

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE
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Report of the President
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When I began to contemplate the writing of this address, I struggled with finding something to say that would have the smallest bit of worth to any of this august body of dance professionals. After some mental and emotional struggle, I decided that what I needed was professional advice. Some indisputable instruction from the best experts in the field.

So of course, I went to the internet, and found exactly what I needed.

Four Rules on How to Write a Perfect Speech

According to this article:

If you write and deliver a speech that doesn't go over well, you'll get feedback in real time. The people sitting in front of you could lose interest, start talking, doze off, or even wander out of the room.

Knowing this group as I do, all of these are excellent possibilities.

Rule #1

Know the Purpose: To educate, To inspire, To entertain?

So, problem number one. Did I know the purpose? Clearly not to educate. I mean this is the most erudite group of intellectuals that I know. Inspire—well, that might be a noble intent, but again, knowing the audience, can I live up to that? Entertain—ok, so here might be the route for me to take: find very clever and slightly humorous ways to talk about some very serious subjects. That is a definite maybe: style over substance.

Rule #2

Know your audience: Your speech should be tailored for your audience, in terms of ideas and language. If you're speaking to an octogenarian quilting circle, you probably shouldn't go on and on about Snapchat and TikTok.

Ok, so I got this one. Use ideas and language that are unique to this group of dance administrators... and given the rise in the median age in the room—no reference to TikTok influencers.

Rule #3

Know the length: You don't want to underwhelm or overwhelm your audience. Ten minutes may be too short for a keynote address but is probably too long for a best man's speech.

I have no idea what to do with this one since this is neither a keynote address nor a wedding speech. Regardless, I am sure that it will easily be perceived as too long.

Rule #4

Write, revise, practice, revise, practice.

Excellent advice. Write, revise, practice. Easy. I must admit that I don't understand how this will ensure a good speech—I have stressed over specific words so much that in the end, it probably won't make any sense—but I might have perfected the delivery (although this, I doubt).

Ok, research complete. I felt very comfortable that I now knew how to develop this presentation and if I followed these simple rules, I would have the Perfect Speech. So, be prepared; here it is, oratorical perfection. Remember this day, it will only happen once in your lifetime.

As I learned from the Internet, all good speeches have a clear point of view. A topic that has meaning to the ensemble, a "theme" that would serve as the reference point for anything that the speaker might decide to say. If only there was an event or happening that I was certain that we all had experienced or had to deal with in one way or another. What could it be?

Eureka! A Global Pandemic. The virus in the room that cannot be ignored, this thing called COVID. COVID-19, a coronavirus, or as I have been told if I want to increase my street cred—it is just: the 'Rona. Not a very happy topic but it certainly fit the bill; something tailored for this audience. Something we could all relate to.

Now that I had the topic, all I needed was the proper format. Many versions came to mind but in the end, I finally decided upon an approach that is a dramatic reading of my version of "What I Did Last Summer/Fall/Winter/Spring." An epic fantasy of historical fiction that is a cross between and among *Through the Looking Glass*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, and *Game of Thrones*.

March of 2020 began the spring of our discontent. The world began to shut down, students went home, we had no idea where this was going to take us, or even if we would ever see our students in the studio again. What were we to do? There was no "template" for this one. No "how to" textbook to use as a reference. There were no "consultants" we could hire, no commission reports full of data. No one had developed the "key imperatives" with accompanying "action items." We were in essence, ALONE. Or so it felt.

How were we to we survive?

After a very frustrating couple of weeks, where we were all classified as "essential" or "non-essential," we woke up and realized that we were not alone at all. We had each other.

We rediscovered our own dance family and we found brilliant minds at work coming up with brilliant solutions to what felt like insurmountable problems.

We did what we have always done when confronted with adversity of any kind. We made a new dance. For me, it was a dance in three parts.

PART THE FIRST: Make A Plan; PART THE SECOND: Implement the Plan; PART THE THIRD: Make Performance Possible

PART THE FIRST: Make A Plan

For many of us, the plans were being devised on multiple levels at the same time but without much sharing of information. The first plan my university offered was to meet virtually for seven weeks and then in-person for seven weeks. No good. Try again.

This continued for quite a while, until in the end I had made 19 different schedules for 19 different plans. We settled on Number 19—shortened semester, no breaks. Tricky.

All over the country, institutions were establishing their own versions of the Number 19 plan. We took a deep breath and prepared for the “new normal”. We were all sure that we had thought of everything. Ready, set, go—5-6-7-8!

Not so fast.

PART THE SECOND: Implementing the Plan (our #19)

The day before classes were to begin, the decision was made to shut down all in-person classes and move to a fully virtual campus for 14 days—everything and everyone went into quarantine. The ONE scenario for which we did not have a plan: students were all here but we could not let them into the studios. What to do?

The faculty leaped—“jeté”ed, if you will, to action and the virtual dance class was born. A new dance craze that we called Zoom-ba!!!!

All dance programs were asked to “pivot” into a methodology that was totally unsuited to the traditional pedagogical approaches that were near and dear to our hearts. Dancers were creating studios in every space that they could find. Hallways, bedrooms, dorm lounges, kitchens, bathrooms, basements, garages—anywhere that they could continue to work physically.

Overnight, dancing became totally “VIRTUAL.”

Now there’s a word that has become part of our daily vocabulary. So, I thought that it would be good to pause a moment and look at its definition:

1. “Almost or nearly as described, but not completely”
2. “Not physically existing”

3. “Something that exists in essence but not in actuality”

The antonym of virtual is actual. So, without meaning to, when we say something is “virtual” we are also saying that it is essentially not “actual.”

That it isn’t real!

As much as we wanted to believe that “virtual” teaching was “ok”—we all knew that statement was also virtual—not real.

We had to get back into the studio and with much determination, perseverance, and the ingrained ability to “follow the rules,” we did.

We marked off floors into 6’ or 8’ grid patterns, we measured off 6’ intervals on ballet barres, we developed technique material that fit the new protocols. We could make it happen. It may not be pretty, but we would be in-person and dancers could be back in the studio.

Everything looked and felt different. The “boxes” that we are always urging students think outside of became a real and very frustrating limitation.

PART THE THIRD: Make Performance Possible

Could we perform?

Yes, but there would not be anyone there to see it?

Like trees falling in a forest, a similar question arose: If a dancer dances and there is no one there to see it, is it still a dance?

Theatres and performance spaces were either restricted to very limited audience capacities or not allowed any audience at all. There were limits to the number of people that could be on stage at the same time. Protocols required that performers would be masked; there would be no thunderous applause.

In the end, we found solutions to all of these imitations and dances continued to be created and shared in new and innovative ways. We became movie makers, honed our technology skills to a razor-blade efficiency, and “site specific” took on a whole new meaning.

Thanks to the magic of the internet, more dance was viewed by more people than had been the case in the last five or ten years of “live” performance. People were desperate for entertainment and they spent hours searching for something to watch...and dance was one of the top selections.

To ensure our access to the studio and the stage, we followed the rules and regulations with vigor. We sanitized, we wiped, we disinfected, we cleaned, we washed our hands, wiping, washing, cleaning, masking, wiping, washing, wiping—an endless parade of dutiful adherence to protocol.

Just to be able to dance.

Did we like it? No.

Did we complain? Every minute of every day, if only to ourselves.

Did we do it? Absolutely.

Was it worth it? 100%.

Never tell a dance person “No, that can’t be done.”

Give us all the restrictions that you will, we will find the creative solution to the problem and prove you wrong.

We refused to become the cohort that just gave up and stopped making art, simply because it was just too hard. Instead, we “pivoted,” or *pirouetted* if you will. We made touch-less *pas de deus*, re-imagined every move we had ever made and found new strengths of purpose and endurance. We forgave the small stuff and began to hold ourselves to a higher standard of achievement than ever before.

We have endured this current travail and its numerous variations. In many ways, the pandemic has made us stronger and more focused. It actually gave us a very valuable present.

The gift of time.

Time to reflect on what is most meaningful in our lives. We now know that every moment is precious and not one second should be wasted on those things which do not sustain our hearts and our souls. It required us to rethink old practices and discard those that were no longer useful or relevant. It allowed us to step back and take a deep, hard look at our programs and ask the difficult questions. Is this course appropriate or applicable to the art form or have we continued to offer it just because it has always been there?

Are we truly inclusive or do we just put the required buzzwords into our institutional rhetoric and call it a day?

We also learned to never take anything for granted.

Glancing at the time, I know that I am dangerously close to breaking Rule #3, so let me try to bring this audio epistle to a close.

I wanted this talk to be a verbal monument to the dedication and artistry of every dance program in the country and to the people that have sacrificed so much to keep each one alive, but much more importantly, I wanted this to be a celebration of the fact that we are all in the same room at the same time.

So, was this educational? I doubt it.

Was it inspirational? Hardly.

Hopefully it was a wee bit entertaining.

I thank you all for indulging my theatrics. I am humbled and honored to stand before you as President of NASD.

Please stay safe, stay strong. Mask-up when necessary and stay away from the 'Rona.

And remember, winter is coming!

Thank you.