

USC School of Dramatic Arts

INSTALLATION REMARKS

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September 26, 2016

Thank you, President Nikias, for such a kind introduction. I'd also like to thank you and Provost Quick, for giving me both the opportunity and the privilege of assuming the deanship at the School of Dramatic Arts. Thank you to the Trustees of USC for your unwavering commitment to the advancement of the University. A heartfelt thanks also to my colleagues at the SDA, both faculty and staff and members of the School's Board of Councilors, for all their wisdom, past present and future. I'd also like to thank my colleagues all across the University in multiple Schools, all those in senior administration, and of course my fellow deans, for making my interim year such a pleasant experience that, inexplicably, I came back for more, and now we are stuck with each other. Thanks also to the many supporters of Dramatic Arts who are in the room today, who help us on a daily basis to build a stronger community, and without whom we would not be able to pursue our ambitious agenda. I'd also like to acknowledge that this is the first in a three part series of dean's installations this Fall. I am honored at the company I keep and I wish my new colleagues the very best for their installations, beginning with Dean Miller tomorrow. And lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to my wonderful family; to my children Felix and Edith, who cannot join us today; and to my beautiful wife Amanda, who is here, for all the love and inspiration on our voyage together.

My journey at USC has already been a long one. I first came to campus in January 2005 to offer a brief three-day workshop; later that year I joined the adjunct faculty; in the Fall of 2006 I became a full time non-tenure track associate professor of practice, helping to articulate and teach the curriculum of the current MFA in Acting at the School of Dramatic Arts under the guidance of dear friend and mentor Professor Andrew J. Robinson. As the years passed, thanks to the trust placed in me by my predecessor dean Madeline Puzo, I moved into administrative and leadership roles at the SDA. So I have seen my School, and the University at large, from several different angles during my ten years plus at USC, and thus I can say with a confidence born of lived experience that I am truly fortunate to serve this remarkable institution. I feel especially grateful for USC's implacable emphasis on the value of the arts in education and the public sphere, and I recognize the unique and almost unlimited potential of six major arts schools conducting research and practice within a stone's throw of each other. All this by way of saying, whatever kind spirit it was that brought me to this island, I am permanently in their debt.

The dramatic arts consist of a number of complementary disciplines that intersect in the service of performance. Designers of all stripes imagine the show; technical directors build the show; directors shape and conduct the show; stage managers run the show; scholars and commentators critique the show. But the show itself, the planet around which everything orbits, consists of the moving body and the spoken word, and it is in pursuit of these two disciplines – acting and playwriting – that I have created much of my own life's work.

I have an inexhaustible fascination with acting. The mimetic replication and representation of character is one of the most complex of art forms, involving carefully orchestrated intersections of psychology, sociology, anthropology, athleticism and virtuosic skill. If an actor were to play the role of you, he/she would have to learn your history, reimagine your environment, mimic your physicality, inhabit your temperament, embody your desires, fight your enemies, and understand and seek to actualize your life's true purpose. This is equally true of the playwright tasked with telling your story, who would give you voice and action, craft your narrative, and divine those truths about you that you dare not admit even to yourself. Are you a Peer Gynt or a Hedda Gabler, an Othello or a Falstaff, a Jet or a Shark? Ultimately the Dramatic Arts seek to probe, take apart, and reconstruct our characters and our existence, until we know ourselves and each other more deeply, more fully. After all, the meaning of the word theatre, from the original Greek, is "the seeing place." But a play is not only a kind of highbrow mental and intellectual exercise in perception – it is also a corporeal experience, one that impacts senses and emotions, and relies on the living breathing community of an audience to offer up its full meaning.

As a matter of fact, to spend a life in the theatre is to embark on an involuntary study of audience behavior. From the expectant hush of an opening night crowd to the awkward fidgeting of a Sunday matinee, audiences never fail to complete the event of a play, for good or ill. This reality is epitomized by the experience of the great British thespian Mark Rylance, when, during a run of *Hamlet* in which he portrayed the eponymous prince, he decided one evening to take his time delivering one of Shakespeare's most celebrated lines, and after coming downstage to the footlights and beginning in languorous fashion, "To be, or not to be...", he heard a little old lady in the front row turn to her husband and whisper loudly, "*That* is the question."

My own favorite brush with the glorious unpredictability of audiences came when I was myself one of a sold-out house watching a fairly uninspiring production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* on London's West End stage. During the intermission I struck up a conversation with a friendly neighbor, an elderly German man who was slightly deaf; later, half way into the second act, when a mortally wounded Cyrano visits a convent and in hushed tones delivers the play's coup de grace, my neighbor leans over to me and in a very loud voice, easily audible to the entire audience, asks me in no uncertain terms: "SATISFIED WITH THE PERFORMANCE?" It was a pretty dull production, and I didn't want to ignore the question, but I was acutely aware of making a disturbance at this delicate and sensitive moment in the drama, so in the most inconspicuous and hushed voice possible I responded: "Not particularly." To which my friend, after a moment's thought, replied at full volume: "NEITHER AM I." From that day on, I have always had the greatest respect for audiences, for they never lie, and the bond that connects an audience to a live performance is, to me, one of the greatest authenticities that art is capable of achieving.

So, time flies, and I am now officially a little over four months into my tenure as dean of the School of Dramatic Arts. As each day passes, I get just a little bit more excited by the extraordinary potential of our School. As an independent entity at USC, Dramatic Arts is 26 years old, and like anyone in their mid-20's, we are looking to the future and eagerly anticipating our best years – still young enough to be full of energy, but wise enough, I hope, to know where we are going and who we want to become. Our graduates and alumni make waves in all corners

of the entertainment industry and beyond, and whether they are winning Oscars or Emmys or teaching grade school, each of them in their own way contributes to the enduring potency of the dramatic arts and the great proliferation of storytelling in our modern world, that becomes ever more astonishing in its variety.

In fact, it's the new abundance of story-telling platforms that is charging and catalyzing a healthy part of my mission for the School. We all know the stage, film and television as venues for performers, writers, and creators – but what about YouTube, video games, webisodes, Virtual Reality, and the flood of new digital spaces that have revolutionized the entertainment world in the last ten years? Given the speed of these changes in the dramatic arts landscape, our School must adopt a flexible and contemporary approach to its education, research and practice in order to stay relevant and forge the next generation of artists in our field. While core principles rooted in tradition remain invaluable, ever newer applications of dramatic arts disciplines, on ever more original platforms, are the way of the present and the future, and the School must recognize, embrace, and explore these new methodologies.

During my tenure as dean, then, USC's School of Dramatic Arts will evolve its curricula and its culture to develop artist-creators who will connect, catalyze and collide the traditional arts of theatre and story-telling with the digital and entrepreneurial age and evolving social and political conversations. By developing students who can navigate and influence multiple dramatic arts contexts, from the traditional to the cutting edge, the School seeks to be a standard bearer in redefining what it means to train a dramatic artist for the 21st century. Our future alums should be fully prepared to practice their craft online as well as on Broadway; they should know the art of business as well as the business of art; and they should understand their platforms, from the classic to the modern, from realism to Virtual Reality.

In order to structure the evolution of the School and to help us pinpoint measurable outcomes, I have identified a sequence of priorities that will guide our growth and influence our decision making in the coming years.

The first of these priorities is New Programming. Our curricular offerings are being overhauled even now, as we prepare fresh approaches to all of our disciplines; by way of example, within a year we will relaunch our flagship BFA in Acting under a new title – the BFA in Acting for Stage, Screen and New Media – the only program of its kind in the country, and an indicator to our prospective students, parents, and our peers that we at the SDA are not satisfied with peddling the status quo – we will lead the way in forging new paths in actor training. Our unique and highly regarded MFA programs will continue to make national impact, while new classes will reflect our desire to explore the multi-faceted arts of performance and story-telling, in stand-up comedy, magic, podcasts, and other non-traditional forms. Meanwhile our extra-curricular programming is rapidly expanding, including our Professional Development Spotlight and Salon series, our inaugural Careers program, and Live Read@SDA which brings professional theatre-makers to work with our students in the creation of new commercial theatre projects.

Our second priority is New Media. Within the curriculum, we will embrace the digital and technological revolution, exploring Motion and Performance Capture, the Voice-Over

explosion, and how Going Viral is now an essential part of the dramatic artist's portfolio. Our annual New Media and the Dramatic Artist Summit will generate discussion and opportunity for our students, while a new Lab space will allow for digital experiment and content creation. And in addition to connecting with Hollywood's extraordinary progress in this arena, we must acknowledge that the American theatre nationwide has made enormous strides in the adoption of new media, in technology, design, and integrated narrative, and we will enter this territory and push its boundaries in our curriculum and our productions.

Our third priority is New Partnerships. Already, our School is deeply engaged in discussions regarding new partnering opportunities with theatres, industry companies and professionals, and, crucially, with fellow Schools here at USC. Among the Arts Schools, the opportunity to evolve multi-disciplinary programming, initiatives, and collaborations is irresistible, and I thank my fellow arts deans for their willingness to dive headfirst into a variety of partnering projects. But our work in SDA is not limited to art for art's sake, and I believe that our evolving dialogue and interconnections with Medicine, Public Policy, Engineering and Education - to name a few and for which, again, I owe thanks to the vision and receptivity of my colleagues - are only the beginning. It's worth noting that aptitude tests conducted by the Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation in Chicago have discovered that theatre artists and professionals score unusually high in three "aptitude categories": Foresight, or creative future thinking - the ability to imagine blue-sky concepts; Ideaphoria, or Idea Flow - the ability to think and communicate laterally and across boundaries; and Analytical Reasoning, the ability to see patterns in thought and intention. In addition to these specific aptitudes, the testing also concluded that dramatic artists overwhelmingly favor collaborating with others and sustained group contact and collective creativity. Small wonder, then, that graduates from our School find themselves employed in such a wide range of fields - and that partnering in multiple disciplines and sectors, catalyzed by curiosity and motivated by the desire to make change, is such an essential part of the DNA of our School, and a vital piece of our future.

This leads me to our fourth priority: what I have termed a New Culture for the SDA. First and foremost, our School seeks to fully engage with our own family, and here I refer, in particular, to our alumni base, whom we welcome to campus in our inaugural Alumni Week later this Fall, and with whom I intend to build bridges and create involvement at all levels in the coming years. Secondly, as questions surrounding Equity and Diversity continue to resonate, not just on campuses and in society at large but also in the American theatre - our School must rapidly evolve in order to raise the standard for inclusivity, welcome every identity with equivalence, and promote a breadth of perspectives among our faculty, our staff, and our students, and in every aspect of our work. Only when we cease to treat the existence of cultural pluralism as an issue to be negotiated, and instead simply incorporate it into the innermost fabric of our institutions and our minds, will we do justice to the innate potential of our collective mission and our community. Our School will work tirelessly, albeit imperfectly, towards an equitable and integrated future for our stakeholders and our partners. We also seek to further the extraordinary work that dramatic artists have forged in the area of social change. We see social and political crisis events not only as problems of policy, economics and social science, but also as matters of culture, especially at the "ground level", where factors such as hierarchy and status, individual and group narrative(s), self-image, self-expression, and collective memory - all prime "territories" for artistic exploration - are frequently flashpoint for communities in crisis.

Navigating the fluid arena of culture is the prerogative of artists, whose work, if permitted and encouraged, intersects dynamically with policy, planning, development, and social sciences, offering new perspectives on struggle and giving voice to under-represented people and populations. Experts and their students in our School have a powerful track record in pursuing the dramatic arts as a practice in conjunction with institutions of social or political change, here in Los Angeles with local partners – including USC hospitals – or across the world in affected communities in Brazil, in Rwanda, in Afghanistan, in the Ukraine and in Iran. During my tenure as dean, I look forward to supporting, in collaboration with you all, the University’s commitment to the public good by exercising the power of the arts in the pursuit of social change.

Our fifth and last major priority falls under the category of New Facilities for our School. Notwithstanding the excellence of our education and our impact in the professional world, this is an exciting moment to consider the possibility of upgraded, state of the art space and equipment for students and faculty alike. We look forward to working with the University on this theme, always mindful of our status as a young School, but eager, nevertheless, to fully realize the part we can play in the cultural life of this great University.

A sequence of priorities – New Programming, New Media, New Partners, a New Culture, and New Facilities – that offer an overview for my vision of the coming years at the SDA. Of course, no list in a speech can do justice to the fever of activity that courses through our Schools on a daily basis, and similarly, no amount of planning and forward thinking can account for the ups and downs, the triumphs and the disasters, of everyday deanship. I am certain I will be improvising my responses to new challenges and new opportunities on a regular basis. I pledge my wholehearted commitment to this new role, knowing deep down that a role is to be inhabited to its fullest and then bequeathed to the next actor when the time is right. With your collegiality to guide me, I will enjoy my work in the coming years and cling on to my sense of humor. And just as I ask my students, I will strive to continue my own practice of constant examination, to surrender to inquisitiveness; never to have all the answers, always to value the questions. In the words of one of my theatrical muses, the Romanian/French playwright Eugene Ionesco: “When one has understood, one stops, satisfied with what one has understood. Understanding is far too little. To have understood is to be fixed, immobilized. But then a mere Why, a new Why can set one off again, can unpetrify what was petrified, and everything starts flowing afresh.”

Thank you.