

Presidential Address to the 2019 ATHE Conference

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Before talking about my vision, I'd like to start by reiterating my thanks to now-Immediate Past President Harvey Young; it's been a pleasure working closely alongside you these past few years and I look forward to continuing to do so long into the future. It's an honor to receive this Presidential gavel from you and to feel the responsibility of all the hands through which it has passed on the way here. Harvey and I first met somewhere near the registration table at an ASTR conference in Minneapolis as graduate students, where I remember being registered by then local volunteer University of Minnesota grad student and Harvey's predecessor as ATHE president, Patricia Ybarra. My road to ATHE leadership started most directly in an ATHE conference corridor in San Diego, when Patti's predecessor, Henry Bial, whom I knew somewhat from the CUNY/NYU doctoral alliance, stopped me and encouraged me to come into a rather sparsely attended Performance Studies Focus Group business meeting. As Paula Vogel said in an ATHE keynote lecture about twenty years ago, "circles rise together." And of course, with regard to academic circles, I would be remiss not to mention Jill Dolan, who was ATHE President when I first started my PhD and encouraged a huge sense of community engagement and conference participation from successive cohorts at the CUNY Graduate Center, where so many of my circles began. Speaking of the Graduate Center, I owe so much to the support and encouragement of my partner, Jen Parker-Starbuck, who has been alongside me every step of the way for both of our careers since those graduate school days, and who, similarly to Harvey, probably thought she would be stepping back from ATHE today as her term as editor of *Theatre Journal* comes to an end. Sorry, Jen. I also want to thank and congratulate Andy Gibb, who along with Harvey, the conference committee, and the focus group conference planners, have put together what I am sure everyone here will join me in saying has been a remarkably impressive conference, "Scene Changes: Performing, Teaching, and Working Through the Transitions" (August 7-11, 2019, Orlando Florida), even more so for knowing the work they did in the midst of a major management transition that added an incredible amount of complexity to what's already nearly impossible labor. Part of making that happen has been the willingness of Nancy Erickson to come back on board as a consultant, and the incredible work of Devon Binder and her team at Red Door Alliances, who have been fully in place with ATHE for only seven weeks.

I feel both an incredible privilege and challenge to have been elected as the first ATHE president not based in North America and to be able to think about what that means, both for me and to us as an organization, especially in this moment of complicated politics on both sides of the Atlantic. ATHE historically has been grounded fundamentally in practices of the US academy, represented through the focus group structure and much of the content offered, as well as particular

vocabularies and discourses. The focus groups allow us to acknowledge and engage with the diversity of our practices, while ATHE's overall mission and structure allow us to speak together, recognizing that, to much of the world outside these doors, the difference in our specialisms and the internal lines we draw appear largely meaningless. Our focus group structure reminds us that while we all may face different challenges or different facets of similar challenges within our individual roles, our departments, and our institutions, our work is often guided by similar goals and aims. Theatre is a collaborative art form, and we all succeed most clearly when we work, or "rise," together and seek to understand one another. So what, I suppose you might ask, is my 2020 vision for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education? I lay this out in 2019, recognizing that at the end of my term in 2021 we will hopefully have the benefit of true "2020 hindsight."

In many ways, I have long understood ATHE to be an advocacy organization. I echo many of my predecessors in saying this: what does it mean, what might it mean as an academic organization, dedicated to theatre, to make a claim to advocacy in an age of "crisis management" in our present global state of emergency? We are not RAICES (The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services) or the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), we are not Extinction Rebellion. What can and must we do with our voices, with our organizational voice, amidst the constant clarion of alarm bells? We are living through the largest refugee crisis of at least the past seventy years and likely ever; a planet that we have and continue to destroy, which may be largely uninhabitable to humans within the lifetime of many of the people in this room; mass murder and "ethnic cleansing" perpetrated by individuals on a "small" though consistent scale in the United States and on larger scales elsewhere in the world; and growing incivility. While I could go on, I would rather think about what we can and must do as an organization to move forward and speak up. In the words of the great Toni Morrison, "I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art" ("No Place for Self-Pity").

The conference theme this year, "Scene Changes," reminds us to think about transitions. As someone working in an institution that, like so many of ours, seems to multiply acronyms by the day, I am reminded by this to think of our own organization and the transitions, the words forgotten in the acronym, the prepositions erased when we abbreviate. A.T.H.E., ATH-uh, Ath-ee, all lose a sense of direction; we are the Association FOR Theatre IN Higher Education. "FOR"- "IN," FOR Theatre, IN Higher Education. We might parse the name differently depending on how we read and understand these words. Are we an Association "for [the importance of] Theatre in Higher Education"? Or are we an Association located "in Higher Education" for the Theatre? While this may have varied over time since our founding and split from ATA (the American Theatre Association), amidst the crises of

the moment it is fundamental that we focus on what it is that we inculcate in our students and in society by teaching theatre.

I want to first think about the “for theatre” part. Relatively few of our students will remain in the theatre per se, the bulk of people whom we influence will impact society not necessarily through an explicit theatrical practice, and yet the learning we share is crucial to understanding how to be in the world, how to act in the world. These are the abilities to listen, to collaborate, to see what appears before us and react in the moment, albeit with an underpinning of research and understanding. In this era of televisual politics, it has been too easy over the past three years (certainly in both countries in which I spend the bulk of my time, the United Kingdom and the United States) to slip into quagmires of depression, or perhaps to respond only through individual actions (phone calls and the like). We must, as an organization and as a profession, double down on professing the values of understanding and making theatre, which is at its heart a fundamentally ethical act. I stand before you and you see me. I offer myself to you. The understanding of presence and the ability to see who is in front of us, not simply to recognize ourselves, but to accept the challenge of knowing that “you” are unique is fundamental to the theatre. If we can facilitate this acknowledgment and understanding, we might reach different outcomes than in the current moment where partisanship overwhelms true listening, where too many people refuse to see the reality of the person or the action taking place in front of themselves.

Working in an institution where we have, amongst other courses, both a historical conservatoire and an undergraduate program with a long history of teacher training, (both of which I recognize as important and valuable distinct types of education), I am frequently reminded that all theatre is an applied art form—it *does something*. We as an organization can and must seek to influence and impact this doing through our actions and practices, not only in our institutions, but in our varied and multiple communities. The research and scholarship we share at the conference every year and through our world-class journals and other publications, and which we bring back and inculcate at our own institutions, demonstrates and advocates for the vitality and necessity of our discipline and the importance of theatre and performance literacy in the world of the twenty-first century. In the transitions from the presentations and discussions here to our return to our own locations, we are, as we often speak about trying to become, already a year-round organization. We need perhaps to reinvest in finding ways to ensure that we engage our membership throughout the year and provide the resources as an organization to support the continual sharing of best practices and new ideas. I have heard many great suggestions for ways to do this over the past few days; please continue to make these—I’m listening!¹

And what of the “IN Higher Education”? I recently read Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University*. While I still have much to digest from it,

throughout it does what so much good scholarly writing does: drawing ideas together in fresh ways, simultaneously feeling novel and as if you have always-already somehow known the things it is telling you. It speaks to the generosity of listening and engaging our community, and reminds us that in many ways, as people around academic institutions, too often our own acceptance of practices has undermined arguments for universities and education as a public good. Fitzpatrick asks: “Can we argue persuasively on behalf of using scholarly work to cultivate community, of understanding ourselves in service to that community, while refusing to allow our administrations, our institutions, and our governments to lose sight of the fact that such service is a form of labor that is crucial to the future that we all share?” (44). Reading her words, part of the familiarity I found was the recognition that certainly within the ATHE orbit, the ideas underscoring her arguments are not new, although they offer new combinations and new articulations. I found myself returning to Nancy Kindelan’s 2012 *Artistic Literacy*, recognized by ATHE’s book award (and blurbed by ATHE president Karen Berman), and to former ATHE president Jill Dolan’s 2001 *Geographies of Learning*, both of which argue for the value of theatre and performance to helping us reimagine the university—or indeed to take a step away from the page and the valorization of publication, as all three books encourage us to do in order to advance the recognition of other forms of practice. In that light, I’d like to take a moment to remember, for instance, last year’s “Theatres of Revolution” conference, under Conference VP Ann Shanahan, or the “Performance Labor & ATHE@30” conference organized by a committee led by Kelly Howe in 2016. (I remember the words of another powerful voice who has recently left us, Ntozake Shange, whose writing on the need to move forward despite the difficulties we face are a clarion call today: “I hit my head against the wall because I don't want to know all the terrible things that I know about. I don't want to feel all these wretched things, but they're in me already. If I don't get rid of them, I'm not ever going to feel anything else.”)

There are powerful changes coming *to* and *for* higher education. We need not simply be ready, but prepared to lead on these as an organization and as a field. To pick one forthcoming challenge, we are moving more and more toward Open Access publication; I encourage you to read Fitzpatrick on this, as well as the Plan S principles in Europe.² I believe that ATHE can and must have a significant voice in conversations like this (for example, how might Open Access impact, and be impacted, by the different modes of output that we expect in theatre and performance?). In order to build that voice, in my time as ATHE President, I am seeking to bring together organizations with similar voices and challenges from throughout the world, since these issues are interrelated and global. We held an inaugural summit of presidents of higher education–related theatre and performance organizations in January of this year and are planning a second meeting around March 2020. These are scoping meetings to allow us consider how best to bring together our voices and enable us to echo and amplify one another, as well as to explore models and alliances by which we

can reimagine some of the things we do to face challenges and questions about our own organizational practices and expectations as well as to provide support for theatre in higher education in our globally connected world.

We face shared challenges. The arts, and particularly theatre, are increasingly sidelined in schools, affecting both our potential applicant pools and the audiences we seek to develop. Neoliberal rhetorics and skyrocketing university costs continue to present obstacles for programs that are not always seen as directly vocational. Our teams and students often do not reflect our societies, nor model the societies to which we aspire. The first black woman (full) professor of theatre in the UK, Lynette Goddard, was just promoted to that post earlier this summer.³ By standing and speaking together, we as organizations can support and build the field that we want and intervene in systems to make the change that we need as we move forward in the twenty-first century.

Global connection isn't always easy, but it is important. We had visa denials this year for people on the conference program; how can we ensure that those voices are heard? As we look toward next year's conference in Detroit, we should remember that Detroit is a border city with Canada, which today offers us both an opportunity and a challenge. How might we engage that idea? How might we remember this at within our conference next year, while also recognizing that freedom of movement near, to, and over the border is not something all our members or potential conference attendees can take for granted? The possibility of cross-border events in the Detroit area raises fundamental ethical questions as we grapple with the reality that some events will not be safe for all of our members and guests.

I want to end by thinking about performativity. Somewhat like that ever-present gun on the wall in the first act, I suppose that if you call a conference "Scene Changes," the language enacts something and you ensure that the world will change around you. And this has been, and continues to be, a year of transition for us as an organization and a discipline. In addition to the many powerful individuals we lost, we also lost theatre programs on both sides of the Atlantic, at the University of Tulsa and University of Surrey, as well as elsewhere. We need to be fleetier as an organization to respond to and advocate in cases such as these. It has been a year marked for too many of us as an organization by those things that have fallen through the gaps, missed communications and missing details, confusion and frustration. We will continue to grapple with these as we move forward together. I acknowledge these errors and challenges, and ask that you speak to me and to the leadership team, bring us suggestions, complaints, and ideas for things we can and need to do better. I am confident and hopeful that with our team of volunteer leaders on the Governing Council⁸ and throughout the focus groups, and a new executive director who, as a former member with a PhD in Theatre Literature, History and Criticism, not only understands us, but *is* us, ATHE's future offers us so much possibility. What words and actions can and must we utter and enact to ensure that the

hopeful future we imagine is the future we get? *For* what must we as an organization continue to strive, and *in* what spaces can we do that?

<A>Works Cited

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Morrison, Toni. "No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear." *The Nation*. 23 Mar. 2015. Web. Accessed 8 August 2019.

¹ Email me at president@athe.org.

² See <https://www.coalition-s.org/>.

³ While Professor Goddard identifies as non-binary, they clarified that for the purposes of this conversation/cause, the term "woman" was significant.