

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE

Annual Meeting 2018

President's Report

Jory Hancock, NASD President

Good morning everyone; it is great to be here with you.

Two years ago, I approached Karen with an idea I had about the traditional remarks from the President made during these national meetings. I wanted the message to connect to important themes of the conference, reference something that is personal to me, and use what I thought were meaningful literary passages, usually from authors whose writings go back several decades.

My first year as President I spoke about my father-in-law, Marvin Lowe, a visual artist and tenor sax man who grew up in Brooklyn and ran the streets in NYC with the likes of Lenny Bruce. But Marv was reverent, and also loved science, and so I quoted from Albert Einstein about the importance of having the opportunity to be educated. I wish I had time to read the entire quote again, because it is wincingly timely now.

My second talk was about my actual father, Harvey, who was born in 1896 and would be 122 now if he were still alive. Born in Arkansas, his dream was to get to California, and so I quoted from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. My father made it only as far as Denver. Poverty stricken and in poor health most of his life, he said his goodbyes from a hospital bed where he assured us—my mom, four sisters, and me—that if we were to come to the hospital some day and he wasn't there, it would mean he had gone to California.

The importance of wanting a life that is full is the centerpiece of what I'd like to talk about today. We in the arts are graced with the privilege of being scholars, teachers and practicing artists. Our lives are enriched by what we discover, and indeed by what we create, and certainly those who are patrons know the renewal the arts can provide. Perhaps especially in times of despair, we in the arts are more suited than any profession to turn things around. From José Limón we heard the call:

“The contemporary artist can do no less than to dedicate the power of his spirit and the flame of his art to bring light to the dark places.”

That quote is etched into the glass front of our dance theatre on the Arizona campus.

Each of us has dealt with the many unknowns of a career in the arts. We've worked against some pretty long odds as we launched out, seeking lives as performers, teachers, researchers and creators. And along the way, we became patrons of the very professions we practiced and still practice. How would you explain why you worked so hard, and are so driven still, to make sure this world continues to be blessed with music and dance and work for the theatre and screen, and with any form of art that is, in fact, a monument to our humanity?

It's important to be able to do that. Here's what we face: *Business Insider* recently ranked the "value" of various college degrees, and their "findings" were announced on national news by Norah O'Donnell. Actuarial Science came in first, reporting that those with this major make an average of \$108,658 per year. Ranked second and third are Zoology and Nuclear Engineering. Reported as the "least valuable:" Fine Arts and miscellaneous, with an average salary of \$40,855. The problem is not just the money. It's the language being used to describe us... "least valuable."

Here's a bit of my own story, framed in terms of "value." When I was twelve years old, my oldest sister, Pat, who at the time was also my Spanish teacher in junior high, took me into the school gymnasium to teach me a little movement, because she wanted to start a Spanish Dance Club. That was how I began—learning everything from *La Raspa* to *Los Viejitos*. And then my life changed, because my sister introduced me to one of the best folk dance teachers in the country at the time. His name is Sonny Newman. He is eighty-seven years old now, and still teaching. Sonny's own story started of course many years before mine. His mom wanted him to study dairy science. That would have been lucrative, but Sonny ran away from his farm home in Washington State and hitchhiked by himself across the country to get to NYC. He eventually ended up at Juilliard, where one of his primary teachers was José Limón. The conversation Sonny most treasures was one he had with his teacher. From José Limón he heard this: "You know, Sonny, you and I understand what it's like to sit on the side of a mountain and be able to see 100 miles." With arms stretching out toward the horizon, José Limón made the connection between the size of our physical world and the hugeness of the arts, and he became to Sonny what Sonny became to me—a mentor and teacher who perhaps can never be shown enough gratitude.

But back to the question of why we do what we do, it has to be out of conviction, of course. And it has to be done out of love. The combination of these creates perseverance, and probably for every one of us, it is why we are able to be here today.

My sister pulled me away from what would have been a life dedicated to simple survival, and sent me on a path that was enriched by dance and all the arts. My first teacher, with his ties back to José Limón, made sure I kept going because through him dance was for me about people and other cultures, not just steps. International folk dance—Greek, Balkan, Russian, Israeli—was the perfect pathway for that. And along the way, Sonny encouraged me to study ballet.

We in this room are a determined bunch, and I think about, for example, Garfield Lemonius, working on a degree in Environmental Science at York University, but wanting to dance, much to the chagrin of his mom. She said "no," but Garfield said "yes," and switched to dance without her knowing it. But mom was partly right, because his other studies in education allowed him to teach math and science to high schoolers in Canada until the time was right for him to make a move professionally, and soon he launched his dance career.

Our past president, Madeleine Scott, who as a young girl started in figure skating, was encouraged to study ballet, but then in 7th grade decided that wasn't quite the right fit, and moved to basketball! In those days, Madeleine told me girls could only dribble the ball twice and then they had to pass it—Yikes! So from skating to ballet to basketball, but years later the drive to express herself was still there, and in college Madeleine found an outlet, first through theatre, and then, through her own moving body. And she had a teacher who said to her, "If you think you're going to miss this for the rest of your life, you better do it now." For Madeleine, the pathway was a bit roundabout, but the compass that guided her was powerful.

Nick Johnson, who discovered mime first and dance soon after, told me about the career decision he faced early on, with his dance teachers suggesting he didn't have enough dance training for a career to be realistic, and with parents who continually said, "you can't...", and, "you'll never," and, "you didn't start this early enough." But while he fought with his parents every time they got together, friends of his parents who were in musical theatre, would whisper to him, "Do what you love." The temptations to give up were many, not the least of which was the opportunity to become business partner to fellow skier and snow boarder, Jake Burton. In the end, Jake launched Burton Snowboards, and is now a multi-millionaire. Nick became a mime and a dancer and a choreographer.

So, what do we do? We find a way **to do what we love.**

This is my third and final address as President, so here is the third and final literary quote, and let's see if some of you know it:

"For myself, and I was not alone, all the conscious and recollected years of my life have been lived to this day under the heavy threat of world catastrophe, and most of the energies of my mind and spirit have been spent in the effort to grasp the meaning of those threats, to trace them to their sources and to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world.

In the face of such shape and weight of present misfortune, the voice of the individual artist may seem perhaps of no more consequence than the whirring of a cricket in the grass, but the arts do live continuously, and they live literally by faith; their names and their shapes and their uses and their basic meanings survive unchanged in all that matters through times of interruption, diminishment, neglect; they outlive governments and creeds and the societies, even the very civilization, that produced them.

They cannot be destroyed altogether because they represent the substance of faith and the only reality. They are what we find again when the ruins are cleared away."

Seem timely? It is from a 1940 work called "*Flowering Judas*." The writer is Katherine Anne Porter, and this was produced as a radio drama in 1948.

It's been an honor to serve with you these last three years. Perhaps at some point during the time we have left today you'll be able to share with each other your personal stories, which I'm sure are much like the ones I've just told.

Let's promise each other that we'll continue to find a way to do what we love.

Thank you.