

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE

43rd Annual Meeting

September 13 - 15, 2023

Oral Report of the President

**Larry A. Attaway**

---

---

Good morning, everyone, it is once again my honor to stand before you to deliver what is intended to be an erudite display of presidential insights on the state of the Association and the state of the art-form.

Before I begin, I must offer the following disclaimer. My remarks may contain language that some people may find offensive. I shall be referencing controversial issues such as freedom of speech, professional integrity and educational autonomy and in so doing I may refer to such words as “ethics”, “honesty”, “kindness” etc.

I shall not use the word gay, because use of the word gay has been proven to incite flamboyance in sensitive people. So, to protect that group I shall be very careful not to use the word gay in my address.

I shall also try not to misuse the words *literally, like, totally, and unique*.

In the course of my talk, I **may** resort to the use of satire as a literary device, but only in like the most totally unique set of circumstances.

Literally.

Looking at the current state of the profession, we find ourselves in very difficult times as educators and administrators. In my attempt to focus my report on the problems we face in the world of dance, I reached out to several colleagues to get their input on the most current difficulties confronting dance in higher education. The list I received was, to put it quite simply, overwhelming. The financial challenges of keeping the doors open, creating the “safe space”, student entitlement, academic freedom, elimination of dance programs, governmental intrusion on classroom autonomy, dance and gender, crisis management as the “new” normal, expectation of faculty as “therapist”, and artificial intelligence to name just a few.

In our roles as leaders within our institutions it is assumed that we will address each and every one of these problems and that we will also develop solutions to fix them. We all know the folly of assuming anything. Many of these problems, can be traced back to the pandemic and the restrictions Covid-19 placed on the entire world; however, an equal number of these major concerns are the result of years of educational/societal/curricular neglect (benign or otherwise).

The massive socio-political divide that is permeating our lives on a daily basis has created an atmosphere of contempt and disdain and in some cases outright hatred. We are all expected to “take-a-side” and if you pick wrong then you are quickly ostracized in one way or another. It is far less likely that you will be asked what you stand **for** rather than what you stand **against**.

Myself, I prefer intelligence and common decency over stupidity and disrespect. Once again placing myself fully in the minority camp.

Clearly, I have veered from the path of administrative enlightenment and the *raison d'être* of my remarks.

Where was I, oh yes solving the problems of the world.

Obviously, I don't have a secret formula or a magic spell that with a wave of a wand will cure the ills of society or tell you exactly the steps you need to take to solve any of the issues listed above, What I can do is take a moment or two to remind you of the strengths that you have and the substantial tool-set you already possess as artist/teachers.

You are all very adept at creative problem solving. You have been thinking out of the box since you first stepped into a dance studio. Your practice as choreographers is all about making something out of nothing. Think about it. You have an idea. You let that idea incubate until it tells you how to begin.

The dance is not created in one fell swoop, but bit by bit, one step at a time.

There is much trial and error, but once all of the "steps come together" the dance is complete and ready to be seen. During this process there are often outside pressures working against you; limitations in time, facilities, performers, funding, etc.

Do these restrictions stop you? No.

Do they cause you to re-think the scope of what you had envisioned? Sometimes.

So what **do** you do?

You **could** just quit; drop the notion of creating anything at all; give up entirely. However, if the work speaks to you in such a way that you cannot ignore that burning need to bring it to life, then you take on those limitations as artistic inspiration and create the new piece. It might not be exactly the piece that you had originally envisioned but it can still be a work of value.

You can use this same process in working out possible solutions to the most difficult of problems. Just work in reverse. Deconstruct the problem, find the various parts and pieces that can be first addressed individually and then globally as you put them back together.

Sounds simplistic and doesn't always work but if you fully immerse yourself in the exercise, the discoveries you make will become valuable tools for you to use forever.

If we are **sincere** in our desire to make things better, then we must face the reality that change is not only necessary it is inevitable, and in some cases the change will be epic. **Change** is the "new normal".

Practically speaking, in order to make way for the new we must be willing to give up **something**. Does this mean watering down curricula or lessening the rigor of our studio work? Not at all. But it might mean taking a good hard look at content. It will be up to us to develop new methodologies and approaches to the dissemination of the physical and intellectual knowledge of dance.

**Is** it time to investigate our style of critiquing our students? Possibly, but only in the nature of the delivery, not in the demand for excellence. I know that some

faculty have even begun to question whether we should be offering critique at all for fear of being sued or even more seriously being fired.

The minute we withdraw our professional expertise from the pedagogical conversation, we no longer have any substantive content to offer the academy and we **should** be asked to leave the debate.

However, if we truly believe in the power of our art-form and its formidable ability to speak without talking, to create community where there is none, to bring fantasy to reality, to force us to question accepted norms, and to transcend confrontation, then it is our duty to make sure that we stay in the conversation. We have no choice but to become advocates of the art-form. It is time consuming and often not very rewarding. It is, however, an essential part of our responsibility as leaders in the dance world. From the smallest department to the most prestigious professional organization, we must take a stand and use our physical and aural voices to ensure that we are heard and seen. Individually and collectively.

How **do** we do that? There is no universal answer, but there is help to be found. That help is all around you, literally.

Look around. The people in this room **are** the “google” engine of dance knowledge. Reach out. Ask each other. Someone has experience in that one thing you are currently trying to address within your institution.

I am completely aware that I have offered no concrete advice in how to “fix” any of these seemingly insurmountable problems. However, one thing that I do know is, that if we do not develop plans that address these problems from the pedagogical understanding of the art-form, then we will be subject to having to deal with bureaucratic policies thrust upon us without consultation.

I am not naïve enough to think that my barrage of verbiage can stop the political intrusion dictating what I can and cannot teach or limiting the words that I can or cannot say. I do know that in this moment I possess the “bully pulpit” and that I should use it to advocate the cause whenever possible. There is power in the “bully pulpit”, especially when it is not used to just be a bully.

As I bring my tirade to a close, I would ask your indulgence for just a moment longer. One more grand difficulty to deal with, CHATGBT.

When I first began to work on my address, I thought that I would just resort to using CHATGBT and then make fun of it. I asked it to write me a speech on the state-of-the-art form, using the voice of Martha Graham and to quote, William Forsythe, Crystal Pite, and Alonzo King. Unfortunately, the speech that it gave me was actually quite good, wonderfully wordy and as full of empty platitudes as the talk you just heard. Someday I might share it with you. But not just now.

Regardless of what you choose to do with any of this conversation, please take away this one thought. Complacency is not an option. We can no longer wait for someone else to step up and solve any of these issues for us. We must be willing to embrace change or if we find that impossible then we must get out of the way and let the next generation take over. Hopefully we have prepared them to do so.

*“Our shared vision is not merely to educate dancers but to nurture the spirit of artistic exploration, creativity, and innovation within each and every student who steps foot into our studios. Dance is not merely about mastering steps; it is about unleashing the limitless potential that resides within the human body and soul. It is about translating emotions, thoughts, and experiences into movements that resonate with the very essence of humanity”.*

*“Let us celebrate the state of the art in dance today—a vibrant tapestry woven from the threads of tradition, innovation, and unbridled passion. May we continue to be mesmerized by the spectacle of movement, and may the dance forever captivate our senses and inspire our souls”.*

Those last two statements were stolen directly from the Chat Gbt. Scary huh. Thank you for your patience and your indulgence in following me on this very rocky and unfocused path. Once again, I am humbled to be given this opportunity to speak before you.

I totally mean that, like for real.

A very unique experience.

Literally.

Thank you.