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I work in a room that is painted black. I mean everything in this room is black: the floor, the walls and, believe it or not, even my teaching materials! So, you may wonder whether “light” is ever shed in a room that affords nothing more than cubes of various geometric shapes, all painted black.

In a traditional classroom setting, this configuration would appear rather grim, if not useless. Yet, because this is used for acting classes, students find answers in this room to the questions that scenes propose. In other words, the absence of a definitive object lends itself to what an imagination could provide. So, on one level, a pile of cubes could become a bench, a table and so on. On another level, when cleverly arranged, the cubes could physicalize the psychology of a scene, affording the student an opportunity to discover action.

In his book, *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky teaches us about action. He introduces the concept by calling our attention to action verbs such as “lift,” “block,” and “balance,” to name a few. The theory is that the verb “lift,” for example, functions on both physical and psychological planes. I have found that with the use of nondescript cubes, an infinite variety of physical combinations is available to solve any psychological conundrum a character faces. We can build and remove walls, open and block pathways, align and straighten access, all the while readily mastering the challenges of dyadic encounters found in plays.

Upon the completion of such an exercise, students are often amazed at how effective the acting cubes are in unlocking the answers to questions posed within a monologue or scene. When the psychology of a scene creates a question for the actor, a quick arrangement of cubes soon reveals the answer. Once the scene is played without the use of the cubes, the trick is to somehow retain them.

So, would I request a room where all the furniture is painted black? Only if I was certain it was for an acting class.

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Have an opinion you would like to share on a topic related to theatre? Send your column of 400 words or less to deanna@setc.org.
In this issue of *Southern Theatre*, we look back at the keynote speakers, performances and events that inspired us at the 2014 SETC Convention in Mobile. If there was an overriding theme at this year’s convention, it was the importance of saying “yes,” of being ready to both recognize and grasp the opportunities that come your way.

Broadway star Terrence Mann, SETC’s 2014 Distinguished Career Award winner and the Saturday keynote speaker, exhorted his audience to always say “yes,” while reminding them that there is no “magic bullet” for success. Paul Crook shares Mann’s story and advice.

The power of “yes” was also the message of legendary artistic director Bob Moss, Friday’s keynote speaker. In his address, he traced the twists and turns that career took over the years because of his willingness to answer in the affirmative when opportunities presented themselves. Kent Brown takes a look back at Moss’s career – and shares some of Moss’s tips for young professionals.

Playwright Wendy MacLeod, Thursday’s keynote speaker, brought an inspirational message directed not just at playwrights, but also at others in theatre. Amy Cuomo describes how MacLeod urged audience members to conquer fears, find the through-line, and recognize that stamina is the key to success.

Rounding out the 2014 keynote speakers was Wednesday’s presenter Daniel Banks, who also co-led the Teachers Institute with Adam McKinney. Rochelle Elman takes us beyond Banks’s SETC presentation to explore the ways that he and McKinney are making a difference around the world through the arts with their nonprofit, DNAWORKS.

Also at the SETC Convention in Mobile, we surprised former SETC President David Thompson with the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award, our most prestigious award for one of SETC’s own.

In our regular “400 Words” opinion column, Ed Kelly explains how he encourages his students to solve the puzzles of their characters by moving cubes in a black room. We close out the magazine with abstracts from this year’s winners of SETC’s Young Scholar’s Award.

I hope, when you are finished with this issue of *Southern Theatre*, that you, too, will be ready to roll up your sleeves and say “yes” to the next artistic venture that comes your way. Enjoy!
Broadway’s Terrence Mann

Always Say ‘Yes’ to Opportunity

by Paul B. Crook

After wowing audiences as a keynote speaker the last time the SETC Convention was in Mobile in 2002, Broadway actor Terrence Mann returned to SETC (and to Mobile) this year to share “The Magic Bullet or What it Takes” as a convention keynote speaker – and to be honored as SETC’s Distinguished Career Award winner.

In a talk that transported the audience from North Carolina to New York to L.A. and London, Mann recounted his remarkable career. Known for his memorable roles in some of the modern theatre’s most successful shows, Mann teased the audience with the title of his speech before revealing what we all know: There is no “magic bullet” that guarantees success in theatre.
Success is a combination of hard work, dedication, good fortune and a willingness to, as Mann put it, “always say ‘yes.’” His advice echoed that of Friday keynote speaker Bob Moss, who also attributed his long career in theatre to a propensity for saying “yes” to opportunity.

Mann began his conversation with the audience by discussing the oft-repeated story of his beginnings as an actor when he was a junior in high school. His decision to audition for the class play was rooted in the fact that in the audition scene, between a boy and a girl, he got to kiss the girl. That chance spurred him on and, as he put it, “I got to kiss the girl. I got the role. And the girl became my girlfriend.” While that tale got the expected appreciative response from the audience, it also opened the door for Mann to offer one of a series of observations that turned his entire talk into a master class on the art of acting – a class that centered on his theme of saying “yes.”

Mann noted that he was an extrovert at the time – “because I was shy.” The extrovert personality, he said, protected the fragility inside. After his talk, as Mann and I continued our conversation, I asked him if the fragility he mentioned is part of what makes a good actor. “Yes,” he replied. “You have to protect the vulnerability, but you have to use it and let it be revealed, also.”

He continued his lesson on the necessity of vulnerability when an audience member asked him about the difficulty of wearing a costume and makeup as extreme as The Beast’s in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast. Mann said the exaggerated costume and makeup of The Beast helped him with building a character that was trying to fight through layers of his life, and that he, as an actor, had to “buy in to the fear of being that vulnerable.” He went on to note that, originally, the costume and makeup designers for the show were trying to recreate the animation, but seeing the performance in previews in Houston changed their minds. After stripping down the costume, makeup and hair to help discover the character, they were able to turn an eight-hour process of preparation into a four-hour one. It was their willingness to say “yes” to the idea of change that allowed Mann to help fight through and show the character’s vulnerability.

The importance of saying “yes” for an actor was truly brought home as Mann recalled his Broadway breakthrough in Barnum in 1980. Having only recently moved to New York, Mann saw an ad for auditions for a new play, to be directed by Joe Layton. Layton
had directed Mann at The Lost Colony, the outdoor drama in Manteo, NC. When Mann came to the auditions, he coincidentally arrived at the same time as Layton, allowing Mann, who did not have an audition appointment, to get in to be seen. When the director asked him if he could do all of the circus tricks required in Barnum, Mann replied, of course, “Yes.” He got the audition, he got the callback, he got the role, and he got his Equity card. The importance of that “yes,” though, was not limited to Mann’s answer to Layton’s question. As Mann reminded his audience, he had worked with Layton at The Lost Colony, so it is just as important to be ready to say “yes” when you have opportunities presented to you – any opportunities.

“You never know who you’re working with who can give you a job later,” Mann said. “Always. Say. Yes.”

Being persistent in seeking opportunities, and then seizing and making the most of them, was the next

**Terrence Mann: Bio and Career Highlights**

**EDUCATION:**
- Attended Jacksonville University in Florida
- BFA, Acting, NC School of the Arts (now University of North Carolina School of the Arts)

**REGIONAL WORK:**
- Got his start at Paul Green’s outdoor drama The Lost Colony in Manteo, NC, in 1970
- Later played Old Tom in The Lost Colony
- Returned to direct the show for four seasons
- Artistic Director, North Carolina Theatre, for 10 years
- Helped create the Carolina Arts Festival; served as artistic director for four years

**TEACHING:**
- Currently Distinguished Professor of Musical Theatre at Western Carolina University (WCU) in Cullowhee, NC
- Conducts The Triple Arts Musical Theatre Intensive in the summer at WCU and in NYC

**BROADWAY ROLES INCLUDE:**
- Broadway debut, *Barnum*, 1980
- Rum Tum Tugger, *Cats*, 1982
- Czolgosz, *Assassins*, 1990
- The Beast, *Disney’s Beauty and the Beast*, 1994
- Frank N. Furter, *The Rocky Horror Show*, 2000
- Charles, *Pippin*, 2013

**FILM AND TV CREDITS INCLUDE:**
- *A Chorus Line*
- *Critters*
- *Big Top Pee Wee*
- *Solar Babies*
- *Law and Order*
- *As the World Turns*
- *Liberty! The American Revolution*
- *The Dresden Files*

**TONY AWARD NOMINATIONS:**
- 1987, for his performance as Javert in *Les Misérables*
- 1994, for his performance as The Beast in *Disney’s Beauty and the Beast*
- 2013, for his performance as Charles in *Pippin*
lesson Mann gave his listeners. After hearing from a friend about an exciting new play in London—about cats—that had a perfect role for him, Mann had his agent try again and again to get him an audition. The producers had no interest in seeing him for the role, but he kept working, looking for an opportunity to audition. After a series of contacts made through his then-wife, who was British, Mann got an opportunity to audition for Gillian Lynne, the renowned choreographer of *Cats*. After flying to London and seeing the show, which was prepping for its transfer to Broadway, Mann showed up at the stage door where Lynne was rehearsing with replacement performers. Recalling that the choreographer remarked to those assembled that they were about to be “entertained by an American,” Mann then described how he seized the somewhat awkward moment and sang “Take Me To the Pilot,” by Elton John. Of course, he did receive a callback in New York and wound up as the original Rum Tum Tugger on Broadway. Mann’s persistence and willingness to keep pursuing his opportunities propelled him forward in his career.

While his success as Rum Tum Tugger led to a role as Larry in the 1985 film version of *A Chorus Line* and the role of Saul in the musical *Rags*, Mann still had to work and persevere to create opportunities for himself. In an sequence of events eerily similar to his *Cats* experience, another friend returned from a trip to London to tell Mann about a new musical that had a perfect role for him. This time, it was Javert in *Les Misérables*. After unsuccessfully exhorting his agent to get him an audition for the Broadway production of *Les Mis*, Mann ran into the casting director while filling out insurance paperwork at the Equity building. Mann was able to talk his way into an audition, but for the role of the student revolutionary, Enjolras—a tenor. Undeterred, Mann went in and gave his audition for Javert. Once more showing his talent for humor, Mann described how he saw composer Claude-Michel Schönberg’s shift from mouthing the word “No,” while pointing to Enjolras’ name, to circling Javert’s name for the actor. A call later from Charlotte d’Amboise (whom he was to later marry, in 1996) informed him that producer Cameron Mackintosh said Mann was the first person they cast. The moral, as Mann commented, is that “sometimes people give you your breaks. Sometimes you have to make your own breaks.” Recognizing those breaks when they appear—and saying “yes” to them has led Terrence Mann to where he is today.

Mann’s successes as a professional have not happened in a vacuum. The importance of finding inspiration in others was another highlight of his talk. Mann mentioned several actors he has admired, starting with his fascination with Sir Laurence Olivier, whose version of *Hamlet* he saw when he was young. Mandy Patinkin and Kevin Kline are actors he likes to watch, and Len Cariou’s origination of the villainous barber in *Sweeney Todd* on Broadway inspired him. He was especially honored to receive praise for his work from Tim Curry, an actor to whom Mann has often been compared—originally by Lynne in his *Cats* audition. Curry came to see Mann perform in Broadway’s *The Rocky Horror Show* as Dr. Frank N. Furter (a role Curry originated in the 1975 film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). Mann said that when Curry came backstage to visit with him afterwards, receiving that compliment—that “yes” to his performance—was a big moment.

The theme of “yes” weaved its way throughout Mann’s stories and into the responses he gave audience members during the question and answer session that followed his speech. Many of those answers were aimed directly at today’s theatre students. Mann urged students to not have expectations, but
“Sometimes people give you your breaks. Sometimes you have to make your own breaks.”

Mann’s care for students is not just a passing fancy. As a Distinguished Professor of Musical Theatre at Western Carolina University, Mann, along with his wife, Charlotte d’Amboise, started the Triple Arts Musical Theatre Intensive. What began as a summer intensive in Cullowhee, NC, at WCU has grown to include sessions at the National Dance Institute in New York. Mann and d’Amboise feel a drive, as successful theatre professionals, to help teach and train the next generation of artists and to “give them a feeling of what it’s like” to be a working actor.

From *The Lost Colony* to *Barnum* to *Cats* to *Les Mis* and all the way through to his current role as Charles in *Pippin*, Mann has succeeded in being just that – a working actor – thanks to talent, hard work and the ability to both recognize and seize opportunity.

“There is no magic bullet,” he tells his audience. “You just always have to say ‘yes.’”

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Paul B. Crook is an associate professor of acting and directing at Louisiana Tech University and the chair of SETC’s College and University Theatre Division. He is a frequent contributor to *Southern Theatre*.

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Bob Moss addresses a large crowd at Friday’s keynote presentation at the 2014 SETC Convention in Mobile. Like Terrence Mann on Saturday, Moss noted the power of “yes” in opening doors.

Waving the SETC Convention program high above his head, legendary theatre leader and director Robert Moss launches into his 2014 SETC keynote presentation with boundless enthusiasm. “I’ve never seen something like this before,” he says, a big smile on his face. “Page after page of rich lessons and experiences. You’ve got everything you need here.” Then, with a wink of his eye, he adds, “Anyone who participates in a quarter of these sessions should go straight to Broadway.”

We laugh and applaud. His timing is spot-on.

Having captured our attention, Moss begins to speak of his love of theatre and his compelling need to be a part of it from a young age. His anecdotes describing “A Life in Theatre” include both cautionary tales and inspirational advice for a packed audience of theatre students, teachers and professionals.

Theatre Icon Bob Moss  
I’ve Said ‘Yes’ to Theatre All My Life

b y K e n t R . B r o w n

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**Broadway Beckons**

It’s 1946, and 12-year-old Moss finds himself seated between his parents at the Adelphi Theater in New York City. They have come to see Orson Welles in Cole Porter’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

“We lived in Newark at the time,” explains Moss. “We weren’t very well off, but my parents loved going to the theatre. And anyone could go in those days. You didn’t have to mortgage your house! So that night they took me along. It was cheaper than getting a babysitter. You could sit upstairs for 90 cents.”

Leaning as far forward as possible, the young Moss couldn’t take his eyes off the stage. “I was so enthralled,” he relates. “I had never seen a play before. All I knew were movies. And I felt an electricity. It was thrilling. That experience was very important to me. I think the show ran 70 performances or so – Cole Porter’s only flop – but it lives on in me. And I told my parents I was going to do this. They nodded politely, but I knew they didn’t take me seriously.”

Shortly after, an ad appeared in the local newspaper. A community theatre was looking for an understudy for a juvenile actor. “My aunt calls my mother and says, ‘Bobby should go to this.’ So, after a long day’s work, my father drove me to my first audition. But I didn’t know what an audition was. I had never seen a script. But I read, and I got the gig. And two weeks into the rehearsal, the actor I was understudying got sick.”

The director approached Moss and asked if he knew “the moves.”

“I said ‘yes!’” Moss recalls with a smile, “and, boy, do I know my moves. And every one of my lines. And everybody else’s lines, too. I had found my religion. Somehow, instinctively, in the rehearsal room, I knew that this was a religious experience – that one didn’t move while the director is talking, that one didn’t walk in front of the director when he is directing. And at the end of the evening, a terrible thing happened. They took the role away from the other kid and gave it to me. A terrible thing for the other boy, yes, but it confirmed for me that I was going to do this.”

For the next several summers, Moss’s parents granted him permission to join a nearby summer stock company that produced 10 plays in 10 weeks. A grueling pace. But Moss loved every moment of it. “I even changed my name,” he says. “I used my middle name, which is Harris, and billed myself as Robert Harris. And I was in every play, in various roles.

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**Robert “Bob” Moss: Career Highlights**

Bob Moss began his career as an actor, a director and then a stage manager before moving on to become an acclaimed artistic director and a teacher. His theatre “roles” over the last 40 years have included:

- **1971-1981:** Founder/Producing Artistic Director, Playwrights Horizons, the much-honored New York theatre which continues yet today to focus on the original mission Moss set out: to be “a writer’s theatre dedicated to the support and development of contemporary American playwrights, composers and lyricists, and to the production of their new work.”
- **1982-1996:** Artistic Director, Hangar Theatre, Ithaca, NY, where his work was instrumental in the Hangar achieving national prominence as a professional regional theatre.
- **1996-2008:** Producing Artistic Director, Syracuse Stage.
- **1996-2008:** Taught at (1983-1996) and directed (1990-1996) the Playwrights Horizons Theatre School (an affiliate school of NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts). Also taught in the Syracuse University Drama Department (1997-2007).
- **Worked intimately with the board of the 42nd Street Development Corporation on the creation of Theatre Row in New York City.**
- **Continues to direct throughout the country.**
Ridiculous roles sometimes, too, but I was deliriously happy. They even let me sweep up the theatre after rehearsal and before performances! I got five bucks a week. And there was some food in the kitchen that I could steal.”

The last show of the season was a new play. Because a premiere wasn’t that common outside of New York City, Variety reviewed the production. “And I got my first Variety review,” says Moss, proudly. “‘Moppet Robert Harris contributes better than average straw-hat thesping.’ And I did plays and more plays. Nothing could keep me from doing plays. The profession was sucking me in.”

**With $70 in His Pocket**

After graduating from high school in 1952, Moss was eager to go to New York City. But the prospect seemed daunting. “We didn’t have any of the support systems you have now,” says Moss. “SETC was just beginning [1950] but it was in the South. I was in New Jersey. In the ’50s, the nonprofits didn’t exist. The major funding options didn’t exist. In my naïve eyes, there was only Broadway. And it seemed that there was this Great Wall of China surrounding Broadway. And I could never imagine how in the world I could get through that wall.”

Moss’s parents were not thrilled about their son’s uncertain future. They wanted him to go to college. “And why was that?” Moss asks the audience. We all know the answer.

“To have something to fall back on,” we reply.

“That’s right,” Moss says. “But I’m not one of those people who says, ‘What will we do if it rains?’ I’ve never been like that, seeing the negative before seeing the positive.” So, to please his parents, he enrolled in Queens College. But there was no major in theatre. He decided to get a degree in art history. “For phys-ed,” he says, “I had a choice of touch football or tap dancing. So what do you think I chose?” Then, with the agility of a Broadway gypsy, Moss snaps off a few tap steps.

The applause builds. He has beguiled us again.

“Of course I said ‘yes,’” says Moss. “Because that’s what I do. I say ‘yes.’ And as I was directing, with my three actors, I felt centered. I felt my place in the universe. I felt this is where I belonged.” From that moment on, Moss stopped being an actor and became a director.

He directed a few plays in college, but was impatient. He dropped out of school, got a job at the New York Public Library for $40 a week, and started putting on plays. “I knew a lot of actors because of all the summer stock I had done,” says Moss. “And I just started getting actors together. And we found rooms. And made theatre.”

He enrolled in a directing class at the famed Herbert Berghof Studio and audited several acting classes taught by Uta Hagan, one of the premier acting teachers in the country. “I’d sit in the back of the class,” says Moss, “and listen to Uta talk about method acting. She was one of the major influences on my directing. An amazing teacher.”

He was becoming more familiar with the vocabulary of acting – how an actor should think, how to talk to actors, discovering what an actor needs from a director.

**Three White Lies**

Then, in 1960, one spring afternoon, Moss attended a Martha Graham dance concert. At the intermission, a fellow director approached him. “This isn’t a very nice story,” cautions Moss, “but it makes a good point. He [the director] asks me if I was doing anything this summer. Now, I did have a full-time job, so I was, technically, busy for the summer. But I had an instinct. So I say, ‘No, I’m not doing anything this summer.’ Then he asks, ‘You’re a stage manager, right?’ So I say, ‘Yes.’ Then he says, ‘You’re Equity, right?’ So what did I say?”

“Yes!” we reply.

A producer on Nantucket was looking for a stage manager. “So I send this producer a list of the plays I’d done,” continues Moss. “Not one of them was an Equity show. Now a careful perusal of my resume would have revealed the truth, I suspect, but I got the job nevertheless. I don’t know if he couldn’t find anybody else or what, but I was there. And I was eager. So I started learning how to stage-manage. I made a lot of mistakes, but I never made the same mistake twice. You learn fast when you have to stage-manage 10 plays in 10 weeks.”

**The 1960s and Beyond**

Over the next several years, Moss was never out of work as a stage manager. An opportunity to stage-

(Continued on Page 18)
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SETC celebrated the 65th anniversary of its founding at the 2014 SETC Convention in Mobile, AL. At Saturday’s business meeting, SETC President Jack Benjamin (above) and other officers were elected. On these pages, we revisit scenes from the annual convention, which was attended by about 4,400 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 Porfirio Solorzano
65th in Mobile
Auditioning

An audition is a mercantile experience. Not an artistic one. An audition is an opportunity to show your craft. Your ability to stand on stage and be someone else. Be in another place. Change the chemistry of the room.

A general audition should begin somewhere. It should get intense. It should resolve. It should have intention, character, tactics. It should have a moment before and a moment after. It should be constructed, thought about, have an emotional connection, and have some kind of mind behind it. Most people just get emotional for a minute and a half.

Dedication

You have to want it, a life in the theatre. More than anything else. You have to dedicate yourself to it. The ice skating champions in Sochi? Hours and hours. Again and again. Attempting a quadruple axel over and over. They want it. What do you want?

Making Your Own Theatre

There is so much diversity in theatre today. All across the country. Not everyone wants to see commercial theatre. You have to make your own career. Find some like-minded people and start to make work, and somebody will see it and say, ‘Hey, let’s get her and her group to do something.’

Your Career

Don’t limit yourself. If you’re an actor, great. Be a singer, too. And a dancer. The more you can do, the more you will be asked to do.

A career is something that happens. You have to leap in. You can’t worry about the long-term. You have to do it. Now.
Art and Paying the Bills

When asked during a Q&A session following his speech about the obstacle of earning a living as a young theatre artist, Moss is quick to state that making money has never been the decisive factor in his decision-making. “I spent a lot of my life on unemployment,” he admits. “The financial motive didn’t factor into it. It’s always been the quality of the project. If no one was paying me at the time, then I’d gather friends together and we’d make work. We’d create a project. I don’t see the world as full of obstacles, financial or otherwise. You know, you never have enough money. The money you have is what you have. The set isn’t quite what you thought it would be. But it’s the set you’ve got. Make theatre with it.”

The Cost of Broadway

“The prices aren’t going down,” Moss says. “To take the curtain up on a Broadway show, I think you have to deal with 10 different unions – all negotiating for their right to earn a living wage. And why shouldn’t they?”

Moss says that Ricky Martin “got $75,000 a week for his role in Evita. The other two leads, I believe, combined for another $65,000 a week. It is what it is. A show without a famous person, not necessarily a star, but famous nonetheless, has a difficult time maintaining momentum.”

“But what’s so unfortunate,” he says with a note of disappointment in his voice, “is that high school kid from Newark who is trying to save a little so he can see a show upstairs in the balcony as I did, that kid can’t drop $70 to $80 to sit upstairs. He doesn’t have it.”

Multi-Media: Friend or Foe?

“A few of us snobs,” says Moss, “when slides were first introduced years ago, we were offended. But now the only question is whether the media dimension is used appropriately. We can’t go back, you know.”

“But,” he says emphatically, “nothing electronic will ever take the place of the humanity of the moment. A real touch between two people can be electrifying. Technology will never replace what happens when you and I look at each other. With Spiderman, in a theatre of 2,000 seats, the actors are this big [indicates 5 inches in height] for most of the audience members. Amazing. Seventy-five million dollars and not a single human moment!”

What Keeps Him Going?

When asked what keeps him going from show to show, Moss replies, “I love it. I don’t think I’ll ever stop loving theatre. Not possible. I think I’d like to die in the middle of a rehearsal. I want you to cross down righ –’ Flop! And then have one of the actors say, ‘I think Bob would want us to go on.’”

After the laughter dies down, Moss says, “I am here today because I did what I always do. If I’m asked to do something and my calendar says I can, I say, ‘yes.’ I’ve said ‘yes’ to theatre all my life. It probably goes back to when God selected Moses to receive the Ten Commandments. In his heart, I suspect, Moses may have thought, ‘I’ll make a leap of faith here, a leap of the imagination, and accept these Ten Commandments, and we can talk about them later.’ And that has been my way. Saying ‘yes’ has led me into joyous situations such as being here with you. And I thank you so very much for inviting me.”

A burst of applause. Louder and louder it gets. Moss waves and smiles. We wave back. We have been fortunate, indeed, that his calendar was clear, that he said “yes” to an invitation to share his vision with us. Afterward, Moss is overheard saying to a student, “I’m so glad you were here.” And to another, “Good luck with your audition.” He is genuine. Confirming. Motivating. Very much in the moment. As he has always been. A mentor for us all.

Kent R. Brown, Emeritus Professor of Drama at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, is an award-winning playwright whose works have been produced across the United States, and in Canada, Belgium, Germany, Australia and Singapore. He lives in Simpsonville, SC.
Playwright Wendy MacLeod

Face Your Fears, Find Your Through-Line

by Amy Cuomo

“Whether we’re writers or actors, what really counts is not dreaming about fame and glory, but stamina.”

With the quote above from Anton Chekhov’s The Seagull as her opening line, playwright Wendy MacLeod embarked on a Thursday SETC Convention keynote address that provided sound advice for artists interested in a career in theatre. In her address and a guided conversation that followed, she shared truths she had learned during her 25 years in theatre. “Most things worth doing can be learned,” MacLeod noted. “It is inevitable you will learn more about how to do something the more you do that something, and what you learn will also inform the other things you are doing.”

The inspiration for her address came from a recent production of The Seagull at Ohio’s Kenyon College, in which MacLeod traded her normal professor’s hat for an acting role – portraying Arkadina opposite her colleague Ben Vicellio’s Trigorin after a long hiatus from the stage.

“The reviews were very good; well, actually there was only one review, but it was very good!” MacLeod noted and then quoted the Kenyon Collegian, which wrote, “MacLeod and Vincellio have palpable talent that they have cultivated through years of experience.” She stopped, repeated the sentence, and smiled, saying, “Never mind that the reviewer was tacitly calling me ancient. What surprised me was that my experience was considered evident, even though it had been 25 years since I’d last acted. Somehow, the years I spent...
writing plays, directing plays and teaching plays had translated into acting. So I began to ask myself, what is it that I have learned over the past 25 years that might apply to both writing and acting? I wondered if I might come up with a list of pointers that would enable you to learn these things, too.”

What followed were six pieces of sage advice for theatre practitioners.

1  
“When you’re scared, work harder.”
MacLeod noted that she was “plenty scared” when she agreed to take on the role of Arkadina. She wondered if she could remember her lines now that she was older, and if she would be as good as her colleague, a “real actor” who had performed with Steppenwolf Theatre and at The Goodman. She explained that she would be performing for an audience of her students, and that undergraduates “are a notoriously tough house.” In order to cope with the pressure of the production, MacLeod “handled that script like rosary beads. It was the last thing I read at night and the first thing I read in the morning.” She developed a process during rehearsal that contributed to her success on stage: “I wrote down what I discovered in rehearsal the night before and wrote down questions to bring into rehearsal that night.” MacLeod described herself as a “determined investigator of the play.”

2  
“Find the through-line.”
Recognizing the importance of fully understanding her character, MacLeod “mined the script for motivation.” She noted, “It is not enough to say Arkadina is cheap. Why is she cheap? Arkadina is an actor and the roles are getting more scarce . . . But more important, she is trying to hang on to her young lover, and she needs money to do so. Find the through-line. As a writer, or an actor, you must find the through-line; you must find the stakes.”

3  
“It’s all the same work.”
Returning to the stage after a long absence is difficult. Returning to the stage after you’ve achieved fame as a playwright only increases the pressure to do well. The temptation might be to downplay the importance of the project. “What I didn’t do was alleviate my fears by saying ‘it’s only a college production,’” MacLeod said. Instead she focused on putting her best effort into the role, noting, “It’s all the same work. I was doing one of the great roles in one of the great plays, and it finally didn’t matter if it was on Broadway or in a tiny college town. If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well. . . . It doesn’t matter whether you’re writing a 10-minute play for a college festival or working on a play that’s slated to open at Playwrights Horizons.”

4  
“Go big or go home.”
For MacLeod, “going big” is about not shrinking away from the work because of fear. MacLeod shared a story that exemplified her point. She set the stage by telling the audience that in the third act of The Seagull, Arkadina must convince her lover to come home with her. The character’s line is, “There. You see?” MacLeod noted that it is “a small line, even a throwaway. But I wondered if maybe his body had responded to her at that point. . . and she was offering this as evidence of his continued desire for her.” This rehearsal discovery led, according to MacLeod, “to an R-rated scene.” She quipped, “I all but had sex with the man down center.” As if the stakes were not high enough already, MacLeod’s co-star was not only a colleague, but also a former student, and her current students would be watching every move, as would her two sons, who are students at Kenyon College, and her husband. During the performance, they would all be watching her “roll around on the floor downstage center,” with a younger, handsome man. Despite all of these pressures, she committed.

She followed her call for commitment with an important corollary: “Making theatre isn’t about being nice.” Sometimes, as artists, theatre practitioners take large risks and make people uncomfortable. It’s part of the business. And the business of theatre is collaborative, which moves us to the next point.

Wendy MacLeod: Bio and Career Highlights

EDUCATION:
• BA, Kenyon College; MFA, Playwriting, Yale School of Drama

PROFESSION:
• Playwright
• Professor of drama and James E. Michael playwright-in-residence, Kenyon College, OH

PLAYS INCLUDE:
• The House of Yes (adapted into a Miramax film starring Parker Posey)
• The Water Children
• Juvenilia
• Things Being What They Are
• Women in Jeopardy! (premiering at Rochester’s GEVA Theatre in February)

More info: www.wendymacleod.com
“You are not alone.”

MacLeod emphasized that “we’re all struggling with the same issues.” She noted that during tech week of The Seagull, a significant special effect was not working, and the director briefly considered cutting the last two pages of the play. As a dramatist, MacLeod was able to explain to the director why it was important to the playwright’s vision to retain them: “Rather than entering into the melodrama of Konstantin’s suicide, Chekhov leaves the characters on stage in their final moments of innocence. In that moment, the audience is like God; they know more than the people on stage and this inspires in them such pity and fear. Look at what Chekhov is teaching us in that moment about compassion, about restraint, about understatement, and know that as writers, we are not alone. We may not be writing plays as good as Chekhov, but we’re sitting in the same chair. We’re struggling with the same tasks, and we are not alone; he’s there to teach us.”

“What really counts is not dreaming about fame or glory, but stamina.”

As she concluded her presentation, MacLeod returned to the quotation that opened her speech. Remembering her first bad review, MacLeod noted the shock she felt, adding with a bit of tongue in cheek, “I’d seen other writers get bad reviews, but their plays deserved bad reviews—whereas my plays, by contrast, were wildly entertaining.” Eventually she realized that her writing was in no way dependent on the reviews: “Whether the reviews were good or bad, I was going to continue writing plays. I was in this thing for the long haul and given that, the critics had no power.”

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After Wendy MacLeod’s initial remarks, she joined SETC President Jack Benjamin for a guided conversation on theatre. What follows is a distillation of their discussion.

BENJAMIN: What scares you as a theatre artist, and how do you attack it?

MACLEOD: The idea that I haven’t done all I could with whatever talent I had. You have this awareness that your time is limited. I want to make sure that I haven’t settled for what people say I do—that I have continued to push myself as a writer.

BENJAMIN: What’s the greatest challenge for the playwright today?

MACLEOD: This is a world that is media-driven, that is celebrity-driven. It’s all about celebrating fame and glory. “Did you win the Oscar? Did you have a hit show on HBO?” It’s more interested in that than it is interested in the question: Are you a great writer? It is easy for someone working in the theatre to feel marginal. I love good television; I love good films. But I feel like theatre is doing something important and unique and that there are great writers working today, and that very often you have to work—knowing that you may not make a lot of money, you may not get a lot of recognition—and trust that the work is important.

BENJAMIN: How do we ask the young playwright to move past the 100-character world we live in today? How do we get folks to center in on ideas?

MACLEOD: I think that the universities and colleges are very important because we’re still reading the great works. We’re reading plays by recent playwrights, like August Wilson, who are playwrights for the ages. We have to know to set the bar high and know what it is that we’re aiming for, and I think you do have to be familiar with the canon. Overall, I think it serves you to know the tradition you’re coming out of.

BENJAMIN: What’s your through-line for your theatrical career?

MACLEOD: When I was at Yale Drama School, my work-study job was in the office. And I remember that somebody was doing a survey, and they were asking the students about their career goals. Looking through these surveys, I was astonished at how many people were using the drama school as a jumping-off point to get into film and television. I was so naive. I was shocked because I was there because I wanted to write plays, and I wanted to make theatre. I always wanted to be a writer. It took me a little while to figure out what kind of writer, but once I wanted to be a playwright, I continued to want to be a playwright, and I trusted the single focus would serve me.

BENJAMIN: You talked about, “It’s all the same work.” Can you talk to us about challenges for you being a female playwright and for other female playwrights?

MACLEOD: When I was in college, I pissed off the burgeoning women’s studies program by giving a speech where I said I didn’t want to be thought of as a woman playwright, that I just wanted to be thought of as a playwright. Now I’m starting to understand why I pissed them off. Now I’m absolutely willing to be called a female playwright.”
a female playwright. I have been reading a lot of articles about the under-representation of women in the theatre, the challenges being faced, what the percentages are. About 20 percent of the plays being programmed in America are by women writers. So we do have a problem. People have been holding up models of how sexism was addressed in other fields. For example, in symphony orchestras, auditions are now held behind a screen. And they even carpet the room so that nobody can hear high heels coming in. Once they started this blind audition, there’s been a more equal number of men and women in the symphony orchestras.

BENJAMIN: How do we improve it? How do we get to the point where we are not having to put carpet on the floor and wondering whether we’re hearing heels?

MACLEOD: I was reading an article that Marsha Norman wrote for American Theatre several years ago, and she was saying we need more female critics. I’m not totally convinced of that because I’ve had female critics be really mean and male critics be really supportive. So I don’t know if you can predict an aesthetic in that way. I think artistic directors need to feel ashamed of their numbers. They need to be shamed; producing female playwrights needs to be set as an institutional priority.

BENJAMIN: How do you as a playwright “go big or go home”?

MACLEOD: I’ve just been reading this book about August Wilson, I Ain’t Sorry for Nothin’ I Done. He applied to the National Playwrights Conference four times before he was finally accepted, and in fact he submitted his play Jitney twice. He realized that what he was doing was not working. He said, “I’m not just going to write a better play, I’m going to write one of the greatest plays ever written.” He wrote Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, and of course the rest is history. I was so inspired by that story, because I noodle around and sort of say, I don’t know why, but I’m writing this play now. But I’ve never sat down and said to myself, I’m going to write one of the greatest plays ever written. There’s something so ballys and wonderful about that.

BENJAMIN: You’re not alone. How do you help students understand that concept?

MACLEOD: I think that playwriting students need to learn how to leave room for their collaborators. If you spell everything out, the play is dead. It’s got to be a living, breathing organism that leaves room for the designer, that leaves room for the actors. It’s got to be a clear map. You need to know what story you’re telling, but you have to allow the other people who are telling the story to tell it.

BENJAMIN: Do characters drive your plays or do thoughts drive your plays?

MACLEOD: I think definitely characters drive my plays. I’m all about the story. The first thing you have to do is tell a story that makes an audience lean forward in their chairs. And then, they decide what the play is about. I don’t want to see a play where they tell me, “This is important. You have to listen to this play because I’m going to tell you what I think about this issue.” I want to enter a world that is unique to that playwright.

BENJAMIN: Stamina. As a writer where do you find the internal capabilities to continue forward when you are beset by critics or writer’s block or society beating you down based on the topic you’ve chosen to write on?

MACLEOD: I have to say, for me, the greatest enemy isn’t critics or “the man.” My teaching job is very time-consuming. I want to go to the gym. It’s really fun to watch TV at night. The devils are really daily life because you can have a very meaningful life without ever writing another word. What I rely on is waiting for this itch to start. There comes a time when an idea kind of tugs at you. And you go, “That idea is still there. I’m going to have to sit down and deal with that idea.” And once I do sit down in that chair, even though I do all kinds of stalling and all kinds of laundry to put off writing, when I do sit down and I get into a play, it is the most wonderful, meditative, trance-like, productive feeling. So I feel I have to battle the demons of entropy in order to write.

BENJAMIN: What would you say to your sons, if they were these folk in the audience here, about how to be successful as you move forward?

MACLEOD: It’s a small world; tend your relationships. Be on time. Work hard – if you have a small part this year, it might be a bigger part next year. Do the preparation you need to do. Ask questions of the people who might be able to help you. I would say much of what I said today, which is to think long term. If this is where you want to get to, what are the steps to get there?”

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.
Adam McKinney and Daniel Banks
Making a Difference via the Arts Is in Their DNA

by Rochelle Elman

The potential to transform lives is at the heart of what we do in the arts. When we take to the stage to present a play, we provide our audiences with an opportunity to look at the world from a different point of view and be transformed – and the chance to escape a harsh world for a few hours. Some involved in the arts are taking its transformative power a step further – using theatre and dance techniques to create opportunities for people from historically marginalized communities to raise their voices. Chief among these innovators are Daniel Banks and Adam McKinney, who cofounded DNAWORKS in 2006 as a service organization that, according to its website, “is committed to dialogue and healing through the arts.” Over the last eight years, they have worked with groups in Africa, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Mexico and the U.S.

Banks, a faculty member in City University of New York’s master’s program in applied theatre who also is founder and director of the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative, comes to this work from a theatre and directing/performance background. McKinney, a classically trained dancer who is chair of the dance department at the New Mexico School for the Arts and a former member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, brings a dance and choreography background. I sat down with them at the SETC Convention, where both men led the Teachers Institute and Banks delivered Wednesday night’s keynote presentation. Following is an edited version of our conversation about the work they do through DNAWORKS with communities around the world.
ELMAN: How did your partnership develop?
MCKINNEY: I was in New York and met Daniel, and we realized the need for a dialogue about using the arts, and particularly theatre and dance, to have important conversations around mixed heritage and mixed identity but also thinking about using the arts as a catalyst for healing. And so we founded DNAWORKS soon thereafter in 2006.

BANKS: We actually created the company because there were so many inquiries and opportunities about having us come and do work together and so it seemed as if the company was a de facto thing that we did in order to structure the work we were being asked to do in tandem. I think that mixed heritage/identity was very much part of what we talked about – also, identity in general: the limiting language, the lack of accurate language, the lack of desirable or humanizing language that we had both encountered in people questioning our identities and the identities of the people that we knew and loved. So we recognized that we could create work that would raise questions rather than give answers; we could give people a moment to reflect on the language they were using in talking about all different kinds of identities and really being mindful and thoughtful of language. Words have histories and legacies, and sometimes there are words in the common vernacular that don’t have loving connotations.

Their first project came about after they were invited to lead university courses at NYU in Ghana and then received a grant from the U.S. Embassy in that country.

DNAWORKS Dialogue and Healing Programs

- **HaMapah/The Map**: Multimedia dance performance tracing the intersections of dancer Adam McKinney’s African American, Native American and Jewish heritages, with opportunities to explore issues of identity, ancestry and family in a post-performance discussion.
- **Belonging Everywhere**: Screening and discussion of a filmed oral history Daniel Banks and McKinney led with members of the Jewish community in Sefwi Wiawso, Western Region, Ghana.
- **We The Griot – Performance and Community Healing**: Workshop using movement, storytelling, improvisation, writing, group dialogue, song and games to help participants explore the power of their own experiences and stories as they relate to important issues in their communities.
- **DNAWORKSHOP**: Workshop designed to nurture exchange, communication and the sharing of ideas and practices among artists-activists.
- **Move2Heal**: Group self-exploration workshop, in which McKinney guides participants in exploring connections between movement, performance and healing.

For more information or to see where Daniel and Adam have partnered with communities, visit the DNAWORKS website at www.dnaworks.org.

More info on organizations, people and videos mentioned in article:

- Adam McKinney and Agulhas Theatre Works: www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1BN2siBgAI&list=UUkee6_LxhlcyNGPnn017CA
- Trailer for HaMapah/The Map: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LJEE6DBjuA&list=UUkee6_LxhlcyNGPnn017CA
- The Hip Hop Theatre Initiative: http://hhti.org
- Theatre Without Borders: www.theatrewithoutborders.com
- Animating Democracy: http://animatingdemocracy.org
- Sojourn Theatre (Michael Rohd): www.sojourntheatre.com
- The Center for Performance and Civic Practice (Michael Rohd): www.thecpcp.org

(Continued on Page 26)
try to create an oral history project with a Ghanaian community in Sefwi Wiawso. The community is of African and Jewish heritage—a mix that resonated with McKinney. Both of his parents are Jewish, but his mother is of European heritage and his father is of African American and Native American heritage. The oral history project then became a film, We Are All One: The Jews of Sefwi Wiawso, which McKinney and Banks began presenting as a jumping-off point for dialogue about mixed identity.

MCKINNEY: While I was on tour with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, I contacted different community organizations and said, “I’m going to be in town. Are you interested in both showing this film and in leading community dialogues around this issue about African roots of Judaism and mixed identity?” They were, and it was to great success. We continued to show the film and have these conversations. After Ghana, we went directly to South Africa. We were Culture Connect Envoys through the U.S. Embassy in South Africa.

BANKS: We were there for six weeks.

MCKINNEY: I choreographed a piece with a mixed-abilities dance company there so this conversation of identity moved toward ability and what it means to be able-bodied or multiply-abled.

BANKS: I did a workshop production of a Hip Hop Theatre play by Zakiyyah Alexander called Blurring Shine at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, and out of that came a week-long Hip Hop Theatre Lab with local actors, poets, artists, emcees and critics. Then I did a series of workshops at the Sibikwa Community Theatre and in some of the townships outside of Johannesburg and Capetown. Adam and I also led sessions through the Market Theatre’s Community Theatre Festival. We visited a couple of community theatres in the Soweto Townships and watched their work and gave them feedback and led some workshops with them.

ELMAN: How do projects like these come about?

BANKS: Different ways. The way that the South Africa project came about was that I had directed the African premiere of Jitney by August Wilson at the National Theatre of Uganda in Kampala in 2002. The Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Kampala when I was there had moved to a new post as the PAO in Johannesburg, and she had been talking for several years about bringing me there. By that point, Adam and I were working together. When I told her about our work, she was very excited about bringing us both there. When she heard we were going to be in Ghana, it became a lot easier to bring us to Johannesburg.

MCKINNEY: If you google my name and go to YouTube you’ll see a video that was taken as part of a project with this mixed-ability dance troupe Agulhas Theatre Works. I saw a decrepit, dilapidated building in a Coloured township called Kliptown, and I said, “We have to dance there. I don’t know why, but we have to dance there.” And it turned out that this building was a drug house. Formerly, it was a building where the Freedom Charter was signed. The Freedom Charter was a precursor to the constitution of South Africa.

BANKS: From the ’50s, right?

MCKINNEY: We were doing this dance, and community members came about and said, “Who is this crazy American dancing on our building?” I said, “Come on, dance with us.” Instead of people using drugs, we had an opportunity for these young people to dance and in a way reclaim their space in a positive, uplifting, collaborative manner. It was an improvised, site-specific dance workshop with community members. There were people grilling hot dogs outside, and we said, “Come on, let’s dance!” And it turned into this
beautiful movement of bodies reclaiming the space in which the Freedom Charter was signed. It was history, it was bodies, it was art all happening simultaneously. That has influenced a lot of my work in the last eight years. I go back to YouTube and watch that video, and I’m still so inspired by what is possible for us in our communities. That dance film won an award at the San Diego/Tijuana Dance on Film Festival.

BANKS: We have very rarely been in a situation where we’ve said, “Hmm. We have an idea that we want to do this, and we want to do it in this place.” It’s not really our nature to impose ourselves on people or on places. It’s more being in a relationship with somebody. The project in Uganda came out of reconnecting with a playwright from Uganda that I had met years earlier, and I guess they had done *Fences* before, and he said, “We want to do another August Wilson play and would you want to come to Uganda and direct this play?” Or a colleague of mine who was beginning the NYU-in-Ghana program and thought that the Hip Hop Theatre work and the Dialogue and Healing work would be powerful there, saying, “Would you consider spending a semester in Ghana?” Or when we were in Ghana, being shown around the Buduburam refugee camp – primarily for Liberian refugees – outside of Accra, and a couple of different people living and working in the camp said to us, “Would you come and work with the youth of this camp?” Without really knowing what we were getting into, the answer was, “Yes, of course. If this is something that you think would be meaningful and powerful for your community, who are we to say no?” It’s always about partnership. Sometimes these projects can fall into the pattern of someone’s coming from the U.S., or someone’s coming from the West, they’re going to lead. We find a way, we research, we talk, we land, we meet and we say would you do this with us? Would you come and lead this with us? Or would you assist us or be in the room with us?

MCKINNEY: I was just thinking, when the universe calls, you answer the call and say “yes!”

BANKS: I used to have concerns about the lack of preparation, or issues like what are the vectors of power, what are the dynamics of power and how do we invert or subvert those dynamics of power? But I’ve been in quite a few situations where people who’ve invited us to work with them have said to me, “We’re inviting you. Don’t worry about that. We’re taking responsibility for our community. You’re not imposing, you’re invited, and you’re more than invited, you’re welcome.” When we were in South Africa and we were asked to do a one-day workshop in a township outside of Capetown, I was concerned about the sustainability of a one-day workshop. . . . The woman who worked in the township and was the point person said, “You do realize that taking young people off of the streets of the township for a day could literally save someone’s life?”
was a little bit of hyperbole. As we pulled up to the community gym where the workshop was to be held, Adam saw two boys, who were not in our workshop, in an altercation where one stabbed the other with a screw driver. Meanwhile, the 75 participants who had voluntarily come out to take part in something creative that day were safely inside the gym and not part of that street violence. It brought home to me that, while a certain degree of humility and modesty is a very necessary thing, sometimes it’s also important to get beyond an overly sensitive reticence and to listen to what people from those places are saying and not to over-intellectualize the invitation that’s actually coming from within the community.

ELMAN: How did you become sensitive to not being an imposition to these communities?

BANKS: I’m a member of Theatre Without Borders, and I have an active role in the leadership of the organization; it’s something we’ve talked a lot about. We’ve used the term, borrowed from one of our colleagues, not being a “parachute artist,” where you parachute in and parachute out. The artist has mobility; how do you set this up so there’s some modicum of parity or some modicum of exchange? How do we not turn this into a repetition of some sort of colonial set-up? That’s an incredibly important question, but the flip side of that is listening to your hosts. If your hosts say, “Come and do a workshop; one day will be meaningful,” then not swinging the pendulum to the other side of making it overly academic and worrying about sustainability, et cetera, is important. In fact, in almost every place that we’ve been, we always engage in group learning. As the facilitator, my voice is not the dominant voice of the workshop. I must make sure that everyone in the workshop has had a chance to speak and share, interconnect and interrelate, flipping those power dynamics as much as possible. What we have found is that by simply creating the space for people to step into leadership roles within the context of a workshop, people have grabbed the reins after we’ve left and done remarkable things. In this township in South Africa, there was a young woman who was 14 and sat in on a conversation about leadership with people older than her that I was facilitating. Almost immediately after this conversation, she decided that she was going to create an anti-domestic violence campaign in the township. We got an email from our organizer in the...
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‘This is the mission of DNAWORKS: arts and healing through dialogue. You can’t do that alone. You can’t be a selfish artist. You actually have to take other people in.’

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David Thompson Receives Suzanne Davis Award

David Thompson, Annie Louise Harrison Waterman Professor of Theatre at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta, GA, was honored with the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award for outstanding service to SETC at the 2014 SETC Awards Banquet. Thompson served as SETC President in 2007-08 and is currently chair of the Bylaws Committee and editor of Theatre Symposium, SETC’s scholarly journal. Chris Rich, chair of the Nominations Committee, said the following before presenting Thompson with SETC’s highest award for one of its own.

The standard format for this speech is to leak biographical information of the award winner so that the identity becomes aware first to the winner and by steps to the people who work closely with them, then those who know of this person and finally to the population as a whole with the announcement of the name of the winner. I will be deviating from the aforementioned format to speak about the important genesis of this award.

Suzanne Davis was a costumer for the summer outdoor pageant Unto These Hills in Cherokee, NC. Her husband, Harry, was chair of the Department of Dramatic Art at UNC-Chapel Hill, and both worked in the early days of SETC to help grow the organization and make it a valuable resource to theatrical artists and companies in the Southeast region. On a buying trip to New York, Suzanne and Harry became friends with Alvin Cohen, owner of a small company known at the time as Paramount Theatrical Supplies. They introduced Harry to SETC and used their contacts to help Harry in growing his business outside the NYC area. Harry stated that, “She introduced me to everyone she knew and when business was slow, it was the South who helped me to survive. I never forgot that.”

David Thompson, Annie Louise Harrison Waterman Professor of Theatre at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta, GA, was honored with the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award for outstanding service to SETC at the 2014 SETC Awards Banquet. Thompson served as SETC President in 2007-08 and is currently chair of the Bylaws Committee and editor of Theatre Symposium, SETC’s scholarly journal. Chris Rich, chair of the Nominations Committee, said the following before presenting Thompson with SETC’s highest award for one of its own.

It was only a few months after those thoughts were exchanged that Suzanne’s husband, Harry, called Alvin to tell him of her passing away. Alvin approached the president of SETC in hopes of establishing an award in honor of Suzanne. The Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award was endowed as a permanent award in 1964. In March of 1965, Sara Spencer received the first honor for her work with SETC.

This award has been presented to SETC members who continued giving of their time, energy and knowledge to help provide the growing constituency of SETC more opportunities for success. Porterfield, Ballew, Galloway, Bales, Weiss and Schwartz are a few of the names who have won this award. Alvin Cohen received this award in 1983, 19 years after establishing the award in Suzanne’s honor. The names are associated with scholarships, competitions and awards providing more avenues to opportunity through SETC.

Bob Moss and Terry Mann both spoke of the power that “yes” can hold for you in your search for success. Here are two words that I believe keep those opportunities to say yes coming to you: “Thank you.” Suzanne Davis recognized that we are working within a field that is a passion for us and that a lot of the reward comes from the sincere appreciation of those we affect. We must also be mindful to thank those who help us from the very beginning. Direct help may come from parents who don’t understand what we do, but support us anyway; teachers or community members who give us our first experiences with theatre and open that door to personal expression; peers and mentors who give us the tools to make our way in this world as artists and give us connections to other artists; and spouses and kids who support us when our time is spent in rehearsal and performance. Take the time to say thank you every chance you get.

Simply stated, Suzanne Davis wanted to publicly say thank you to those who give of their time and energy to make this organization better and make success in theatre more accessible for us all. Alvin Cohen made this moment possible by saying thank you to SETC and Suzanne Davis by founding this award.

Our recipient has served in every major role for SETC and continues to serve. He has helped SETC grow in number, strength and exposure. For many within the organization, our recipient has been a mentor by example, a professional example in action and a friend who can always make you laugh, but more importantly, make you think. I am very privileged to say a personal thank you for your work. And on behalf of the Southeastern Theatre Conference, the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award for outstanding service goes to David Thompson.
their own feelings and also notice the person standing next to them. It just wouldn’t be possible, the kind of exploitation that happens. To me, it’s the most elemental; it’s the mother looking at the baby for the first time. It’s that moment of unconditional love. Do I think that we can create pockets of real hope and optimism and connectedness? Absolutely. What will those pockets add up to? I don’t know. I’m not coming at this as a social scientist trying an experiment. I just do what I feel in my heart is right to do. And hope that it works, and sometimes it doesn’t work.

ELMAN: What do you see in the future for DNAWORKS?

MCKINNEY: I want to tell you about our current performance work called HaMapah/The Map. Our work isn’t only about working with communities; it’s also around performance work. We’ve structured this piece in an innovative way so that I perform my story, which for me is a universal story about family. And then we take the lights down on me, we put the lights up on the audience, and we ask the audience to tell stories about their families. I see our work moving in that direction: continuing to work with communities, but also creating more performance work to lead those important questions that we referenced at the beginning of the interview. That’s how I see DNAWORKS moving forward.

BANKS: I think it’s again returning to some notion of what the role of ritual and performance is in society. Certainly other people have done this before us. I think the fact that we’re structuring it around family histories, family stories, heritage and ancestry. . . . We did it and then suddenly there is this explosion of this conversation in society. Maybe it has to do with the availability of DNA testing now, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s television show and other memoirs and things. . . . We happened to strike a nerve; it’s a very rich topic to invite people into that conversation. We’ve been influenced by Liz Lerman, Animating Democracy, and Michael Rohd’s work. We realize that we’re part of the larger family or network of people doing this work. The fact that the performance itself [Adam’s dance] is 30 minutes, and oftentimes people will want to carry the dialogue on for an hour or an hour and a half after those 30 minutes, for me that is a sign that perhaps, if anything is innovative about this, it’s that we’ve allowed for a flexible structure where it can go on as long as people want it to go on. We performed at a festival in Spain, and it was a 9:30 show. We didn’t leave the stage until at least 11:30, then it took 45 minutes to clean up. We had to wedge our way through the crowds of people still on the street talking about what they had just experienced. There was a young woman who was waiting to tell us that she had never known her father’s name – her mother would not tell her. But during the dialogue session, she called her mother from the audience, and her mother told her his name. She waited 45 minutes to tell us that another link was connected. It’s been a really profound and moving experience, hearing the stories from those community dialogues. I feel in some ways they heal me. We have people all year round who write to us saying, “I saw the show a year ago, or I saw the show two years ago, and I’m still thinking about this.” “I reconnected with this side of the family.” Or “I’ve helped the two sides of the family reconcile.” We want to continue taking that work around. We’re actually in the process of making a documentary for communities who can’t afford to bring it to them or don’t have the dance space. We’re also talking about what’s the next performance piece?

MCKINNEY: And what’s the next conversation that we feel is important for our communities to have? What are people chomping at the bit waiting to uncover and talk about together and not in isolation?
Undergraduate Winner: Briana Valderrey, Bert Williams and the Subtle Black Pantomime

Briana Valderrey, the undergraduate winner, is a recent graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she earned her BFA in Drama - Technical Production, focusing on stage management.

Abstract: It might be tempting at first to dismiss the legacy of the enormously talented Broadway comedian Bert Williams. A light-skinned West Indian immigrant who performed in blackface and ragged costume for several large white audiences in the early 20th century, the success and adoration Williams received in his time could be indicative only of the extreme racist climate which seemed to celebrate the degradation of black people. But any thorough and nuanced study of Bert Williams reveals a shrewd and complicated character. Devoting his career to a sort of ethnography of African-Americans, Williams was able to subvert the usual brashness of blackface minstrelsy by instead employing a subtler, quiet pantomime of black misfortune. A gentle understanding of sadness and impeccable use of gesture combined for unforgettable performances, which in their humor grew very softly subversive. While no audience ever marched out of a Williams routine demanding an end to the inequality he exposed, his unique ability to “smile his way into people’s hearts” planted small seeds of critical thought and a sense of injustice in the minds of many. Rather than forget Williams because he no longer fits our image of safe, righteous performance, we owe him a debt for the understated battle he waged to reveal blackface for the humiliation we see it as today.

Graduate Winner: Samuel Kolodezh, Spectral Laughter: Constructing a Modern Subjectivity through Humor in The Castle Spectre

Samuel Kolodezh, the graduate winner, is a first-year doctoral student in the joint PhD Program in Drama and Theatre at the University of California, Irvine and University of California, San Diego.

Abstract: In this paper, I argue for the role of humor as an interruptive tactic in gothic drama which facilitated an imaginative rather than a didactic response to the instability encountered by the British subject at the turn of the 19th century. Humor worked alongside terror in the gothic mode in order to both assuage and re-imagine fears inspired by change and instability. I argue humor facilitated and encouraged individual becomings with a flexibility that took place within the official system rather than outside of it. In order to make my argument, I focus on Matthew Gregory Lewis’s popularly acclaimed The Castle Spectre (1797), which I locate in its socio-political context and put into conversation with Michel de Certeau’s conception of space and Diane Hoeveler’s argument for the gothic as an alternate theology secularizing the uncanny, as well as Matthew Lewis’s use of citation. Humor, along with parody, irony, and citation allowed for a deferment of meaning which moved the onus of definition from the author to the subject. In this sense, humor within the gothic mode helped facilitate both a subversion of official territory and a rise of the individual subject in the wake of great instability.
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