

Such Stuff As Dreams Are Made On

Vivienne Benesch

Remarks for the UNC Retired Faculty Association, September 15, 2022

Hello everyone, and thank you for welcoming me here and for the opportunity to spend some time with you talking about the work of PlayMakers Repertory Company. It's a great privilege, and I'm excited to share some of my dreams with you.

When Pete Andrews asked me for a title for this talk this past summer, I knew I wanted to speak about dreaming, as I believe the theatre operates in the world of dreams; and I tried hard to find something from Hamlet, as I'm directing that this season. But the Hamlet quotes about dreaming are a little somber for the subject of a speech: "Oh God I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space— were it not that I have bad dreams." "A dream itself is but a shadow" And of course: "To sleep, perchance to dream— ay there's the rub." Maybe not today.

Instead, I allowed myself to travel seven years later in Shakespeare's play chronology and borrow from that ultimate artist-conjurer, Prospero: "Such stuff as dreams are made on."

Many of you might be quite familiar with PlayMakers Repertory Company and its relationship to the University, the Triangle community and the larger ecosystem of professional theater. However, I continue to think it's important to spend some time illuminating this very particular relationship that makes us uniquely positioned in the field.

UNC is known for so many things – basketball, of course, a host of great departments, several Nobel laureates, a top-tier medical school – but few people know that the University boasts the second oldest department of drama in the nation, established just after Carnegie Mellon's – and as we are so very fond of bragging, just *before* Harvard's. In fact, in 1850, Carolina was the first public university in the country to have a building dedicated to theatre – and that is the Historic Playmakers building near Memorial Hall, originally called Smith Hall.

But over one hundred years ago, a man named Frederick Henry Koch – "Prof Koch" to his friends and students – was brought to Carolina by way of Peoria, Illinois and the University of North Dakota, where he had developed an idea of "folk theatre" that he hoped would someday produce an American Shakespeare. His "folk theatre" meant slow years of amateur theatrical experimentation in which every local tradesman could take part, producing plays based on the lives of real, ordinary people, performed *by* those people, rooted in place and shaped by their background.

Before Prof Koch arrived, theater was apparently in such a bad way in our state that the play publishing and licensing agency Samuel French had literally crossed North Carolina off its list of prospective patrons. But UNC President Edward Kidder Graham had observed Koch from afar

and thought that his ideas about folk drama rooted in the people and their heritage could promote unity across class lines here in North Carolina. His hope was that this might demonstrate to a national audience that North Carolina was a progressive, enlightened state, rich in the arts and culture.

In 1918, Koch established the Carolina Playmakers—a talented “town and gown” troupe of amateur and academic actors, writers, and theatre enthusiasts – along with students such as Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paul Green and author Thomas Wolfe, whose name now graces our largest theatre. The Carolina Playmakers performed their folk plays at Historic Playmakers Theatre and at the open-air Forest Theatre, still across the street from us today. But the Playmakers also organized theatre festivals around Chapel Hill, and went on to tour their productions statewide, embarking on twenty-one tours over the course of ten years. Incredible.

While that program ended over 50 years ago, one of my own first dreams for PlayMakers was to answer Prof Koch’s call to bring our stories to the people, turning our gaze to engage our community outside just our theatre walls. We launched PlayMakers Mobile. This program brings a streamlined, inventive, relatively bare bones version of a play to community centers, Title One schools, libraries throughout the area, and non-traditional spaces on and around the UNC Campus – absolutely free!

Thanks to the generosity of our annual fund donors and the hard work of our artistic office, the program grew from being a small, adjunct project that was mostly a labor of love, to a highly anticipated, richly-rewarding exchange between our company and our community. While the pandemic required that we put this program on pause over the last few seasons, I am so pleased to share that PlayMakers Mobile will once again hit the road in the new year, building upon the relationships we established during the program’s nascency. In fact, our graduate acting students practically demanded that we produce the Mobile Tour again this year, as it presents them not only with valuable experience in work that they deeply value, but also work that is becoming a large part of the professional landscape they will enter upon graduation.

While we are still discussing possible titles for this year’s project, what’s most important is that the play serve as a means toward meaningful dialogue. Gone are the days of transactional artistic relationships: you buy your ticket, you watch our work, you go home. In order to remain relevant and essential to the communities in which we reside, arts organizations must leverage our assets to serve a vital function within communities that encompasses entertainment but leads to other important goals such as deeper compassion, humanity, and empathy. Tied so meaningfully to the University, PlayMakers’ specific role is to connect the profound scholarship of the academy with our community through the lens of our art.

In the mid-1970s, during the burgeoning development of the regional theater movement in America – led by, among others, my own mentor Zelda Fichandler, who founded D.C.’s Arena Stage – two prestigious men of the theatre, Arthur Houseman and Tom Haas, came together here in Chapel Hill to create that very important bridge between art and scholarship. The

Department of Dramatic Art had grown to the point where it was attracting professionals at the top of their fields to lead and teach in its three MFA programs, but it was clear that productions of the Carolina Playmakers needed to reflect this high quality, too. So, in 1976, with Tom Haas at the helm, PlayMakers Repertory Company officially opened its first professional season as a member of the League of Resident Theaters, an organization representing the highest standard of non-profit theatrical excellence nationwide.

Six artistic directors and one inimitable Millie Barringer – who was both Department Chair and Artistic Producer – have since stewarded PlayMakers into the nationally recognized theatre that it is today. In forty-six years, more than a thousand performers have graced our stages’ nearly 300 productions for over two million audience members, with over 160 directors and 400 designers.

PlayMakers is one of the very last resident theatre companies still operating in the nation. We boast not only a faculty and staff of professional resident actors, designers, artisans and scholars, but alongside it, a company of emerging talent from those three graduate programs: the Professional Actor Training Program, the Technical Production program and the Costume Production program. These students learn first-hand as they play a part in bringing all our shows to life, under the guidance of and in collaboration with our resident and other renowned professionals. This old-fashioned-made-new-again “apprentice” program has enabled PlayMakers to become a great “teaching hospital” for professional theatre artists – also one of the few of its kind in the country.

PlayMakers is a busy place! While most faculty at UNC balance their research, teaching and administrative duties, many of PlayMakers’ resident company spend their time teaching all morning, move into rehearsal or head to the shops during the afternoon, and often perform or run a show at night. And for up to 9 weeks a year we are in tech: intense technical rehearsals in which we put all the elements of a show together. These used to run from noon to midnight, but now in a new era where we attempt a better work-life balance, we only go from noon to 10 p.m. That’s maybe a subject for a different talk, about the evolution of “sacrificing for our art.” But I’m happy to report that what remains true is that we believe that “creativity lives at PlayMakers” – and we recognize that we are lucky to get to do what we love.

One of my ongoing dreams is to create more and different opportunities for our patrons to interact with the wildly creative people who envision the shows we put on stage. We are continually looking for opportunities for them to share their reflections on how a production came to be, the original impulses behind the design elements, and the sometimes-maddening but enlightening changes that come about during tech rehearsals and preview performances. For many years we offered a series of events called **The Vision Series** that presented live conversations for audiences to engage with our artists before a preview performance. One of the lessons we are taking forward with us from the pandemic is how our recorded and virtual work can really make a difference in who can access our work: both educationally throughout the state, and for people who cannot make it to the theatre for a variety of reasons. Hence, we are transitioning these conversations online, so we can share the vision in short, consumable

mini documentaries that can then be used in a variety of settings: in the community, in the classroom, but most importantly to tell our story as broadly as possible. The first of these is being developed with our upcoming production of *Native Gardens*, and they will be an ongoing project for the season.

We continue to offer post-show conversations that position our plays through the lens of the present, whether the show was written in 1622 or 2022. These conversations bring together the rich scholarly resource of the University and the Triangle community with artists involved in a given production, to take a deep dive into a particular theme or issue raised in our plays. The conversations can range from the play and playwright's history to the present-tense socio-political, cultural or personal context, all meant to deepen an audience's experience of the show.

For our upcoming production of *Native Gardens*, we've built new partnerships with the North Carolina Botanical Gardens, the Carolina Latinx Center and the American Indian Center to explore some of the deeper themes raised in Zacarías' play. Working with these campus organizations, we're looking at the Landback movement, the Latinx/Indigenous relationship to the land and to the United States specifically. We're exploring the landscape and plants native to North Carolina, and we're going to host a fabulous Opening Night celebration featuring plant-based, Indigenous and Latinx inspired cuisine. The beautiful opportunity that these relationships present is one that celebrates some of the amazing work happening on campus, and it makes a direct link to our students. The Opening Night celebration happens to coincide with both Indigenous Peoples Day and a campus celebration of Carnival, and we're hopeful that the play's bristling satire will fit in nicely with the energy of the week. It also happens to feature a spectacular quartet of actors: faculty company favorites Jeff Cornell and Julia Gibson and returning guest artists Sarita Ocon and Alejandro Rodriguez. This also happens to be — and I was shocked to discover this— the first Latinx or Hispanic playwright to be produced on our mainstage!

For as long and wonderfully storied a history as PlayMakers has, it's always possible — and necessary — that our dreams will wrestle with our past as much as they will imagine a better future. A new and truly exciting initiative on which PlayMakers will embark this season — and one which was recently awarded a "Spark the Arts" grant from the North Carolina Arts Council — combines two of PlayMakers' core priorities: developing new work and engaging our work with communities. We developed the idea by posing a series of questions: If we deeply center community members over the course of an extended period, and give them unparalleled access to the process of developing new work, how will it impact the audience member's view of themselves as a stakeholder with the artistic product? With our theatre? Does the artistic work have a more meaningful impact on the lives of our community partners? These are some of the questions we are hoping to answer. We are calling this initiative "radical inclusion."

So this season, we will produce the world premiere of Professional Actor Training Program alumnus Tristan André's multimedia/dance/theatre piece, *They Do Not Know Harlem: In Communion with James Baldwin*. The play centers on how Baldwin's life and work shaped

Tristan's own sense of identity and creative practice. Directed by company member Kathy Williams (who is also the new Chair of the Department of Dramatic Art), this piece with deep roots in the Triangle will begin work in October with a week-long workshop residency. With a goal of creating a deeper and more meaningful connection to the African American community in Durham, North Carolina, our intention is to bring community partners into the process from this very early moment in development. We are partnering with Pierce Freelon and NorthStar Church of the Arts to host a meal in the community and to introduce Tristan and his collaborators. Community members will be welcome to visit and observe the workshop process, and a final showing will be presented at NorthStar at the end of the week. In the spring, when we give the piece its world premiere, we will provide transportation for community members to travel to PlayMakers to attend a first rehearsal, tech and performances and participate in community meals with the artists, and a culminating celebration of the artist/community partnership. This level of connection to the developmental process of theatre is unparalleled in our field. It's a grand experiment, but one that we think will radically shift the script between community and arts institutions.

As I mentioned, the development of new work has been a hallmark of my tenure at PlayMakers. It's in my blood. At Chautauqua, where I was artistic director of the theatre company for 12 summers before coming here, I started the New Play Workshop, which brought two to four new plays each summer that spoke in some way to the thematic programming of the larger Chautauqua Institution's weekly themes. That was a dream that flourished, and before I left, no small number of those plays went on to productions Off Broadway and across the country.

I wanted to find a way for that dream to take root here at PlayMakers. My predecessor, Joseph Haj, had developed PlayMakers' incredibly successful conversation-starting Second Stage series – PRC² – and for over ten seasons it brought a host of topical, one-act plays to PlayMakers, always followed by a "second act" of lively conversation between the artists, expert panelists, and the audience. Under Joe's tenure, PRC² largely featured presented work: plays that had been developed and produced before, which then made a stop at PlayMakers. PRC² was a way to champion new artists who take risks, and it proved that new work was viable at PlayMakers and provided a wonderful invitation for the direction in which I would begin to steer us after my arrival in 2016.

When I took the helm of the theatre, PRC² became more like a development platform for new work, also expanding the boundaries of what we understand theatre to be. Those of you who were able to see *Draw the Circle*, *Temples of Lung and Air*, *Bewilderness*, *Count*, or *No Fear and Blues Long Gone* during their short time at PlayMakers know exactly how electric these new plays can be.

Now in my seventh season at PlayMakers, I have decided to direct resources toward the formalization of a new play development initiative called @Play. These workshops, readings, and productions will take place in both of our spaces: Tristan's *Harlem* is very much a part of this work. And we have many more titles in the development pipeline, including a number of commissions: for instance, an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* by UNC Alumna Bekah

Brunstetter and a wildly fun, Triangle-focused holiday extravaganza being developed by Mike Wiley and Howard Craft (much in the vein of a 21st century folk play), among others.

Quite a few of our long-time subscribers have asked why we have let the PRC² series go. To be totally honest, one reason is that as we recover from the pandemic, we need to responsibly focus our financial and human resources and be very mindful of how we rebuild. Another is that the PRC² series had a great run, and in some ways, the one-person-show form had run its course. But also, those “topical,” “hot button issue,” conversation-starting plays are no longer relegated to our second stage. That work — often amplifying global majority and/or other marginalized voices — is now happening on both our stages, or should I say on *all* our stages, and the conversations are too. With a particular commitment to amplifying Southern voices—tying to the University’s own Southern Futures initiative, women’s voices (a personal life-long passion), and voices of the global majority, PlayMakers is now truly both a home for new play development and a true hub of social and civic discourse in the region.

I arrived in North Carolina at a challenging moment. 2016 was a momentous year, in the state and in the country, if you’ll remember. As I planned for my first programmed season, I knew it would be my great joy and responsibility to give our artists and audiences new opportunities for entertainment and debate, for escape and empathy, for beauty and for transformation. That remains a credo.

We opened the 2016/17 season with transgender artist Mashuq Mushtaq Deen’s *Draw the Circle*, a heart-forward, funny and frank story of his gender transition told mostly from the point of view of his Muslim American family. That show, it turns out, has been a touchstone for my tenure. Certainly, its title and message has been. Since then, much of my work has been driven by the idea of drawing our circle wider: a wider and more representative audience, ever wider representation of voices on stage and off, ever wider accessibility and ever wider curiosity. The Public Theater in New York City has a slogan: the public theater is theater of, by, and for all people. I too work in service of that aspiration. PlayMakers, in its own way, is a civic institution engaging, both on-stage and off, with some of the most important ideas and social issues of today.

In many ways, we find ourselves reengaging with and pushing the boundaries of this circle as we emerge from the last three years. It has been challenging for all of us, and the theater and the performing arts more broadly have suffered mightily. We have been faced with questions about our viability, our responsibility, and now how we apply those learnings to our future. As I mentioned, it is no longer enough for arts organizations to solely hold a transactional relationship to the communities in which we reside. It is incumbent upon us to function in *service to and with* the community. Additionally, as an artistic institution housed on the campus of a Research 1 university, we can function as a synthesis point for the larger goals of the academy. Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz recently wrote that “Our aim is that every Carolina student will know how to grapple with the past, think critically about the present and have the confidence to shape the future. They’ll understand data and information, know how to make

new discoveries and be ready to weigh ethical questions with rigor and empathy.” Simply put, this is exactly the role and function of a meaningful, community-focused professional theater.

During the summer of 2020, a group of artists of color organized to develop a statement directed to leaders of our nation’s institutional theaters. This group of over 250 artists developed a list of demands of these predominantly white institutions, calling for an end to historic, racist practices that make up “a house of cards built on white fragility.” *We See You White American Theatre* was a bracing and honest account of many folks’ experiences of working within the American theater. And it led to many, if not most, theaters developing a series of anti-racist statements as well as a commitment to do better.

PlayMakers was no different. We had long been engaged in the difficult work of understanding systemic racism, but we were called on to do more. We formally developed an Access, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (AEDI) committee that is made up of staff, artists, students and faculty of the Department of Dramatic Art and PlayMakers, and committed resources to engaging one of our brilliant faculty members, Professor Jacqueline Lawton, as a racial equity facilitator for the entire unit. We began engaging intimacy directors and drama therapists in the development of our work when it was called for. And we continued to deepen our conversations, internally and with artists engaged in our work, to better understand how we can make PlayMakers more equitable, and how we can ensure we are creating a safe, open, and inclusive work environment where all artists are enabled to do their very best. The work is ongoing. It is difficult, but it is necessary if we want to remain an important part of a national conversation on the power and impact of live performance.

Today, for good reason, we spend a lot of time talking about AEDI. I’ll add that many educators, artistic leaders and institutional and organizational leaders worry that it is *all* we talk about these days, and that the work we are creating — and the craft we are trying to teach — may be compromised. I will admit that this has been an exhausting, challenging time. But I also deeply believe that my job is to keep my attention on both “areas:” indeed, it’s my job to make a future for PlayMakers where the high quality of the creative work and the AEDI work are inextricably and seamlessly linked. But I am also aware that I happen to be serving this company at a time of transition and transformation when we are learning how to do that: asking what the nature actually is of the nature to which we are “holding up a mirror.” I will also share with you that this time has made me cherish the moments I get to spend in a rehearsal hall: *making* the work, as opposed to only talking about it. And fundamentally, great stories, told well, bridge so many divides. I try to make my rehearsal rooms *brave* spaces as opposed to only *safe* spaces, whether I’m working on Shakespeare or Susan Lori Parks.

PlayMakers has always been committed to the “classical canon” of plays as part of the work it puts on stage. We consider “classics” anything written 50 years ago or longer, so the pool of titles is quite deep. These works are not to be cancelled: they became classics because they contain fundamental, timeless human truths, and/or wrestle with things that we continue to wrestle with today. For me, the question comes down to who gets to tell them? For the second time in my tenure, I was proud to offer a season of diverse plays last year entirely directed by

women, three of whom are women of color. Our resident acting company is currently made up of a majority of people of color. This means many of these classic works must be *reimagined*. And they must be produced alongside works and voices that never had access to become classics, as well as new work that will define a brand-new canon. And this to me is a great joy. Done well, this diversity of perspectives makes for richer, more complex and surprising work. And of course, it also informs how we balance a season of work.

In this coming season, PlayMakers will take on two classic works with a fresh new perspective. First will be Kate Hamill's adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*, which recently premiered at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Directed by Meredith McDonough, this is a wild and delicious romp that, while maintaining Austen's beautifully written social satire, brings with it a wildly fresh and contemporary aesthetic. It has all the beautiful trappings of the period, infused with color, music, and rhythms of the 21st century. I got to see the Guthrie's production, which Meredith directed, a couple of weeks ago, and I am so excited for our audiences to experience *Emma* in this inspired, hilarious, and moving retelling. I hope it will appeal to audiences of all ages.

The second of our classic texts this year will be my first attempt at directing one of greatest plays in the English language. It hadn't been on my immediate list, but I've been waiting for the right moment and the right company with which to make it, and that moment has come. At the start of the pandemic we were mid-production of a lovely production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in which our company member Tia James was in the role of Marc Antony. Watching her build that role during rehearsal, and seeing it come to life on stage, I was convinced that Tia should be my Hamlet. Finally, a few years later, I'm so excited (and terrified) to dig into this play with her and the rest of the company. In fact, the work on my end began months ago as I put my creative team together.

There is no question that I could probably quit my day job and spend every waking moment between now and first rehearsal working on *Hamlet*. The further you dive, the further you have to go. But working on it is also keeping me sharp, curious, and aware of our deep, complex and shared humanity. Working on it is allowing me to dream on every conscious and unconscious level.

And it reminds me that we never lose sight of the fact that one of our main goals is to entertain—in communion with one another – in as many different ways as there are perspectives. So I also want to share with you some information about our final show of the season. In the summer of 2017 I went to see my dear friend and colleague Jeff Meanza's production of a quirky little play about an Elvis impersonator who, through some hijinks outside of his control, is thrust into a new role as a drag queen. At the end of the show people were actually dancing in the aisles, and I knew I wanted to tell that story on our stage. Well, that dear friend and colleague is now back at PlayMakers, and I am happy to say that Matthew Lopez's *The Legend of Georgia McBride* will close out our season this year in all its gawdy glory. It's ridiculous funny and deeply poignant – a rare feat to accomplish – and I hope you'll join in the party.

I want to conclude with a few words born of one of my long-time favorite inspirational quotes. At a conference I once attended, the Danish architect Bjark Ingells said that “I hate the expression ‘think outside the box.’ In architecture, the box is everything. Our job is to dive further and further *into* the box: to limitlessly dream into and push the boundaries of the box.”

I believe a director and an artistic leader should guide, encourage, provoke, protect, and confront artists and audiences alike to dream and dive further and deeper “into the box.” I believe that everything we produce — and the way we produce it — should in some small or large way have this mission at its core. As a director, my greatest passion is for the detective work in understanding the world of a play and discovering all the possible stories inside it. That detective work is intellectual, spiritual, political and kinesthetic. As an artistic leader of a regional theatre, the same applies. I try to be equally curious, compassionate and rigorous in discovering the intricate make-up of all that defines our institution.

Transformation was the theme of my inaugural season, but I have quickly come to realize that it has only just begun. And begun again. And again. That is what it means to be an artist.

Transformation will mean taking risks to plan for a future that may not (and in many cases *should* not) look like our legacy, but must respect it as the context that got us here and gives us the information that we need to move forward.

If universities are spaces for the development of new knowledge, then theater can give that knowledge meaning. Theater artists begin with a text or an idea, then allow those ideas to infect them through the creative process. Those ideas lead to dreams, and the dreams are made manifest on stage. The playwright makes the dream tangible, the director envisions the dream into a world, and the actors and designers breathe life into this new reality. Then we invite the audience to share in this dreaming, giving them the fuel to inspire the flame of their own imaginations: to awaken their empathy. I believe that it is our creative work and responsibility to dream of a better world collectively. Because our imaginations are indeed the stuff that dreams are made on.

Vivienne Benesch is Producing Artistic Director of PlayMakers Repertory Company and Professor of the Practice in UNC’s Department of Dramatic Art. Before coming to UNC in 2017, she was Artistic Director of the Chautauqua Theater Company from 2005 to 2016, and also has directed productions by the Folger Theatre, Trinity Repertory Company, the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, the Detroit Public Theatre, and New York’s Roundabout Theatre, among others. As an actress, she has worked on and off-Broadway, in film and television and at many of the country’s most celebrated theaters, including an OBIE Award for her performance in Lee Blessing’s “Going to St. Ives.” In 2017 she was awarded the Zelda Fichandler Award, given by the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation to a director or choreographer who has made, and who continues to make, a significant contribution to their community through extraordinary work.

