

Keynote Address to the Virginia State Thespian Conference

February 5th, 2017

How's everybody doing tonight? Having a good time? My name is Clifton Leo Arthur Frei, I am an Artistic Associate of the Chicago Neo Futurists, the world's most vital, exciting and popular experimental theater, a founding member of the Showparty! theatre collective, and finally a proud Virginia Thespian of troupe 3178.

So what's your name? Everybody on the count of three, say your name out loud, everybody at the same time, I'll hear you. Ready: one, two, three...

(Audience response)

Ohh, nice to meet you, nice to meet you, welcome to the speech.

One of my jobs as keynote speaker, as I understand it, is to give you advice. Last person I gave advice to was a cat--he threw up on my shoe. This little stray kitten came up to me and I thought it would be good to tell him some things about life, being older and wiser as I am. So we're talking and I'm like "you have to take care of yourself before you can take care of anyone else," and the kitten's like, "bleh." So it took my advice! It took care of that hairball without any regard for me or my shoe, so if anybody out there feels nauseous at any point while I'm speaking, relax, it just means it's working.

That's one of my main themes tonight, relax. Don't Panic. Is anybody out there apprehensive about the future? Well, if you're not, to borrow a phrase from the world renowned spiritual leader Master Yoda, "you will be."

Because you are human being living in this country you will face hardships both personal and political, but I am here to tell you that you can always go back to the Theatre, because the Theatre will always be there for you.

It doesn't matter if you feel you need it, if you love it, if you just think it's a fun way to organize your favorite people in a room for a few hours. There's no right or wrong or good or bad reason to do it, whether you're a Thespian or Non, Techie or Actor, deck hand or props master, or whether the best way to label yourself is just as a person who finds themselves in theater everyday after school.

Theatre doesn't care whether you want to go to Broadway, Hollywood, or better yet Chicago, stay where you're at, get a BA, BFA, No FA, get a degree from Yale or certificate from CodeAcademy, study Engineering, Nursing, Biology, Early Childhood Education, HVAC repair--

Theatre doesn't care if you do it seven days a week, one day a week, or if you set it aside for years and years.

Theatre doesn't check your resume, add up your credits or hours, or only let you speak if you're an "actor," or touch a lighting instrument if you're a "techie."

Theatre doesn't care where it is, it doesn't need a thousand seat proscenium house, a plain house will do, or no house at all.

I am speaking for the Theatre and the Theatre welcomes you and will be there for you. All that Theatre requires is that at least a single person's being be heightened above the status quo of a particular space and at least one other person be there to perceive them.

Theatre knows that we are all human beings and each and everyone of us has value and stories to tell, or worlds to explore, little experiments to run on existence--Theatre is the laboratory in which we examine the human condition and its relation to the vast unknowable universe.

Why would Theatre care what other people call you, it only cares about what is inside of you and what you want to get out.

Bleh

Everybody still with me, stomach's good? Ok, push through it.

Now all this doesn't mean that an individual who heretofore has only concerned themselves with learning the formal methods of acting can just hop behind a light board and start pushing buttons, nor does it mean that the techie who has only concerned themselves with lavs and floor mics can jump on stage and perform complex choreography. My point is that the tools of Theatre can be adapted to the abilities of any individual.

Theatre doesn't always need you to have extensive movement training to heighten yourself, all you have to do is move purposefully in an out of the ordinary way. Theatre doesn't need a massive lighting grid, a flashlight in the dark can serve just as well.

It's all about scaling your work to fit the resources you have available to you and the size of your audience. Do you need a stage and a thousand watts of power, or could you place yourself in the middle of an audience, light yourself with a single naked light bulb and speak to people directly, knit together with them by the faint light dividing you all from the darkness?

From the technician's perspective, I will say that constraints make you more creative. I have seen glorious spectacles made with gelled cliplights, fabric, sticks, and multiple practical sound devices like phones or old boomboxes collaged together to make incredible soundscapes.

You may be a craftsperson, but you are also an artist.

For those of you who identify as neither actor nor techie, you can still draw upon whatever talents you have and heighten them. Perhaps you are more of a visual artist. You can create a series of comic book splash pages or collages of photos from the internet, and create a ritual of giving them to an audience. Make a circle of lights and stand in the middle with a song playing in the background. Have the audience surround you and make a gift of each image to each person.

These are just examples, how you feel about them or whether or not you understand them doesn't matter as long as you understand that you do not need a theater t-h-e-a-t-e-r to make theatre t-h-e-a-t-r-e.

And at your core, you aren't whatever label is printed on your lanyard, those are just a words. At your core you are human, you have value, you are an artist and the tools of Theatre are always available to you.

Let me speak to your humanity for a moment, because it isn't just about what you bring to the Theatre, it's about what might take you away from it too. No matter what your personal beliefs might be about why we exist, I think we can all agree existence isn't always easy.

There are going to be times in your life when circumstances will conspire to throw you off of the path you have envisioned for yourselves, when the nights you thought you'd

be able to rehearse and perform in will be stolen from you by responsibilities or calamity.

For me there was the first night I saved my Mom's life. Nights spent in emergency rooms, in mental health facilities, in funeral parlors. Nights spent working overtime to pay for rent on two apartments, for medical bills, electricity, and food. Nights filling out forms, making out wills, and mailing paperwork. Nights stranded in the snow at rest stops, driving for hours and hours half awake. Nights of screaming and nights weeping. Nights where everyone I loved were all barely holding on to the same thread.

But for everyone one of these nights, there was another inside of a theater, in a basement at a read through, a class on the second floor, a book of theory in a coffee shop, because there is no set path to the Theatre.

It can be reached by many roads, and it will always welcome you into its arms. Just work at it when you can. If you can't do a show, go see shows, take small roles, small duties backstage, read books of theory, take classes, treat every experience as an opportunity, always be beginning, and don't quit just because it's not going the way the Equity Handbook or your teacher said it should, because if you're in pain, the best place to relieve it is in the Theatre, so don't stay away.

Not everybody has the ability or luxury of waiting tables until they "make it," some of you are going to have bills to pay and mouths to feed, I know I did. Assuming you have to suppress the rest of your life or suffer mindlessly in order to keep grinding is absurd. If you have a day job, try to make it one you don't hate, put some time into doing that if you need to. Theatre wants you to be whole. Take care of yourself, be kind to yourself.

Bleh

That was my "life is hard, but Theatre is your shield which cannot be broken" section. Definitely the most advice heavy, but everybody seems pretty sturdy, so I'm going to bring it home with my "this is the awesome performance art style I've embraced as a result of all of those years of hard living section," namely the work I do now with the theatre collective known as Showparty!

We are a group of friends who met in a class and decided that we wanted to keep working together. Over the years we have developed an aesthetic that shares a lot in common with the Neo-Futurists, but which we feel is now uniquely our own.

The tenants of our work are as follows:

We support one another.

We are always experimenting, there is no failure, only the experience we create.

We are DIY, everything we need, we make ourselves.

Our material is derived from our personal stories and interests which we heighten and abstract.

And finally and most importantly, we are radically concerned with creating a sense of community for and with the audience.

All of these concepts overlap one another, and I've touched on all of them, but the audience is closest to my heart, so let me focus there to close things out.

This is the most important point I can make to you: without the audience, there is no Theatre. And as human as you are, the audience of course is just as human and just as inherently valuable. Your purpose is always to communicate with them. We try to remove as much static between us and them as possible, to make us one group, sharing an experience that they are contributing to as much as we are.

First of all, our shows are free. This removes the class barrier. Theatre is for everyone, not just those who can afford a ticket. In my opinion this also keeps the audience and performer from falling into the artificial capitalist roles of customer and service provider. No one is providing a product or judging the experience based on its monetary value, only on how they feel about it and who they're with.

When our audience members enter our space, we greet them. We don't hide backstage, we offer food and drinks, we have art installations for them to interact with. We treat them as guests, we want them to know we care about them, and we want them to care about us. It turns jokes into in-jokes, our stories to their stories, and questions into conversations.

The other barrier we remove is the fourth wall. We inherit this tradition from the Neo Futurists who inherited it from others. By not pretending we're someone else or somewhere else we can craft real human moments that can be so much more captivating than false emotions or staged conflicts. By not constraining ourselves to the

conventions of an imagined reality, by not asking anyone to suspend disbelief, we can fully engage their senses by creating amazing spectacles right in front of their eyes.

We can have direct conversations with the audience, human to human. We can invite them to contribute their own stories as a part of the shared performance. The audience should never be your prop in this, only your collaborator. One of the most satisfying things you can do is give them a platform to tell their own stories.

And one of the reasons this is so satisfying is that it allows us to share in the hearing of diverse voices.

In a time when the State has deluded itself into thinking that a gerrymandered, foreign influenced, fake-news supported election gives it a mandate to eliminate, deport, and/or suppress the voices of immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ folks, and women I can think of no greater aim than to amplify those voices within both your audience and your ensemble.

If there is something in your heart that you just have to express, if you see injustice in the world, the tools of Theatre are there for you.

Theatre is the art of breaking the status quo of a given space and heightening and elevating the soul of humanity so if the status quo of the space you're in is dehumanizing, than elevate yourself and break it!

Elevate those around you. You don't have to write a Hamilton, I've seen two minute long performance pieces that have permanently altered my perception of reality and put fire in my soul.

But Hamilton *is* brilliant, so many traditionally staged productions are and I personally have found great satisfaction in working on a great number of them over the years. It would be hypocritical of me to say that the type of work I am discussing is better than any Broadway production, and I hope I haven't given you that impression.

All I want you to know is that there is another path, a path that is available to you right now, a Theatre that is immediate and accessible and gives you the power to express yourself and communicate directly with your audience.

And I know I haven't said a lot about training and education, and right now your teachers might be composing lectures on how you still need to put in the work and learn your craft, and they are absolutely right.

There are no shortcuts, but you can choose where and when to put in the work. If you go to college for Theatre, great! If you go to a trade school for computer programming to make sure you have a job that you can enjoy and make money at, great! Theatre will be there for you when get back to it as long as you keep it close to your heart.

Bleh

Value yourselves, value your audience, there are no set roles, no rights or wrongs, Theatre doesn't care where you're at, it is there for you, you are artists, Don't Panic!, you can resist, everything will be ok as long as you remember and return to these truths, you are wonderful, you are beautiful, thank you for allowing me to speak with you, thank you to Nancy Curtis and Troupe 3178 for teaching me to act well my part and to volunteer first, thank you to Showparty! for your assistance in preparing these remarks and preserving my sanity, enjoy the rest of the conference, make the most of every experience, and good night.