

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE

57th Annual Meeting

and

Retreat for Administrators of Theatre Programs in Higher Education

March 23 – 26, 2022

Oral Report of the Executive Director

Karen P. Moynahan

“If Only”

Good afternoon.

To those attending the NAST Annual Meeting for the first time, thank you for coming. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to benefit from the pleasure of your company and the contributions you will make during your days in Baltimore. Welcome.

To those returning, thank you for your unfailing efforts and abiding support. We look forward to re-establishing connections and continuing conversations. Welcome back.

To all in attendance today, thank you for your fealty to the bedrock principles upon which NAST sits and which guide NAST as it works in support of its members, and the institutions and individuals it serves. Thank you for the community you together create—one abundant in intellect, wisdom, curiosity, and potential. It is so very good to be with you in person. Welcome home.

As citizens of a nation in peril, we have, during these last many months, witnessed and been affected by conditions and forces more powerful in their effect, broader in their reach, and more sustained in their intensity and duration than at almost any other period in our lifetimes. Established mores, customs, and traditions have been questioned; boundaries have been blurred and, in some cases, erased; effective and well-tested approaches have been modified and, at times, replaced. Yet, despite all that has been endured, as theatre administrators you gather here in assembly eager to courageously carry on your work, and purposefully so. Thank you.

Throughout these many months, having had the privilege of speaking with countless numbers of arts administrators and having witnessed firsthand the sustained tenacity of theatre executives evident as they face and manage with aplomb existing conditions and forces, all the while balancing the need to move imperative initiatives forward, I have wondered on more than one occasion what fuels the will of an individual to keep going regardless of the nature of

a challenge or its intensity. What conditions must exist to propel an individual to arise each day to face the same challenges as those faced the day before, and the day before that, as well as those that have arisen overnight which will accompany the new day, and do it all over again. Pondering this observation, the words of Rudyard Kipling offered in a favorite poem came to mind and provided insight into a prevailing mindset which has been pervasive among arts executives not only throughout these last thirty-six months, but for the many years preceding. The poem is powerful in the timelessness of its message. The words console, remind, speak of hope, and clearly affirm the possibilities inherent in the future. Allow me to share these words with you, and the perspective they offer to us at this time.

If
by Rudyard Kipling

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;*

*If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;*

*If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

It has often been suggested that this poem, written circa 1895, was meant to be a set of rules for “grown-up living” Kipling intended for his son. More likely, as noted in his autobiography posthumously published in 1937 entitled *Something of Myself*, Kipling, by his own admission, suggests that he was inspired by Lieutenant Leander Starr Jameson. Regardless, the poem’s intended message seems as poignantly applicable to his son as it does to Lieutenant Jameson. In point of fact, its message is as prescient and applicable to us today as it may have been to these gentlemen when it was written in 1895.

Although we might suggest that “the Earth and everything that’s in it” is well beyond our reach, we also understand that no pursuit is in vain, for the possibility of success exists in various degrees, forms, and natures. Guided by Mr. Kipling’s approach to queries offered in the form of suppositions that frame “if” conditions, it seems prudent for us to take the time to revisit, and as or if necessary recommit our attention to the conditions that have served throughout history as the foundational pillars of NAST—pillars upon which our guiding principles rest—principles that inform the efforts of theatre executives as they strive to educate and train students to the highest level of expertise possible—expertise that serves to advance the field of theatre not only for the benefit of those who live within it, but for those who cannot or should not live without it.

Theatre administrators gather in community at this Annual Meeting sharing commonalities—one of which, without question is the deeply held desire to connect and interact in person. This desire is palpable; it is tangible. We witness it in the warm greetings, kind words, and effervescent smiles exchanged among attendees. Although it has been thirty-six months since our last gathering, we have arrived here in Baltimore and picked up where we left off—seamlessly so. But it is clear that that which truly and concretely connects us transcends a mere desire. In fact, the connection is a result of and attributable to a long-standing bond which exists between and among theatre administrators—a bond firmly rooted in at least three abiding truths, which although may not always be self-evident, are nonetheless ubiquitously present.

First and foremost, NAST theatre administrators share a common vision.

- A vision that reflects an understanding that theatre as an artform is a critical aspect of human life, and that it must be nurtured and shared.
- A vision that reflects an understanding that it is our responsibility to protect, defend, advocate for, and advance theatre as an artform, without pause or hesitation.

- A vision that reflects an understanding that efforts in the academy must include pursuits that ensure the development of competency, excellence, and virtuosity in the students enrolled today and those we will welcome in the days and years yet to come.

Second, individually and collectively, theatre administrators are committed to this vision.

- A commitment that is exemplified by an understanding that theatre administrators together, and united in common cause, represent a formidable voice, one backstopped by a set of comprehensive national standards, your standards, that for over fifty years have spoken loudly and clearly about the rigor expected of both institutions teaching theatre and students enrolled in theatre study.
- A commitment that is exemplified by actions that advance not only the initiatives of one's own institution, but as well, support, assist, and advance the efforts of all involved in the discipline of theatre. A commitment driven by an understanding that each institution holds a responsibility to give, as well as the privilege to receive, and that at any time due to current realities, the path of an institution's "give and take" pendulum can change direction without notice or warning, and therefore, its ability to give or necessity to take will fluctuate; an understanding that any such fluctuation will be absorbed within this finely-tuned system—one that embraces and seeks to balance the inevitable ebbs and flows—for the benefit of all.
- A commitment that ensures that rhetoric employed is used for positive and constructive good—to persuade through intellectual and well-considered thought the value of theatre study, rather than as a weapon to discredit or disparage another for the intentional purpose of individual gain. We would be wise to remember that discipline-specific fields, and therefore the institutions that offer study within them, tend to be painted with the same brush. The singular success of one is, or often can be, attributed to all—an unquestionable benefit. But as well, the singular failure of another can, and often does, color or cast a pall over the entire field. Therefore, it is prudent to work together not only to realize but to advance the successes of all.

And third, deep and abiding respect must be offered to all, at all times, and in all circumstances. This includes a willingness to listen rather than to talk over, to contribute rather than to tear down, and to engage rather than to stand aside. If we are to remain dedicated to these truths, it is important to continue to embrace each and every voice, to celebrate and defend the collective diversity of mind and thought, and to continue to recognize each institution's unique mission and purpose.

If we remain committed to the shared ownership of these conditions, we will continue to be drawn together, to remain bound in our purpose, to advance our pursuits, to be the beneficiaries of our collective will, and to secure the freedom and independence necessary to ensure that we as artists maintain our ability to create, make, and innovate—unencumbered by barriers.

If we are united in vision, focused on commitments, and aligned in efforts as a community, we will not only protect our right and liberty to continue our work, but as well, maintain a posture that will enable us to mobilize as may be necessary to address forces that seek to weaken our resolve, divide our loyalties, divert our attentions, and challenge our allegiances. It is within our power to ensure that no force would ever be successful in causing or attempting to cause such destruction within our ranks. It is our responsibility to continue to maintain a stand-ready posture, capable in its resolve, of addressing any affront that may arise. Although we hope that such would not be necessary, as students of history, we of course, know better.

Our greatest asset is without question our greatest defense—a collective expanse of subject matter knowledge. We are wise to remember that: theatre is our artform; NAST is our organization; the national standards are ours—conceived, developed, reviewed, applied, embraced, aspired to, and met—by us. It is the collective community of those involved in theatre and theatre study, after all, who own the content, and it is these individuals who should rightly determine the means and terms by which it should be understood. To relinquish the responsibility for the care and feeding of this discipline to non-artists would result in devastating effects—including the possibility of characterizing the discipline as irrelevant to the livelihood of our country, the richness and vitality of our culture, and the spirit and will of our citizens.

In addition to all else that we must do, we must remain vigilant in our efforts. Although there are taxes on time and energies at the moment, the need to remain engaged has never been more acute. The participation of each theatre administrator in some form or fashion is paramount. You can make a difference. Continue to remain engaged—in your field, in your department, on your campuses, with your colleagues at other institutions, and in the work of NAST. Continue to support, and preferably lead, efforts that speak to and demonstrate the importance of theatre study and its positive effect. Remain abreast of federal and state initiatives. Two initiatives under consideration at this time worthy of your attention and watchful eye include the intention on the part of the federal government to re-regulate rules pertaining to gainful employment, and the removal of geographic boundaries once assigned to regional accrediting bodies. Although upon first read these initiatives may seem harmless, the first has the ability to remove from institutions existing freedoms and autonomy, and to tie decisions regarding whether a discipline-specific field is fit to “gainfully employ” students to an answer which may be predicated on a simple mathematical formula; the second to move institutional accreditation, and therefore the institutions served, one step closer to federal control.

The future of theatre in higher education, and quite possibly theatre as an artform, rests with those possessing expertise, those who have dedicated their lives to the field they love, those who in the first moments of each day recommit their efforts to these noble pursuits. This may seem a daunting task to others, but to us, it is our wheelhouse. In our professional lives there is nothing we know better how to do; there is little we care about more. Our education, training, experiences, and life’s lessons have taught us that it is prudent to proceed from positions of

humility rather than arrogance, patience rather than agitation, intelligence rather than superiority, and competence rather than power. We understand the value of consensus and the process undertaken to reach it, as well as the risks inherent in ultimatums. We understand that we must deal with the human condition kindly and with compassion—to embrace and include, rather than to ostracize and exclude.

We also understand that we have been given the greatest gift—the opportunity to create beauty, and to share this beauty unselfishly with others. As is often the case, most every great gift is accompanied by a set of challenges. Not necessarily unwelcomed, these challenges enable us to indulge in our artform, and provide to us opportunities to reevaluate, strengthen, recommit, renew, and create—and through these considerations to not only celebrate what exists but conceive of what might be possible.

Remembering Kipling’s last verse,

*If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,*

And—what is more—maybe we are closer than we think.

We offer to you best wishes as you bring this extraordinary year to a close. May you take great pride in your accomplishments and hold great hope in the possibilities which lie ahead.

Thank you.