

**National Association of Schools of Theatre
ANNUAL MEETING 2019**

NAST President's Report

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Good morning and once again, I thank you for making time in your busy lives to attend our 54th Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Theatre. I am pleased to have the opportunity to share with you today some thoughts, dear colleagues whom I hold in such high esteem.

I'd like to begin by offering a personal response to one element highlighted in our Executive Director's address, for she describes something I have experienced. I, too, was that attendee, quietly collecting the pearls of wisdom eloquently offered from the tongues of the seers, sages, and soothsayers. I, too, was that person who suddenly found herself missing the accomplished ones, the influencers, the experts. I too wondered, who would replace them? Who would the next generation of leaders be? I couldn't imagine myself in those shoes, and yet, when an invitation was received from someone admired and respected; an invitation to participate in a meaningful way in the work of this Association, it seemed right to accept without hesitation. And so I did, and have done so since the early 1990s, when I inched out of my protected "box" to find productive and meaningful ways to contribute to this Association and to the cause of theatre in higher education. When your time comes, I hope you will not hesitate to embrace what may lie ahead. I have not looked back. In fact, the benefits of volunteer service have returned to me far more than I may have given to date. I find myself fortunate beyond words.

As I contemplated possible topics for this address, the words of fellow NAST Board members both inspired and haunted me—thoughts such as “We want our presenters to teach us something, to tell us something we don't already know.” Could this be presumptive, for I would never presume to hold all of the answers or to even know all of the questions that must be asked. But what I *can* do is share some thoughts collected during my many years of service as a theatre administrator. Perhaps these thoughts have crossed your minds. If so, the comments that follow will seem comforting in that they offer a perspective which speaks to how those of us in theatre are so perfectly positioned to prepare our students for whatever lies ahead, for whatever their futures might hold, and how accreditation supports at every turn our efforts to do so.

This year I have been consistently reminded of the inherent value in what theatre practitioners do. Pondering a question asked by a higher administrator to demonstrate theatre's relevance in both today's world and the world of tomorrow, continued exploration of the skills and knowledge we develop as well as the transferability of those skills led me back to author Daniel Pink. Several years ago, Pink challenged us to think of the MFA as the new MBA. In his seminal book *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers will Rule the Future*, Pink posits that more

education and organizational attention should be placed on high-touch, high concept, intuitive skills. “The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind — creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people — artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers — will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys.”¹

Pink’s vision predates iPhones and Droid; mega data and the expansiveness of the Internet; Nest, Alexa, and Elon Musk’s cautionary warning about artificial intelligence; and the rise of market makers like Amazon, UBER, and Airbnb. Pink’s predictions were spot on. However, he underestimated just how soon they would occur, and thus how quickly we would need to adapt to the new, particularly as it relates to teaching and learning, and to reaching today’s students.

Similarly, Rebecca Weicht, writing for the World Economic Forum, recently explored the vitality of entrepreneurialism, describing skills that are useful beyond any job market, those we might describe as life skills. Despite the apparent value of entrepreneurial skills, the 2016 Eurydice study conducted in Europe revealed that, “no country has made entrepreneurial learning mainstream within education, and few countries have embedded experiential learning to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and skillset.”²

Pause for a moment with me, let us think about our theatre programs, our curricular programs, and our production processes. Without question, as the beneficiaries of our programs, our students are positively developing skills as artists and as entrepreneurs that hopefully will serve them well, whether they choose to work in theatre or in a variety of other careers. I have always found that parents of students hoping to major in theatre are consoled when they are reminded of the transferability of skills and knowledge gained in a theatre program. The competitive arena so often associated with careers in the arts might deter parents from supporting their child’s desire to study them, fearing that their child will be less employable. While no university degree leads to an absolute promise of employment, the point here is that the skills developed reach beyond what one might need to be successful in theatre. This is not to diminish in any way the value of learning theatre for theatre’s sake, but we might say “yes and” when we demonstrate how those skills that are intrinsic to theatre transfer to any number of post-graduate pathways.

As noted in the “Future of Jobs Report” prepared for the 2016 World Economic Forum, the top 10 skills anticipated to be required by employers in 2020 are: Complex Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Creativity, People Management, Collaboration, Emotional Intelligence, Judgment and Decision Making, Service Orientation, Negotiation, and Cognitive Flexibility. Allow me to repeat these a bit more slowly: Complex Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Creativity, People Management, Collaboration, Emotional Intelligence, Judgment and Decision Making, Service Orientation, Negotiation, and Cognitive Flexibility. Just five years ago, in 2015 the top 10 skills were: Complex Problem Solving, Collaboration, People Management, Critical Thinking, Negotiation, Quality Control, Service Orientation, Judgment and Decision Making, Acting Listening, and Creativity; and again—Complex Problem Solving, Collaboration, People Management, Critical Thinking, Negotiation, Quality Control, Service Orientation, Judgment and

Decision Making, Acting Listening, and Creativity. Note the changes in the hierarchical order. Creativity was listed last five years ago—but today, it rests as third in position of importance. One could easily suggest and passionately defend that theatre study holds the ability to develop in most, if not all students, the top skills sought by employers. With regard to critical problem solving, the #1 skill listed in both 2015 and 2020, theatrical production is, by its very nature, one giant puzzle to be solved. Our creative teams, which include directors and designers, some or all of whom might be students, unpack and deconstruct scripts, analyze their meanings, messages, themes, motifs, characters, styles, and periods, to arrive at approaches that reflect each team’s collaborative, unified vision. Subsequent to this initial conceptual phase, the actors and technicians join in the collaborative, creative process. Critical thinking, complex problem solving, people management, quality control, judgment and decision-making, all are inherently woven into the fabric of our work. The production arm of any theatre program provides opportunities for students to develop these life skills. Our student stage managers practice people management skills, negotiation skills, quality control, and critical thinking beginning with design meetings and progressing through strike. Our actors engage in critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility as they work to expand their technique and style.

At the core of our operations in theatre lies creativity, which is listed third on the top skills list. Creativity in theatre is not taught as a one-off activity, but rather is a continuous and integral part of the process. Every part of the theatrical process requires divergent thinking; each step should provide opportunities for failure and pathways for success, all of which are critical aspects associated with any creative process. We are fortunate that our students come to us interested in the creative process, generally speaking, ready to pursue their artform with great purpose and intent. Hopefully, for us and for the students, this means that there are minimal barriers to creative thought and therefore meaningful engagement. Our students seem to have broken through the childhood experiences that could have diminished their confidence and therefore their willingness to take creative chances. But for some, the lack of creative confidence may still be an issue.

I am reminded of a story told by David Kelley, a representative of the renowned design firm IDEO, in his 2012 TED Talk. Mr. Kelley spoke of a child who upon creating a clay horse was told that the work looked nothing like a horse. In reaction to the statement, the child balled the clay into a lump and threw it away. Did this feedback kill the spirit of a budding artistic spirit and create doubt, if not disinterest? Have you come into contact with those whose suggest that they are not the creative type? Maybe they endured less than supportive feedback with regard to an early masterpiece. It seems that it is our role to not only seek out the creatives, but to support them in their efforts and dreams. If this is the case, then we must find effective methods of teaching that nurture and celebrate creative confidence. Kelley goes on to suggest that one way to turn fear into confidence is by walking individuals, in our case students, through a series of small steps, a series of steps that lead to small successes, allowing the students to turn fear into familiarity. Like our production processes, when we first open the script with a bare stage before us, the endless possibilities can be overwhelming. However, we do have parameters—the size and type of the stage, our budget, our time, and our talent. So

we take small steps within those parameters and before long we find ourselves with a finished product, and a renewed sense of creative confidence.

A story comes to mind which speaks to this point. Last month at Kean we opened a contemporized production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One designer lamented that she “could not do it.” Day after day, production meeting after production meeting, she struggled to come up with ideas, but eventually, the path became more clear, and as it did, ideas seemed to percolate, and the way forward unfolded. This student, through a step-by-step process, amassed idea after idea, each of which offered her the freedom to choose the best of the best. On opening night, the set, under the magical lighting of a fellow student, transformed the bare stage into the wonderful world of the dream. The students (the doubtful designer included), proud of their accomplishments, were the recipients of congratulatory praise offered again and again by their peers, the faculty, and members of the audience. Their creative confidence received a visible and substantial boost. Surely we all have experienced this sort of transformation in students. For the students involved, this was a watershed moment; it was apparent that the flood gates had opened, and for them, there was no turning back.

There is no doubt that theatre and creativity are inextricably linked, that creativity is an organic aspect of theatre study. In his TED Talk titled “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” Sir Ken Robinson suggested that creativity is as important as literacy, noting that creativity should be held in equally high esteem. (For this, he received tumultuous applause.) He described a hierarchy of learning which is led by study in the sciences and mathematics, which is driven by Industrialism or what is needed “for work,” followed by the humanities, and lastly, the arts. Further, within the arts, he suggested that art and music are deemed more valuable than drama and dance. In this case, applause did not follow. Why? Because our theatre students won’t get jobs as actors, designers, or technicians? Perhaps Sir Ken’s intention was to prompt us to get on our soapboxes, educate others about the value of creativity, and more specifically, to advocate for drama and dance and their inherent value to society. What *is* the measure of success for graduates of arts programs, beyond those few whose talents, perseverance, or connections lead them to the profession? Kelly Pollock, Executive Director of St. Louis’ Center of Creative Arts suggests that, “The true purpose of arts education is not necessarily to create more professional dancers or artists. It’s to create more complete human beings who have curious minds, who are able to lead productive lives. I think most people come to think of arts education as developing technical skills in the arts—how to dance, how to sing—which we absolutely do. But it’s more than that. The value of arts education and the creative process is also about developing the skills that are most in demand in today’s workforce—creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and ingenuity. Also, we shouldn’t underestimate the practical value of inspiration and engagement. We’ve seen that time and time again—that spark in young people when they find their passion. It’s life-transforming.”³ I doubt we would find fault in Ms. Pollock’s statement. I suspect that most all of us, regardless of the broad spectrum of our own institutional missions, are extending our teaching far beyond subject-matter knowledge to include some focus on the important attributes articulated in the lists above. Hopefully we are assisting our students to be ready for what lies ahead.

As members of NAST, we are fortunate. Our national standards, which we have worked for decades to develop, hone, and implement, support our creative efforts, and through their courses of study in theatre, the creative efforts of our students. Our national standards, which rest at the heart of our peer review process, push us to think beyond what is possible today, and consider what is possible tomorrow. They spur us to create our own future.

It is not surprising to note that our institutions are eager to celebrate and share the fruits of their labors, to announce that a program is accredited, to feature a program's innovative successes. It would be my hope that our theatre units are recognized for these achievements, and for the passions of those here in this room and those of our fellow theatre educators, devoted advocates and champions, who demonstrate day after day to the decision-makers and administrators how the arts provide comprehensive instruction and experiences to students that assist them to lead productive lives as highly skilled artists, critical thinkers, innovative creators, adroit problem solvers, and expert collaborators. This is our powerful story, one worthy to be shared with others as a model.

In closing, I offer several testaments which speak to the value of arts study and a short vignette. In his famous Stanford commencement address, Steve Jobs credits an arts class for the inspiration to develop elegant fonts for the Macintosh. In a blog post titled "In Defense of Music Education," Jef Raskin credits the arts as the inspiration for the development of the personal computer. And a former U.S. President noted that he did not think he would have become President if not for school music. For each of these individuals, the arts offered pathways that were paved by their creative intentions and pursuits. They possessed the confidence to take the first step. This confidence is displayed in the following vignette. Sir Ken Robinson often tells the story of a four year old who is attending drawing class. The teacher asked the young girl, "What are you drawing?" "I am drawing a picture of God," said the little girl. "But nobody knows what God looks like," said the teacher, to which the little girl replied, "They will in a minute."

Theatre offers to us and to our students not only an opportunity to experience the richness of human capacity to create, but the ability to serve as the architects, those have the tools of the trade in hand who stand ready and able to continue to build our discipline's future, whatever that future may be.

Thank you.

1. Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).

2. Rebecca Weicht, "Education systems can stifle creative thought. Here's how to do things differently." World Economic Forum, 4 April 2018. www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/education-systems-can-stifle-creative-thought-here-s-how-to-do-things-differently/. 15 March 2019.

3. Jorie Jacobie, "Creative Conversations: A Q and A with Kelly Pollock, Executive Director of COCA in St. Louis," *Alive Magazine* (20 March 2017). <http://alivemag.com/creative-conversations-a-qa-with-kelly-pollock-executive-director-of-coca-in-st-louis/>. 15 March 2019.

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Beckford, Avril. "The Skills You Need to Succeed in 2020." *Forbes Magazine* (August 2018).
World Economic Forum. *The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, 2016. <http://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/>