

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE

59th Annual Meeting

March 27 – 30, 2024

Report of the President

DeAnna Toten Beard

I wish you a warm welcome to this, the 59th annual NAST meeting and Retreat for Theatre Administrators.

I invite you to participate boldly in the sessions and discussions that will take place over these days. Whether you are a first-time attendee, a seasoned NAST veteran, or someone in between – your voice matters. Your contributions are invaluable to our collective success as theatre artists, educators, and leaders. Please share your ideas, ask questions, and connect with others.

It has been a pleasure to participate—in collaboration with Vice President Saltz, Executive Director Moynahan, and our NAST staff colleagues—in the planning and preparation of this annual retreat. We spent a lot of time in conversation about the *what* of this meeting:

- *What* topics do members want to talk about right now?
- *What* issues are folks living with in their home departments?
- *What* questions are occupying their time as administrators?

You will, I hope, experience the fruit of those rich conversations in the sessions being offered, with subjects such as how might we think about gender and casting in our classrooms and stages, how to manage the opportunities and challenges of leading a blended academic unit, and whether the concept of “artistic freedom” is now an anachronism.

In the conference planning stages, we also spent a great deal of time talking about the *why* of this meeting:

- *Why* does it matter that we gather in person?
- *Why* are the performing arts important in higher education?
- *Why* should we continue to care about theatre as a field of study and artistic practice?

I hope that various good answers to these questions will infuse your experience of this gathering with purpose and that you will leave Minneapolis more encouraged by feeling connected to your own *why*. Since I have been given the chance to address you all at the start of this meeting, I’d also like to offer my current thinking regarding these questions of *why*.

I recently read David Brooks' new book *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. In it, Brooks offers the idea that in our lives we encounter some people who are **Diminishers** and some who are **Illuminators**.

Diminishers, in Brooks' words, "make people feel small and unseen. They see other people as things to be used, not as persons to be befriended."¹

Illuminators are different. They make others feel bigger, deeper, and more respected. Brooks writes that Illuminators, "have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others. They know what to look for and how to ask the right questions at the right time."²

In his varied and interesting career, Brooks has observed Illuminators from many walks of life, but in the book, he particularly calls out *us*—theatre people. He writes about doing a panel at the Public Theatre—the institution of our keynote speaker Oskar Eustis—and describes how encouraging, open, and receptive the panelists were. Brooks writes, "They talked about magical moments when they were undone, transported, or transformed by some artwork or play.... Then, after the panel, we celebrated with another group hug. I thought, 'This is fantastic! I've got to be around theatre people more!'"³

Of course he found Illuminators among theatre folk! Listen again to his very definition of this type of human being. Brooks says, "They have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others." In other words: script analysis, actor training, playwriting, directing! And he writes that Illuminators, "know what to look for and how to ask the right questions at the right time." That sounds like the best designers, dramaturgs, and stage managers in my life! No wonder Brooks said: "I've got to be around theatre people more."

After all, that's one of the reasons we've traveled to Minneapolis for this meeting: to experience each other as Illuminators. We are here because, deep down, we hope that this gathering of fellow Illuminators will shed much-needed light on the things that occupy our minds and our calendars.

We are hungry for that kind of nourishment. That's a big *why* for coming to this meeting.

Because leading our programs is hard. Our students' changing needs are hard. Our faculty's career concerns are hard. Our institutional budgets are hard. Our state politics are hard. We need each other's gifts of Illumination to connect us back to that part of ourselves that is bigger and deeper.

¹ David Brooks, *How to Know a Person* (New York: Random House, 2023) 12.

² Brooks 13.

³ Brooks 6.

And the world needs our Illumination, too. They need to watch and learn as theatre artists and educators engage meaningfully in our shared humanity.

In *How to Know a Person*, Brooks says “several generations, including my own, were not taught the skills they would need in order to see, understand, and respect other people in all their depth and dignity.”⁴ To this social shortcoming—the “failure to treat each other well in the small encounters of everyday life”—he assigns some of the blame for the pandemic of alienation, disconnection, and even cruelty that we see in our social fabric.

But the good news is that we can help. Better yet, *we are helping*. Theatre artists and educators offer opportunities to contemplate other people as whole and valuable human beings.

You are teaching your students how to pay respectful attention to other people. Thank you.

You have given your professional lives to an art form and field of study that fosters empathy and human connection. Thank you.

You are Illuminators mentoring and leading other illuminators. Thank you.

This conference is for you. May you leave having thought more deeply about “the craft of understanding others.”

May you go home with new ideas about “how to ask the right questions at the right time.” May you depart this place feeling bigger, deeper, and more respected.

Have a great meeting!

⁴ Brooks 106.