

Preface to Keynote
The Crisis in American Theater Training
October 13, 2006
Shanghai Theater Academy

My thanks to Professor He for his vision and generosity in the support of the Shanghai Theater Academy's conference of Directors of Drama Schools. Thanks, also, to Professor William Sun who has combined a meticulous sense of organization during the conference with great warmth and hospitality. I know that I speak for all of the participants, when I say we are most grateful.

As a preface to my keynote, let me begin by saying something about my role as a dean of an art school at an American University and my role as the chair of the conference's steering committee. As dean, there are three critical aspects to my job: 1) chief educator 2) chief administrator and 3) chief Money procurer, manager and investor. Of these three roles, the most important is chief educator. Although I am the Chief Educator of my school, at the outset, I need to make a disclaimer: I am not a theater artist; by training, I am an art historian. Though I don't have the day to day involvement that many of you have in the pedagogy of training theater artists, nonetheless, I am a passionate theater-goer. I go to theater all the time. As cultural affairs commissioner for New York City, I had to attend theater of all types: Spanish language theater in the South Bronx; Chinese Opera at Lincoln Center; experimental theater in downtown

Manhattan; lavish productions at the Metropolitan Opera and, of course, Broadway.

When I became dean, I also took on the assignment of Tony nominator and, for five years straight, attended every show on Broadway and I have been a member of the board of trustees of the Public Theater for the past 14 years. I attend as many student productions as possible and, frankly, often find that they yield a far more rewarding theater going experience than theater outside of the academy. Every time I go to the theater whether it is students, off Broadway, Broadway, London or Shanghai, I go with the expectation that I will get that deep communion of feeling that makes live theater so gratifying, important and potent.

My keynote today focuses on some of the threats to the potency of live theater in my country in particular, the sources of those threats and our responsibilities as theater educators to focus on them. Though this keynote makes use of American theater as its example, I believe that these are concerns we share worldwide.

The Crisis in American Theater
Shanghai Fine Arts Academy
October 13, 2006

Several months ago, the renowned Greek-American actor, Olympia Dukakis launched a monthly meeting of actors in her home to discuss the distressing state of the American actor. Over time, the group grew and now includes, in addition to several accomplished actors, a playwright, the head of a theater that encourages young writers, a patron of the arts and me, a representative of an institution that trains contemporary artists. In a recent meeting, Ms. Dukakis read, in her powerful voice, the following statement as a codification of the group's collective observations:

We have choices. We can choose to seek understanding and find expression for the issues that shape this time in which we live; we can challenge old myths and seek to create new ones or we can choose to remain marginalized; excluded from the creative theatrical process.

Our concern is for the American theatre artists -- actors, playwrights, directors, designers -- for the American audiences who look to us for an understanding of themselves and the times in which they live, and for the educators who prepare and train students to engage in the unique processes theatre artistry demands.

It is our hope that our efforts will provide a starting point and will make possible a public dialogue.

Olympia Dukakis

What, you might ask, is the source of the discontent in this statement? What is the source of the sense of hopefulness that resonates in the statement as well? What responsibilities does the statement place on us, the educators of the world's contemporary theater artists?

Authentic Theater

First, let me make some observations about the potency of what I will call authentic theater. Last night Professor He pointed out to me the logo of the Shanghai Theater Academy. Their logo pictures five people-- representing the individuals who come together to make theater—intertwined as one, a symbol of the seamlessness of theater collaboration. The actors who meet in Ms. Dukakis' home understand deeply the need for this seamlessness. They understand that they are the ones who bring to life the playwright's words on the page with their flesh and blood performance on stage every night. Every pitch and rhythm of the actors' voice, every movement, gesture, cast of the eye, every silence create a palette of emotional nuance that opens up a portal to the playwright's imagination. In a successful production, within a few moments, a world visually created by sets, costumes and lighting, admits us to its precincts. We, the audience, are like silent houseguests who slip in unnoticed and sit silently in the interiors of the play, bearing witness. We shed our sense of real time and live, instead, inside the time of this imagined world and, if the play is working, we experience a communion of feeling and intellect that connects us to the fate of the characters unfolding onstage. Good directors bring to a production their vision of a play and, working seamlessly with actors, sets, costume and lighting designers and the text (the playwright if it is a living

playwright), establish that communion right from the outset, right from the moment a play begins. Good directors are able to sustain the communion between the play and the audience throughout the length of the play, if the communion among all of the theater artists is working on stage.

A successful production for me has always meant feeling as though the fate the characters on the stage is my fate. You know the feeling. You come out of the theater convinced that something momentous has happened.

Looking just at theater in the 20th century, we can point to several examples of the momentousness of theater: the McCarthy hearings in the 1950's were the occasion for Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, which exposed the cruel hypocrisies of that era by presenting them in the guise of the religious persecutions in America of the 17th century Salem witch trials; a recent revival of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* underscored the work's powerful representation of the collective willfulness to change the citizenship status of African Americans at the dawn of the civil rights movement; Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Parts 1 and 2*. was a searing probe into the social and political hypocrisy that confronted the Reagan era's dealings with what would become the global aids epidemic.

In my own school, where I often find myself deeply gratified by the work of the students, one example stands out—a play entitled, *In the Continuum*, authored and performed by two graduate acting students as part of a mandatory classroom assignment called “Freeplay.” Born in a classroom at the Tisch School of the Arts, the play presents the dilemma of two women—one African, one African American—who are infected with the HIV virus and whose respective cultural circumstances trap each of them in a nexus

of denial. A critical and box-office success, its relatively modest production costs, its value as a site of international collaboration, its success with international audiences and its umbilical link back to its genesis—a theater school—hold some lessons for us. More about that later.

Increasingly, that feeling of something momentous happening is rare in American theater. The dissatisfaction the actors and playwright express in Ms. Dukakis' home is not unlike the dissatisfaction I feel as a member of the audience. Plays often look as though they have been rushed into production. Too many times, I have watched plays that appear to contain several interpretations of the play in one production. The production is disjoint, as if each of the actors is in a different play. What is the problem I ask myself? Is it that the playwright did not have enough time to develop the play? Too often the content of contemporary plays, by necessity, is timid or small, lacking in ambition. Even when the play itself might be interesting, there is very often not a consistent vision. Is it that the director did not have a long enough rehearsal time? Is the casting right? Was the director forced to cast a celebrity who has no idea what he or she is doing on stage, but who might sell tickets?

The actors in our group will tell you exactly what is wrong from their perspective. They will tell you that they are made to feel like hired hands, that they don't have a voice in the creative process, that they are like pieces of furniture on stage that get moved from place to place, that sometimes they are not given the entire play to read, but only their parts so they deliberately receive a narrow view of the play, that if some piece of direction or a costume or a piece of the set, they know is not working, they have no way

of communicating their insights, that as professionals they feel as ungratified by the experience as the audience feels in watching the play.

How did American theater get to this point?

Much has been made of the fact that the economics of making theater in my country are brutal and that brutal economic realities have a lot to do with the conditions in American theater. Economics certainly has something to do with the situation. In the past twenty years owning and maintaining the real estate housing theaters has skyrocketed all over the country. Rising costs along with reductions in public support from federal, state and local agencies has made making theater in the United States a costly enterprise. Theaters keep expenses down by foreshortening the artistic process and taking fewer risks. Rehearsal times are shortened. On Broadway and off Broadway, revivals are safer bets than new work. Plays with small casts are favored over plays with large casts. Do writers then inhibit themselves as a result, writing smaller less ambitious plays? Investors often are not willing to take risks with new writers doing new work or new actors and new directors. Regional theaters, which for fifty years have been a site of innovation in the theater and a crucible for the development of new theater artists, have felt the same economic crunch as New York theaters. The opportunities for renewal and re-invention of modern theater that come from including young talent are constricted. Without new voices, theater deprives itself of one of the means of connecting with new generations of theater goers.

The same brutal economics which make it hard to do exciting risk taking theater, also has an adverse impact on American theater audiences. Who can afford to be adventurous, to go to the theater night after night, to take a chance on spending two or

three hours on a possible disappointing experience at prices like the ones we are asked to pay for theater these days How can inner city teenagers afford the cost of a theater ticket? How can a college student working two or three jobs afford the cost of tickets? In an economic environment like this, a theater like the Public finds it challenging to produce free Shakespeare in the Park. A free public good, Shakespeare in Central Park, on most nights boasts an audience that resembles the diversity of a New York City subway car. A great civic event such as this, however, is continually threatened by high costs. If the cost of going to the theater remains high, what will happen to young theater goers, whose attention is already diverted by more easily accessible forms of electronic entertainment? What will happen to loyal theater goers who just cannot afford to attend?

For years, those of us in the arts in the United States have looked longingly abroad at state supported theaters, dance companies, museums, orchestras and arts training programs which are free of the burden of hunting down private financing or earned income. Internationally, however, there is a growing trend in some countries to wean cultural institutions away from 100% state support and to introduce the idea of private support for art and culture. Let the current state of affairs in the United States stand as a cautionary tale for those who wish to push too hard on dependence on the private sector funding for culture. As our state of affairs demonstrates, private funding and the marketplace are no panacea.

As disturbing as the impact of economics may be, there are far more disturbing political trends have impacted the public arena for the past twenty years, trends which bear not only on theater and the institutions that train theater artists but impact the country as a whole. These trends are an even more critical bellwether for the

international community as they speak to the capacity of theater to do what it can do so effectively and that is, “speak truth to power.”

Olympia Dukakis’ declaration states: *We have choices*. Indeed, as a secular democracy, presumably we do. The climate within which we make artistic choices, however, both institutionally and individually, has changed. To understand the depth of change, it is useful to look back forty years.

Forty years ago, our Federal government codified a narrative for the arts which presented them as a public good, an expression of everything we value in a secular democracy. This narrative was institutionalized in the enabling legislation that established the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities in 1965. The two endowments provided individual and institutional support to artists and scholars and transformed the cultural landscape in the United States. Voices previously unheard were given voice resulting in a cultural heterogeneity in the arts, unparalleled in our country. Language used in the endowments’ enabling legislation suggested that support of the arts and a vibrant democracy were two sides of the same coin. The legislation reads, in part, as follows:

...a high civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone but must give full value and support to the other great branches of man’s scholarly and cultural activity.

The next section of the legislation reads as follows:

Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens and that it must therefore foster and support a form of education designed to make men masters of their technology and not its unthinking servant.

Having established the relationship between a healthy democracy and federal support of the arts, the legislation asserts what support can accomplish:

...the practice of art and the study of the humanities requires constant dedication and devotion and that, while no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.

Both the NEA and the NEH were expected to provide not only wisdom and vision through their grants but the “material conditions” that make it possible for artists and scholars to work.

Following the federal example, state arts councils and, in many urban areas, municipal governments as well proliferated all over the country, reinforcing the narrative of art as a public good. With the increased investment in the arts on the part of public agencies, private support increased as well and the arts, theater in particular, with the growth of regional theater, flourished. NYU’s School of the Arts, now known as the Tisch School of the Arts was born in the same year as the founding of the national endowments. Billing itself, “a daring adventure,” the school was yet another expression of a liberal progressive agenda for the arts. As such it heralded a spirit of experimentation and risk taking in the arts that was taking place all around it in the downtown scene in music, performance art, dance, film, the literary scene in the west village, the east village and the lower east side

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, however, came the assertion of the values of the conservative right, a political movement fueled ideologically, in part, by well-organized Christian fundamentalists. During the Reagan years, politics wedded itself obediently to religion unleashing an unusually relentless and fierce drive to accomplish the realization of those conservative values in every imaginable arena of American life. Faith and belief are non-negotiable. For the faithful, if a work of art offends religious beliefs, the art work loses every time. For fundamentalists, the arts were an obvious target; for the political right the bonus was if not the silencing, the muting and discrediting of oppositional voices. In the late 1980's, Conservative Senators and Congressmen singled out certain artists, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and labeled their work obscene. In response and with great righteous indignation, legislators imposed on artists and institutions the requirement to sign a statement promising not to use public funds to support forms of expression they defined as obscene. The culture wars were declared. Almost overnight conservatives seized the high ground and control of the public narrative in the battle over whose art gets funded with American tax payers dollars. They used that narrative to tell a story in which art was cast as evil and decadent, no longer a public good but an emblem of public shamefulness. Consciously or unconsciously, many leaders, institutions and individuals artists were chastened by the assault. Legislators, at all levels of government, promptly cut funding for the arts, reductions from which the arts in our country have not recovered to this day.

A democratic administration in the 1990's offered little reprieve from the unrelenting attacks on the arts. Championing the arts had become a political liability and

little was done during the democratic presidential administration to restore to the arts the luster they once enjoyed, when the endowments were established originally.

At the start of the 21st century, another conservative agenda, this one made more ferocious and vituperative, after the attacks on the World Trade Center, and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 has resulted in an expansion of executive power in this country, an escalation of the influence of religious fundamentalism, and involvement in a debilitating war.

Two legislative actions, in particular, have constricted the flow of free expression in our country: one is the patriot act, passed just 45 days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and which expanded the government's authority to spy on its own citizens and; the second is the renewal of the Patriot act earlier this year. In both cases the administration made it clear to congress and the public that any dissent or debate would be construed as disloyal and treasonous.

Recently, critique of this executive expansion of power has come from none other than a Republican former chair of our National Endowment for the Arts in the senior Bush administration, John Frohnmayer. He delivered a speech in June of 2006, at the Eugene, Oregon City Club, entitled *Canaries in the Coal Mine: Art, Freedom, and Community*. Frohnmayer warned that not only was the renewal of the Patriot Act a cause for concern but the manner in which the current president expanded executive powers with his signing of the renewal was troubling as well. Frohnmayer notes that the President signed the patriot act by making use of what is called a "signing statement," which allows the executive branch of government either not to enforce a bill or to enforce the bill in accordance with the president's interpretation. In the case of the Patriot Act,

As Frohnmayer points out, the president signed the bill in a way which permitted the executive branch of government to withhold information such as FBI reports from the congress, the public or the media. Frohnmayer observes that the president has made use of a “signing statement,” something rarely used by presidents, 750 times. What makes this dangerous is that it uses the executive branch to modify legislation rather than the courts, robbing the courts of their traditional role in our system of checks and balances and it robs the legislators of the power to make laws independently of the executive branch.

This expansion of executive power is pervasive. As Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas Mann, experts on the American congress, have observed in the November/December issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the Republican congress (at least until the 2006 mid-term elections) have virtually relinquished oversight into executive foreign policy decisions. As measured by the failure to debate, scrutinize, challenge a range of executive decisions from Homeland Security to the Patriot Act to the War in Iraq, the congress has given up the constitutional role envisioned by the Founding Fathers and, instead, become an extended branch of the executive, according to Ornstein and Mann. Add to that, the observation of many that the American media has traded its role of critic and challenger for entertainer and the health of American democracy strikes many as deeply troubled.

Intellectually, expanded executive power has reached into the decision making processes that award funds for scientific inquiry. The intervention of religious dogma into scientific inquiry has been so intrusive that in February of 2004, sixty world class scientists—including Nobel Laureates, medical experts, former federal agency directors,

university presidents and chairs were signatories on a letter to the president protesting in the administration's ideological interventions. As one former government official observed, decisions are now made not on rational thinking but on political expediency, not on what will happen, but what certain ideologues want to happen.

Frohnmayr's response to this expansion of executive power in our country, is to look to the arts. As he puts it, "When politicians don't speak truth to power, artists can and do." Or as Jeanette Winterston has written about art "it can waken us to truths about ourselves and our lives: truth that normally lie suffocated under the pressure of the 24 hour emergency zone called real life...but the responsibility to act on what we find is ours." If, indeed, we believe that art has that power, what is our responsibility as theater educators?

And what does all of this rather provincial analysis of theater in America and the state of American democracy have to do with an international theater conference? First, democracy in and of itself is not a sufficient condition for sustaining a robust and independent voice for the theater. As noted above, threats—economic and political-- to the democratic sphere abound in our country and threaten what Olympia Dukakis and our group defines as our choices. Chief among those threats are the de-secularization of democracy, a danger elsewhere in the world as well, and the ascendance of religious fundamentalism which challenges all arenas of expression. Second, economically, as more countries shed the dependency of government support for the arts or at least temper that support with increasing participation from the private sector, the American system of

private support is an example of the debilitating impact on theater of an over reliance on market forces that subordinate all values to the value of the sound bottom line.

The promise which a conference such as this holds is two fold: first, the possibility of an international marketplace for the exchange of ideas on theater training and the discovery of new vocabularies, syntaxes and grammars for the theater in ways that re-vitalize the theater and re-engage new audiences and second, this conference brings with it a recognition that colleges and universities worldwide over the past two decades have emerged as potent sources of new talent, new work and re-vitalizing partnerships for professional theater all over the world. The question is what can we do to build on this role?

The Responsibility of the Theater Educator

Speaking “truth to power” is what Arthur Miller, Lorraine Hansberry and Tony Kushner accomplished in their work—wake up calls for all of us. Internationally, theater artists such as the Kenyan, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, South Africans, Athol Fugard, John Kani Vaclav Havel and his collaborators all at great risk to their personal comfort and safety created theater that challenged the status quo and introduced dissent and debate into the public sphere. As theater educators first and foremost if we are committed to theater which, in addition to entertaining, and providing careers, also speaks “truth to power,” or “wakens us to truths” or expands our choices, I believe that we need to commit ourselves to the following actions:

- 1. Identifying Committed Faculty**

Faculty hired to teach in theater programs should be those who have an active sense of the vibrant power of theater. Schools should seek out teachers for whom theater is a mission and for whom teaching theater artists is more than a job or a career path but a powerful commitment to what theater can accomplish in a culture.

2. **Engaging in Active Talent Identification** Colleges and universities in most cultures are in the business of finding and recruiting talent. In our country considerable energy is put into scouting athletic talent. The same energy should be given to scouting and identifying artistic talent. Educators have a moral responsibility to take it upon themselves to go out burrow into urban areas, reach out to rural communities not tapped in the past, make every effort to find and attract young people with something to say, to discover the bold voices, regardless of their economic status or ethnicity or cultural background. We cannot wait for candidates to show up on our doorstep; we have to go out and find what choreographer, Bill T. Jones calls “those hungry young artists” bring them to our campuses and feed them. At our school, we have begun an aggressive campaign of talent scouting, working closely with community based organizations throughout the country and making use of high school programs at our school to begin the cultivation of that talent.

3. **Preserving Universities as Bastions of Free Speech**

In spite of the chilling impact of the Patriot Act, free speech and dissent are still viable commodities on American campuses. Cuban playwright, Eduardo Machado noted in a recent speech, that there seems to be a fear of conflict in contemporary

theater. “What” he asks “is drama, if not conflict.” Dissent and debate are key to keeping that sense of conflict alive and well.

4. **Encouraging Risk and Experimentation** Educators need to make use of the relative freedom of the college campus to encourage the freedom to explore, experiment, make mistakes. Students need to feel as though they, as Beckett notes “try, fail, fail again, fail better.”
5. **Creating Cultures of Critique** To make this risk taking environment work, we—the educators-- need to be ever vigilant against settling into a comfort zone. The status quo is easy to maintain. Challenging the status quo can be unsettling. Faculty and administrators need to develop a culture of critique that permits a periodic interrogation of pedagogical assumptions and a willingness to violate assumptions to try something new.
6. **Fostering Professional Partnerships** This experimental climate makes college and university training in the arts ripe for partnerships with professional not for profit theaters for whom risk taking, otherwise, might be too costly. Our theater programs can function, in part, as Research and Development, for partnering theaters. At Tisch we are considering one such partnership with the Classic Stage Company, in which we develop work at Tisch that moves to the theater and becomes part of their regular season.
7. **Lowering Ticket Prices** If theaters do forge partnerships with schools, it might allow non profit theaters to lower ticket prices. The plays that move from school to professional theater can offer lower tickets because production costs will be measurably lower. If production values are high and audiences begin to feel that

this is a chance to see new work, new artists, they can afford to come out and take a chance.

8. **Enhancing Interdisciplinary Collaboration** Educators in university and college theater programs must resist mightily the urge to defend disciplinary boundaries and retreat into specialties, the bane of university arts programs everywhere. If theater feels fragmented and disjoint, it may be, in part, because, a true spirit of collaboration is missing in the training of theater artists. Theater artists need to understand the working relationship between director and actors, designers and directors and the writer to the whole process. Under the supervision of Oskar Eustis, Tisch has established a year long course that makes use of the entire third year of the graduate acting program, five writers and five directors so that the course content is the artistry and protocols of theatrical collaboration. Our plan eventually is to add designers, as well.
9. **Engaging Our Respective Publics** Public accessibility is vital to the process of educating young theater artists and to the extent that colleges and universities provide opportunities to bring the public to see productions, participate in talk backs with the cast, director and/or playwright, theater artists in training come to understand their audiences as integral to what they do.
10. **Creating a Viable International Theater Community** We must connect to an international community of artists to explore new theater vocabularies to make sure that our students develop the ability to cross cultural boundaries to provide our faculties the opportunities to learn new vocabularies and understand new pedagogical approaches.

If we leave this conference not only with a network of relationships but a measure of access and a means of mobility among our various programs, we will have accomplished a major step.

Last week, Oliver Stone—an alumnus of my school-- screened his film “World Trade Center” to a standing room only audience. During the question and answer period, he observed that he went to the school of the arts from 1969 to 1971 and that back then “we were revolutionaries; we had a mission.” As educators that’s what we need to restore to the arts, and to the training of the artist—a sense of urgency, a sense of mission. The times demand nothing less.