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Playwright Pearl Cleage Takes a Stand Against Censorship

by Rochelle Elman

Pearl Cleage’s ‘The Nigger Speech’

Keynote address by Pearl Cleage, SETC 62nd Annual Convention, March 3, 2011

Celebrating SETC’s 62nd in Atlanta

Photos by Reis Birdwhistell and David Hawkins

From Actor to Artist:
Matt Cavenaugh’s Challenge to Create

by H. Duke Guthrie

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50, Conventions, 50

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2011 SETC Young Scholar’s Award Winners

Abstracts by Margaret Toomey and Allison Powell
When the House Is Dead, Who’s to Blame?

If you’ve never seen John Cleese’s British comedy series Fawlty Towers, you should. I know, it’s TV. But it’s more like a theatrical farce than a television sitcom. Cleese has said that he based the character of Basil Fawlty, the perpetually annoyed proprietor of a run-down resort hotel, on the manager of such a place where Cleese once stayed, who seemed to feel that running a hotel would be all very well if it weren’t for the guests.

One summer, I worked at the great Cumberland County Playhouse in the resort town of Crossville, TN – a place not unlike the setting of Fawlty Towers. In addition to painting an endless number of palm trees on huge drops, I played SeaBee #7 and Henri, Emile de Becque’s houseboy, in South Pacific. We performed the show over 80 times that summer. On the weekends, we ran a Friday night show, a Saturday matinee plus an evening performance, then a Sunday matinee. Four performances in less than 48 hours. After one of those Sunday matinees, the actor playing Joe Cable started to grouse about all the “blue hairs” in the house. I think it was then that I began to develop an intolerance for actors who blame the audience.

We’ve all had bad nights. But after a show falls flat, why are the dressing rooms filled with comments like, “The audience was so dead tonight,” and “What a lousy house,” and “Did you see that one girl? She was totally not paying attention.” Instead, we should be trying to figure out why we failed. Were they sleeping? We should have kept them awake. Did they seem distracted? We didn’t command their full attention. Were they bored? Guess what? It’s because we bored them. Or, to put it a bit more bluntly, we were boring.

Don’t be boring. Don’t believe the lie that it’s the audience’s job to adore you. You are there for them. When you go out for your curtain call, remember that a bunch of people just sat and looked at you for two hours. Many of them did so even though they weren’t having a particularly good time. But they sat there all the same. And now they’re even clapping for you. Don’t blame them. Thank them.

Sure, there are audiences who are genuinely rude or truly dull. But that’s not our concern. As artists, our job is not simply “to be” and then disdain anyone who doesn’t worship us. In the end, artists are servants. Don’t be like Basil Fawlty, complaining that theatre would be great if it weren’t for the audience. Without them, there is no us.

Joining Actors’ Equity Association is an important career step and the decision to join should not be done without due consideration. I, for one, to build as full a resume as possible prior to joining, did not join AEA until the second time an Equity card was offered to me. I then worked steadily throughout the country for 25 years; which in part was thanks to contacts I made while I was non-Equity.

My Equity card is a source of great pride for me. It serves as a symbol of accomplishment. It connects me to a national theatre community and to an organization that’s got my back.

There are many definitions of “professional.” I believe you begin to learn the meaning of the word from the very first moment you set foot on a stage and then continue throughout your entire career. “Professional” is best defined by you, as an attitude based on respect for others, respect for the audience, respect for the workplace, respect for employers and, most importantly, respect for yourself.

For nearly 100 years, Equity has fought for the rights of actors and stage managers – negotiating salaries, safety provisions and pension and health benefits. Equity works as a strong collective voice for a fair share and for the respect due those in this noble and rewarding career.

Tom Miller
Director of Education & Outreach
Actors’ Equity Association
tmiller@actorsequity.org

Southern Theatre welcomes submis-
sions from readers for the 400 Words column. Please send your opinion column of 400 words or less on a theatre-related topic to Editor Deanna Thompson at deanna@setc.org.
From the SETC President

Reflecting theatre’s oldest tradition, the keynote speakers at this year’s SETC Convention in Atlanta all challenged us to examine our thinking in some way. In this issue of Southern Theatre, we explore the meaningful issues they addressed.

Playwright Pearl Cleage, Thursday’s keynote speaker, gave a powerful speech about censorship, arguing eloquently against recent attempts to ban the word “nigger” in plays and books. Her message was so thought-provoking that we asked and received permission to print her speech in its entirety. If you weren’t at her session, I urge you to read this important speech by a nationally-acclaimed writer who makes her home in Atlanta. She hopes the publication of this speech will provoke some discussion, and so do we. To learn more about Cleage herself, be sure to read the story on the playwright by Rochelle Elman.

She was followed on Friday by Broadway star Matt Cavenaugh, who challenged performers of all ages to examine their performance mindset, making the leap from actor to artist. Duke Guthrie shares more detail from Cavenaugh on why this is important and how actors can take their talents to the next level, becoming artists molding their own futures.

Finally, Distinguished Career Award recipient Ben Cameron, known nationally for his arts activism, delivered a timely keynote address on Saturday, urging artists to recognize and embrace the changing dynamics of the arts in today’s world. Paul Crook details Cameron’s message and his challenge to all of us to “skate to where the puck will be.”

This year’s SETC Convention marked a milestone for Past President Ward Haarbauer and for our organization as well. The 2011 event was Haarbauer’s 50th consecutive SETC Convention! Past President David Thompson shares the story of Haarbauer’s journey through SETC.

Also at the SETC Convention in Atlanta, we surprised longtime SETC member Denise Halbach with the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award, our most prestigious award for one of SETC’s own. Past President Glen Gourley outlines her many contributions and adds a special “thank you” to Halbach.

Please join us as we nurture and celebrate the art form we love in these pages. Enjoy!

Alan Litsey, SETC President
Playwright Pearl Cleage Takes a Stand Against Censorship

by Rochelle Elman

At the 2011 SETC Convention, Atlanta-based playwright Pearl Cleage delivered a thought-provoking keynote presentation on the subject of censorship, focusing in particular on a topic that has been in the news in recent months: use of the word “nigger” in plays, books and other works in today’s society.

Her address at the 2011 SETC Convention was a down-to-earth, honest and forthright discussion of censorship and race. It was at times amusing (her story of appearing in a homemade African dress for her Spelman graduation to protest the white oppressors’ tradition of wearing a cap and gown was self-deprecatingly funny) and at other times as unrelentingly disturbing as discussions on censorship can be.

Cleage passionately defended artists and writers from censorship, even when the censorship seems well-intentioned (e.g., preventing the pain the word “nigger” may inflict on African Americans, or the idea that by using the word authors may unknowingly perpetuate its use by insidious individuals).

Southern Theatre has obtained permission from Cleage to publish the speech, which is published in its entirety beginning on Page 9.

The groundbreaking nature of the speech is nothing new for Pearl Cleage, who often tackles controversial topics. She is the author of seven plays and six novels, one of which, What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day, was selected for the Oprah Book Club and spent nine weeks on the New York Times Best-Seller List. She also is the author of a one-act play about the abusive behavior of jazz icon Miles Davis and domestic violence in general, Mad at Miles:
A Blackwoman’s Guide to Truth (pictured on cover), which was presented as part of the Fringe Festival at the SETC Convention. Her play Flyin’ West is being made into a ballet. Her latest script, The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years, was commissioned by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival (ASF) and co-produced last fall by ASF and the Alliance Theatre, the 2007 Regional Theatre Tony Award recipient.

Cleage’s personal story is as fascinating as the tales she spins. She grew up on the west side of Detroit, the daughter of Black Nationalists. (Black Nationalism, which advocates black separatism, economic self-sufficiency and race pride, is a movement that started with Marcus Garvey in the 1920s and was prevalent in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights movement.) Cleage moved to Atlanta when she transferred from Howard University to Spelman College in the late 1960s. After graduating in 1971, she made Atlanta her home, working in media jobs and as press secretary to Atlanta’s first African American mayor, Maynard Jackson, before establishing herself as a novelist and playwright.

With all of her accomplishments and after seeing the first African American elected as U.S. president, Cleage has experienced the transformation of her own ideas from the Black Nationalist environment in which she was reared to the collaborative spirit that theatre brings to diverse individuals. It is with this mindset that she spoke to her fellow theatre folk about the serious and controversial topic of censorship.

One of Cleage’s most compelling revelations as a writer came upon her when she couldn’t stop reading Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God on the SETC Convention. You can read her speech beginning on Page 9, or read the speech and a transcript of the wide-ranging Q&A that followed on the SETC website, by clicking Southern Theatre under the Publications tab at www.setc.org.

RECENT CENSORSHIP ATTEMPTS AROUND THE COUNTRY

January 2011, Connecticut: David Snead, the superintendent of Waterbury, CT, schools, tried to block the performance of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone by the Waterbury Arts Magnet School, citing as the reason: “The use of the N-word is something all civil rights leaders around the country want us to stop using,” according to a January 13, 2011 story in The New York Times. The principal of the school, Elizabeth McGrath, told The New York Times that the school tried to get permission to change the word but was unsuccessful. Some school board members discussed creating a policy that would require all play selections to be approved by the board. The play’s director, Nina A. Smith, created a study guide and made sure to always contextualize the use of the word in rehearsals and when studying the play in class. After much deliberation and community support, the play was allowed to be performed and after-performance talk backs were conducted by the dean of the Yale School of Drama and the artistic director of the Hartford Stage.

Fall 2010, Alabama: New South Publishers, located in Montgomery, AL, published a new version of Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, replacing the word “nigger” with “slave,” to much controversy. Randall Williams, owner of New South Publishing, explained on the March 20, 2011 broadcast of 60 Minutes that it was done because the book has been unofficially banned from many schools because of the word. “Nigger” is mentioned in the novel 219 times.

Fall 2010, Florida: The principal at a Flagler County high school would not allow a drama club production of To Kill a Mockingbird to be performed because of the word “nigger” in the play. A review committee of teachers and parents met later and deemed the play acceptable for a high school audience. The school board then voted unanimously to allow the play to be performed. Eventually, the principal allowed the play to be performed at a later date in the fall term.

Fall 2010, Georgia: Drama teacher David Dixon was fired from Haralson County High School for showing a clip from the film The Reckoning as support material for a class on the consequences of bullying. The class session was focused primarily on the bullying of gay youth, and the clip contained strong language. Dixon quickly turned the clip off and apologized for the language. He believes there wouldn’t have been controversy had the film clip not included a gay theme.

February 2009, California: The drama teacher at Corona del Mar High School accused the principal of blocking the school’s production of Rent because gay characters were in the musical, the Los Angeles Times reported. The principal denied the allegation, saying that she only asked to read the script. The production was changed to You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown.

June 2007, Connecticut: Administrators from Wilton High School blocked the performance of Voices in Conflict, a play about the war in Iraq. The administrators called the play “sensational and inappropriate” when giving reasons for the decision. Eventually the students performed the play in New York City.

- Rochelle Elman
PEARL CLEAGE’S WORKS INCLUDE:

BOOKS:
What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day
I Wish I Had a Red Dress
Some Things I Never Thought I’d Do
Babylon Sisters
We Speak Your Name
(with her husband, Zaron W. Burnett, Jr.)
Baby Brother’s Blues
Seen It All and Done the Rest

PLAYS:
Chain
Flyin’ West
Late Bus to Mecca
Blues for an Alabama Sky
Bourbon at the Border
A Song for Coretta
The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years

MORE INFO:
www.pearlcleage.net

the eve of her graduation from Spelman. She almost missed the ceremony because Hurston’s storytelling had grabbed her and would not let go. This was a watershed moment for Cleage as a woman and as a writer. “I wanted to write that good, that true, that deep and wide and wonderful,” Cleage said.

Yet Zora Neale Hurston’s masterpiece (it is one of the most banned books in publication) continues to face censorship issues today because of the use of one word: “nigger.”

Please note that I use this word in this article based on the ground rules Cleage set up during her speech. Those ground rules are:

- “No white people are allowed to use the word unless they are engaged in teaching text where the word appears, participating in discussions where the word itself is being discussed, as dispassionately as possible, among consenting adults or creating works of art that require dialogue to reflect time, place and character (in spite of their best efforts, there can be no exceptions made for white youth who claim that the standard hip-hop pronunciation of the word, Nigga with an ‘a,’ makes it a different word which can be used across racial lines without serious consequences).”

- “African Americans, who are assumed to have an understanding of the many and varied ways the word is employed within their own culturally specific community, are allowed to use the word at their own discretion.”

Noting how important Their Eyes Were Watching God has been in her own development as a human being and as a writer, and how that importance is mirrored in other female African American writers, Cleage railed against the power of one word to cause a ban of classic literature. As Cleage eloquently stated, “I don’t know if it’s because I’m a full-time, straight-up very opinionated writer dedicated to truth and craft and the relentless forward movement of people yearning to be free, but banning words or books or sexual acts that occur between consenting adults always makes me nervous.”

Cleage’s decision to take a stand on censorship in her SETC address came about after she found herself face-to-face with attempts at censorship several times in recent months. First, there was controversy swirling about the new edition of Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, which replaced all references to “nigger” with the word “slave.” Then, in January, while reading The New York Times Arts section, she found an article about a Waterbury, CT, school superintendent who was trying to block an arts magnet high school’s production of August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone because the teenage actors would have to say the word “nigger.” Set in 1910, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is “about the big dreams and tumultuous lives of the residents of a Pittsburgh boarding house and is widely considered one of the best plays in Wilson’s cycle of ten works about the African American experience in each decade of the 20th century,” according to the same article. Wilson uses the word “nigger” often in the play to reflect the authenticity of the community.

Cleage wondered, “Why is it better to be called a slave than to be called a ‘nigger’? ‘Nigger’ is a word used by some to insult and belittle. Slave is a status, a condition under the law that denies one group of human beings the rights and privileges accorded free people.” The fact that the Waterbury school superintendent is black and wanted to shut down Joe Turner to shield students and their parents from controversy and the pain that can be invoked by the word “nigger” was no excuse to Cleage.

“I put down the paper and considered going back to bed and pulling the covers over my head until the dust cleared,” Cleage ruefully confessed.

Instead she did what Pearl Cleage does. She wrote, first a letter to the play’s director and then the speech that begins on the next page.
It is an honor and a pleasure to be here at the 62nd annual SETC conference to share some thoughts with you about two of my favorite American writers, part-time playwright Zora Neale Hurston and full-time dramatist August Wilson.

It was, in fact, my unwavering admiration for Zora, and an invitation to the annual festival in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, that led me to re-read her classic novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a few weeks ago.

And, it was *The New York Times* Arts and Leisure section that led me back to August Wilson’s prize-winning drama, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, at right around the same time, but I’m getting ahead of myself.

The first thing you need to know is that Zora Neale Hurston is responsible for one of my top three writer revelation moments, the other two being my discovery of Langston Hughes when my mother read *The Big Sea* to us at bedtime the way other mothers read fairy tales, and the time I wept my way through my first production of Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls…*, convinced she had been sitting outside my bedroom window, taking notes.

My Zora moment occurred on the weekend I graduated from Spelman [College]. I was in the bathtub trying to relax after a long, trying night sewing the African print dress I would wear to graduation as a protest against the European tradition of the cap and gown. It was 1971 and revolution was in the air, but my skills as a dressmaker would have put the generations of seamstresses in my family to shame. What I had thought would be an easy few hours had evolved into a nightmare of ripped-out seams and crooked hems.

I needed a break. So I ran a tub of hot water, grabbed the paperback copy of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* I had been trying to finish all week, and opened to the page where I had stopped reading just as Tea Cake and Janie were fleeing for their lives in the midst of a flood and Tea Cake, protecting Janie, is bitten on the cheek by a rabid dog. I knew I needed to get out of the tub and get ready for the ceremony, but there was no way I could leave Jamie in the midst of such a predicament. So I kept reading; through Tea Cake’s descent into rabies and madness; through the devastating moment when she has to shoot him or die at his hand; to her trial, and ultimate release.

By the time I got to the last few lovely lines, I was weeping audibly:

“Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life
The reason for the problem is one thing and one thing only: Some of the characters in Zora’s novel use the word nigger.

Now you notice I did not say “the N word.” I never say “the N word,” which means that before we go any further, some facts and ground rules are in order.

Let me say first off, for those who may be uncertain, that I am an African American. My racially ambiguous appearance can be traced back to the unfortunate racial mixing that occurred when my family was being held in slavery in Alabama prior to the American Civil War.

I mention it only because my appearance sometimes confuses people and since we’re going to be talking about the word nigger, I want it to be clear that I am African American and therefore governed by the rules accordingly.

Simply stated, the rules fall into two general commandments. No white people are allowed to use the word nigger unless they are engaged in teaching texts where the word appears, participating in discussions where the word itself is being discussed as dispassionately as possible among consenting adults, or creating works of art that require dialogue to reflect time, place and character.

In spite of their best efforts, there can be no exceptions made for white youth who claim that the standard hip hop pronunciation of the word, nigga, with an “a,” makes it a different word which can be used across racial lines without serious consequences.

African Americans, who are assumed to have an understanding of the many and varied ways the word is employed within their own culturally specific community, are allowed to use the word at their own discretion. For the purposes of this discussion, African American is used synonymously with the word Negro, which has fallen out of favor with many people, but which more accurately describes the group under consideration, a unique mixture that occurred because of the forced breeding of Africans with their white captors during the days when slavery was legal in our country.

Since the word nigger grew out of the peculiar institution of American slavery, under generally accepted rules of current racial comportment, its use is limited to the descendants of the people who were held here in bondage during those terrible times. That means, even people of African descent from around the diaspora, and people from the African continent itself, are not allowed to use the word nigger unless they are given special dispensation by an African American.

You see how complicated this gets? And how quickly? There are many reasons for this, but I place the blame for much of the confusion at the feet of the late Johnny Cochran, the African American attorney who became known to most of us when he defended O.J. Simpson against murder charges in a case that became notorious for its racial overtones, racial undertones, and general weirdness.

During one portion of the trial, Attorney Cochran was making an argument for O.J. Simpson being not a cold-blooded murderer, but simply the victim of the racist L.A. police department, the racist criminal justice system, and a racist America. He wanted...
to use the word nigger to make his argument, but he deemed the word too insulting, too incendiary, too disturbing for the ears of the jurors, and so the phenomenon of “the N word” was born, and spread rapidly through the popular culture from sea to shining sea, muddying the water, confusing the issue and clarifying nothing.

Before Johnny Cochran, it was assumed that white people understood that in their mouths, nigger was always considered a fighting word. Within the black community, it was considered a culturally specific all-purpose moniker whose nuances made it variously an insult, an endearment, a description and a challenge.

In his poem, Watts, Conrad Kent Rivers used it to ask a profound and terrible question:

“Must I shoot the
White man dead
To free the
Nigger in his head?”

But after Johnny Cochran, things changed. The word, although it had been in common usage for decades, seemed suddenly to gain power in some quarters. It was presumed to carry such negative weight that there were even several protests calling for its removal from the dictionary. This, of course goes against the whole idea of a dictionary, since once you start picking and choosing which words deserve to be there, you’re opening a whole new can of worms.

I don’t know if it’s because I’m a full-time, straight up, very opinionated writer, dedicated to truth and craft and the relentless forward movement of people yearning to be free, but banning words or books or sexual acts that occur between consenting adults, always makes me nervous.

The other thing that makes me nervous is the ongoing discussion of this particular word in a way that implies that the word itself is so lethal that we can’t even speak it out loud, but must content ourselves with using only the first letter, assuming the listener or the reader will surmise the word we would have said except that its awful, negative energy would have exploded in our mouths like a roadside bomb, or the very sight of it on paper would have struck us dumb and dumber.

But I hadn’t heard anything like that lately, so imagine my surprise when I picked up the paper one morning and read the following item on Page 2 of The New York Times Arts section:

January 14, 2011:

“School Officials Object to August Wilson Play”

“The schools superintendent in Waterbury, Connecticut, is seeking to shut down a production of one of August Wilson’s great dramas, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, because some of the teenage actors would have to utter the word ‘nigger’ as called for in the script, according to the play’s director, Nina A. Smith. According to Ms. Smith, the superintendent, David Snead, who is black, said this week that educators should not do anything that might encourage people to use the word. Joe Turner, about the big dreams and tumultuous lives of the residents of a Pittsburgh boarding house, is widely considered one of the best plays in Wilson’s cycle of ten works about the African American experience in each decade of the 20th century.”

I put down the paper and considered going back to bed and pulling the covers over my head until the dust cleared. By the time August Wilson came under fire, Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn has been in the news for several weeks, following the publication of a new edition of the novel that presented the black character, who previously had been called Nigger Jim as Slave Jim. The editor obviously was convinced that was an improvement, although I can’t imagine why. Why is it better to be called a “slave” than to be called a “nigger”? Nigger is a word used by some to insult and belittle. Slave is a status, a condition under the law that denies one group of human beings the rights and privileges accorded free people.

Besides, when we meet Jim, he has already escaped from slavery and is, therefore, a free man, exercising his freedom by heading north as fast as he can figure out how to read the stars and get there. Why then is describing this character as what his former owner called him an improvement over showing what an evil man like Huck’s drunken fool of a father called other human beings.

Walt Whitman said: “The dirtiest book of all is the expurgated book.”

When I read that story about Mr. Snead’s attempts to close Joe Turner, several things jumped out at me immediately. First thought: August Wilson won two Pulitzer Prizes for American Drama and this guy wants to rewrite the play? Second thought: This guy is black?

The idea that anyone would have the temerity to rewrite August Wilson’s work was outrageous, but the fact that the attempted censor was a black man...
from Detroit with a Ph.D., was inconceivable. Did he really believe what he was saying? Had he no more understanding of culture, generally, and his own African American culture, specifically? Had he no appreciation of the intricate specificity of the word and its myriad uses, both on and off the printed page?

Trying to understand Mr. Snead, I was reminded of my father’s reaction to the African American character, Coalhouse Walker, in the film version of E.L. Doctorow’s masterpiece, Ragtime. Finding himself the target of abuse by racist white men, Coalhouse was surprised and hurt. Shocked, mystified even, as to why a group of working class white men might retaliate against a wealthy, well dressed member of a group they felt entitled to be better than as if by divine right, simply because he showed up in a fine suit of clothes, requesting service on his beautiful, convertible roadster.

After several minutes of whining and self-pity from Coalhouse, my father couldn’t take it anymore, and his voice rang out suddenly in the quiet movie theatre.

“How long has this Negro been black in America anyway?”

“Amen, brother,” another voice answered in the darkness. “Amen!”

I wanted to ask Mr. Snead the same question, but I didn’t know how to frame it. Clearly, he was a man conscious of race as America’s continuing challenge, but how that consciousness translated into his decision to challenge the work of one of the giants of American theatre, a man who has won the Pulitzer Prize, not once, but twice, I did not know.

How Mr. Snead decided that the most helpful thing he could do to foster racial tolerance and understanding among American high school juniors and seniors was to censor a writer for using a word every student in that class has heard, and/or used, since they first became aware of it at about the same time they saw their first rap video, remained a mystery to me.

I wondered if Mr. Snead had even read the play, and that is not a rhetorical question. In two of America’s most recent book burnings, one in 2001 and another in 2003, both involving Harry Potter, the pastors who organized the events admitted they had never read the book in question.

“Books won’t stay banned,” Alfred Whitney Griswold wrote in The New York Times. “They won’t burn. Ideas won’t go to jail. In the long run of history, the censor and the inquisitor have always lost. The only weapon against bad ideas is better ideas.”

Almost every African American writer has used the word nigger at least once. Most African American authors, including August Wilson, are repeat offenders. Listen to this passage from Joe Turner that probably set Mr. Snead on fire.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Act One/Scene One.

The character Seth speaks:

“These niggers coming up here with the old backward country style of living. It’s hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with, there ain’t been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. Word get out they need men to work in the mill and put in these roads and niggers drop everything and head North looking for freedom. They don’t know the white fellows looking, too. White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellows come over and in six months got more than what I got. But these niggers keep on coming. Walking … riding … carrying their Bibles. That boy done carried a guitar all the way from North Carolina. What he gonna find out? What he gonna do with that guitar? This is the city. Niggers coming up here from the backwoods … coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars and looking for freedom. They got a rude awakening.”

Keep in mind that this character, Seth, is giving voice to complex problems of class and race and geography and religion and culture and the Great Migration. He’s holding a mirror up to a fear voiced by many Northern-born black folks as their Southern cousins found their way to Chicago, and St. Louis, and Detroit, and Harlem. Keep in mind that this migration is one of the most amazing voluntary social upheavals in the history of our country.

And in the hands of August Wilson, all that is conveyed through one small paragraph that also establishes time and place and the specific world view of one of the drama’s major players. But all Dr. Snead heard was the word nigger.

What would he hear in this passage from Their Eyes Were Watching God?

“Janie took a room at the boarding house for the night and heard the men talking around the front.

‘Aw, you know dem white mens wasn’t goin’ tuh do nothin’ tuh no woman dat look lak her.’

‘She didn’t kill no white man, did she? Well, long as she don’t shoot no white man, she kin kill jus’ as many niggers as she please.’

Let’s call this latest round of well-meaning, but misguided attempts to de-niggerize the American literary canon exactly what it is: censorship.
‘Yeah, de nigger women kill all de mens dey wants tuh, but you bet’ not kill one uh dem. De white folks will sho hang yuh if you do.’

‘Well, you know whut dey say: ‘uh white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth. Dey do as dey please.’”

Just a few lines in Zora’s skillful hands give us deep insight into the ambivalent feelings the close-knit community on what they call “the Muck” have for Janie … regarding her as an outsider, no matter how much Tea Cake loved her; the complexity of being a pretty woman whose looks are unimportant to her, but never far from the minds of those with whom she interacts, black or white.

That brief exchange shines a light on the often repeated, and always bizarre accusation that somehow black women have an unfair advantage under a system that was both relentlessly racist and smotheringly sexist. The self-hate the speakers feel drips from every word as they evaluate their relative status in the eyes of their oppressors and, at the same time, accept that second-class status is their only option.

But all Dr. Snead heard was the word nigger.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Every burned book enlightens the world.”

The Chinese say that the beginning of wisdom is to call all things by their proper names, so let’s call this latest round of well-meaning, but misguided attempts to de-niggerize the American literary canon exactly what it is: censorship.

In a recent online essay, Jonathon Green writes:

“The populist authoritarianism that is the downside of political correctness means that anyone, sometimes it seems like everyone, can proclaim their grief and have it acknowledged. The victim culture, every sufferer grasping for their own Holocaust, ensures that anyone who feels offended can call for moderation, for dilution, and in the end, as is all too often the case, for censorship. And censorship, that by-product of fear – stemming as it does not from some positive agenda, but from the desire to escape our own terror and superstitions by imposing them on others, must surely be resisted.”

American writers have always resisted any attempt to control their work. At the height of the Black Arts Movement, Leroi Jones, now Amiri Baraka, defined the task of the revolutionary black writer as producing something so ba-a-a-a-ad they have to ban it, and then was forced to defend his poems in court when he was charged with inciting to riot for reading them in public.

Ray Bradbury’s classic novel, Farenheit 451, imagines a world where books are banned. In response, a small underground group recruits people to memorize a book at a time so that when the book burners are no longer in power, these word warriors will be able to write all the books down and start again. I spent months after I read that book wondering what volume I would chose if I had to pick just one to memorize and say like catechism … like prayer.

My friend Alice Walker tells me that one of her books is always on somebody’s banned list in America. Our country has a history of being afraid of books. In the late 19th century, a former U.S. postal inspector, Anthony Comstock, appointed himself America’s censor, creating the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. One of his primary targets was obscenity of literature, along with birth control materials written by people like Margaret Sanger.

In 1873, Comstock wielded enough political influence to get Congress to pass the Comstock Law, making it illegal to transport and deliver “obscene, lewd or lascivious materials.” He proudly claimed to have been responsible during his lifetime for burning 160 tons of obscene literature and causing the arrest of over 3,000 perpetrators.

Theodore Dreiser’s hometown removed his books from their library shelves for obscene and leftist content. In 1939, copies of John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath were burned all over the country for “political content and vulgarity.”

In the 1950s, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy sent his operatives into the libraries of the United States Information Service to search for “subversive” books, with instructions to burn any they might find lurking there. To his credit, President Eisenhower repudiated McCarthy’s tactics and urged citizens not to “join the book burners,” but in 1973, Kurt Vonnegut’s novel, Slaughterhouse Five, was deemed obscene and burned in the furnace of a local high school.

Harry Potter has been burned in Almagordo, New Mexico, in 2001 for satanic content, and for the same thing again in Greenville, Michigan, in 2003. In both instances, the clergymen who organized the events admitted they had not read the books.

Heinrich Heine wrote in 1823: “Wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings.”

I followed the development of the Waterbury story online for several days, since it never made the
papers in Atlanta. I couldn’t stop considering the consequences if Superintendent Snead was allowed to institute a rule that prohibited the study or production of any work by any American author whose works include the word nigger in any context whatsoever.

Think about the people who would have to be on this list ... Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, James Baldwin and Mark Twain. Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, Charles Fuller, Ed Bullins, William Faulkner and Larry Neal. Conrad Kent Rivers, Ernest J. Gaines, Ernest Hemingway, Jill Nelson, Lynn Nottage and Suzan-Lori Parks. George Wolfe, Sonia Sanchez, Ron Milner, David Mamet, Zaron Burnett and Chester Himes. Walter Mosley, Robert Penn Warren, Sapphire, Toni Morrison, Norman Mailer, Ntozake Shange and Tayari Jones. Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Edward P. Jones, Bebe Moore Campbell, Terry McMillan, Tina McElroy Ansa, yours truly, Waterbury, and even confessed that the school did go so far as to ask the rights holder of the play if they could substitute another word for their production, but they were told absolutely not.

With no other option except bowing to Superintendent Snead’s wishes and canceling the show, or going on with the play as written, Ms. Smith and her equally courageous principal, Elizabeth McGrath, announced their intention to proceed with the production.

That’s when I decided to scrap the indignant letters I’d been drafting to Dr. Snead and instead send one of appreciation to Nina Smith, which is exactly what I did:

To: Ms. Nina A. Smith, Theatre Arts Department, Waterbury Arts Magnet School, 16 South Elm Street, Waterbury, CT.

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am an African American playwright, living in Atlanta, Georgia. I saw the articles about Superintendent David Snead objecting to your students performing in August Wilson’s play Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. From everything I’ve read, you chose this play for what I think are all the right reasons and have taken care to be sure your students and their families understand every aspect of it, including specificity of time and place and language. I applaud your intention to go through with the production and to continue exploring the issues it raises in a non-judgmental way that puts your students at the center of a wonderfully challenging discussion about race and language.

As much as I was heartened by your choice of Wilson’s masterwork, I was saddened by Mr. Snead’s objection to the use of the word “nigger” within the literature produced by American authors. I’m sure he had good intentions, but if Mr. Snead’s ideas were to take hold, it would be almost impossible to produce the work of many, many American playwrights, or to read novels, and poetry, written by many, many American authors. Race, and racial prejudice, are at the heart of much of African American writing, but race, and racial prejudice, are also at the heart of many wonderful works by European American authors who use the word “nigger” as part of their effort to accurately reflect the language spoken by the
characters they have created. It is absolutely necessary that these characters live and breathe and speak in a way that rings so true that those who encounter the play will think they are experiencing real life as they know it to be, imperfections and all. That is the playwright's challenge.

Human beings can be the most loving, compassionate, admirable creatures you’ve ever seen. They can also be selfish, mean, violent, cruel, racist, sexist, homophobic and manipulative. Sometimes they speak with the beautiful clarity of President Barack Obama, and sometimes they speak with the angry, accusatory cadences of Rush Limbaugh. The thing is, when the angry, hateful language or angry, hateful people show up in a story a writer has chosen to tell, it is not the writer’s job to clean up that language. It is the writer’s job to accurately reproduce the words that real people would really say, no matter how offensive, in the hope that if we can encounter each other honestly through our literature, perhaps we can understand each other more deeply and more compassionately. This can only be a good thing.

One of the first things you learn as a young writer is “don’t say darn if you really mean damn.” It is good advice, too, and we scribes who try to live by it, appreciate your understanding that if you change even one word, you break the magic of the spell we work so hard to weave.

In his introduction to the boxed set edition of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, playwright Romulus Linney says that the play, Wilson’s favorite, showcases his “devotion to the terrible realities of African Americans in the twentieth century.” He goes on to say that in the tangled lives of his characters, Wilson has created “life at its most beautiful.” That kind of magic can only happen if a playwright is allowed to, as poet Mari Evans says, “tell the truth to the people.” August Wilson’s life was devoted to looking that truth square in the eye and then passing it on to the rest of us in that ten-play cycle whose individual dramas are amazing, but whose collective scope is unmatched in American theatre. To change one word for fear that people cannot handle the truth, and be transformed by it, is not only to diminish Wilson’s life, but our own as well.

Thank you, Nina A. Smith, for standing up for playwrights everywhere. Don’t stop doing what you do … peace.

Tommy Smothers said: “The only valid censorship of ideas is the right of people not to listen.”

The New York Times, January 21, 2011:
“August Wilson Play to Go On Despite Officials’ Objection”

“Joe Turner will indeed come to Waterbury, Connecticut. After three hours of discussion on Wednesday night and testimony from community members and other interested parties, including the Dean of the Yale School of Drama, the Waterbury Board of Education allowed a public school’s production of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, to proceed in February. In doing so, board members overruled an initial decision by their school superintendent, who tried to cancel the play because its dialogue included several uses of the word ‘nigger.’ Superintendent David L. Snead, who is black, had raised some concerns, saying that the school and educators should not be staging a play that might encourage use of the word.”

Of course, this is not really about a word. Censorship is never about a word, a book, a film, a play, an act of love. It’s always about fear and a desire for control over those people the would-be censor is convinced need to be protected from artists and writers and rappers and rebels of all kinds, whose work may incite others to think for themselves, to feel things deeply, and to challenge authority.

These are the crimes that land writers in jail, or worse, in countries all over the world, but not here. Not now. Not ever! Because that’s not the kind of country we want to live in. A writer who can be censored can be banned. A classic that can be butchered can be burned. At a time when outright lies and gross exaggerations can fly around the blogosphere in a matter of seconds and come back disguised as fact, truth has never been harder to define, or more critical to defend.

The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth …

Words mean something. Each one is different and precious and maddeningly specific. For a writer to be told there are words in her author’s arsenal that are too powerful, too dangerous, too complex for her to use them is to tell a musician he can only play the white keys on the piano because the sound of the black ones will surely drive concert-goers crazy!
end, the computer would be instructed to translate the phrase back into English. The goal of the experiment being to see how close the first English sentence was to the last one. At the appointed time, when all systems were go, the programmer fed these words into the machine: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Certainly a challenge wherever human beings gather. The machine did the translations smoothly, spit out the result to the programmer, and this is what it said: “The spirit is ready, but the meat is raw.”

In 1911, George Bernard Shaw said: “Assassination is the extreme form of censorship.”

Which is why we can’t allow it, no matter how well-intentioned the censor might be. Which means, if you want to say nigga, please!, say nigga, please!, and let the chips fall where they may.

Voltaire said: “Think for yourself and let others enjoy the privilege to do so, too.”

I have no doubt that is what Zora would have done and what August would have done and what I will continue to do as part of my job as a cultural worker, deeply rooted in and reflective of not only my own people, “in all their terribleness,” as Amiri Baraka once wrote, but of my great big, complex, confounding, strange, sweet, deluded, amazing, breathtakingly beautiful, super-power-in-decline country. It isn’t perfect, but it’s the only one I got, warts and all, and the difficult questions are the ones that will ultimately define her, just like they will ultimately define us.

As a person who works with words for a living, I am looking forward to the day when censorship is no longer a threat, assassinations are a thing of the past, just like slavery, and we never have to talk about this again. There are too many other things we need to consider. In anticipation of that not too far off time, I offer 25 things I’d rather talk about than the meaning and appropriateness of the word nigga:
1. How to stop the wars.
2. What’s really going on in Egypt?
3. Love.
4. What would Jesus do?
5. Rebuilding New Orleans.
6. Rebuilding Detroit.
7. The sound of my grandchildren’s laughter.
8. Post-menopausal sex.
10. Community control of schools.
11. The importance of fully funding the National Endowment for the Arts.
12. The full moon hanging like a Chinese lantern at the end of my street.
13. What would Buddha do?
15. Community gardens.
16. Health care.
17. Feeding hungry people.
18. Housing those guys who sleep under the freeway overpass near the car detailing place across from the fire station.
19. What would Michelle Obama do?
20. How to end child prostitution, domestic violence, and rape of all kinds.
21. A writer’s role in wartime.
22. Why I love President Obama.
23. Watching my grandson play basketball.
24. The pink sky at sunset over my neighbor’s house.
25. What would Beyonce do?

And that’s just for starters!

At the end of her autobiography, Dust Tracks on the Road, Zora Neale Hurston summed up her life, and her hopes for the future. In closing, I’d like to share her words with you:

“I have no intention of wasting my time beating on old graves with a club. I know that I cannot pry loose the clutching hand of time, so I will turn my thoughts and energies to the present. I will settle for from now on … I don’t know any more about the future than you do. I hope that it will be full of work because I have come to know by experience that work is the nearest thing to happiness that I can find. No matter what else I have among the things that humans want, I go to pieces in a short while if I do not work. What all my work shall be, I don’t know that either, every hour being a stranger to you until you live in it. I want a busy life, a just mind, and a timely death.

But if I should live to be very old, I have laid plans for that so that it will not be too tiresome. So far, I have never used coffee, liquor, nor any form of stimulant. When I get old and my joints and bones tell me about it, I can sit around and write for myself, if for nobody else, and read slowly and carefully the mysticism of the east, and re-read Spinoza with love and care. And all the while, my days can be a succession of coffee cups. Then when the sleeplessness of old age attacks me, I can have a likker bottle snug in my pantry and sip away and sleep. Get mellow and think kindly of the world. I think I can be like that because I have known the joy and pain of deep friendship. I have served and been served.

I have made some good enemies for which I am not a bit sorry. I have loved unselfishly and I have fondled hatred with the red hot tongs of hell. That’s living.

I have no race prejudice of any kind. My kinfolks and my skin folks are dearly loved. My own circumference of everyday life is there. But I see their same virtues and vices everywhere I look. So I give you all my right hand of fellowship and love, and hope for the same from you. In my eyesight, you lose nothing by not looking just like me. I will remember you all in my good thoughts, and I ask you kindly to do the same for me.

Not only just me. You who play the zigzag lightning of power over the world, with the grumbling thunder in your wake, think kindly of those who walk in dust. And you who walk in humble places, think kindly too, of others. There has been no proof in the world so far that you would be less arrogant if you held the level of power in your hands. Let us all be kissing-friends.

Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so. Maybe all of us who do not have the good fortune to meet, or meet again, in this world, will meet at a barbecue.”

Sounds good to me, Zora. I’ll bring the potato salad.

Thank you!
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SETC celebrated the 62nd anniversary of its founding at the 2011 SETC Convention in Atlanta, GA. At Saturday’s business meeting, SETC President Alan Litsey (above), was elected to a second term as President. On these pages, we revisit scenes from the annual convention, which was attended by more than 4,000 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 Reis Birdwhistell and David Hawkins
62nd in Atlanta
From Actor to Artist
Matt Cavenaugh’s Challenge
by H. Duke Guthrie

Matt Cavenaugh, who had made his Broadway debut by the time he turned 25, has a message for his fellow performers at all stages in their careers. Don’t set your sights on becoming an actor. Take ownership of your career and become something more: an artist.

“I was fortunate that I had a lot of quote–unquote success early on in my career,” Cavenaugh told a packed audience at Friday’s keynote session at the 2011 SETC Convention. “I booked a lot of stuff straight out of college.”

But Cavenaugh, who has appeared on Broadway in Urban Cowboy, A Catered Affair, Grey Gardens and West Side Story, says he has come to realize that surviving in this business long-term requires that actors see themselves as artists, taking ownership of each creative moment on stage and of their lives as well. Both in his keynote address and in an interview, he emphasized the importance of making the leap from actor to artist.

“You can empower yourself by thinking, ‘I’m not just an actor, I am an artist,’” he said. “If what I create is just this moment, or this audition, this role, or this play, then that’s something that is powerful and I can take ownership of its creation.”

Becoming an Actor
Cavenaugh, now 32, began his journey to “actor” in middle school after being bowled over by a production of West Side Story at Jonesboro (AR) High School. When he entered high school the next year, he dove in to theatre. “I remember wondering if I could actually make a career out of being an actor,” he says. He consulted with the director of the theatre department, Keith Salter, who told Cavenaugh: “If you can be happy doing anything other than acting, do it instead.” If you decide that you do have the passion and drive to pursue a career in theatre, Salter told Cavenaugh, “You need to read, to listen, to learn about every show, writer, technique, history, every possible thing about the theatre that you can.”

Cavenaugh took that advice and, after graduation, enrolled at Ithaca College in New York to study musical theatre. There, Cavenaugh says he “was on the five-year plan. I took a year off after my freshman year and toured the country doing Grease, where I played Eugene.”

Touring taught Cavenaugh “valuable lessons in stamina, in being flexible and being able to adapt to different theatres and environments,” he said. After the tour ended, Cavenaugh resumed his formal education at Ithaca, “to continue honing my craft.” While

One of the ways that Matt Cavenaugh has used his creative talents to make the leap from actor to artist is by developing a debut album, a collaboration with his wife, the musical theatre actress Jenny Powers. The album, Gonna Make You Love Me, was released shortly after Cavenaugh’s SETC keynote speech. You can listen to sound clips or purchase through his website at www.mattcavenaugh.com.
completing his degree, Cavenaugh worked in summer stock and spent a semester studying in London. After graduation, Cavenaugh moved to New York City and began his professional career as an actor.

**Creativity elevates the actor to artist**

As he made his way along his career path, Cavenaugh experienced a change in the mindset through which he viewed his approach to the profession.

“Thinking of one’s self as simply an actor can be limiting,” he said. “When you think of yourself as an artist, you hold yourself to a higher standard. Striving to be an artist, with all the inherent dedication, imagination and craft required, provides the greatest sense of creative fulfillment.”

Cavenaugh expressed his respect for actors and acting but encouraged his listeners to move beyond “someone who memorizes lines and takes direction” to one who brings “their full imagination and soul” to each creative endeavor they launch.

Acknowledging the collaborative nature of theatre, Cavenaugh noted that actors are surrounded by other people “organizing and structuring our time.” He noted that actors often find these “others” throughout their careers: “The high school teacher becomes the college professor becomes the agent becomes the PSM on your first professional job.”

While a supportive team is vital to success, Cavenaugh says actors can become too dependent on those “others.” That can leave the actor unsure of what to do between jobs, or when the “others” aren’t there to spur the actor forward. Cavenaugh says the answer is to be an artist: “When you think of yourself as an artist, you also empower yourself to create if, in fact, no outside influences are creating for you.”

That realization and the need to take a greater sense of ownership of his career and art led Cavenaugh to ask himself, “How do I create?” Currently, the answer includes: acting, producing an album with his wife, Jenny Powers, producing a play that is making its way to New York, and being a contributing writer to Beverly Hills Lifestyle magazine.

**The Artist’s Product**

Cavenaugh can find artistry in the creation of a script, or a design or a lesson plan, and he adds,
“there is art in everything Steve Jobs creates. He is a Michelangelo, he’s a rock star. I say that there is art there. Not just talent and skill, but the dedication, the precision of an artist to create something.”

The product of the actor-artist is more difficult to define. Cavenaugh says it is authenticity.

“The sculptor has clay to make his composition,” he said. “If you’re an actor, you have ‘you.’ It takes an artist’s focus and love and craft to create an authentic moment.” It is authenticity that breathes life into a performance, he said.

Creating authenticity requires “a continual commitment to cultivate one’s craft, the courage to share not just your talents but your entire essence with the world, and being confident in your courageous commitment to being an artist because you have to be,” said Cavenaugh.

Artistry Requires Commitment

Cavenaugh stressed the important of dedication and commitment for actors to achieve artistry.

“If you look in the dictionary for the definition of commitment, you’ll find the words, ‘the state of being emotionally impelled,’” Cavenaugh said. When artists feel committed, he said, “something inside of you is driving you forward to practice your imaginative art every day.” Artistry, he said, is “a process that’s continual. It has no end. How do you do 300, 500 or 1,000 performances of the same role in the same show?” The answer, he said, is to continue to dive into one’s imaginative art.

Maintaining that kind of drive can be challenging, Cavenaugh acknowledges. Staying committed is aided when, “You draw on others. Find someone you can lean on and draw support from. Hopefully there is at least one other person in that ensemble that can be helpful, or maybe outside that ensemble.”

For Cavenaugh, that person is his wife, actress Jenny Powers. “We both have an understanding of what this business takes,” he said. “She is an insanely talented and inspirational person. I am humbled every day by her.”
Artistry Requires Courage

In addition to dedication, imagination and craft, artistry “requires the courage to share not just your talents but your entire essence with the world,” noted Cavenaugh. Courage, he said, is the “strength to persevere and withstand danger, fear or difficulty.”

Cavenaugh shared moments requiring perseverance from his career: “Danger can come in the form of being thrown off a set piece and bruising your ribs and skull, and being rushed to the hospital, like I was during previews of West Side Story in Washington, DC. Fear can be knowing that the chief drama critic of The New York Times is in the audience judging your work. Difficulty can be going through 10, 20, 50 or 100s of auditions without booking a job.”

Artistry Requires Confidence

Confidence, or “the state of being certain,” is another key tool in artistry. “True confidence (I’m not talking about ego here),” Cavenaugh stressed, “is one of the greatest and most vital tools of an artist. Without the confidence of being an artist, acting is “too hard, too unstructured, and too unexplainable to be anything less than. It’s not enough to just be a skilled technician or a skilled singer or a skilled dancer or an actor with technique. Actors, have to always work beyond simply mastering a litany of technical skills.” Creativity makes the artist-actor stand out among a crowd of actors.

A Confession

Cavenaugh ended his keynote speech with a confession. “That word ‘artist’ has always scared me,” he said. “It seemed too much to attain.”

His keynote address, Cavenaugh said, was directed as much to himself as to the audience. “I’m choosing this moment, today, right now, to take complete ownership of my career,” he said. “Because for me it’s not enough to just be an actor. As an artist, I can have much more power and fulfillment than I ever could as an actor. As an artist, I can create. I can create an album, I can create a show, I can create a business, I can create a set, and I can create 90 seconds of magic for a room full of directors and producers. I can take full ownership of my craft, my skills, my talents, my mind, body and soul, my imaginative art. I hope you’ll join me.”

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The sculptor has clay to make his composition. If you’re an actor, you have ‘you.’

H. Duke Guthrie is an associate professor in Valdosta State University’s Theatre & Dance Area and managing director of Peach State Summer Theatre.
Ben Cameron Encourages Artists to Join Today’s Arts Reformation and Embrace The ‘New Normal’

by Paul B. Crook

In the 1970s, they were college roommates who shared a house near the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. More than 30 years later, at the 2011 SETC Convention in Atlanta, they shared a stage, as film and stage costume designer Fred Lloyd, one of the respondents for the SETC Design Competition, surprised his old friend Ben Cameron by introducing him as Saturday’s keynote speaker. “There is not a more passionate, more articulate advocate for the arts,” Lloyd told the audience.

Anyone who has had the pleasure of hearing Cameron speak before, and certainly everyone who gathered in the Grand Ballroom at the Atlanta Hilton to hear his SETC keynote address, will agree with Lloyd’s sentiment. In an impassioned, inspiring talk, Cameron was thoughtful, witty, engaging, provocative, innovative and insightful as he addressed the challenges that face the arts in today’s society and how we all can move forward, embracing what he called the “new normal” in 21st century America.

Cameron, who received SETC’s 2011 Distinguished Career Award, currently is the program director for the arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in New York City, supervising a $13-million grants program that focuses on artists and organizations in theatre, contemporary dance, jazz and presenting fields. Prior to his work at the Foundation, Cameron was executive director of Theatre Communications Group (TCG) for eight years, worked with the Dayton Hudson Foundation, served as director of the theatre program for the National Endowment for the Arts, and worked in Target’s grants division. Cameron holds an undergraduate degree from UNC-CH (leading to his rousing chant of “Anyone but Duke”) and a master of fine arts (MFA) degree from Yale University School of Drama.

All arts are challenged

Cameron offered some analysis of the state of theatre today, steeped in a bit of a history lesson. He noted that there are more professional theatres today than at any time in American history, with over 2,000 nonprofit theatres operating. That is a staggering figure when contrasted with the number – fewer than three dozen – that existed in 1961, when the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts were just beginning their work. Even so, many theatres, including Tony Award-winning regional theatres, have closed their doors in recent years. The challenges are not just financial, Cameron said, encouraging theatre people not to “define ourselves in terms of finances. Our challenges are not financial at all.”

Instead, he noted that there is a “new normal” in the world of today’s artist that theatres must learn to embrace. In meetings with artists across the country in 2007, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation identified six issues that represent the crux of problems facing the 21st century American artist:
Idiosyncratic issues specific to each art form, such as the short career span that most dancers face.

Chronic issues such as underfunding and undercompensation.

The rising difficulties of the 501(c)3 model, which increasingly necessitates that business people and politicians, not artists, run the organizations.

The impending generational transfer of leadership. Cameron notes there are more than enough of the younger generation ready to lead, but the younger people don’t want to “merely be custodians of what the older generation made.”

The erosion/decline of audiences in all fields. Cameron notes that 60 to 75 percent of audience members come to only one play in a season, and most ticket buyers purchase tickets the day of, or perhaps the day before, the show.

The struggle to integrate technology. Cameron notes that: The average person contacts between 3,000 and 5,000 marketing images each day; video games outsell music and movie recordings combined; and technology is changing how we consume things. The Internet has taught us to expect immediacy.

Cameron made the point, however, that we as artists are not alone in facing these issues. These same problems are affecting many industries, from newspapers to bookstores to music distributors. The upshot of these challenges, though, is not what many of us have believed over the years, according to Cameron. Rather than a financial problem, “the crisis we face is one of urgency and relevance,” Cameron said. “The financial merely redefines resources we can bring to bear.”

Why are we relevant?

As difficult as these issues are, Cameron sees a path forward for artists. He highlighted two quotes that he has found especially relevant. The first is from Abraham Lincoln’s 1862 annual message to Congress: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.” The second is from well-known hockey player Wayne Gretzky, in response to a question about how he always managed to be in the right place at the right time to score. His answer: “I skate to where the puck will be.”

The first quote is one that we must embrace. Cameron said. The second one leads to a crucial question for people involved in the arts: How can we “skate to where the puck will be”?

To determine the location of that artistic puck (and we’re not talking about Shakespeare’s mischievous sprite), Cameron poses four questions:

- What is the value of theatre?
- What specific value does theatre have to an individual community?
When the artists took the stage, the screens went down and everyone leaned forward. It’s a universe of people who are desperate to slow down … to surrender to experiences that are emotionally compelling, spiritually renewing, intellectually provocative … the very things we are called to do every time we take the stage.

An Arts Reformation

Cameron encouraged the audience not to view his comments as a death knell for our careers. What he perceives happening is what he referred to as an “Arts Reformation.” In comparing this new reformation to its more well-known predecessor, Cameron stressed the fact that the religious Reformation did not end the Catholic Church, it reorganized how, where and when religion could operate. “The Arts Reformation,” said Cameron, “will do the same. Just like Zelda Fichandler selling $15 shares [to start her theatre], a new model has to be set forth.”

Cameron stressed the need to embrace our core values, to identify why the arts are important – to each of us individually. He noted that burnout doesn’t occur because of too much time spent working, it occurs when we disconnect from our core values. As an example of what we need to do, he cited his experience attending an annual conference called PopTech in Camden, ME, that brings together thinkers of all descriptions. Each section of the conference concluded with a performance of some kind, and each performance enlightened and embodied an aspect of the human condition. Unlike most arts conferences he attends, Cameron noted that the concern at PopTech wasn’t survivability: “The unwritten agenda of PopTech is how will we change the world? … There is nothing we cannot do. In the world of technology, anything is possible.” Pop Tech also demonstrates how technology is complementing, rather than overtaking, the artistic world, Cameron says. He noted that in a community that certainly could have convened virtually, the participants found value in face-to-face communion, in “conspiring, in its Latinate sense, which means ‘to breathe together.’” Attendees would text, IM, tweet and e-mail during speakers’ presentations, Cameron says, “but when the artists took the stage, the screens went down and everyone leaned forward. It’s a universe of people who are desperate to slow down … to surrender to experiences that are emotionally compelling, spiritually renewing, intellectually provocative … the very things we are called to do every time we take the stage.”

By identifying and embracing our core values, and by recognizing the shifting landscape, and by welcoming the changing world around us, we will still be able, as artists, to do what theatre has always done, he says. “In the theatre,” Cameron says, “we invite people to come together to view their fellow human beings with generosity and curiosity.”

Speak to where people are listening from

In a question-and-answer session and a post-speech interview, Cameron elaborated on the need for and role of the arts advocate in this changing landscape. He notes that he learned a valuable lesson in that area from his time as the manager of community relations for Target, where he supervised a $51-million giving program that focused on grants, cause marketing and community volunteerism. The lesson: “Advocacy is the ability to speak to where people are listening from.”

Artists need to recognize who our listening “audience” is when we advocate. When talking to business leaders, we need to highlight that every $1 spent on the arts leverages $5 to $7 in the local economy. When addressing school boards, we need to speak to the educational benefits of the arts. And when speaking to social groups, we need to focus on the role the arts play in teaching tolerance, sharing and growth.

This idea of speaking “where people are listening from” is ultimately the job of a leader, Cameron said. He told the story of choreographer Trey McIntyre, who formed a dance company in Boise, ID. “Not Houston, not San Francisco, but Boise,” said Cameron. The company created a documentary featuring dancers talking about why they love Boise, and they are (Continued on Page 29)
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Denise Halbach Honored with Suzanne Davis Award

Following is an edited version of the remarks made by past SETC Past President Glenn Gourley in presenting the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award to Denise Halbach at the 2011 SETC Awards Banquet.

The Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award is established to honor one SETC member each year (providing a suitable recipient is found) for distinguished service to SETC over a number of years. Administration of this award is assigned to the Nominations Committee, with the final choice made by vote of the Board of Directors.

Suzanne M. Davis was the wife of Harry Davis, who was an SETC founder, its ninth president and the original director of Unto These Hills. Suzie was that production’s first costume designer, and was first to suggest that there should be an annual award to a person for outstanding service to SETC. When Suzie died, Alvin Cohen endowed that award in her memory.

If you have made it to Page 63 of your convention program, you will find a list of the past recipients of this award. It is a list of individuals who have given their time and talents as volunteers to this organization. Some have given with True Grit, some have given with the ferocity of a Black Swan, and some have been accused of Inception. Some of them, their supreme purpose was to make sure that The Kids Were All Right. Some of them have seen SETC as The Social Network, and some have led ever so eloquently by using The King’s Speech. This year’s recipient has embodied and continues to embody all of the above and at times probably appears to some as The Fighter for what he or she sees as what is best for the organization.

It is indeed an honor that I stand here tonight for the second time to give the citation for this most prestigious honor that SETC gives to “one of its own.” The first time tonight’s recipient attempted to communicate with or to me it was simply two words: “Thank you.” The second attempt was the same two words: “Thank you.” The third and final attempt on the part of this individual to communicate with me, the two words were again: “Thank you.” Bear in mind, of course, that each “thank you” was said with increas-ingly intense volume. As I am sure you may have guessed, I was participating in the state SETC screening auditions; I had nailed the high note at the end of my song and did not hear the three over-time “thank you(s).” For those of you who may have figured out of whom I’m speaking, that will tell you just how loudly I was wailing my high G. Upon exiting the stage, I was greeted by this intense blonde individual and as our blue eyes met, she very kindly stated, “Didn’t you hear me? My God! I said ‘thank you’ three times!” We’ve been friends ever since: a friendship that has now been going on for more years than either of us will care to admit. You see, I had just met “the Diva”: Miss Denise Halbach.

Denise’s involvement in this organization spans over three decades and is quickly moving towards her fortieth year of involvement. Who would have foretold that when this high school English teacher won the Mississippi state drama festival in 1976, thus advancing to SETC, that now these many years later we would honor her tonight for a lifetime of devotion and service to an organization she now considers to be “4,000 of her dearest and closest friends.” Incidentally, she has not missed a conference since 1976. Two years later, her 1978 high school production of The Serpent, won the SETC Secondary Festival, was invited to participate in the International Amateur Theatre Festival in New York, and won that festival, too. Her friend, the professional actor John Maxwell, then commented: “With a little training, you might be dangerous!” How prophetic! Denise took this advice and attained an MFA from the University of Southern Mississippi, during which time she continued to attend...
SETC, taking advantage of our learning experiences, networking and, as she states, “the energy and excitement I always found there.”

Upon receiving her MFA, she took the position of director of theatre at Hinds Junior College and while there learned of the SETC state screenings and volunteered to coordinate those auditions. The following year, she again agreed to coordinate those auditions. She continued to agree to coordinate the Mississippi state screening auditions for a total of 24 continuous years, thus assisting and encouraging young actors to further their careers by auditioning at SETC. I was one of those fortunate actors.

Her service to the organization has been not only long-term but also all-encompassing. She has at one time or another been a member of and involved in all five divisions of the organization, to include directing the production that won last year’s Community Theatre Festival in Lexington, KY, where 32 years earlier, the production of *The Serpent* she directed won the Secondary School Festival. She has served in every office of the organization with only one exception, and two of those offices – secretary and administrative vice-president – she served for two terms. She has chaired and been a member of numerous committees – the Auditions Committee and the KEAP Committee, to only name two of the vast number – which have benefited from her knowledge, experience and the infamous “you’re kidding.” (Make the Denise face.) She lists among her proudest accomplishment the endowment of the Denise Halbach Award for Graduate Study in Acting or Musical Theatre, thus giving further evidence to her long dedication to the advancement of young actors, helping them to afford the opportunity of furthering their education.

For her involvement and dedication of over 36 years, on behalf of the Southeastern Theatre Conference, I have the honor to say to you the first two words you ever said to me: “Thank you.”

Ben Cameron

(Continued from Page 26) considered the “rock stars” of the city. What McIntyre and his company did was to “insert themselves into the civic dialogue in a way that’s not arts-centric,” Cameron said.

Ultimately, that is the path we must take – the “new normal” we must embrace, Cameron said. We must identify the value of the arts, not just generally, but in each of our specific communities. We must embrace the core values and importance of what we do and serve our missions. We must identify our constituencies and serve them. Finally, Cameron said, “to be for everybody is to be for nobody.” We need to ask ourselves: Who are we? What do we do? Where will we go? How will you, how will we all, take part in the Arts Reformation and learn to “skate to where the puck will be”? ■

Paul B. Crook is an assistant professor of acting and directing at Louisiana Tech University and the chair of SETC’s KEAP Award Committee.
When Ward Haarbauer arrived at the 2011 SETC Convention, he marked a golden milestone in his life and in SETC’s life as an institution. The 2011 convention was Haarbauer’s 50th consecutive convention – and, as far as can be told from SETC records, Haarbauer is the first to achieve that distinction.

Since his first convention in 1962, Haarbauer has attended in just about every capacity possible.

“I’ve attended as a student/auditionee, a professional director hiring through the auditions, a university faculty member, an SETC officer, and a retired person doing some community theatre on the side,” Haarbauer says, adding in his customary droll style: “Sometimes I’m tired.”

What he didn’t note in that list is that those years also include a remarkable record of service to SETC covering a spectrum of responsibilities and titles, including program chair, 1980-81 President and 2004 recipient of the organization’s highest honor for one of its own members, the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award.

Southern Theatre asked Ward Haarbauer to share his thoughts on how the SETC Convention has changed over the years since he first attended in 1962 as a student. The following Q&A is drawn from recent correspondence and interviews conducted with Haarbauer at the 2011 convention in Atlanta.
What are your memories of your first convention?

It was 1962, and I was a senior at the University of Alabama (UA) majoring in physics, not theatre, although I had already been planning to do graduate work in theatre, something the physics faculty simply could not understand. At theatre faculty urging, I and several others drove to Durham, NC, to do “SETC,” something we knew almost nothing about. I had no idea so many people did theatre! The halls were full of them, and there was an array of programming completely unlike our classwork. What came home with me, though, was the sheer diversity and excitement and energy that was the art of theatre, and I don’t know that there could have been a better thing for that convention to provide. Theatre was no longer something that happened on campus among friends but something that was region-wide and important enough to bring all those people together. Wow!

Did you get a job at that first convention?

I auditioned – the only time I ever did. I got a single callback, from the Miami Shakespeare Festival, but I didn’t get a job offer. It didn’t matter because I already had a job offer to do sound at *Horn in the West*, the tech director of which was on the UA faculty. I guess I could say that SETC got me my first job by not providing my first job! But that first job led to a 10-summer outdoor drama career at the *Horn*, and those 10 years in a lot of ways determined my entire future. They convinced me that my decision for theatre was right and that academe was where I wanted to be.

How did your convention experience change as you moved from student to graduate student to faculty member?

That first convention was a learning experience about theatre and about SETC. Over time, the learning was still there, I think, but it was less about details. As I pursued my master’s and doctorate, I knew more facts, and conventions became more about operations, I guess, learning about what was going on. I paid less attention to acting workshops and more to who was doing what and how they did it – research, management, creative techniques, public relations. As time passes, you discover what we now call “networking” but used to be called “meeting people.”

As perspectives change, you see the convention in a new light, less about the art of theatre and more about how to make that work for a huge array of people. Certainly in going from student to faculty, your convention focus changes. When you have students attending, you pay attention to what will help them move forward, succeed and, dare I say, make you look good. And while you insist that they do things that will expand their vision and offer challenges, I think most faculty secretly hope that they won’t find something that will contradict what you believe in.

You also attended the convention as a hiring company representative. How was that different?

During my early years in SETC, I moved up the *Horn in the West* ladder and in 1967 became its director,
When it comes to career choices, NSU is a hard act to follow.

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the youngest director of a professional outdoor drama in the country at that time, I think. That’s another new perspective for the convention. Suddenly it’s all about hiring a first-rate company, in competition with a bunch of folks who are trying to do the same thing, all of whom are older and more experienced. You simply don’t see the convention any more. I remember sitting in the city auditorium in Mobile, AL, watching over 500 mostly young people of varying skill levels audition in a single day. It was crushing. And then I headed off to the room for callbacks, eating what my loyal and considerate wife, Martha, could bring in for me for the entire remaining convention time. Programming? I have no idea!

**How did you get involved in SETC as an officer?**

When we met in Birmingham in 1975, Phil Hill was President, and he asked me – I was Local Arrangements chair – to arrange beverages for the President’s Reception. I said I couldn’t, and I think we both discovered a good friend and a worthy debate antagonist in that moment. He opened the doors to the world of SETC committees and politics, and I never walked away. And the convention was the focus and the center of all that. I suppose the interest would have come anyway – I had always enjoyed telling other people what to do – but the contact with Phil saved my finding my own path, which was useful. I think SETC also made a great contribution in illustrating that you negotiate what the people should do, not tell them.

**How has convention programming changed since you planned the program in 1980 as Vice President and program chair?**

When I “did” the convention as Vice President in 1980, I had around 150 programs, no computer and no staff. Today there are over 500 events of various kinds, computer support at many levels, and committees and multiple SETC staff backing you up. And it’s still an immense job. That’s because the convention over the years has come to serve such a huge diversity of ages and interests and skills – a level that I couldn’t have dreamed of.

I think, though, that the growth has been largely unplanned. That’s good because it comes from SETC’s responding to the suddenly discovered needs of different and often new groups of theatre folk. It’s not so good because it has created a jagged path without many guiding principles except to serve the needs of theatre in the Southeast.

**How has attendance growth altered the convention?**

Once there were 1,000; now there are well over 4,000. Does that change things? Of course it does. It’s much harder even to find somebody you know amidst the multitudes. The convention becomes a crowd, a huge crowd. It splits its crowd among multiple festivals, incredible numbers of programs,...
countless hallways large and small, and bars, restaurants and food courts around the area. Now it usually sends attendees to multiple hotels and several different theatre facilities. The excitement is still palpable, I think, but the cohesiveness isn’t. I’ve wondered if this has created, oddly, a more personal than communal experience.

As interest groups have coalesced, I’ve sometimes wondered if our willingness to bring people of like particular interests together might be encouraging them to separate themselves from others. In other words, I wonder if a consequence of attendance growth is to undermine the importance of the whole in favor of learning the catalog of the parts. When I went to my first convention, I thought it was about theatre. I’m less sure of that now.

I have to say, too, that my impression of my early convention times was more like Mardi Gras than today’s motivated gatherings. The hallways, especially late at night, housed a higher level of celebration than they now do. Today seems to me much more professional, more focused on succeeding, more businesslike. There are virtues to that. But the symbolism of theatre as a profession vs. theatre as celebration seems to me not entirely a gain.

Attendance aside, how has the convention changed?

Put simply, it’s hugely bigger. As best I can tell, everything has grown—exhibits, programming, festivals, auditions. The good thing is that it has happened by membership demand. The problem is that fewer and fewer cities have facilities that can accommodate us.

What demographic changes have you witnessed?

I think there’s no question that the dominant demographic in SETC has become the students—high school as well as college. This has affected programming, whose overtly educational elements have proliferated. This has happened, I suspect, because there are so many theatre students now and because what SETC does is something they need and appreciate. With the numbers, serving those numbers becomes wise. I think that “adult” attendance at conventions has stayed level while the major growth demographic is students. Faculty who used to share ideas on teaching and research with each other increasingly offer educational programs and are usually rewarded with meeting rooms crowded with students and smiles around the tenure table.

The most rewarding demographic change, primarily within the student membership, surely is the increase in African American attendance. A short but very concerned list of SETC people worked for years to make this happen, mostly without success. (Do we all know that one of the early presidents of SETC was Thomas Poag, an African American who could not have dinner or stay in the same hotel with his professional colleagues in most places in the region?) I suspect that the magic parameter was the increase in African American theatre students in the high schools and universities in the region. Many SETC leaders, some of whom are gone, are celebrating. But I suspect that (Continued on Page 36)
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Margaret Toomey received her master of fine arts (MFA) degree in theatre design from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in May 2011. She holds a bachelor of arts (BA) degree with honors from Grinnell College in Iowa, where she began to explore the connections between design, directing and dramaturgy.

**Paper: Becoming a Feminist Designer: Troubling the Traditions of Design**

**Abstract:** In recent years, the traditions of theatrical design have come into question and been reformulated using a feminist framework for design pedagogy as well as realized designs. In this paper, I assert that this reformulation not only challenges the traditional, masculine design processes but also makes space for female designers in the male-dominated field of theatrical design. Using self-proclaimed feminist-designer Delores Ringer’s design questions as laid out in her article “Re-visioning Scenography: A Feminist’s Approach to Design for the Theatre,” I explore how approaching theatrical design in a feminist framework creates space within the theatre to showcase women's stories and compels a designer to become aware of her role in creating meaning through what visual language she chooses. Working from the questions laid out by Ringer, the feminist designer challenges the traditions of design, including the practice of excluding her own voice and experience from the designed production. The active inclusion (and awareness) of the designer’s own experience enriches the meaning that can be sought in a theatrical production. Furthermore, the analysis of the selection of and meaning behind the visual components chosen for the production lays the groundwork for meaning in the world of the play that delves deeper than the script and blocking. Feminist design techniques challenge definitions of power and gender, both in the form of the art being created and the artist’s role in creating it.

**Undergraduate Winner: Allison Powell**

Allison Powell is a junior at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, majoring in drama. Her first experience with theatre was through her local community theatre. Her love of history and community theatre provided the inspiration for her paper. After completing her studies, she hopes to have a career in film acting.

**Paper: The People’s Theater: The Living Newspaper and Political Community Theater**

**Abstract:** The climate of society during the Great Depression is easy to imagine. Hopelessness and misery would have been more plentiful than happiness and harmony. Yet, for some people this time of horror would become a time of greatness. Hallie Flanagan was such a person. Flanagan would be placed in charge of an ambitious theatrical outreach program known as the Federal Theater Project. This project would include many branches of theatre, from puppet shows to Shakespeare. One of the most important branches would be the Living Newspaper Project. The Living Newspaper Project was one of the most successful aspects of the entire undertaking, exemplifying the combination of politics and art sought by Flanagan. Even though the venture ended, Hallie Flanagan’s work with The Federal Theater Project and the Living Newspaper productions were a starting ground for community-based performance in the United States, allowing communities to come together to express political beliefs through art.

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**Haarbauer**

(Continued from Page 34)

they’re also wondering when this will filter up to leadership roles.

And I have to ask about the future growth of Hispanic attendance. And also about the transition from student membership to membership in the other divisions.

**Personal reflections**

An important fact about seeing 50 conventions is that it’s very hard to keep them straight. The year I was President was memorable, but the year I was Vice President (and convention program chair) stands out more. It’s the person having the experience and not the event that creates the memories. As you grow up in theatre in the Southeast, the conventions provide the reason to come together, but the people provide the knowledge and the excitement and the laughter and the joy. If I worry about the collective future, it’s because I wonder if the massive size will allow the personal friendships and even the personal conflicts that breed strong relationships. But as I look back on 50 years of being a part of the largest and most active professional theatre organization in the United States (a phrase coined by me in 1980 as I became President, and still valid), I’m grateful for every one of those years.

David S. Thompson is the Annie Louise Harrison Waterman Professor of Theatre at Agnes Scott College and a Past President of SETC.
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This page contains information about Virginia Commonwealth University's Theatre program, including programs and master classes.

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