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Some of my commercially minded friends challenge community theatre as an economic waste of time, and many of my fellow trained artists pretentiously view it as a dilution of our craft. As a passionate opportunist, I view it as the true resource it is: a chance to share stories and to grow.

Community theatre often gets a bad rap for its smashing together of artists from amateurs to professionals, but I have learned valuable lessons from collaborating with people of various skill levels.

As a non-union actor, I’ve had the opportunity to work with highly skilled union artists who chose to participate in community theatre simply for the joy of it. Volunteering our time to work for our art is a lesson in selflessness and gratitude. Egos dissolve and trust grows as we focus on the project at hand, rather than the length of the résumés in the room.

Balancing my teaching schedule with performing has not always been easy, but I know the one thing that will destroy us as artists – even more so than not booking a gig – is not practicing. Musicians practice their instruments daily. Dancers practice routines and condition their bodies daily. As actors, we are our own instruments – and we are the worst at scheduling daily practice.

Performance is our practice, and we need an on-stage medium to truly test our work. Community theatre is a setting where we can often find that. In this high-reward environment, I have experienced the opportunity to:

• Test my skills and take risks;
• Try my hand at something new;
• Quickly build my résumé;
• Develop resourcefulness;
• Create new work;
• Engage with my community.

The point of theatre, if there could be just one, is to share stories with individuals and find our common ground. Community theatre breaks through socio-economic barriers and provides accessibility to artists and patrons alike. It gives us the opportunity to practice our craft. It brings people together and keeps theatre alive. Imagine: a group of strangers with nothing in common but their love of theatre. Doesn’t it make you want to join in?

Have an opinion you would like to share on a topic related to theatre? Send your column of 400 or fewer words to deanna@setc.org.
This issue of *Southern Theatre* revisits the themes of our keynote speakers at the 2016 SETC Convention. Their discussions proved that success is not one thing to all people, but that knowing yourself as an artist allows you to define your idea of success. Each responded to an artistic question or challenge and, in doing so, found success.

The power of puppetry was on display throughout the convention, from the opening day Teachers Institute presentation by Aretta Baumgartner through legendary puppet artist Peter Schumann’s Friday keynote presentation, as well as in workshops and in appearances by the life-size puppets from Paperhand Puppet Intervention. In our cover story, Tori Lee Averett profiles the puppeteers and explains how puppets can add an extra dimension to productions of all types.

Renowned playwright and author Pearl Cleage, SETC’s 2016 Distinguished Career Award winner, enthralled and energized a large crowd in her Saturday keynote address, crossing the generation gap and inspiring listeners of all ages. Amy Cuomo shares her story.

As the world commemorates the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death this year, SETC paid homage to the bard with a keynote presentation by Jim Warren, co-founder of the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, VA. George Hillow shares the story of Warren and his center, which includes the world’s only theatre designed as a re-creation of Shakespeare’s indoor theatre, Blackfriars Playhouse.

From South Carolina to Hollywood, from the stage to the screen, Bill Oberst Jr. has traveled a path that is the dream of many in theatre and film. Kim Doty shares the journey of the successful horror film actor and one-man show performer, who also provides an insider’s advice for aspiring film and television actors.

Also at the convention, we surprised longtime SETC member Dean Slusser with the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award, our most prestigious award for one of SETC’s own.

In our regular “Outside the Box” column, Brian Smallwood details the advantages of substituting vinyl flooring for wood flooring. Megan Monaghan Rivas writes in our new plays column about some scripts that are ideal if you need a one-set show. And in our regular “400 Words” opinion column, Adriano Cabral extols the virtues of acting in community theatre, no matter what your level of training. We close out the magazine with abstracts from the winners of SETC’s Young Scholars Award.

I hope this issue inspires you to redefine success based on your ability to innovatively respond to artistic questions.

Tiza Garland, SETC President

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**NOTE ON SUBMISSIONS**

Southern Theatre welcomes submissions of articles pertaining to all aspects of theatre. Preference will be given to subject matter closely linked to theatre activity in the Southeastern United States. Articles are evaluated by the editor and members of the Editorial Board. Criteria for evaluation include: suitability, clarity, significance, depth of treatment and accuracy. Please query the editor via email before sending articles. Submissions are accepted on disk or via email. Stories should not exceed 3,000 words. Color photos (300 dpi in jpeg or tiff format) and a brief identification of the author should accompany all articles. Please note any photos, disks and other materials to be returned and include SASE. Send stories to: Editor, Southern Theatre, 1175 Revolution Mill Drive, Studio 14, Greensboro, NC 27405. Email: deanna@setc.org.

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From the SETC President

Tiza Garland, SETC President
Go Vinyl!
Create Wood-Look Flooring for Less Money

by Brian Smallwood

When a set designer presents me with a design that includes a wood floor, I brace myself for a budgetary conversation. Is there enough money in the budget to cover labor for the build? Is there enough paint time? Load-in time? Moreover, after strike, I know that we won’t have room to store the floor. That means we have to disassemble it at the end of the show – and throw it away. With a recent production, I tried a different route: using wood-look vinyl flooring.

The Challenge

For the Nevada Conservatory Theatre’s production of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, the designer called for a gymnasium floor treatment. The floor had to be as thin as possible and durable enough to withstand a 500-pound caster load. Most importantly, the floor had to be cheap to build and install.

Rather than working with strips of 1/4-inch-thick lauan, routed plywood or actual floorboards, the team decided to explore alternatives. The assistant technical director discovered rolls of vinyl sheet flooring at Home Depot. The material is between 1/16-inch and 1/8-inch thick and is available in 10-foot to 13-foot widths with an 80-foot maximum roll length.

Testing

Our first concern with any new material is safety. We exposed the flooring to a 12-second vertical flame test, and it self-extinguished with no embers. There were also no volatile organic compound (VOC), ingestion or skin irritation concerns.

Next, we tested durability. We were able to tear the material, but it is extremely damage-resistant. The vinyl is similar to dance flooring and recovers remarkably if folded. It also is unlikely to shift underfoot once unrolled. The flooring did not bubble, scuff or tear when a 700-pound Genie aerial work platform was rolled over it.

For color testing, we placed the material under incandescent and LED lights. The surface colors behaved consistently with no wild color shifts, even under mixed LED light sources.

The Build

Essentially, there was no build other than two people going to Home Depot to pick up the material. For cutting the floor, we started with utility knives and straight edges, but eventually switched to standard office scissors.

Load-In

As we considered load-in, team members were concerned about tripping hazards. We could see that someone who dragged a foot across the edge of the material might stumble. We also were concerned about whether the material would stay in place when subjected to the 500-pound caster load.

As a solution, we considered stapling down the perimeter, but thought the staples would be unsightly. After some experimentation, we decided to apply heavy-duty carpet tape, with gaff tape as a base to limit floor damage.

We started by laying out the gaff tape in a 4-foot grid pattern and then placed carpet tape on top, leaving the top backing for later removal. We then placed the flooring down, ensuring it was correctly aligned. The vinyl sheet flooring was folded back, exposing the bottom of the vinyl and half of the taped floor. We removed the carpet tape backing and slowly unfolded the vinyl to adhere to the carpet tape. Once one side was complete, we repeated the process for the remaining half.

Paint

One of the strengths of this material – its resistance to stains, scuffs and water – can be an issue in theatre usage. The flooring resists paint, and our show required a “basketball court game lines” layout with a “center circle” logo. We needed a way to
overcome the surface resistance.

Our shop has a “no oil-based paint” rule, so we had to brainstorm water-based or non-paint solutions. The designer created a vinyl sticker for the center logo. To create the game lines, we used a water-based concrete primer. That base stuck to the vinyl and allowed latex paint to stick to the surface. No touch-up was required during the two-week run.

**Strike**

Peeling up the flooring was a delicate process, but we accomplished it fairly quickly. We found that moving too fast caused some tears, but they were easily mended with tape on the underneath side. Separating the carpet tape from the floor and the underside of the vinyl flooring was not fun.

Once we had completed all of the above steps, we rolled up the vinyl sheet flooring and stored it with our large carpets. Six months later, the flooring behaved as it had on the day we bought it.

**The Catches**

Vinyl flooring comes in finishes common to the interior of homes, such as the look of a wood, tile or marble floor. However, it may not work as well for custom floor needs you have in the theatre.

You also need to pay careful attention to price structure. Some materials are priced by the linear foot, some by the square foot and some by the square yard. The price for these materials can range from $4.68 per square yard to $39.70 per linear foot in a 10-foot width. Be sure to do the math to compare their costs. For example, using the prices given in the previous sentence, the floor that is priced in linear feet is almost nine times the cost of the floor priced by the square yard.

**Materials Price Comparison**

Assume a 24-ft. x 32-ft. rectangular deck meant to mimic floorboards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Description</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¼-inch lauan underlayment with ¼-inch ripped strips (48 sheets, lauan; 4 gal., Rosco paint, pneumatic staples; glue)</td>
<td>$810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¾-inch plywood with CNC routed pattern (24 sheets, ply; 3 gal., consumer-grade paint; drywall screws)</td>
<td>$909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop-made plank flooring (190 - 1x4x14-ft. furring strips; paint; finish nails)</td>
<td>$1201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinyl flooring (12-ft. wide, 86 sq. yds.; carpet tape, gaff tape)</td>
<td>$780</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To calculate the vinyl flooring cost shown here, we used the lowest available, non-clearance price. Cheaper alternatives may be found in the clearance section at your local vendor. This means that a prudent technical team will research and present options to a designer rather than saying, “Go online and find what you like.”

**The Bottom Line**

When you examine the pricing in the box at left, you will see that materials costs for some of the traditional floor construction methods are comparable to the cost of the vinyl flooring. Where you will find the big savings is in labor costs. In addition, the vinyl floor easily rolls up for compact storage – so it can be re-used the next time you need a wood floor.

Brian Smallwood is an assistant professor and technical director at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

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Do you have a design/tech solution that would make a great Outside the Box column?

Send a brief summary of your idea to Outside the Box Editor F. Randy deCelle at rdecelle@ua.edu.
Pearl Cleage, the 2016 SETC Distinguished Career Award recipient, has an impressive résumé – speechwriter, essayist, novelist, award-winning playwright – and a reputation for speaking passionately about today’s issues, especially those she believes are important for African Americans and women. Whether communicating via the page, the stage or a convention keynote address, Cleage shares her vision with a clarity, a joy and an optimism rarely seen in theatre or political discourse today.
Introducing Cleage at her Saturday keynote at the SETC Convention, SETC Executive Director Betsey Horth spotlighted the power of Cleage’s inspirational presence, noting the eloquence, power and heartwarming persuasion that define her. Pearl Cleage, Horth said, is “an artist who makes us better people,” an artist who “challenges us to be more than artists … to be citizens of the world and conscientious contributors to our cultural landscape.”

In a rousing speech followed by a Q-and-A session, Cleage did exactly that, captivating an audience of theatre professionals, educators and students and ultimately bridging the generation gap with her powerful oratory.

Cleage began her keynote by describing the realities of the world of theatre, recognizing that “there are never as many parts as there are players.” Life in the theatre is to deal with unemployment and fickle audiences, she said, while also noting that theatre is a time-honored “ancient exchange.” She spoke of theatre’s redemptive nature and of its stories that reveal our humanity. Citing the low level of discourse found in the current presidential campaign, Cleage asserted that now more than ever there is a “need for better communication at the highest level about the issues that really matter.”

That better communication, she said, can come through theatre.

“It is my feeling that what we do as theatre artists specifically has never been more critical to the survival of the nation,” Cleage said.

Enumerating some of the pressing issues facing the country, she said, “I care about clean water and affordable housing, and universal health care and good public education and peace at home and abroad … I want a public discourse that has at its vibrant center an unwavering commitment to the truth.”

**Drawings on a Cave Wall**

In discussing her personal history, Cleage made it clear that she has lived through interesting times. After graduating from high school in 1966, she was both witness to and participant in the many changes brought about by the civil rights struggle. As a playwriting student at Howard University in Washington, DC, in the late 1960s, she believed it was possible to “make love, make revolution and still get the grades we needed to keep our scholarships.” During that era, she said, “we were dragging our parents kicking and screaming into the next phase of our collective national life … Is it any wonder then that as a writer I embraced fully the African-American literary tradition that required both activism and aesthetic excellence? The tradition that Amari Baraka says requires that we write something so bad that they have to ban it.” She lamented, however that for many young people, those days of activism and advancement are ancient history.

Cleage recalled reading a story earlier this year in The Atlanta Journal Constitution about the Black Lives Matter movement, titled “The Next Generation of Activists.” In the article, a young activist named Mary Hooks was quoted as saying that “this is not your granddaddy’s civil rights movement.” The quote caught Cleage’s attention, making her realize the great need for intergenerational communication. Addressing the students in the audience at her SETC keynote presentation, Cleage noted that she understood their desire to tune out older activists because “any advice we offer is assumed to be about as relevant as ancient drawings on a dry cave wall.” However, the need to communicate is imperative, she said: “We have to find a way to bridge that gap … because our world and our country are in crisis, and somebody has to fix it. If not us, who, and if not now, when?”

Members of the older generation give advice, she said, “because we’re short on time … Advice is a love offering, a peace offering.” It is a gift of hard-earned lessons, Cleage said.

**Sharing Lessons for Life**

Cleage noted that “there is no reason to reinvent the wheel,” describing the lessons she’s learned under the heading, “How to survive in the world as a free person.” She offered 10 pieces of advice for students:

1. Work hard.
2. Love harder.
3. Eat your vegetables.
4. Travel light.
5. Pay cash.
6. Be kind.
7. Buy time, not stuff.
8. Bring your own birth control.
9. Register and vote in every election.
10. Don’t lie – ever.

When Cleage has given this advice previously, she said, the list was met with praise – except for the last admonition. People, it seems, are reluctant to tell the unequivocal truth, but Cleage passionately insists this is what is demanded, what is needed, because, “no reason why – a lie, is a lie, is a lie.” She explained
the dangers of lying, juxtaposing them against the need for truth.

“There is no wisdom without truth,” she said. “There is no peace without truth. There is no justice without truth. There is no love without truth. There is only fear and anger and selfishness and cruelty and violence and rape and murder and guns and war and more and more manifestations worldwide of that strange human idea that the one who kills the most people wins – but wins what? Absolutely nothing. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And where is that truth to be found? At the theatre, of course. Isn’t that why we do it?”

**Lose the Hyphens, Find Commonality**

At the heart of truth is our commonality as Americans, according to Cleage. The common threads of our stories can be found in the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Disgraced* and the Broadway hit *Hamilton*, she said. Those stories need to be told, she added, noting that stories lead us to understand that we are one.

“We have to find a way to eliminate the hyphenated Americans: African-Americans, Muslim-Americans, European-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Asian-Americans, gay-Americans, trans-Americans …,” Cleage said. “Our challenge is to stir that famous American melting pot one more time, so that in the end we can all simply be Americans.” Cleage called for a “new national narrative,” a narrative that unites us. The playwright noted that this is our truth and that “truth needs a soldier.”

Cleage concluded with a call for magic, a flow of ideas and culture, a world tribe, a passionate commitment, a need for diversity and inclusivity, for a recognition that “love is the only answer to any question worth asking” and that “if we can believe in the possibility of our own magic and the power of our own righteous momentum, then we are halfway home and picking up speed.”

Cleage also proclaimed again the power of theatre, noting that “most people are good and when they see the truth … they open their arms to it … At the heart of what we love about the theatre is that it is a ritual … that brings us … closer to each other, and if we’re lucky, closer to the spirit that binds us one to one, and each to each – sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, lovers and friends, parents and partners together turning, always turning toward the light.”

At the end of her speech, audience members rose for an extended standing ovation. In the question-and-answer session that followed, a steady stream of students came to the microphone to make comments and ask questions. Following is an abbreviated version of that conversation.

**Q** What are your thoughts on diversity and inclusivity?

“I’m all for diversity of all kinds, but I think we really have to be careful about language. Sometimes these days, I find when we talk about diversity, we still are in that same old moment of putting one group at the center, and everybody else as kind of being diverse around that center … I think we are all in the center … All of us have stories to tell.”

**Q** How much did attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) influence your career?

“I had the wonderful advantage of working with people who were already doing the work that I needed to do and wanted to do, and there was no question of ‘Oh, I’m black – can I still do it?’ They were black, and they had been doing it since the Harlem Renaissance … The idea of going to an HBCU is wonderful, because it gives you a chance to do everything and you don’t have to argue about race. We’re still in that messy moment, as Americans, where we talk about race a lot … That can take a lot of time and waste a lot of time when you’re trying to learn how to be a writer or an actor or a stage manager or a lighting designer.”

**Q** What was it about plays that made you believe they were the best way to share your ideas?

“I always knew I was a writer … My father … was a minister and a wonderful, wonderful speaker. I think I grew up with the understanding that speaking the words out loud is a very, very powerful thing, and if you can do it in a way that lets people hear their own voices resonating in what you have to say … you set up an exchange between people that doesn’t depend on their intellect … If you can reach them through
Pearl Cleage is a writer who has won wide acclaim for her work across multiple platforms. Her play *Flyin’ West* was the most produced new play in America in 1994, and her first novel, *What Looks Like Crazy On an Ordinary Day*, was an Oprah’s Book Club selection and a *New York Times* bestseller. Cleage is currently the Mellon Playwright-in-Residence at Atlanta’s Tony Award-winning Alliance Theatre, which presented her first children’s play, *Tell Me My Dream*, in the fall of 2015.

**EDUCATION:**
Howard University; Spelman College, BA, Drama, 1971

**SELECTED PLAYS:**
*Flyin’ West* (1992)
*Chain* (1992)
*Late Bus to Mecca* (1992)
*Bourbon at the Border* (1997)
*Song for Coretta* (1997)
*The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years* (2010)

**NOVELS:**
*I Wish I had A Red Dress* (2001)
*Something I Never Thought I’d Do* (2003)
*Babylon Sisters* (2005)
*Baby Brother Blues* (2007)
*Seen It All and Done the Rest* (2008)
*Till You Hear From Me* (2010)
*Just Want to Testify* (2011)

**NONFICTION:**
*We Speak Your Names: A Celebration* (2009)

**SELECTED AWARDS:**
Southeastern Theatre Conference Distinguished Career Award (2016)
Black Theatre Festival: Theatre Legend Award (2013)
Sankofa Freedom Award (2010)
Five AUDELCO Awards for Outstanding Achievement Off-Broadway (1983)

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"Sometimes these days, I find when we talk about diversity, we still are in that same old moment of putting one group at the center, and everybody else as kind of being diverse around that center … I think we are all in the center … All of us have stories to tell."

necessarily have the same opinions?

“The best thing is to try to stick with that discussion as long as you can, as long as you feel like you’re actually being heard. When you feel you’re not being heard … you should say … ’I think we’ve done enough for today. Thanks for talking to me.’ You are not required to do the missionary work to change every person who is wrong about race in America.”

How do you handle the criticism you get because of what you do and the color of your skin?

“I don’t hear it … I hear you. I hear all of you. You all stood up and clapped for five minutes after I got through. I hear that. So if I run into one person who says we can’t really do two African American plays … I think about you. Because … in my experience, there have always been more good people than bad people. It’s just that the bad people are so damn loud … All of us at this moment who know what good is, who knows what it means to be a good person and embrace other human beings and help them be the best they can be, all of that is real, and all of that is what we need to do … Think about this moment, this specific moment when we all are in here together and draw on the strength of that … We represent everybody … We’re all in here because we believe in the power of culture and, at this moment, that has never, ever been more necessary. So, do the work that you do. I so love the energy that you all are sending … And when bad things happen, I’m going to think back to this moment and say, ‘They’re going to be voting. They’re going to be in charge of it. They’re going to be running these theatres, and it’s going to be wonderful.’”

After the Q-and-A session, Cleage stayed to talk with numerous people who approached her. Cleage’s passion for “the younger generation” was evident as she listened to student after student seeking advice or validation. It was clear that Cleage had connected with her audience, effortlessly crossing that generation gap – and yes, that her words were ever so much more than “drawings on a dry cave wall.”

Amy Cuomo is a professor of theatre at the University of West Georgia. Her short plays have been produced in theatre festivals in New Mexico, New York and Colorado Springs. Her play Happy was a finalist for the Heideman Award.
Our regular column on newly available plays and musicals focuses on big stories in small footprints: Each play requires just one set. Whether your theatre is physically constricted (my first professional productions took place in a former post office-turned-theatre) or budgetarily challenged (and whose isn’t these days?), the one-set wonder might be just the ticket. To develop the following list of suggested titles, we surveyed major play publishers’ offerings during the past six months. With each play, you’ll find the cast breakdown and a referral to the publisher who holds the rights.

**Luchadora!** by Alvaro Saar Rios
Nana Lupita, a grandmother in Wisconsin, is thrown back in time to her life as a teenage Texan tomboy in the 1960s by the discovery of a worn pink wrestling mask. When a World Championship lucha libre wrestling match is announced, young Lupita discovers her sick father plans to compete in it. Lupita finds supernatural help to train so she can wrestle in his place, but keeping the secret from those closest to her grows more difficult every day.

**Cast breakdown:** 6 females; 7-12 males
**Publisher:** Dramatic Publishing
www.dramaticpublishing.com

**subText** by Tyler Dwiggins
Dating has always been awkward, but it’s even more so in the digital age: from taking the world’s most flattering selfie, to negotiating the perfect moment to make a romance “Facebook-official.” In a series of hilarious short scenes, this play evokes how even the most advanced technology doesn’t necessarily help us communicate any better.

**Cast breakdown:** 3-13 females; 2-7 males
**Publisher:** Playscripts, Inc.
www.playscripts.com

**When She Had Wings** by Suzan Zeder
B knows a few things. She knows her name is B – just B, like the letter. She knows she is about to turn 10 years old. And she knows to the marrow of her bones that she was once able to fly – but if she can’t recall how to do it before her 10th birthday, she will lose that ability forever. Her struggles are interrupted by the arrival at her treehouse of a stranger, who only speaks in single words, squawks and the letters “KHAQQ” – the identifier of the plane Amelia Earhart was flying when she disappeared. B and the stranger have to help each other figure out how to fly, and what flying really means.

**Cast breakdown:** 2 females; 2 males; 1 any gender
**Publisher:** Dramatic Publishing
www.dramaticpublishing.com

**The Veil** by Conor McPherson
In a crumbling manor house in the Irish countryside, 17-year-old Hannah anticipates marrying a nobleman to solve her family’s money problems. But what noble will want a bride who hears ghostly voices in the air? A former clergyman conducts a séance, hoping to bring everything to light. *The Veil* interweaves Irish history with a deeply felt love story and a meditation on the nature of time.

**Cast breakdown:** 5 females; 3 males
**Publisher:** Dramatists Play Service, Inc.
www.dramatists.com

**The Metromaniacs** by David Ives
In this fresh, contemporary riff on Alexis Piron’s classic 1738 farce, the story turns on mistaken identity, misplaced ardor and a fight for true love. Damis, an aspiring poet, has fallen in love with the verses of a mysterious lady from Brittany. The poetess is really Francalou, a middle-aged gentleman, with whose daughter Damis’ friend Dorante has fallen in love. The daughter in turn mistakes Dorante for her favorite poet – Damis! How will it all come right in the end?

**Cast breakdown:** 2 females; 5 males
**Publisher:** Dramatists Play Service, Inc.
www.dramatists.com
“Puppetry? No, thank you.” This was the response I received from a theatre colleague when I mentioned that I would be heading in March to the annual SETC Convention in Greensboro, NC, where I would have an opportunity to spend time working with, learning about and experiencing the possibilities of puppetry in theatre arts.

As it turns out, this is not an atypical response for many theatre artists. At least in American theatre, film and television, puppetry is often viewed at one extreme or another: as either inextricably tied to Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and creative dramatics, or as an unattainable and complex realm of theatrical design and performance, unreachable for most.
We think of *The Muppets*, *Sesame Street* or *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, which contextualize puppets with the family-friendly, living room TV culture of the latter half of the 20th century. Or we go to the other end of the spectrum and consider the elegance of the Handspring Puppet Company of *War Horse*, or marvel at the Taymor-esque magic of stage productions such as *The Lion King*.

Perhaps many of us – the day-to-day producers, directors, performers, designers, technicians and educators in theatre – stand suspended somewhere between Kermit the Frog and Joey the Horse and feel uncertain about whether or not we can actually engage with puppetry in a way that is authentic and beneficial, and serves our individual and collective purposes. Despite the misconceptions or apprehension we may hold regarding puppetry’s place in theatre – its historical and cultural significance, its merits in training performers and theatre artists, its appeal in interdisciplinary education and arts integration, or its value as a vehicle for heightening communication and shared experience among participants and audiences – there is room for play and discovery in puppetry for nearly every realm and venue of theatre.

**Peter Schumann: Something Bigger**

In fact, there’s plenty of room, according to Peter Schumann, founder and artistic director of the Bread and Puppet Theater, an iconic company based in Vermont that is known for big ideas and daring works that span over 50 years of performance puppetry art.

Schumann, the Friday keynote speaker at the 2016 SETC Convention, was the superstar in a constellation of puppet makers and presenters at this year’s convention. The annual Teachers Institute, presented on the opening day of the convention, featured the Center for Puppetry Arts’ renowned education director Aretta Baumgartner, who also led a special presentation and workshop on puppetry. In addition, several other puppet makers presented workshops, and puppets from Paperhand Puppet Intervention in central North Carolina paraded the halls of the convention and made appearances at the annual Awards Banquet. *(See cover photo and photos on Pages 20-21.)*

Schumann’s interest in using puppetry to address important issues dates back more than 50 years. Beginning in the 1960s with anti-Vietnam protests in New York City, Schumann and his collaborators created larger-than-life puppets and masks that literally put protestors inside the cause by asking them to wear and operate these symbolic creations.

“These were not performers, but people who wanted to say things,” Schumann said. “They were used to carrying little signs with slogans … They wanted to do more than that. Putting them inside the puppet was the education they needed. It was bigger than they were.”

As the crowds grew larger, so did the puppets. Out of necessity, they used scale to convey their messages and stories during street demonstrations and parades.

“We built larger and larger to be above the crowd to be able to do it in the streets of Manhattan,” Schumann said.

**(Continued on Page 18)**
SETC celebrated the 67th anniversary of its founding at the 2016 SETC Convention in Greensboro, NC. SETC President Tiza Garland (above) presided over Saturday’s business meeting. On these pages, we revisit scenes from the annual convention, which was attended by over 4,800 theatre artists, managers, teachers, students and volunteers. The convention provided members with an opportunity to audition, find a job, perform, hear keynote speakers, learn new techniques, network, view exhibits, hire employees, watch top-notch theatre and much more.

**Photos by VanderVeen Photographers**

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“Puppetry training for an actor helps you interact with the world and objects around you in a richer, more vibrant way. Props, costumes, sets … every object on stage has the potential to transform the way you tell your story.”

- Aretta Baumgartner, Center for Puppetry Arts

Thus, the trademark giant puppets of Bread and Puppet Theater were born. It was not just the size of the puppets that forced the Bread and Puppet players into the streets of New York City. Their decision to perform in the streets and slums was a conscious one.

“Our theatre started with the idea to not step into the theatre,” Schumann said. “The elitism of it being labeled ‘art’ and as such being immediately valuable … That, to me, didn’t click.”

He further rationalizes their decision to escape the trappings of the traditional theatre setting by noting, “It is the logic of going outdoors – you don’t select your audience … They are there.” These days, in the natural amphitheater on the Vermont farm the company calls home, that philosophy still holds true.

A commitment to using immediately available resources to make “magic” has fueled the organic creations of Bread and Puppet Theater since its beginnings. From 1975 to 1998, the company produced countless circuses, pageants and sideshows for annual crowds that numbered in the tens of thousands. Bread and Puppet now hosts interns, employees and volunteers on the farm during the summer months. New pieces are developed and performed each week, and old favorites are reprised (such as the legendary “Mother Earth” piece, a single puppet which requires 60 people to operate). All the stories, music, movement, puppets and masks come as a result of collaborative creation among the participants.

“We never start with a finished product in the way of a script or preordained thinking …” Schumann said. “We start with ideas. Many people make the shows and circuses.”

The group builds its own theatrical implements from found supplies, grows its own food, keeps a close eye on recycling materials and limiting waste, and puts all hands and ideas to good use. The communal approach to Bread and Puppet’s work is a reflection of Schumann’s own views on theatre and art. “Art isn’t solo education,” he said. “Art is some huge thing, and you can’t learn it soloistically. It doesn’t work. It’s all needed to click together with other folks around you.”

Even the “bread” in Bread and Puppet is a literal and symbolic representation of this belief in sharing art with others. In his keynote speech at the SETC Convention, Schumann described to the audience the strong rye grass that formed the base of the bread baked in his childhood home, the original 150-year-old “mama loaf” that has provided the living sourdough to share with friends and neighbors for generations. His theatre has a long tradition of building itinerant ovens and baking loaves of bread to offer sustenance and literal food for thought to
audiences who come to experience Bread and Puppet Theater events.

“When you have something really good, you don’t keep it,” Schumann said. “You give it away.”

Aretta Baumgartner: It’s Not Just About You

“Transfer of energy!” and “Shared focus!” – these phrases were rhythmically repeated throughout the week of the SETC Convention by workshop leader and special presenter Aretta Baumgartner, education director at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta. "It’s about your puppet, not you,” she said numerous times. “There is no room for ego in good puppetry.”

During the all-day Teachers Institute (“The Power of Puppet Play: Transformation for the Classroom and the Stage”), a special presentation and a subsequent workshop on “Preparing the Actor for Puppetry,” Baumgartner engaged participants in discussions and activities that highlighted the many values of puppetry as a subset of theatre arts.

“Puppetry is perfect for every theatre artist,” she said. “It combines all aspects of our craft: design, construction, performance, writing/dramaturgy, directing, arts administration, technical arts.”

Puppetry expands imagination, captivates audiences and meets all sorts of educational standards across multiple disciplines at every age level, Baumgartner noted. In her workshop, she offered participants a cursory look of the history of puppets, as well as a world tour of international puppetry artifacts from places such as Africa, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, Vietnam and England, which provided a global view of puppetry through the ages.

“It’s how communities shared stories,” Baumgartner said. “A way to tell our disparate stories from different and diverse cultures – storytelling to share humanity.”

She was also quick to remind participants that the perception that “puppetry is for little kids” does not necessarily apply outside of the U.S.: “Everywhere else in the world, it’s considered adult theatre. In other places, you have to ask, ‘Is it okay to bring my family to this puppet show?’”

Workshop participants had an opportunity to learn about and handle different types of puppets – hand puppets, rod puppets, marionettes, body puppets and shadow puppets. However, Baumgartner repeatedly reminded attendees that a puppet is “anything you can pick up and bring to life.” In one activity, participants selected kitchen utensils and assigned facial features, personalities, movements and voices to the items, then rehearsed puppet manipulations that mirrored human actions – walking, breathing, conveying point of focus, speaking and expressing emotions.

Engaging in individual and group activities to prepare for puppet interaction allowed participants to warm up mind, voice and body, awaken imagination, direct attention to the task at hand, support the ensemble atmosphere, and practice fundamental puppeteering skills related to object manipulation. Many of the activities and exercises demonstrated the technical skills and high degree of physical, mental and emotional concentration required in puppetry.

“The less you’re noticed, the better,” said Baumgartner, repeating: “There is no room for ego.”

With the performer’s attention on the puppet, mask or object being manipulated, the focus of the
work shifts away from the self so that the energy is re-focused on creating clear, specific choices with the puppet. Baumgartner says that actors sometimes experience frustration with this work because they are often trained to focus mostly on themselves.

“I get it,” she said. “I was a trained musical theatre actor – it was all about me. I didn’t understand how to get out of the way of the puppet.”

When asked if actors should train in puppetry, her answer is immediate: “Yes. Puppetry training for an actor helps you interact with the world and objects around you in a richer, more vibrant way. Props, costumes, sets … every object on stage has the potential to transform the way you tell your story.”

The physical and vocal control required of puppetry is also valuable, she said: “It’s another tool in your actor toolkit – another thing to put in there with Stanislavsky, Alexander technique, physical theatre work, etc. We need to start putting puppetry in that list of tools and theatrical methods … recognizing it with the integrity it deserves.”

Baumgartner actually was an actress herself before finding her way to puppetry by accident.

“I graduated from college and I was a ‘serious actress’… and I needed a summer gig,” she said. “I got a callback for a puppet theatre company … I took the gig, but I was embarrassed to tell people I was working for a puppet company.”

Because she didn’t have the background, experience or vocabulary of puppetry, she viewed puppetry as being “less than” theatre. She soon discovered that she enjoyed the challenge and discipline of the form, “and 25 years later, that’s why I’m still doing this. It’s because I wasn’t instantly good at it. It was harder physically, technically, mentally, artistically, spiritually to do than acting.”

Although she performs, coaches and builds puppets herself, Baumgartner’s primary job is to connect K-12 teachers and students with puppetry through the Center for Puppetry Arts’ educational programming. School-aged students come to the Center to see puppet theatre productions, visit the museum for curated-for-youth tours with activities and special exhibits, and participate in various activities and workshops. Baumgartner draws inspiration from watching teachers do their work.

“I have the great gift of being able to support them … to be more creative and put more stuff out there so that they can do the brilliant stuff they do,” she said.

**Matt Johnson: A Tool for Training**

Another of those leading workshops on puppetry at the SETC Convention was Matt Johnson, a puppeteer, performer, director, writer and designer who teaches acting, movement and voice at Eastern Kentucky University. Like Baumgartner, he believes that puppetry is a valuable tool for actors.

“Some of the clearest actor training is puppetry,” Johnson said. “You have to know what story it is, what your action is and clearly try and go for that. It keeps a focus – you have to be in the moment and
aware of what’s happening around you at the same time.” He says that, for him as a performer, puppetry forced him to be more specific and intentional in his work: “I couldn’t just play or charm my way through it. It’s hard to BS with a puppet.”

Johnson also finds that puppetry connects with dance training. “You’re working on the form, and if it’s only about the form it’s technical and cold,” he said. “But if you use the form to tell story and connect with the audience, then it’s beautiful.”

**Donovan Zimmerman: Connecting People**

The rules in puppetry seem more flexible than in many other areas of theatre: If you can imagine it, you can bring it to life in performance. Freeing yourself from the limitations of using only human actors and moving beyond the boundaries of what’s realistically possible provides creative opportunities that might otherwise be impossible. What would you do if you could push your imagination to the limits to create new worlds and tell stories in new ways? What if you had all the arts – theatre, dance, music and visual arts – at your disposal?

Donovan Zimmerman, the artistic director and co-founder of Paperhand Puppet Intervention in central North Carolina, which brought its life-size puppets to the convention, sees puppetry as the best way to integrate all the arts into his work.

“I tend to be fascinated and drawn to all the art forms … and the best way to facilitate that as a career and a passion for me is puppetry,” he said.

His face lights up as he describes what he does for work each day. “I get to take the art that I make and do theatre with it, and dance, and I get to do that to live music, and I get to design and sculpt and write stories,” he said. “That is what excites me – the synthesis and energy of all the art forms meeting in that one place.”

But it’s not all fun with no purpose. Zimmerman sees the “magic and mystery” of puppetry and masks as something that can transform audiences and performers. He describes watching as audiences have a collective response to a Paperhand puppet production: “It’s a powerful effect … the idea of opening people’s hearts in a moment of whimsical detachment from their crazy life, and they’re just swept away.”

Zimmerman believes he has a responsibility to work against people’s disconnection and “numbing out,” especially in the modern age of technology and fast-paced living. He says of his goal, “I want to build a story that will lead people to feel empathy for the puppet or character I’ve created and give a chance to connect to something.” Zimmerman says that once he saw that audiences were able (and eager) to have these magical, transporting experiences, he knew he had to keep providing them with the opportunity to suspend their disbelief in this way.

In the case of Paperhand, this idea of “intervention” is enacted by using puppets and masks, often large-scale and abstract, to create a fantasy realm for audiences. Oversized versions of household items, 20-foot tall stalks of grass, floating owls and flying cranes, giant animals lit from within like lanterns, mythical creatures, dragons and deities – these stunningly designed things come to life before spellbound audiences. These are not silly puppet shows – they are works of visual art in poetic motion.

In his SETC workshop, Zimmerman guided participants to experiment first with body movement and expressiveness, then to try on oversized papier-mache masks and articulate emotions and character choices through specific and broad movements. Among the many giant masks were the heads of an elderly woman (Page 20), a giant baby (above), a snobby maître d’ and a mustached man – all shaped and painted with carefully designed details.

**Transform Your Show with Puppets**

The focus on puppetry at the convention provided stunning evidence of how masks and puppets can yield interesting performance pieces for adult and youth audiences, add depth and creativity to actor movement training and open a wealth of opportunities for designers and visual artists who create the pieces.

As Zimmerman and Johnson both note, puppetry does not always have to be pleasant or positive. If your goal in a theatre production is to disturb the status quo, puppetry can be an effective tool to use. Sometimes the transformative experience of seeing puppetry in action can be unsettling or stir darker, more difficult thoughts. In fact, puppetry may even be a more active experience for the audience than some traditional theatre.

“The audience and the performer have to invest more of themselves to make sense of it … go further to meet it,” Johnson said.

**Tori Lee Averett** is chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance and coordinator of the K-12 Theatre Education Program at Troy University in Troy, AL.

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The big baby, shown here at the SETC Convention, is from Paperhand Puppet Intervention’s 2011 production The Serpent’s Egg, a pageant about the cycles of life, which included a section in which 12 babies engage in activities and chase around a giant cosmic egg.
Jim Warren, one of the two co-founders of the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, VA, opened his Wednesday night keynote address at the 2016 SETC Conference in Greensboro by asking the audience some questions. How many were actors? How many were theatre representatives looking for actors? How many were students, and how many were school representatives looking for students? How many were under 21? 21 to 48? Over 49? Then he confessed, “I am 49! I graduated from high school in 1984.” With those few casual questions and that simple admission, he glided effortlessly into rock-solid rapport with his audience of several hundred.
He spoke for the next hour about his personal relationship with Shakespeare and the creation of the American Shakespeare Center (ASC). He might have titled his talk, “Let Shakespeare Be Shakespeare,” because the lion’s share of Warren’s success as a director and producer of Shakespeare has come from his commitment to connect his audience with the work of the Bard – or “Genius Boy,” as Warren refers to him – then get out of his way. This formula seems to have worked, because what began nearly 30 years ago as a bare-bones troupe of actors touring Richard III to high schools now inhabits a $3.7-million theatre, plays to more than 65,000 visitors each year, and hosts international conferences for Shakespearean scholars.

The ASC traces its history to the 1980s, when Warren was a student at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA, just up the Shenandoah Valley from Staunton. One of his teachers was Ralph Alan Cohen, a professor of English. As Warren said during his keynote address, “Most of you are aware … there is a wall. There are ‘theatre people’ and there are ‘English people,’ and never the two shall meet.” He noted that “theatre people” claim themselves to be Shakespeare’s rightful descendants and like to perform him, while “English people” lay claim to Shakespeare to study him. But thankfully the two did meet, when Cohen, a Shakespeare scholar, cast Warren as Enobarbus in Antony and Cleopatra. During that production, Cohen and Warren discovered they shared a mutual love for Shakespeare that was more complementary than competitive.

In 1988, Cohen and Warren, a new graduate of James Madison University, joined together to create Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, a touring company that was the forerunner of the ASC. As Shenandoah Shakespeare Express’s reputation grew and its tours expanded beyond the regional to the national and international, a performance philosophy solidified, one that has continued to the current day. Simply put, this philosophy, as described by Warren, is to present Shakespeare using his own staging conditions, which Warren sums up in three points.

Shakespeare with the Lights On

The first staging condition that sets Warren’s company apart sounds like a glib bumper sticker, but it underscores the heart of their work.

“We do it with the lights on,” Warren said. “We leave the lights on in the audience. And as simple as that sounds, it makes a huge difference. [Also] we...
put the audience on three sides of the playing area, and we look for as many places as possible to have our actors speak directly to the audience and include them in the world of the play. The whole idea of the fourth wall didn’t exist in the Renaissance; no writers were writing for that, so that is the hallmark of trying to recreate Shakespeare’s conditions.”

In Shakespeare’s time, prominent audience members often sat in boxes above and behind the thrust stage. Equivalently, several members of Warren’s audiences are seated on the stage itself. Sometimes they are actually used as props in the play, which certainly can lend intimacy to the staging, but the onstage presence of several audience members always creates flow into the world of the play for the rest of the audience. Describing this staging imperative, Warren said, “Using 400-year-old staging conditions allows the plays to be dynamic, interactive and in-your-face fun.” Imagination takes the place of technical production, and audiences seem to thrive on having some of the burden of imagination shifted back onto their shoulders.

**Shakespeare with a Small Cast**

The second part of Warren’s and Cohen’s commitment to presenting Shakespeare as Shakespeare would have done concerns company size.

“We speculate that Shakespeare had a relatively small group of actors … around 15 or so … and there would be doubling, tripling and sometimes quadrupling,” Warren said, so keeping company size down parallels Renaissance staging practices.

Of course, Shakespeare’s theatre only permitted men on the stage, but Warren’s company deviates from the Renaissance norm in this regard. In fact, gender bending is the norm.

**Costuming that Connects**

The third part of recreating Renaissance staging practices concerns costumes. Shakespeare did not costume his actors with historical accuracy; rather, he used contemporary dress. Following that lead, Warren’s company tried to connect via costuming with its audience from the earliest days of Shenandoah Shakespeare Express.

“We wore Chuck Taylor high-top tennis shoes,” Warren said. “That was our trademark for a number of years … If you see people coming out in Chucks, you are not going to be thinking that this is highbrow Shakespeare … but that it is something more immediate … something immediate and visceral … and we like that.”

Warren summarizes this approach to staging Shakespeare another way. He says that it makes the shows more actor-driven rather than director and designer concept-driven. Part of the beauty of this approach is that it puts the actor and the audience in close proximity without elaborate production concepts muddying up Shakespeare’s poetry and stagecraft.

“We will do Elizabethan, we will do modern dress, we will do Edwardian, we will do mash-ups,” Warren said. “We will do everything, but what we work really hard to not do is screw a concept on top of a play in a way that adds another layer of story to what ‘Genius Boy’ wrote.”

Warren’s imaginative yet simple approach to staging creates an unbreakable triangle of responsibility between the audience, the text and the actor – a triangle that is squarely in the heart of Shakespeare’s work.

**Touring Company to Shakespeare Center**

Reflecting on the evolution of Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, Warren said he and Cohen never planned to build a theatre – they only wanted to be a touring troupe. After all, Shakespeare’s King’s Men toured extensively, especially during plague times when the theatres were closed by law for public safety. But almost as if fulfilling a prophecy from Twelfth Night, the theatre company had “greatness thrust upon them” when the city of Staunton, vying with Richmond and Harrisonburg to establish a Shakespeare theatre, won and became its new home.

Renaming itself the American Shakespeare Center, the progeny of Warren and Cohen reframed its original charter as a touring troupe and sank permanent roots in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. A successful capital campaign allowed the construction of the center, including the 300-seat Blackfriars Playhouse, which opened in September 2001. It was designed by architect Tom McLaughlin, using information from research, Shakespeare’s stage directions and consultations with building experts, with a goal of re-creating as closely as possible Shakespeare’s indoor Blackfriars theatre, torn down in the 1600s. To see the theatre, visit www.americanshakespearecenter.com.

The same year that the Blackfriars Playhouse opened, ASC formed a partnership with nearby Mary Baldwin College to create what the school describes as the world’s only master’s degree focusing on how to teach, act and direct Shakespeare.

Today, Warren serves as artistic director and Co-
hen serves as director of mission for the American Shakespeare Center. Fittingly, as the child of parents from the worlds of both English and theatre, the ASC not only presents Shakespeare in performance, but also hosts scholars from around the world who come to study him at the biennial Blackfriars Conference, which focuses on the study of Shakespeare in performance. According to the ASC website: “On odd-numbered years since the first October the Blackfriars Playhouse opened, scholars from around the world have gathered in Staunton during the height of the Shenandoah Valley’s famed fall colors, to hear lectures, see plays, and learn about early modern theatre. In 2017, the American Shakespeare Center’s Education and Research Department will once again host Shakespeareans, scholars and practitioners alike, to explore Shakespeare in the study and Shakespeare on the stage and to find ways that these two worlds – sometime in collision – can collaborate.”

Over the years, the ASC has continued to evolve and attract international attention. Dame Judi Dench, an advisory board member from the 1990s, came to Blackfriars to accept an award on behalf of her late husband, actor Michael Williams. In 2013, ASC celebrated its 25th anniversary and was formally awarded recognition by the Folger Shakespeare Library for its “outstanding contributions to the innovative teaching of Shakespeare in American classrooms.”

ASC now has completed production of every play in the Shakespeare canon, in addition to dozens of other titles from playwrights as varied as Tom Stoppard, Moliere and Christopher Marlowe, and works as playful as the jukebox musical Return to the Forbidden Planet. Not bad for a troupe of actors who started touring Richard III by day and sleeping on high school gymnasium floors by night.

For Jim Warren and Ralph Cohen, the journey has been well worth it. “Why do all this?” Warren asked during his keynote presentation. “It’s about great art and exposing us to great humanity. By examining our humanity, we can become better people. Show by show, we can change the world.”

George Hillow has taught, designed and directed at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, VA, since 1991. He is a member of SETC’s Publications Committee and a regular contributor to Southern Theatre.

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When Bill Oberst Jr. was young, he was convinced there was a room with all the answers. He just had to find it. Of course, no such room exists. “The room is empty,” said Oberst without anger or distress. “No one knows anything.”

It can be a scary discovery, this lack of certainty and knowledge in the face of countless questions. That is, unless you choose to find it empowering. For Oberst, it was liberating to realize he had the freedom to “just try stuff” and see what worked for him.
In more than 20 years as a working actor, Oberst has tried a lot. And with over 150 stage, film and television credits to his name, it’s clear that much of what he’s tried has, in fact, worked. In his Thursday keynote presentation at the 2016 SETC Convention, titled “The Empty Room, the Open Heart, and Other Lessons from Hollywoodland,” Oberst engaged SETC members in the story of his journey. In his early days in Georgetown, SC, he was “the fat kid, smart kid, ugly kid and sissy kid, all-in-one kid” who learned that entertaining other kids was an easy alternative to getting beat up. As an adult, Oberst moved on to tour across the nation in one-man shows based on historical figures (from Jesus to JFK), make a living in Los Angeles as one of the horror genre’s go-to film and television actors, and ultimately find his way back to his passion for the stage.

Oberst kept a busy schedule at the convention, following his keynote presentation with a casual chat-back discussion, a masterclass on video auditioning and a performance of his award-winning one-man stage show Ray Bradbury’s Pillar of Fire. He offered insight and inspiration, sharing his experiences for actors to use as jumping-off points in their own search for answers. “I’m not ashamed to tell you,” he said in his keynote, “that if something works, copy it.”

In addition to describing what has worked for him, Oberst shined a light on important questions all artists must confront when they pursue their passion as a profession.

One-Man Shows:
Create Your Own Opportunities

To make a living as an actor, Oberst says you must simply work. In the same way that a writer must write and a painter must paint, an actor must act. While it may sound easier said than done, Oberst emphasized that you don’t have to wait for anyone else’s permission to start doing what you love.

“When I got out of college, I wanted so badly to act professionally and nobody would hire me, so I hired myself,” Oberst said. “I’m a big believer in hiring yourself.”

Taking his career into his own hands, Oberst created projects that he was passionate about and pursued them with full force. Oberst’s one-man touring stage ministry Jesus of Nazareth was born out of a love of historical characters and an inkling that Jesus “can’t have been as boring as preachers make him.” He started cold-calling churches and fellowships, and during a 10-year span starting in 1994, Oberst...
performed his one-man Jesus of Nazareth over 1,000 times in theatres, community centers, churches and synagogues across the nation.

Oberst also developed and began touring other one-man shows based on historical characters who drew his interest. He portrayed President John F. Kennedy in JFK from 1996–2004, and presented A Tribute to Lewis Grizzard, in which he portrayed the Southern writer and humorist, from 1999–2010.

**Breaking into Film:**

**Lessons in Unabashed Ingenuity**

After more than 10 years on the road, Oberst found his way to the camera. In 2007, with a broken MS-DOS computer and a father encouraging him to get more modern equipment (and a more “real” job), Oberst bought “this thing with something called a browser and a camera.” Only an AltaVista search away, Oberst saw an online casting ad for the lead role of William Tecumseh Sherman in a TV movie.

Despite feeling unqualified for the role, Oberst used everything he had at his disposal – his Jesus of Nazareth beard, red spray paint, a blue coat from his one-man A Christmas Carol, a printer, some Scotch tape, and one of Lewis Grizzard’s jokes about General Sherman – to craft a makeshift, yet photo-worthy costume and express interest. When a request came back to drive to Washington, DC, with the costume for an in-person audition, Oberst wasn’t fazed. He used Google to track down a General Sherman reenactor from a nearby town in South Carolina and convinced the man to loan him his full getup. With a nothing-to-lose attitude, Oberst landed his first on-camera role. When typecasting has an overwhelmingly negative connotation, Oberst reminded participants in his video auditioning masterclass that “the second word in typecast is ‘cast’ – you’ll work a lot.”

**Soon, he began getting typecast as killers and creeps ...**

And while typecasting has an overwhelmingly negative connotation, Oberst reminded participants in his video auditioning masterclass that “the second word in typecast is ‘cast’ – you’ll work a lot.”

**Finding Fulfillment:**

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After this prolific period, Oberst hoped he had finally paid his dues and could start to earn the type (Continued on Page 30)
Kiss the Camera: 10 Steps to Mastering the Video Audition

Bill Oberst Jr. began his video auditioning masterclass at the SETC Convention with a question for the participants: “Does anyone like video auditions?” Not a single hand went up. Over the course of the workshop, Oberst shed insight on how he’s learned to succeed in a format that inspires fear and disdain in so many actors. Here are some of his personal strategies for booking on-camera work through video auditions:

1. Feel the love.
   “It sounds ridiculous,” he conceded, but “the secret to successful auditions is love.” Love the camera. Love casting directors. (Remember: they want you to do well.) Love the unique value you offer as an actor.

2. Embrace the power of eyes.
   Once, Oberst was so rushed to record and submit a video audition that he looked straight into the camera without thinking about it. He booked the role, and since then he’s come to realize the power eyes have to engage viewers (and casting directors). Look into the camera’s eye to create a strong sense of connection.

3. Find the light.
   When filming your audition, play around to find the light that hits your eyes and best highlights your features. “Make sure your eyes have a glint,” suggested Oberst. This advice holds true for headshots as well as video auditions.

4. Take risks.
   Oberst uses the improbability of getting cast as an excuse to throw caution to the wind. “Don’t be afraid to take risks – statistically, you’re not going to get it anyway,” he half-joked. Make it your own, and you might just stand out enough to get the job.

5. Show your strengths.
   Oberst admitted he often ignores requests to include specific shots in a video (e.g., a side profile, a long shot, and a full body shot from left and right) in the interest of showing what he knows works for him. “I get my eyes to the camera as quickly as possible,” he said. “I give what I want, and it shows confidence.”

6. Learn the material.
   Oberst recommended. His favorite technique for learning (and loving) his lines is to sing them, ultimately switching among different musical stylings as he goes. “I sing on until they’re deep down in my soul,” he said.

7. Minimize movement.
   Actions don’t matter on camera like they do on stage. In fact, they can be distracting. If an audition scene takes place in the car, Oberst warns not to mime driving. “Acting on stage is doing,” he said, whereas “acting on camera is being.”

8. Don’t forget your demo reel.
   Oberst recommends keeping your demo reel short and including close-ups. He suggested student films as a good way to start building footage and recommends signing up-front agreements to ensure you receive material you can use.

9. Know your type.
   Understand what makes you unique (and therefore valuable) as an actor. If you’re not sure what that special something is that you bring to the camera – the reason the camera loves you – ask for professional opinions. Directors of photography are great resources for this kind of insight.

10. Unplug to succeed.
    Turn off your phone and unplug from the Internet and social media while preparing for an audition. “You can either be in touch with the world or you can be in touch with your character,” said Oberst. “You can’t do both.”

- Kim Doty
of historical character roles he came to L.A. for in the first place. Instead, he continued to book the same horror work, just with better billing.

“You get invited to nicer red carpets, and that’s about it,” Oberst said. But, he added, “There are some benefits to being frustrated with what you’re doing and that is that it makes you step away from your plan and do something different.”

Oberst took on work “for almost no money at all” that he found more fulfilling. He played a slave bounty hunter in the independent film *The Retrieval* (2013). “Sure, he’s evil,” said Oberst of his character, “but it’s a more nuanced story.” It’s the movie Oberst says he’s probably most proud of. Oberst’s relationship with Hollywood grew strained when *The Retrieval* wasn’t picked up for distribution and he began to see in himself a striving for fame and importance that he found troubling.

When work stopped coming, Oberst turned his focus to one of his favorite authors, Ray Bradbury. A quote Bradbury shared in a 1968 video resonated with Oberst during this period: “The only thing you’re ever going to own in your life is your work – I own my books. We belong only by doing, and we own only by doing, and we love only by doing.”

Oberst asked himself, “What have I been doing?” and “Have I been loving what I was doing?” Then, he focused on another quote from Bradbury: “Do what you love and love what you do, and if you don’t love it, then stop doing it.” Bradbury’s words gave Oberst both guidance and an idea for a project. He decided he wanted to speak Ray Bradbury’s words from the stage. Once again, he didn’t wait for permission to do the type of work he was passionate about. Returning to his one-man stage show days, he started performing Bradbury’s story, *Pillar of Fire*.

Having come full circle, back to his early days on stage in a one-man show, Oberst feels a renewed energy and passion for his art – and has a new approach to working in L.A. “I still do movies,” he says, “but I’ll do things that mean something to me.”

Kim Doty is the communications specialist in the SETC Central Office. She previously worked for Triad Stage and the North Carolina Theatre Conference. Kim received her undergraduate degree from Indiana University Bloomington, where she studied English, journalism and studio art.
Dean Slusser Receives SETC’s 2016 Suzanne Davis Award

Dean Slusser, fine arts director, assistant principal and theatre teacher at Camden County High School in Kingsland, GA, was honored with the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award for outstanding service to SETC at the 2016 Awards Banquet on Saturday night at the SETC Convention in Greensboro.

Helping to surprise Slusser with the award at the banquet were several members of his family, a former high school student, past SETC President Jack Benjamin and SETC Executive Director Betsey Horth.

“This year’s recipient epitomizes the standards that have been set for the award,” Horth said during the presentation. “Our recipient has worked tirelessly ... [and] has been a fixture in and around SETC for over 30 years, touching the lives of many members, both colleagues and students.”

One of the students who was inspired by Slusser, Lance Culpepper, also spoke during the presentation. Now the associate producer of The Lost Colony outdoor drama in Manteo, NC, Culpepper noted that Slusser “introduced me to SETC as a student and opened my eyes to theatre as a career. I am grateful to [him] for instilling in us a respect for the craft and the collaborative process, and respect for each other as individuals.”

The 2016 convention was the 32nd for Slusser, who recalls being mesmerized by the first convention he attended in the 1980s in Florida.

“I was 24 years old and in my first year of teaching at Dabney Lancaster Community College in Clifton Forge, VA, when I traveled to Tampa in 1985,” Slusser recalled. “I saw [composer and actor] Albert Hague and [actor] Polly Holliday, and I was hooked. I haven’t missed one since.”

He also hasn’t missed many opportunities to get involved in the organization. Slusser has served several terms as chair of SETC’s Secondary School Theatre Division and chair of the Secondary School Festival of One-Act Plays. He is the current chair of the Scholarship Committee, helped start and chairs the William E. Wilson Scholarship Committee, has been the state representative from Georgia since 2010, is a member of the SETC Board of Directors, and is a member of the Endowment Committee. He also is a past member of the Nominations Committee, the Long-Range Planning Committee and the Editorial Board of Southern Theatre magazine.
Graduate Winner: Emily Plonski, A Historical Analysis of Costume: Madam C.J. Walker

Emily Plonski is an MFA candidate in costume production at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Abstract: When analyzing a costume, one must take many factors into account. Historical trends and foundation garments are always considered, but the sociopolitical and personal information surrounding a costume can prove equally illuminating. This paper analyzes such factors as they pertain to a 1913 photograph of entrepreneur and social leader Madam C.J. Walker. Madam Walker believed that only by building self-sustaining business communities and gaining financial independence from men could African American women such as herself earn respectability in the Progressive Era; therefore, it can be informative to consider the choices made by Madam Walker in her self-presentation, especially for political appearances such as the one in the photograph studied. In this image, Madam Walker is depicted alongside other major contributors of a campaign to revitalize the Senate Avenue YMCA in Indianapolis. This campaign marked an important point in Madam Walker’s career, one where her company’s success was such that she could turn her attention to philanthropic projects. Upon examination, one can see the competing cultural factors of Victorian respectability, American ingenuity and gender and race politics in her clothing choices as clearly as one can see the stylistic elements that pinpoint this ensemble to the transitional period between the Edwardian era and the sleeker silhouette of the 1910s. It is no stretch to assume that all of these factors went consciously into Madam Walker’s choice of dress since she was a public figure. Through research such as this, one can come to better understand not only one woman, but the motivations that guide the costume choices of us all.

Undergraduate Winner: Nicholas Richardson, Does the Boot Fit? Understanding Race and Sexuality Representations in the Musical Kinky Boots

Nicholas Richardson is a junior at Florida State University studying theatre and Spanish.

Abstract: Critics and audiences alike hail Harvey Fierstein and Cyndi Lauper’s Tony-winning musical Kinky Boots for its uplifting message of acceptance; however, to what extent does the show truly accept one of its central characters: the black, potentially-queer drag queen, Lola? This spunky shoe factory savior is often subjected to “othering,” not just throughout the narrative of the musical, but also in casting practices, as seen in various productions of Kinky Boots. Through interviews with Fierstein and Lola originator Billy Porter, as well as an analysis of Lauper’s lyrics, distinct ideas about Lola’s race and sexuality rob her of full character development, reducing her to the trope of the mythic black mother. Lola, like RuPaul in the early 1990s, maintains a surface-level representation of black drag in order to assimilate into white heterosexual communities both in the show and in the theatre itself. Kinky Boots, although a commercial smash, is not as progressive in its treatment of minority identities as it purports.

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