

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE**

**Annual Meeting 2014**

**Oral Report of the Executive Director**

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Each year, we seem to have the good fortune to visit venues such as Snowbird that are awe-inspiring. Last year we were nestled in sand, sun, and the sway of gentle gulf waters. Next year we return once again to the foothills of the Santa Catalina mountains, where we will be surrounded by the quiet strength of formations that have stood tall and true for hundreds of years.

The earthly powerfulness and physical beauty of these venues cannot be underestimated. They are breathtaking. For a brief period of time, these surroundings allow us to escape from our routines, to free our minds to tackle complex issues, and to join a community of extraordinary individuals who come together to advance our work and our field, and to lay the groundwork for our future.

Their powerfulness and beauty have a striking impact on our mindset. We are uplifted; we are energized; we are invincible. We approach the hard work we face and that which we know lies ahead with buoyed optimism and confident anticipation.

But in just days, we shall head home—maybe with sand in our pockets, or pictures in hand that will remind us to carry forward the mindset. Eventually though the mindset will fade as it collides with our daily routine. We will lament its departure.

If we do so though, it is only because we have forgotten, or have grown too tired to look up, to look around. These places we visit are merely microcosms—microcosms of the world in which we live. A world which if you look up and look around, you will find, is breathtaking. The decision to believe this to be true is yours alone.

We define breathtaking as “astonishing or awe-inspiring in quality” and “so as to take one’s breath away.” For us, that which is breathtaking is ubiquitous in our daily lives, in our work, in our art form, and in our art making. How fortunate we are to be surrounded by this veil of comfort. How fortunate we are to possess the vision, abilities, and opportunities that enable us to create that which is astonishing, awe-inspiring—breathtaking.

We might end the conversation here and enjoy a state of peaceful complacency. But alas, we cannot, for that which is breathtaking is a double-edged sword. Our success, in part, stems from an understanding of this metaphor. Its realities are pervasive. On one edge we experience the exhilaration of the inhale, on the other, the desperation of the exhale. That which is breathtaking, therefore, can be vastly different.

We possess an infinite ability to create works of beauty, depth, and importance. The historical body of work in existence today is our testament. Our accomplishments speak with assurance. We wield our expertise to find the perfect combination of—and balance among—space, place, time, form, movement and so forth. Each work is the sum of its parts, where each part is as important as the whole itself. Each work informs the next, and becomes an integral part of the body of work. Aspects of the work can capture our thoughts, pique our curiosities, challenge our minds, and move our spirits. It can be exhilarating; it can be breathtaking.

But at the same time, there are forces at play that rob us of time, and energy, and will. These forces come in many shapes and sizes. They seem unrelated, disconnected, and sometimes redundant. They lack the elegance the accomplishments described above possess. Their effectiveness in informing future progress is neither known nor convincing.

Take, for example, the collection of numbers for the purpose of counting, without the realization that mere numbers cannot explain everything that counts. Many times the

numbers are collected with great effort and expense, then merely filed. Collection is the terminus.

There is the imposition of testing, devoid of confirmation that the knowledge has been acquired or competencies developed. It appears that greater emphasis is placed on the ability of the teacher to teach to the test, and the student to learn the mechanisms of test-taking.

There is the repeated mantra that questions the role and value of the arts in the education and training of our students, and the concomitant need to conduct an ongoing advocacy campaign that requires the defense of our daily existence.

This is not to say that numbers, testing, and questioning hold no place in the higher education equation. Indeed, each can play an integral role if used appropriately to inform and strengthen the specific endeavor. But this is rarely the case, as a singular lens and a one-size-fits-all approach are far easier to envision and implement than an approach that looks at each discipline on its own terms. Concerns raised about the lack of effectiveness a specific methodology may have on a specific discipline are rebutted with accusations of general disapproval of methodology altogether. This age-old tactic moves the conversation masterfully into another context. Rather than spending time on the issue, we find ourselves returning to describe and defend fundamental principles.

These burdens and challenges, coupled with shrinking enrollments, dwindling funding, and external pressures resulting from federal initiatives such as gainful employment, state authorization, and the development of an institutional ratings system can extract valuable time; time sorely needed to teach subject matter content. They can be debilitating; they can be breath taking.

We are not strangers to these realities. Neither are we devoid of the certainty that today's challenges, once solved, will be replaced by the new challenges tomorrow will bring, and those that will come the day after. We have lived through hard times. We

have worked the problems, and we have prevailed. Much like the Santa Catalinas, we remain standing.

It is important to remember that our powerfulness doesn't come from our surroundings, it comes from us.

One year ago during this gathering we took time to celebrate a special event. Something about our festive evening stirred in me such wonder. In the days preceding our banquet, I observed a work of art in the making. Moments between sessions were captured to practice parts that would be brought together to form a masterpiece—a masterpiece that captured the essence of the individual it was meant to honor and expressed an outpouring of emotion so genuine that it was palpable. It was spontaneous, it was creative, it was clever, it was genius.

As evident that evening, there is no end to what we can accomplish. The questions then become, what must be done, what are we prepared to do, and do we possess the fortitude that the tasks demand. If history foretells the future, we should hold great faith and confidence in our abilities to tackle what lies ahead.

We have witnessed and will continue to witness the beauty and power of our art form.

However, witnessing is not enough. There is a task at hand; there is a job to do.

We are not here by accident. We are here by the design of our own hands, guided by our artistic passions, fueled by the fire of our accomplishments. We are here at this moment for a purpose—to accept, hold, protect, and nurture our legacy, and, at the appropriate moment, to pass it to the caretakers we are training to take our place.

For now, the duty rests with us. It is our responsibility to create, to innovate, to advance; to build and to break; to question and to answer; to teach and to learn.

In assuming these responsibilities, we must devote sufficient time to activities such as planning, considering, and communicating. A calculated sufficiency of time must be

spent on such endeavors. But not to the exhaustion of all time, for to realize results, the preponderance of our efforts and time must be devoted to action. Only through action, both singular and collective, will we continue to advance our art form. Action will forestall the erosion inevitable if our plans cannot be turned into accomplishments, our considerations into practices, and communications into descriptions of actualities. There is no substitute for action.

But we know all too well that the simplicity and pureness of our pursuits are in jeopardy. The world is advancing at a breakneck pace. We must sprint to catch up, and we must run to stay apace—all the while maintaining the balance between inhale and exhale that is necessary to ensure a measured stride. This balance is not easy though, because our breathing is already compromised by the burdens placed on us by the time-robbers, the number-collectors, and the naysayers.

This brings us to a crossroads, to a place where options must be considered, choices must be made, and truth lurks. But available options and wise choices may not be readily evident, particularly if we have allowed ourselves to become caught in the vortex of daily routines, which over time, without conscious thought, slowly and systematically move us away from truth or worse, dull our memory of truth and its importance.

It is our responsibility to keep making choices, to ensure that every choice made emanates from the truth, and that the truth remains at center.

In 2005, David Foster Wallace, offering poignant remarks in a commencement address entitled *This is Water*, suggested that “the whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.”<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Wallace proceeds to suggest that we “get to decide what has meaning and what doesn’t.” We “get to decide what to worship.” But he also offers cautions. “If you worship money and things... you will never have enough... If you worship power, you

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, *This is Water* (Gambier, Ohio, 2005).

end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear... If you worship your own intellect...you will end up...a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.”<sup>2</sup>

The choices are ours to make, and they matter.

The decisions you make must take into account the uniqueness of what lies before you each and every day. They must be informed by your knowledge and wisdom, and your careful application of both. There is no singular answer, or master plan. But there are thoughts to consider, thoughts to keep in mind. Just a few are offered here. First:

- Become expert and revel in your expertise.
- Know that your contributions will have lasting effect.
- Acknowledge that the work is hard, but worth every effort.
- Take stock in accomplishments, even if they aren’t yours.
- Read, study, research, listen, learn, participate, collaborate; be a lifelong student. John W. Gardner suggests that “the need for endless learning and trying is a way of living, a way of thinking, a way of being ready and awake.”<sup>3</sup>
- As a field, don’t hesitate to be of one collective voice—the strength of which should not be underestimated.
- Negotiate today’s realities, and know that tomorrow, you must wake and negotiate all over again.
- Find and develop your voice. Use it to speak and share the truth.
- Separate fact from chatter; know the difference.
- Never give up, never worship the wrong things, never relegate the truth.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> John W. Gardner, *Self Renewal, The Individual and the Innovative Society* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, New York, 1981), xii.

- Always keep the art, the art form, and art making as center.
- Above all, find and hold the joy of it all. We are stewards, bestowed with a gift, fortunate to have the opportunity to make a difference, and to craft what is and becomes of tomorrow.

This list is not exhaustive by any stretch, but it is a start.

There is much to do. There is much at stake.

Thank you for what you have done. Congratulations on your many accomplishments. Best wishes as you set out on the path that takes you on your next journey.

I leave with you a parting thought, not my own. "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away."<sup>4</sup>

May you realize every success in your efforts to create that which is breathtaking.

Thank you.

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<sup>4</sup> Vicki Corona, *Tahitian Choreographies*, Volume 11, Book 18 (Dance Fantasy Productions, North Hollywood, California, 1989), 36.