was aborted. We know this story; we know its ending. Forty-seven years later, the efforts of those involved in the successful return to Earth of Apollo 13 and its three astronauts remains a great source of American pride. What enabled those involved in this space mission to not only accept a challenge of epic proportion, but to go beyond what seemed to be the existing limits of intellectual capacity, to work the problem together, and to find a solution that would bring Apollo 13 back home, safely? The answer to this question is “something,” their “something.”

**Vignette Number Two:** This past fall, Forbes published the centennial edition of its magazine. The cover features a buoyant Warren Buffet holding a copy of the first edition, which was published on September 15, 1917. The centennial edition lists the top 50 largest national companies by sector in 1917, 1967 and in 2017. As you might imagine, given our country’s growth over this period of time, particularly in the technology sector, today’s list is vastly different from those of 1967 and 1917. However, close scrutiny of the lists shows that two companies are included in all three years. These two companies have weathered decades of challenges, and in so doing have remained in the top 50 throughout this period of time under largely their own names. They are General Electric and American Telephone and Telegraph. One hundred years later, these entities continue to survive, at times thrive (albeit the setbacks each has endured recently). They continue to serve people, to bolster our economy, and to represent models of enduring longevity and success. What enables these

companies to not only endure, but to be resilient, to be relevant, and to continue to contribute to our collective success as a nation for over 100 years? The answer to this question is “something,” their “something.”

The accomplishments of the individuals associated with the Apollo 13 Mission and these time-honored enterprises are stunning—but not necessarily surprising—for we, the people of the United States, know how to craft at the highest level of expertise, and dream at the highest level of expectation. What is it about NASA, GE, and AT&T that enabled them to not only weather the challenges faced, but more to the point, in the face of challenges, to surmount that which may have seemed insurmountable when first encountered?

One could argue that it is a combination of several factors—knowledge, intelligence, fortitude, conviction, perseverance, desire, hope, and so forth—and one would be correct, to a certain degree. However, these are merely the necessary strongly-built pillars that enable structures to stand true, and tall, and strong. As is the case with any formidable structure, each pillar must be affixed firmly to a solid and unwavering foundation. For NASA, GE, and AT&T, this foundation is their “something”; this foundation is their shared vision—a vision aligned with mission, a vision embraced by all involved, a vision focused on the task at hand, a vision which transcends any individual pursuit or desire, something more than fame and fortune. A shared vision: understood, embraced, accepted as unequivocal, carefully articulated, and well-conceived. At the center of the successes described in the vignettes is found a simple, singular, and common thread: a shared vision. This is their “something.” It is the foundation upon which all else rests.

Let us turn back to our questions then; let our quest for answers be guided by these stories. Let us consider what underpins the powerful force that binds us together. As newcomers may have surmised, and as experienced participants know, it too is our shared vision: a shared vision that has guided NAST for over 50 years; a shared vision that is the bedrock upon which NAST’s principles, actions, and activities sit and operate in balance and harmony. That which binds us together in the work that we have accomplished, that we accomplish today, and that which will be accomplished in the years ahead emanates from our shared vision. This is a vision that places theatre at center; a vision which is predicated on a desire to ensure that theatre is a pervasive and indispensable part of our culture and the lives of all citizens; a vision which is focused on ensuring that high levels of education and training for those interested, and inclined to study theatre, are available throughout our nation; a vision which reminds us to keep looking beyond the mundane operations and small challenges of any given day, to maintain the focus of our thoughts and pursuits on the future and its possibilities; a vision that helps us focus on what is at stake strategically, so that we don’t lose perspective and become lost in distractions, or consumed with counterproductive desires for personal advancement or conquest.

As administrators with responsibilities to lead, not just manage, we are well aware that a productive common vision is not bestowed or given or assured. Mastery will not come from the study of texts alone. Rather, we understand that vision must be developed, honed, and nurtured—with painstaking care and attention—and that certain conditions must exist for

the seeds of vision to take root, and the sprouts of visionary thinking to mature into living, breathing organisms. Of particular importance in the development of skills in this regard is the existence of three basic conditions, conditions which assist us to frame, address, and solve problems.

**Condition Number One:** The desire to pursue and acquire knowledge. This includes knowledge pertaining to current issues and events, as well as to that which elucidates our history, especially our history in terms of ideas and priorities related to the work we are doing. This knowledge must be factual; second-hand spill and conjecture have derailing effects. Possession of knowledge and its appropriate application can be a powerful combination when options, risks, and possibilities must be considered. An aphorism offered by George Santayana suggests that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>1</sup> This is not merely a charge to avoid that which did not succeed; this is a charge to consider successes, failures, tries, restarts, recalibrations, and the like, to ascertain why an initiative worked or why it did not. The benefits received from lessons learned are invaluable and integral aspects of our futures planning efforts and initiatives.

**Condition Number Two:** The desire to expand our capacity to think, and to think critically. Amassing copious reserves of information amounts to little unless we are able to observe connections, find intersections, observe patterns, and draw conclusions that inform wise decision-making. Decisions made in vacuums void of the understandings which result from the pursuit and acquisition of deep knowledge, and careful pursuit of answers through purpose-based strategic and tactical thinking such pursuits provoke, can be dangerous and costly. Like the situation at Cape Canaveral in early April of 1970, the knowledge base and intellectual capabilities of the NAST membership are staggering and diverse. It can be said that this diversity is our greatest collective strength, the kind of diversity defined by Malcolm Forbes as “the art of thinking independently together.”<sup>2</sup> As experts trained in theatre, we demonstrate mastery of this art in many ways, paramount among them is our theatre making. The concept of thinking independently together is natural to us, and we must continue to hold it fast, and build on it and with it.

**Condition Number Three:** The desire to anticipate and manage risk - to look at situations not only from the ground level, but as well, from various distances, such as the quarter of a million miles that stood between Mission Control and Apollo 13 in 1970. Various and varying perspectives are critical to consider when managing risk. Although we may from time-to-time find ourselves in periods that feel like stasis, we need to remember two things. First, at any given time, some things will change and some will not; some fundamentals need not, or indeed must not, lest losses be too great to bear. Second, given the pace of change and the necessity to remain relevant, periods of stasis at the operational level are always fleeting—and should be considered as such. We may allow ourselves only brief moments of pause to take a breadth and to survey the landscape before we must jump right back into the fray, doing new things from and with foundational essentials that do not change. As experts in the

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<sup>1</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (1905).

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Forbes (1919–1990).

field of theatre, we cannot give up excellence in performance, for example, even though concepts of excellence keep expanding in various dimensions.

Cognizant of these conditions, let us now look at them in terms of current realities. To begin, we must define an *event*: a desire held, an initiative planned, a problem to be addressed. For our purposes today, let us choose a problem to be addressed; specifically, the imposition of excessive and burdensome regulations on institutions of higher education.

We'll return to our conditions and use them to unpack and address the "regulations problem" in a step-by-step fashion.

**Condition Number One:** The desire to pursue and acquire knowledge. What do we know? What have we learned? What information must we seek? Given our careful study of factual information available to date, we know that 2016 culminated in unprecedented efforts to create new and replace existing regulations; to reinterpret existing regulations; and to apply these new, recrafted, and reinterpreted regulations in fashions detrimental to some, if not many institutions of higher learning. This is not to say that regulation per se cannot be effective or is not warranted. However, it is to say that regulation, intended to address the inappropriate actions or behaviors of the few, should not be applied summarily with broad strokes to all. Unfortunately, the existing one-size-fits-all mentality with regard to the application of regulation can place in harm's way those whose intentions are pure, and efforts are honest. We know that in 2017 many regulatory efforts were thwarted, if not halted altogether. Regulations pertaining to Accountability/Data Reporting/State Plan Provisions and Teacher Preparation have been repealed; Gainful Employment and Borrower Defense to Repayment are being renegotiated; and others, such as Assessment, are in a state of uncertainty, possibly inactivity. What we do not know is what will be proposed in the place of the regulations repealed; the resultant effect of renegotiations; or when regulatory activity will come to conclusion and what those conclusions might be. Therefore, we must be vigilant and continue to pursue information, including the consideration of various and varied points of views - the distillation of which can serve to expand our own bases of knowledge. As is so often the case, we must study continually, even though we may not know when and how our knowledge will be called upon or needed to be used.

**Condition Number Two:** The desire to expand our capacity to think, and to think critically. What will happen? What will not happen? What may happen? Given the facts in hand, it is appropriate, if not prudent, to consider connections, relationships, propensities of decision-makers, existing pressures, possible outcomes, and the like. Let us consider for a moment the negotiated rulemaking process. Those called to negotiate represent different and disparate constituencies, each with different and disparate needs and wants. The challenge that arises during any rulemaking process is simply that the needs and wants of many must be distilled into understandings and approaches that will best serve all—a difficult task given the depth, breadth, and complexity of our system of higher education. Successful rulemaking results when the collective body reaches consensus. However, such an outcome is rare, and absent its existence, the responsibility of writing regulation defaults to government employees. With regard to those participating in any aspect of the negotiated rulemaking

process, it becomes imperative to know individual propensities toward regulation. On one end of the spectrum there is interest in heavy centralized regulation and control; on the other there exists support for and protection of institutional autonomy and freedom. Without question, it becomes important to consider the effect any outcome will have on the operational culture of higher education, and the resultant effect on institutions? As we are well aware, what truly matters to the work we are trying to accomplish is not necessarily the result of the actions of the lone individual, but instead, the ideas and policies that gain traction and take hold. Too much regulation stifles; too much control suffocates. Regulation is an issue that requires the deepest sort of critical thinking, because in many aspects of higher education decision-making, there is no single national or state—or even institutional—answer. Many answers are local, or even discipline-specific. It is our job individually to find the best local answers for any given time, but also to be able to articulate the reasons the freedom to find local answers and make local decisions is essential to creative excellence.

**Condition Number Three:** The desire to anticipate and manage risk. What must we do in advance of, and in response to unfolding events? How do we minimize risk so that our sights and those of our faculties, staff, and students remain on the work to be done, and our efforts ensure that our work can and will continue without undue interference or interruption? To successfully anticipate and manage risk, we must be well-studied and have considered in depth the multitude of possibilities that present themselves. We must be able to work with and make decisions about possibilities in terms of basic fundamentals, basic fundamentals of our art form, basic fundamentals of our vision, basic fundamentals of ethical behavior, and so forth. Only from this base of knowledge and understanding can tactical plans and response flexibilities be considered and placed in readiness for action when necessary. We must remain aware of possibilities and realize the potential for rapid position changes. We must try to anticipate some of the paths the future could take and be ready to engage quickly and effectively in terms of ideas and policies, fully cognizant of their potential real-world effects on student learning and institutions.

At what point, after how much effort, does attention to and application of principles associated with these conditions result in the development of a truly skilled and seasoned visionary? The answer is unknown. There is no single correct answer, no absolute mathematical equation, no perfect and applicable example to guide us. Results are a function of many factors, each of which must be given due and appropriate consideration. What is assured is that when all aspects align consistent with a reasoned, reasonable, and shared basic vision, “something” happens, “something” more happens.

There is no question that the challenges before you are great and will remain so. But there is also no question that these challenges are not insurmountable. There is no limit to the possibilities of your reach. May you continue your journey, and in doing so, seek and find your “something.”

In closing, I offer for your consideration a quotation from the book, *As a Man Thinketh*, by the English author and poet, James Allen:

“Composer, sculptor, painter, poet, prophet, sage, these are the makers of the after-world, the architects of heaven. The world is beautiful because they have lived; without them, laboring humanity would perish. He who cherishes a beautiful vision, a lofty ideal in his heart, will one day realize it. Columbus cherished a vision of another world, and he discovered it; Copernicus fostered the vision of a multiplicity of worlds and a wider universe, and he revealed it; Buddha beheld the vision of a spiritual world of stainless beauty and perfect peace, and he entered into it. Cherish your visions; cherish your ideals; cherish the music that stirs in your heart, the beauty that forms in your mind, the loveliness that drapes your purest thoughts, for out of them will grow all delightful conditions, all heavenly environment; of these, if you but remain true to them, your world will at last be built.”<sup>3</sup>

Thank you for your important and essential work. Thank you for your unceasing efforts to advance theatre in higher education in our country. Congratulations on your many successes. Best wishes as you continue to study, think, and work problems to positive conclusions. May you be inspired by the bounty of your good work, an important feature of which is this wonderful time we share together in the cause of theatre, one of the greatest components of our common humanity, one of the greatest powers associated with the human spirit.

Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (1903).