

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE**

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**and**

Retreat for Administrators of Theatre Programs in Higher Education

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**Oral Report of the Executive Director**

**Karen P. Moynahan**

***“Abiding Principles”***

It is clear these days that concerns flood in from many directions. Activities of the federal government and various states, the pandemic and its aftermath, student enrollment projections, and the availability of support, to name only a few, not only divert our attention from our central purpose, but consume time—our most precious commodity. These activities place additional pressures on our already maxed-to-capacity physical, intellectual, and emotional capabilities. Our society is growing more and more complex with each passing day. The world is spinning at a breakneck pace. We must now run hard if we are to remain in the race. I am reminded of James Thurber’s observation that we are travelling “too fast for a world that is round.”

The accelerated pace of life, the stack of tasks in the queue, the uptick in risks, and the “noise” levels continue to increase. We are assailed with the need to make decision after decision. A simple answer problem would be a relief. But alas, too often there is no single answer; there is no prescribed methodology that will work in all cases. What faces us today is far too complex to be unpacked and addressed by “the simple” or “the singular”. We know that we must be extremely skeptical about any idea that seeks a result based on a one-size-fits-all formula or formulaic construction. In theatre, and indeed in all the arts, professionals work to solve each problem and to address each challenge in terms of what that challenge actually is. Theatre administrators today need a toolbox brimming with capabilities to develop well-considered, problem-specific approaches that enable sophisticated maneuvering through the sea of challenges—whatever they might be; whenever they might arise.

Without question, the skills in this toolbox include critical thinking and strategic planning. However, such approaches pursued with best intentions may result in hollow and therefore possibly, ineffective results unless there is in-depth understanding and application of underlying, well-established, enduring, and guiding principles. It therefore behooves us to recall, remember, and revisit often our abiding principles—principles which have served the field well throughout these many decades. We must not forget these principles. Given the

multitude of diversions that arise, we must be vigilant to remind ourselves to remember not to forget. Using our tools we must build ahead and anew on our strong foundation.

So let us take a moment to recall and revisit some of these principles.

First, let's remember why we are here.

- We are here to nurture and advance a national initiative that for nearly 60 years has worked tirelessly to advance the cause of theatre as an artform and an indispensable aspect of human life.
- We are here to reaffirm that individuals and institutions are the sources of work, production, and creativity in the field of theatre and that there exists within this community an individual and collective base of expertise, the depth and breadth of which continues to serve as the engine which advances this artform.
- We are here to build and operate a support system for the content-based work of the field—a support system that engages unique institutions and individuals in creating, updating, and establishing by consensus, standards that represent common agreement on what is essential to effective fulfillment of various common educational purposes and student goals, and to recognize that by virtue of their commonality, these standards become frameworks within which institutional uniqueness can and does flourish freely.
- We are here to join with others in engaging certain issues and necessities best and most effectively addressed in common, remembering that NAST works with and for a set of unique institutions that choose to be members, but it also articulates the work in theatre and educational interests of those institutions to the world at large, including to administrations, governments, theatre and non-theatre organizations, legislative and regulatory bodies, and the accreditation and regulatory community in higher education; and
- We are here to affirm that NAST and the work of its member institutions are critical aspects of the future of theatre education and training.

Second, let's remember what NAST accredited institutional membership signifies.

- Accredited institutional membership signifies a national declaration of our belief in and support for the tenets upon which NAST was founded and the principles which guide its daily operations—a declaration that is over 190 voices strong and growing.
- Accredited institutional membership signifies a willingness to extend our efforts beyond that which advances our own initiatives, and to embrace and advance the work of others in the field for the benefit and future of the enterprise; an understanding that

the health and well-being of the field is our responsibility and therefore, that our local, regional, and national efforts matter and are critical to the long-term success of the discipline.

- Accredited institutional membership signifies an interest in conducting a comprehensive peer-review operation that presents an occasion for long-range institutional and program planning, for an honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and for setting specific goals for long-term improvement; and demonstrates that an institution has willingly and voluntarily initiated a peer-review process specifically intended to assist in considering the effectiveness of its efforts and initiatives and in planning its future contributions.
- Accredited institutional membership signifies a clear and unequivocal support for national standards which serve to advance the knowledge and skills base of those enrolled in the study of theatre.
- Accredited institutional membership signifies an indication that an institution not only currently meets national standards, but by indication of information provided, has the ability to continue to meet applicable standards throughout the period of accreditation, and that once accredited, the institution intends to conduct ongoing conversations which focus on fostering improvement; and
- Accredited institutional membership signifies an immediate indication of the integrity and rigor of curricular programs in theatre as adjudged by those holding expertise in the field and against well-established national standards.

Third, let's remember the role and benefit of the national standards.

- These standards protect the content and integrity of the field in the larger world of higher education. The value of joining together to define content and supporting operational necessities to protect the integrity of the field is incalculable. No one knows when this protection will be needed, either locally or nationally. No amount of naysaying about accreditation can nullify this critically important opportunity and responsibility for theatre units and institutions. This is one reason why schools in so many professions beyond the arts join together in specialized accreditation efforts. They understand the external impact of consensus-based, content-centered standards developed and controlled by knowledgeable professionals in their respective fields. Experience tells them that leaving this responsibility to governments, or to others without content or operational knowledge would produce conditions fraught with perpetual risk and raise the stakes for justifications regarding necessities or increase exponentially the risk of politicization.

- These standards define fundamental content, results, and basic support requirements for advanced study in various aspects of theatre. In addition to their academic uses, these statements produce an authoritative basis for communications and negotiations with colleagues in associated and other fields, arts-related organizations, governments, and private entities. Among other things, the standards are forces for protecting essentials and the integrity of specific degrees, as well as means for articulating clear curricular requirements and therefore the level of rigor expected of students enrolled in various aspects of post-secondary theatre study.
- These standards provide maximum room for institutional differences and innovations in content, curricula, and program operation; and flexibilities and options to institutions as they contemplate and implement operational protocols and curricular content; and
- These standards provide a voice and reference for theatre and theatre study in policy and legislative forums, particularly those dealing with higher education operations, curricula, and accreditation; and with other aspects of the theatre field—the outcome of which often leads to minimized federal intrusion into the work of the theatre unit or institution. As well, they lay a strong and clear foundation for enhanced local autonomy, a condition necessary to ensure effective academic decision-making in local settings.

Considering the principles and understandings articulated above, a roadmap for the future becomes more defined as we:

- Recall that the discipline and its future must remain at the center of our consideration and focus. Theatre study and its future comprise our *raison d'être*. A singular focus on any short-term initiative at the expense of the whole can reduce efforts and lower outcomes necessary to ensure the relevance of our field in the long-term, including the preparation of our students to succeed in any future environment.
- Continue to establish and nurture conditions which promote intellectual curiosity and exploration across a wide range of possibilities; which seek out, listen to, and consider a diverse array of ideas, thoughts, and suggestions; and which welcome ideas that may challenge the status quo, while at the same time, may lead to possibilities that might not otherwise have been considered.
- Continue pursuits to develop, strengthen, and expand the education and training provided to theatre students; and to educate and train students to the highest levels possible all the while understanding that expertise in theatre comes in various forms and presentations, and that permissions to create, explore, and innovate must be granted and protected.
- Recall that protecting individual and institutional freedom to make and realize specific education and professional decisions remains imperative and that we must continue the

work necessary to secure and maintain the freedoms and independence required. Institutions, programs, and individuals in theatre must remain able to chart paths under principles of autonomy sufficient to work at the substance of their field on their terms, rather than on the terms of those who do not possess expertise in the discipline.

- Recall that NAST is an organization of accredited institutional members, each represented by a theatre administrator it designates; that NAST is your organization; that it is strongest when you participate, engage, and accept responsibilities NAST affords to advance the discipline; and when you refuse to relinquish the field and the decisions that will inform its future to those who do not possess the expertise necessary to protect, defend, advocate for, and advance the discipline of theatre in all its multiple areas and forms.

Although your work through NAST has been ongoing for nearly six decades, in many senses, we have just begun. We must continue. Before us isn't a sprint, it's a marathon. Please continue to do your part during your tenure to support and use NAST to advance theatre as an art form, and to prepare the next generation to take the reins and to assume the responsibility for the future of the discipline. As you proceed, please take awfully good care of yourselves. You and your work are indispensable to two great connected causes: Theatre and NAST.

Thank you for all that you have done and all that you will continue do. We extend all best wishes to you as you bring the academic year to a close.