

15 May 08 — The New School — 66 W. 12th St.

I stand before you quaking. Aside from the fact that I feel wildly miscast as someone who has some wisdom to impart, I feel compelled to confess to the fact that I have absolutely no formal training in the theater whatsoever. This may seem like a strange time to bring this up, but I've essentially been faking it for thirty years.

So before I attempt to say anything remotely edifying, you must know that you are listening to a man who couldn't lead a trust exercise to save his life.

I mention all of this on the occasion of your valedictory, because I believe that were we all to be honest—Paul, Bobby, the other distinguished members of your faculty – anyone - playwright, director or actor - who has been at this racket for a little while—if we were honest, we'd acknowledge the fact that whether we were rigorously trained for our careers or got lucky learning on the job, we've never been able to shake the vulnerable sensation that we are just setting out, just getting started, that our noses are still pressed up against the windowpane of the profession. Is that how you feel today? That's how I often feel. I often wonder if I belong. I often wonder if I have the right to lead a company into rehearsal. I often wonder if I'm capable of doing the work ahead of me and I often wonder whether there will be work ahead of me.

And none of that wondering has done me any good.

I suppose neurotic anxiety is considered part of the essential make-up of we vagabonds who choose to go into the theater. Well, as your fellow vagabond, may I suggest that we all set about beating our neurotic anxiety into submission. Let's tame it, trim it down to size and consign that misshapen little beast to the corner of our souls in which it belongs.

I can smell the fear in here. I know what worry about whether an agent, or an audience or a producer, or God save me a critic might make of me smells like. Let's use the occasion of the Commencement exercises of The New School of Drama to banish the smell of that flop sweat. Because, I ask you: How are we going to lead if we are afraid?

That's right. You've chosen to lead. The writing, rehearsing and performance of a play is exemplary action. You all believe you have something to impart to other human beings through the primitive, hopefully entertaining and occasionally

profound ritual of the theater. You arrogant, arrogant people you. Let's take a moment to contemplate all the high paying, utterly secure jobs our much-vaunted global economy has to offer emerging playwrights, directors and actors.

All right then.

You are doing something that is wildly defiant of common sense. Just ask your parents.

With all respect to your parents, I've decided that I am here today to exhort you to cherish the mad belief in yourselves that led you through the doors of this school in the first place. Directors are good at stating the obvious so I will tell you that your belief is certain to be tested. Arm yourself with confidence. You will need it. I'm all for humility, but I've personally found it to be a tad overrated.

Your hard work at this school has elected you to an elite. It is your actual job to love, to study and to celebrate life. Not as callow, untested romantic bystanders but as clear-eyed, brave, battle-scarred participants who never avert their eyes from the awesome spectacle of existence. The Greeks would have referred to you as The Craftsmen and Women of Dionysius. Think of that: Dionysius—the outsider demigod of ecstatic liberation—the challenger of the status quo, the sworn enemy of boredom.

You are not permanently elected to this elite I describe. You must constantly re-certify yourselves through hard work. And this brings me to a simple one-word injunction I wish to deliver.

Prepare.

There is no greater antidote to the neurotic anxiety I described earlier than preparation and there is no greater plague on your chosen profession than its lack. Playwrights sloppily submit first drafts before satisfying themselves that a script is as sound as it can be. Directors allow the morale of their companies to go slack because problems have not been anticipated. Actors waste their fellow actors' time in rehearsal because they show up in the room insufficiently acquainted with the words they will speak and the actions they will pursue. Yes our work is done communally but you have to bring something to the party. Fall in love with the secret, solitary, self-challenging part of your job. Rigorous preparation will distinguish you. Rigorous preparation will reduce your fear. Rigorous preparation will allow you to lead.

I'm warming to this part of the stodgy old gas bag dispensing wisdom. There is another precept I wish to impart before I leave you alone. This one is cribbed from Shakespeare. It's Tranio from Act One of THE TAMING OF THE SHREW, "No profit grows where pleasure is not taken." Remember the joy that is essential to your work—even your work on the bleakest tragedy. Remember the joy that is hidden somewhere in the rehearsal room on days that seem arid and hopeless—waiting for someone with sufficient courage and vision—it just might be you—to point it out. Remember the joy that will make itself maddeningly elusive on the long empty afternoons when you are out of a job. Remember that you may be out of a job, but you are not out of work. There is always something you can do to come more vibrantly in contact with the abundant life that is your raw material.

Full disclosure here—I've failed on many occasions to remember the joy. But when I have, under challenging circumstances, been capable of keeping its memory alive, things have gone much, much better.

As someone who did not have the benefit of drama school, I must express my envy for the fact that you begin your careers with a built in supply of friends and rivals and colleagues. Cleave to each other. Stay in touch with each other. Work with each other. Help each other. Love each other.

I may be utterly unschooled, but I've picked up one or two drama class notions along the way. One especially comes to mind on this occasion. It's a cliché of our trade, but I think it's earned cliché status because it contains wisdom that is applicable in and out of the rehearsal room.

Play the objective, not the obstacle.

Make the choices that will lead you somewhere. Resist the temptation to dwell on what will shut you down.

Remember, you have chosen to lead. The work you do, when it is well done, rehearses your fellow citizens for the adventure of their own lives. Do not permit fear to prevent you from doing your work.

Congratulations Ladies and Gentlemen and my profound thanks for your attention.

Doug Hughes