

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

Oral Report of the Executive Director

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“Our Authentic Selves”

For over four decades, NAST has served institutions offering theatre study. In doing so, the Association has also served thousands of students, the higher education community, the field of theatre, the arts in general, and the cultural life of the American people. Today, I want to talk about just one aspect of this achievement, an aspect that remains critically important to everything we are and do as institutions and as an association.

Throughout its history, NAST has had the great good fortune to have been supported and led by theatre administrators. Each deeply devoted to the continuities of theatre study and excellence. Each deeply devoted to ensuring that theatre remains a critically important aspect of our cultural lives and those of future generations.

It is an honor to be speaking to just such a group of administrators. You play critical roles in maintaining the continuities of theatre study and excellence. Your unfettered and selfless support of the field and of NAST is evidenced in many ways—by your attendance at this Annual Meeting, to name just one. But far more important is the work that you and your colleagues continue to accomplish on your campuses day in and day out, work that NAST exists to support. Many benefit from your devotion, your time, your energy, and your commitment. Many are grateful, so tremendously grateful.

In many ways, the continuing success of our particular world in theatre is dependent upon you. You are the well-studied, the engaged, the intellects who will lead our discussions, gather information and advice, listen to proposals and critiques, seek wisdom, and ultimately chart our course. You are the content-based visionaries, those who understand the important role that theatre study plays in the daily lives of all individuals. You are the enlightened, those who have seen the results and benefits of theatre study firsthand. You are the voices of reason, those who can and must share your understanding of the importance of theatre and theatre study for all students with those in your community and beyond. And you represent that which is peaceful, the power of theatre to affect greater good for all peoples from all walks of life. Theatre administrators have assumed and carried these welcomed responsibilities with grace for decades. The need to continue undaunted remains ever so urgent today. We would be unwise to let the context deflect us.

Worried about the path our nation is following and in particular the nature of our national discourse, not long ago, I shared my concerns with my father, a man possessing wisdom amassed and honed to great depth throughout nine decades of active and engaged participation in his life, the life of his family, his profession, and the lives of others. I lamented that at times I felt that unfolding conditions produced unnecessary barriers and fragmented important conversations. I worried aloud that such distractions could prevent us at times from remaining focused on the essence and pureness of our work—the education and training of students to pursue and teach theatre at the highest possible artistic, scholarly, and educational levels. My father, a physician by training, but a pianist and musician, an artist at heart, understood all too well. He reflected upon the practice of medicine, and how it had changed during his lifetime, particularly the ever-amassing encroachments that broadened the degree of separation between doctor and patient, between available care and good health. We shared stories and concerns. Then, as he gently rocked in his favorite chair, a chair from which he had dispensed his care and wisdom for many years, with his usual wit, quiet patience, and extraordinary intellect, hidden to most by his unassuming and deeply humble presence, he shared his perspective.

He suggested that during his lifetime our country had faced events and challenges that seemed overwhelming and often devastating: the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed; World War II, the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars; the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK; the struggle to expand civil rights; the Watergate Scandal; and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The collective enormity of these and similar events was stunning, but so was his counterpoint. He noted that during this same period penicillin was discovered; the Star-Spangled Banner was adopted as our nation's anthem; the World Health Organization was created; a vaccination for polio was developed; smallpox was eradicated; the wars that began during this same period of time ended; man walked on the moon; and the enormity of the world's cultures and information had been made readily available by the introduction of the Internet. He remarked that each of these events had changed our country, and to varying degrees, those who participated, benefited, or stood in witness.

The specific events described by my father depicted his reality; events that marked the passage of time during his lifetime; events that had had a profound effect on him. Today's realities, those of the generations that have come after my father's, are not identical, but the events that define each generation are no less important, and their ability to affect the lives of the nation's citizens is no less significant.

When the tragedies and successes were placed in juxtaposition, two significant realizations became apparent to me. First, barriers, varied in size and shape, and purpose, and discourses, negative in nature and intent, are two realities that exist in any community of human beings; at times these barriers and discourses are introduced with purposeful intent to ensure that stability is permanently jeopardized, and imbalance prevails. Second, the human spirit, resilient beyond understanding or explanation, bestows upon each of us the strength, fortitude, and capacity that enables us to break down false barriers and diffuse negative discourse, especially the kinds that destroy trust. There is no doubt that maintaining openness and trust are critical

and invaluable components of our daily work, if we are to stay the course and remain true to the purest and most fundamental essences of our art and art form, if we are to maintain necessary stabilities and balances, if we are to support our students and faculty. The lesson gently imparted was that mankind has always been, and will always be, faced with challenges, and thus, the calling to accept the responsibility will be ever-present. Success in the future depends upon the willingness of each generation to accept such responsibility, to consider options, to weigh potential results, and to consider proportionalities and make choices that address the needs of the time, without damaging either trust or essential conceptual foundations.

Each of us is faced each day with a multitude of choices that must be considered and made—the choice to manage the imbalances or to let them tip the scale toward dysfunction, the choice to focus on our core purposes or to let our attention be diverted, the choice to use time wisely or squander it, the choice to redouble our efforts or to look the other way when challenges appear, the choice to educate to the highest level of expertise and intellectual capacity or merely let our students pass through the collegiate experience as placeholders or observers. If we are to continue succeeding, we must remain resolved to stay focused on the core of our work in theatre, and in doing so, to find ways through or around or over whatever distractions appear, regardless of their size or nature or longevity.

Let us now for a moment circle back. Back to us, to theatre administrators, to our roles and responsibilities, to the duties we as the well-studied, the visionaries, the enlightened, the voices of reason, and the ambassadors of peace must embrace and carry out. But first, together, let's bust a myth.

Recently a colleague shared with me a story of his own heartfelt realization. For some years this individual had been traveling to meetings which by and large were attended by a nucleus of seasoned administrators, expert in their fields—the sages, the soothsayers, the all-knowing, or at least the lot-knowing. Conversations were lively, rich, and rewarding in the number of ideas he captured and scribbled on his pad. For him, the world was as it should be. He was a willing participant in the activities that surrounded him. He left each meeting with his passion refreshed, his resolve renewed, and his competence expanded. He felt rewarded to have pages of notes for future reference. However, after a few years passed, he noticed that the situation had changed somewhat. He participated more, others less. Curious to know just what had happened, during a meeting on a particular day, he turned slowly to look at those in attendance. He thought to himself, “Where have they all gone?” “Where are my mentors?” Over the course of time, the community of administrators and teachers that had for so long, and so well influenced and led the field, had one-by-one said their appropriate “good-byes,” making space for those next in line to step forward and assume the mantle of responsibility. Because the departures had been piecemeal, until most were gone, he had not recognized what had happened in terms of content expertise.

In that split-second, he realized that he now was one of the elders, that his words were those attendees came to hear, and that their pads of paper were filled with ideas that came to them

after considering and digesting his thoughts. He realized that the younger administrators now depended upon him and his colleagues much like he had depended upon the leaders who had come before him. The torch had been passed without regard to his perceived readiness to accept it.

Although a performer, as an administrator this individual had worked in the wings and was unnoticed all these years, or at least he thought this to be the case. Now, he saw a new and daunting responsibility which was thrust upon him—much like the responsibility that landed at his feet years ago when he was called to become an arts administrator. On both occasions he accepted even though he believed he was neither ready nor the right person for the job.

Now unable to stay in the wings where he hid and maneuvered for so many years, he knew the time had come to step out. But he hesitated. He started reviewing his perceptions of his inadequacies. In moments, he feared he would be found to be what at times, he truly thought he was, an imposter. He had always seen himself to be successful at flying under the radar so that no one would ever notice that instead of actually earning his place as an administrator, he was merely the beneficiary of being in the right place at the right time. He was the beneficiary of good luck. He had long ago thought himself not as gifted as many of his colleagues, and certainly not capable of constructing in his mind thoughts and ideas that he for years had gleaned from others. He thought without question that others were better equipped than he to manage wisely and deal with the complexities of positive change.

It is probably safe to say that such thoughts are not held exclusively by this administrator. In reality and from time-to-time, it may be said that many of us have such thoughts, or at least, have pondered their plausibility.

And so therefore, we have before us the myth of inadequacy. But before we bust it, there is one more thing we must do—we must address at least two truths.

Truth #1. There is every good chance that there are individuals who are smarter and savvier than we are. There is every good chance that we work hard to find the words that seem to spin so easily in the minds and roll so fluently from the tongues of others. For some, recognition of these truths gives credence to the case they make for suggesting that if they took certain responsibilities they would be or be seen to be impostors. However disconcerting and discouraging such conclusions may seem, it might be helpful to remember the old adage: “if you are the smartest person in the room, you are in the wrong room.” Although each of us may not wish to admit it freely, there is wisdom, our wisdom, in seeking input from others. The same is true for knowledge and experience. And there is counsel, a hallmark of work in NAST. In counsel, we encourage ourselves to expand our understandings, and to challenge our existing understandings so that we may either recommit to our position or recast it from a more informed point of view. The confident administrator takes comfort in the words often attributed to Winston Churchill, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. [and] Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”

Truth #2. There is every good chance that that we cannot know everything. Sometimes it is difficult or impossible to know as much as we should. However, rather than dwell on this reality, the wise administrator understands this and other human limitations, and works to surround himself or herself with the brightest and most insightful individuals available who understand and support the core purposes of the enterprise. Leadership is often about finding the best possible overall direction and helping everyone stay the course in terms of their own specialized work.

With this perspective in hand, let us now bust the myth of inadequacy wide open.

We may be imperfect, but imposters we are not. No credence to this idea of inadequacy is warranted. The imposter concept should be banished from our thoughts. The negativity this conclusion invites or cements is not productive. Perpetuated, it creates barriers—barriers which can and will prevent us from realizing our potential to the fullest extent, our potential to serve, to lead, to solve, to communicate, to build, and to succeed.

What may be found by those willing to bust through the myth of inadequacy may be the realization that there exists in each of us not only a consistent propensity to underestimate and downplay our abilities, but a deep and abiding humility which can prevent us from owning our own authenticity, an authenticity centered in a deep compassion for those we serve, a deep love of our discipline, and a deep desire to serve the field of theatre and its people. As we can see, this humility can be a strong ally, but it can also be a detracting detriment. If our humility shrouds our critical thinking abilities, the rigors of our pursuits, and our formidable expertise, we may appear and be assumed to be meek and unprepared to lead, much less stand and hold whatever line needs to be held. If on the other hand, our humility is used to welcome, to respect, to bring together, we may have enhanced the means that lead to substance, and to diffuse and disperse the negative discourses and faulty proposals that prevent continuing achievement. In such cases, our humility may serve as the antidote for the arrogance du jour regardless of what shape or form it may take. Our true and authentic selves will be found when we not only discover but take ownership of our attributes and learn how they can be used to effect positive, lasting, and meaningful improvement.

Let us be encouraged by the gifts, opportunities, and responsibilities we have. Let us participate, engage, share, take the opportunities to combine our knowledge, skill, wisdom, and experience with that of others. Let us do this wherever we find ourselves, and certainly in various aspects of NAST.

Throughout our time here in Minneapolis we will have the opportunity to listen and learn from seasoned administrators, all of whom, have demonstrated their abilities to work for and advance the arts and our great cause of theatre. We, all of us, will participate in a dialogue which at its base respects the diversity of thought brought to the table by each and every participant in the conversation. It is hoped that this dialogue will offer a wealth of ideas for consideration. Maybe you will scribble notes on your pad.

In closing, allow me to return to where we began, the wisdom of my father. As my father and I concluded our conversation, he shared with me a thought that had been on his mind. He recounted that not long ago a colleague ten years his junior opined that after they retired from medical practice, they would soon be forgotten. I suggested to my father, who knew all too well that his work and his care would never be forgotten, that his authentic contributions were clearly evident in the countless number of individuals his expertise had enabled to live healthy lives, and that memories of his kindness and care were etched in the consciousness of the grateful. As we all know, acts of kindness and care are never forgotten. I offered that, for me, his life exemplified truth as described by the words often attributed to Augustine of Hippo: "The truth is like a lion; you don't have to defend it. Let it loose; it will defend itself." My dad was a man of truth and honor, and he let them both loose with an extraordinary depth of passion and commitment.

These same qualities exist in you. The combination of capabilities represented in this room is staggering. Each of us is inextricably linked to that combination.

What contributions will you make? What is your legacy? How will your contributions live on in those who have witnessed your humility, benefitted from your wisdom, been inspired by your passion, and observed firsthand your keen intellect devoted to the service of theatre? The options and opportunities before us are endless. I share with you again thoughtful words attributed to Winston Churchill: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

Thank you once again and as always for your tireless work. The NAST membership, elected leaders, and staff deeply value you, your thoughts, your participation, and your contributions. I hope that you return home to a comfortable and well-worn rocking chair and have time to savor thoughts of your blessings and the great honor of your calling. We extend to each of you and your family members our warmest regards as we approach this season of awakening and growth.

Thank you.

(In honor of Richard N. Peeler, M.D., September 9, 1925 – December 9, 2017, beloved father of Karen P. Moynahan)