

Thank you, and good evening. I'm very glad to be here with you all. Part of that is because it's so great to see so many people that are making theater an important part of their lives. And part of it is that when my friends and I decided to start the Cornerstone Theater Company, we did it in McLean, just a few miles from here. The co-founder of the company, Bill Rauch, was staying with his parents at the time, and we set up our first office in his old high school bedroom. So, although I came from Los Angeles to talk to you today, in some ways, by being here, I'm coming home. And being here, in this safe place, makes me think about possibilities, and that's what I want to talk to you about, possibilities, about the possibilities of your lives as you go forward being artists.

I'm 45 years old, but I still remember high school well. One of the reasons for that is that 30 years of life goes by a lot more quickly than I ever could have imagined when I was your age. But also, I remember high school because it's a time when I experienced so many firsts. And the first that I'm thinking about most today is that it was the first time I fell in love with theater. I had done plays before in school, but there's something about high school that puts theater in your blood in a way that, for me, changed the course of my life. I fell in love with all of it: I loved rehearsals, I loved being on the stage,

I loved directing, I loved being in the audience, I loved the people that I got to be with doing it, I loved the dressing rooms and props storage and costume storage and hanging lights and folding programs. When I went to college, I stayed with it, and met even more people who loved it. I didn't think about the future, I didn't think about its place in the larger cultural conversation, I just loved doing it. And, for while, that was enough.

Until one day, sitting in a class on theater history, one of my professors said this: theater is a dead art form. It was hard to argue with him when he pointed out that 97% of Americans don't go to live, professional theater on a regular basis. It was also hard to argue with him because he was a honcho in the theater world, Robert Brustein, a guy who built two major theater companies, who had written books of criticism that you might still read today. Heck, if this man, who had been a leader of the American Theater for decades, if he thought it was dead, well, maybe it was. I remember looking around to my friends, and their faces showed the same confusion and concern that I felt in the pit of my stomach. We loved the theater, but we were just at the moment in our lives when we had to decide whether our relationship with theater was a long-term commitment

or a passing fling. How could we ever commit our lives to something that was, you know, dead?

So we did what any self-respecting group of young people would do when confronted with something like that: we ignored him, and dismissed what he said as the cynical ravings of an old guy too set in his ways. After graduation, my friends and I went off to Boston, New York and Washington. And we did theater, some together and some not, and it didn't feel dead at all.

Until.

Until we realized that our audiences really were the 3% of Americans that did go to live theater regularly. They were theatergoers. They were dependable, they were great, but suddenly, for some of us, they weren't enough. Theater might not be dead, but it suddenly didn't feel as alive as it could be. Who were those other 97% of Americans? And why didn't they come to our plays?

We decided to meet them, to go out into America and find out what America was and how theater could be a part of that.

Which was a fine idea. But, of course, we had no idea HOW we were going actually get out there to wherever the Americans were who weren't us. We talked about starting a theater company, but there were a thousand reasons not to do it, among them that we didn't know anything about starting theater companies and we didn't have any money to do it even if we knew how. The whole thing might have died there without the intervention of another friend, an entrepreneurial type, a guy who was buying and renovating properties in New Jersey by the time he was 25. He heard us talking and said, "You want to start a theater company. Why don't you just do it?" And we came up with reasons, and he shot down every one of them with, generally with the inescapable logic that we weren't trying to change the time space continuum, we were starting a business. Such a thing had been done before in the history of humanity, and we had no excuse and no reason to wait.

So this is the first thing about possibilities. They exist. And I'm not just talking about taking advantage of possibilities that are out there, I'm talking about making your own possibilities, now or later in life. Honestly, if we hadn't had that conversation with that friend at that time, I don't know if I would be standing here today. But we did, and here I am, able

to have the same conversation with you. I hope it's as helpful to you as it was to me.

So now we had the determination, but we still didn't know what we were going to do.

At first, we thought we'd just drive across the United States and stop at the side of the road, set up bleachers, and do the plays we liked to do and see if non-theater going Americans would like to see them. But, ultimately, we realized that people would clap or they wouldn't. Would that make us understand our fellow Americans better? Would it make us better artists? No. But that's what we needed.

And that is how the Cornerstone Theater Company was born. What we decided to do was this: we would go into small communities, living there for 2-4 months, and create productions that would reflect the communities we were working with. It wouldn't just be our professional actors on stage, but community members, too, and not just in the small parts. We would take old plays, work with people to find the connection between the text and the community, and adapt the plays to celebrate and examine the communities. In effect, we were taking our audience and making the play about them and putting them in it help tell their

story. We would see, in that context, if more than 3% of the population would show up.

And, of course, they did. From Maine to Nevada, from Oregon to Florida, in communities that hadn't had live theater, sometimes not even in schools, in decades or longer, people came out to audition, they came to tell us about their lives, they came to see the shows. They knew we needed them— how could we do a show about a small town in West Virginia unless the people in the town led us to the truths of that place? We couldn't. We were overwhelmed, stunned by the welcomes we got, and we became better artists and better people because of their generosity. After five years of traveling, when we needed to settle down for the sake of our sanity, we decided to go to a city and see if communities within these challenging, complicated larger communities would want to work with us. We chose Los Angeles because of its many different kinds of diversities— basically, while there, you're in driving distance of the whole world. Cornerstone has been doing this work for 20 years, and in Los Angeles for 15, including, by the way, many original plays as well as adaptations, and we have never had a community project fail because of a lack of community participation. We have moved beyond the 3%.

And we have seen first hand, again and again, as you have, the transformative power of theater to change lives.

Edret Brinston was a high school track star in Port Gibson, Mississippi, a town of 2000 along the Mississippi River between Natchez and Vicksburg. Edret had failed his state literacy test twice-, that spring he would receive a certificate of attendance but not a diploma. To the horror of many Port Gibson residents, we cast this so-called "illiterate" young man as Romeo in our bi-racial production. But we had no choice; he was the best actor. And we really do believe in the words of our mission statement, that everyone is an artist. Of course, Edret went on to learn his lines faster than anyone else, and with renewed confidence and experience, he passed the state literacy test on his third try and graduated from high school to whooping cheers. We happily hired Edret to work with us again on a national tour a few years later.

Ron Temple is the largest grain farmer in the tiny farming community of Norcatur, Kansas-- largest in every sense of the word, since he stands 69" tall. Ron had never been in a play before, but we cast him in the leading role of Orgon in our version of

Moliere's "Tartuffe" renamed "Tartoof, or An Imposter in Norcatur-- and at Christmas!" He turned his farm over to his sons-in-law, and spent 12 hours a day rehearsing and memorizing his lines. Ron teases us that we ruined his life, because after his triumph, he went on to found, in a town of 220, the Norcatur Arts & Humanities Commission, which in turn has inspired the founding of five other community theaters in neighboring towns. Ron has directed up to three shows a year, testified to the state senate on the importance of rural arts, served on Cornerstone's board of directors, and Norcatur is now known in local tourism brochures for its "theater and culture."

And often we see theater's transformative power work on entire families. In 1994, we cast a young kid named Stephanie Escobar in "Los Faustinos," our version of Faust which we produced in Watts, a neighborhood of Los Angeles. Stephanie's mom hung out during rehearsals and before long she was made the assistant stage manager. A few months later we produced our second play in Watts. Not only did Mom again serve as ASM but this time both daughters were on the crew and the teenage son Andrew ran the sound board. In our final production in Watts, we quickly signed up Mom and all three kids, but this time the Escobar father decided he had been missing out on a good thing. An accomplished percussionist as well as a bus driver by day, Mr. Escobar

provided the beat for the show's band and told us that theater was the first activity that his whole family could participate in together. We've gone on to hire all five members of the Escobar family on a professional basis throughout the years, and Andrew decided to pursue a career as a sound designer.

So this is the next thing I want to say about possibility: it exists in everyone. In Cornerstone, we often say that everyone is an artist. This is controversial enough that even some company members don't agree with it, but it's a thing to always keep in the back of your mind.

And the possibilities work both ways: this work says that people are capable of doing theater, but it also says that everybody's life is worthy of art being made about it.

Somewhere along the way we've put into too many people's head that art doesn't have anything to do with them, that theater doesn't have anything to do with their lives. Now, this is wrong on the face of it: art, at its core, is about human experience, and we're all humans. But if we put people's communities and lives on stage, that's a connection that can be easier to see. It's saying we need you, we value you, we want you to be a participant, not just a passive body to fill a seat.

Not that writing the shows is always easy. Our shows celebrate and examine. Respect and sentimentality are not the same thing. The Romeo and Juliet that Edret Brinston was in wasn't set in Verona, Italy, but in Verona, Mississippi, a small town where Romeo and Juliet could have lived their whole lives without having met because all the black kids in town go to the public school and all the white kids go to the private school across the street. That was the way things were in Port Gibson, where we did the show. We re-wrote the play with the people from the community and cast 50 of them, black and white, to act it out. It wasn't a simple story to tell, and it didn't have all the answers. It didn't have to be. It was the first time black and white people had appeared together on stage in the history of Claiborne County, Mississippi and changed the town.

And that Mississippi town was not unique. Every community has divisions, whether in history or culture or race or disagreements about whether the community should bring in polluting businesses or protect nature and lose the jobs or, well, the list goes on. The first show we did in LA was supposed to be with a senior citizen housing project, which we were ready for. But when we got there, we learned that there were four distinct language groups in the population: English, Spanish, Korean and Mandarin Chinese. Most of the seniors only

spoke the language of their homeland, so we ended up creating a play where all the actors spoke their lines in the languages they spoke in real life. Which meant that every scene was going to be partially incomprehensible to most everybody in the equally multi-lingual audience. We hung banners above the stage in every language to explain what was going on, and if, say, there hadn't been a scene with a Korean speaker in it for a while, we had a Korean speaking audience plant stand up in the middle of the action and demand an explanation, which one of our other Korean speakers would come out and give. For the past 4 years, we worked with communities of faith. Here again, we realized our job was to ask questions and not give answers, and sometimes we have to make tough choices. We worked with Muslim Angelenos on several different shows. In one, we cut a casual reference to homosexuality because if we hadn't, we would have lost some community participants, and we and the entire cast and crew, including gay Muslim participants, decided it was more important to keep everyone in the show and keep the conversation going. In the next production, where a character's gayness was central to the story, a story based on the experiences of one of our community participants, we got the same pressure to cut. We didn't cut the gay character, and we lost participants because of it, but we had to serve something above the desires of those community participants. This can be really challenging stuff to

balance, for us and for the community. And I've learned today about the additional pressures you all face as you try to produce your work, because your art unfolds in taxpayer-supported public schools. I wish I had easy answers about how to make it so that you all have the freedom you need in the art you do. I don't, although if there's anything I can do to help, feel free to ask. But, it's true, there are scary and sad possibilities in life, too.

Which makes this a good a time to bring this up: I don't only remember my theater experiences from high school. I remember the other ones, too, the cliques and the confusion and the questions about who you are and who you can become. Community-based theater in this context is as complicated as it is in any. But the next time you're thinking about doing a play, you might sit down with a football player or a kid who cuts class all the time or a kid who only studies. And, yes, you may be one of those kids, too—I'm plugging into the clichés, I know. But ask them what it feels like to be them, ask them if there was a play with a scene about that horrible anxiety they have before they play a big game, or see an old friend they don't talk to anymore, or take a test, or go home to an empty house or an angry house or wonder about how they are ever going to get a job or pay for college, ask them if that was on stage whether they'd

go to see it. Or be in it. And ask them about their joys, too, and their victories. And if there are parents who worry about where this might go, talk to them, offer to put them in the show, too. Get the principal onstage with a kid who spends all his time in detention, get the naysayers doing arias with the yaysayers, mix it up. We did a show that had actual Los Angeles Police Department officers staged to come on and arrest a group of young men of color. Instead of going through with the arrests, however, we had the young men lead the officers in singing The Impossible Dream, and cops and kids alike participated in the dance breaks. I can't tell you how your show would work, I can't tell you what it would look like. But I can tell you it's worth a try. Because, you know, just think of the possibilities.

And here's the last possibility I am going to throw out to you: the possibility that each of you ask yourselves this question: do I want to use my artistry to make the world a better, fairer, more honest and more visionary place? For me, although I think I have gotten more from Cornerstone's work than I could ever put in, I think we have, over the years, done much more good than harm. I'm proud of that. That may be a pride you already have, it may be a pride you aren't interested in. But just make sure you ask yourself the question. Art can be a lot of different

things, but community-based or not, it can always be powerful. You, as artists, need to decide whether and how you want to use your power. As you know, this is your world, and it will be your world longer than it will be mine. You have these gifts. I urge you to use them to their best purpose. Because, of course, when you do, you make even more possibilities for yourself and the people whose lives you touch, and that, as much as anything, is what theater, and life, is all about. Thank you.