

Good morning. I'm here to talk to you today about your lives and your future as actors. This is a difficult time to be contemplating any career, much less one with the uncertain and sporadic nature of the theatre, or of the entertainment business in general. What we have all lived through in the last few weeks is the greatest drama most of us will ever see or know. Nothing we do as actors can equal the life-shaking experience of the World Trade Center attacks. No theatre experience can equal the heroism of our fellow citizens. We feel privileged to bear witness to it, and moved, more than any story could move us, by their sacrifice. But you, today, are entering into the world from the training ground you have chosen. And youth and the living must go forward. You are entering into a life that is part of our culture, the culture that terrorism opposes and that democracy upholds. You are going to be cultural

firemen, and stand in the front ranks of our nation's celebration of life -- through your comedy and drama, through your creativity and joy, through your perspective, your intelligence.

This is meant to be a pep talk, though I'm sure none of you needs a pep talk. I'm pretty sure that you are all rarin' to go and can't wait to show the world how wonderful and how talented you are. And believe me, that's the attitude to have. The profession you have trained for is a demanding and ruthless one. It can eat you up and spit you out. It can take your soul and your heart with the disappointment that is inevitable in such a competitive world. There are simply not enough jobs for all the people in this business. Only 15% of the members of Actors Equity Association, the professional stage actors union, are working at any given time.

Many of you probably don't know who I am, yet I have toiled in the service of Thespis for nearly 40 years. In the few movies I have made, I have played small parts. So I am not what America at Large would call a Star. I have made a living at this business of acting, and have only had to resort to what we call a "job-job" a few times in my career. I've wanted to be an actor ever since I can remember. I was in my first play when I was seven, in Atlanta, GA, for the Children's Civic Theatre of Atlanta. I did a play a year with them in grammar school, and then in High School, I did plays with the Georgia Tech Drama Club, conveniently directed by my Mother! I also organized and performed in my Senior Class play, "Midsummer-night's Dream." I got a scholarship to Rollins College in Winter Park, FL, where I majored in Theatre, and after that, I studied for a year at the London

Academy of Music and Dramatic Art on a Fulbright Grant. That year in England was a treasure. I went to school all day learning how to do what I wanted to do, and I went to the theatre most nights, seeing wonderful actors and English Theatre, an education in itself. When I returned to the U.S., I went to the Front St. Theatre, where I got my Equity card after three shows. I not only acted in the shows, but was the wardrobe lady in charge of cleaning and repairing the costumes every week! I went to Canada and worked up there for several years, then came back to Atlanta, Ga, where I worked at the Alliance Theatre while I was a classical music DJ during the day. I finally came to New York, but it took nearly five years before I was able to get a job in New York City. That was nearly twenty years ago. I've had some successful shows and some not-so-successful, just like everybody. I've had three Tony nominations, and

won two Obies, a Drama Desk Award, and the Clarence Derwent Award.

It sounds like a fabulous career, but it never is a career except in hindsight. I've been lucky to get the jobs I have gotten, and each time, all I could think of was where the next job was. My experience is that you can't really talk about a career -- something that's shaped and thought out with choices that are carefully weighed -- until after it's happened.

I've just ended a run in one of the most satisfying roles of my life -- that of Lady Britomart in George Bernard Shaw's MAJOR BARBARA. We played all summer at the Roundabout Theatre on 42nd St., and I have rarely enjoyed being in a production so much. The cast was uniformly well-cast and made up of very good actors whose only desire was to serve the

play. That doesn't always happen. They also happened to be the kind of people you enjoyed spending time with. That doesn't always happen. In addition to a really good director -- that really doesn't happen often -- we had a fabulous set and glorious costumes, and it was a special, excellent production of a difficult and fascinating play.

MAJOR BARBARA has always been one of my favorite plays, and Shaw has been just about my favorite playwright. I was in my first production of MAJOR BARBARA at the Front St. Theatre in Memphis, Tennessee back in 1964. I played the part of Sarah, the younger daughter, and fell in love with the play itself. Lines from it are seared into my brain and have become part of my perspective on life. Plays can teach us so much if we give ourselves to them, and I have learned a lot from the plays I have

worked on over the years.

We all know that Shakespeare is not only a great playwright, but a great philosopher, poet, historian, and objective observer of human frailty in all its sadness and glory. There is so much that can be learned from working on a Shakespeare play. The language alone shapes our brains to think more broadly and imaginatively. It is like music. And Shaw's language is like music. He revered Mozart, and the sense of speech that his musical ear heard made him able to write some truly wonderful speeches and dialogue.

For me, the theatre is about language. Although I've been in a several musicals, and have had a good time doing them, the root of my love for theatre has always been language and the expression of ideas.

The recent events in our lives points up the necessity of thinking clearly and beautifully about what we want as individuals and as a people. Theatre helps us to think. It helps us to define for our selves the values we want in our lives. It's true that a lot of modern theatre seems more nihilist than life-affirming, but I do believe that every play at its core makes some statement, however negatively expressed, about man's ability to love.

I've played some characters that people respond to as stereotypes, or as "mean" people. They never seem that to me. I find what I can love about those characters and I understand what it is they want in positive terms. Everyone cares about something. Finding the caring, the passion, in a character makes them alive, especially if that character appears to be one-dimensional. They may operate from a value

system that you don't like, but to play them you must try to not only understand that value system, but believe in it. This is why actors can appear so weird to the outside world! Someone once said that actors are schizophrenics, but they are schizophrenics that come back from the other world they go to -- they don't stay there.

Being an actor today is a curious proposition. On one hand you have theatre performers, and on the other you have film and television stars -- the people that everyone thinks of immediately when you say "actor". They are what most of you probably want to be. The fame that makes those actors into celebrities is not for everyone. Celebrity touches very few. If it touches you, please remember that celebrity and wisdom are not the same thing. It's hard to remember that when everyone is telling you

“yes” and agreeing with you and telling you what a wonderful person you are. There’s nothing wrong with that. Just remember that the luck of the draw has a lot to do with it. There are hundreds of talented actors out there.

When I think of “actor,” I think of a theatre actor, and in my mind, being that kind of actor is really a calling. We are called on to express the hopes and dreams, the inchoate longings, the fears, the foolishness, the humor, and ultimately the nobility, inherent in the experience of being human: the comedy and the drama of the human condition. To do that the actor needs to be a Renaissance man. He needs to know as much as he can know, about everything. Any bit of knowledge can help you in your assessment of character and situation. A model from another system, biology say, can give you insights into structuring a scene, or the thoughts or

objectives of a character. Poetry can open your minds and ears to the beauty and flow of language, and that sense can transfer to ordinary everyday speech in a way that enlivens it and makes it richer and more accessible to the audience. Music, of course, is a necessity for the actor. Language is, after all, music of a sort. A sense of rhythm and dynamic is essential to clear speech and concise communication, just as a sense of rhythm and melody are essential for successfully doing other accents than your own. Continuing to learn and hone your skills is essential for growth as a artist, and those who do it best have a love of discovery and exploration, and a discipline that keeps them focused.

The partner of discipline is discernment, which grows more sharp and clear as you garner experience.

Talent is hard to define. It seems to consist of some natural gifts, like vocal beauty, physical ability, intelligence, an ear for music, but it is also determined by perseverance, hard work, the ability to assimilate and use ideas, that illusive thing called imagination, and discernment. Discernment is what we use to make the choices we make, about a character, or in our lives. It is the shaper of our perception. And we are lucky to be in a profession that demands we learn discernment and discipline if we are to be successful.

Every time I learn something as just plain “me,” it becomes part of the bank of experience that I can draw on as an actor. But I learn things through my characters and work as well, and just plain “me” grows through that.

Know as much as you can about psychology -- it's all about actions and objectives. Study speech and deportment. Read historical fiction and history to gain insight into other times and customs and social behavior. Watching old movies is useful for speech and style and carriage. Biographies often contain practical tips, and insights that can help you with your perspective on life. Keep your voice and body flexible and responsive instruments.

And please don't neglect your spirit. The metaphysical element of being, whether as a person or as an actor, cannot be overlooked. I'm sure you know I'm not talking about organized religion. I'm talking about the fact that your spiritual self is the source of your ability and authority as an actor. It is where your power comes from. It defines your truthfulness.

Acting relaxation techniques and meditation techniques are similar. And it's because we cannot do good work without being totally centered, without losing our sense of the personality Self. The actor has to find neutral before he can change gears, although that analogy may not be useful to those of you who have never driven a stick-shift car! Your spirit, your divine nature, is your most important resource. Be aware of it, and nurture it.

At the heart of all really great acting is a mystery. We don't know how we do what we do. There is a transformation that is not understandable. It just happens. And you have to trust it and allow it, and welcome it. It is intuition in the service of intelligent analysis -- an immediate knowledge of a non-cerebral sort. When that mystery happens to you, it is

humbling and empowering at the same time.

Recognize it and remember it.

Be kind to one another and supportive. It can be a very difficult life. Be grateful to your parents for their support of you and what you have chosen. You may need the safety net of family many times in your career. You will even need them when the full glory of success has crowned you, should you be so lucky. Success is never quite what you thought it would be. To be successful, it must be a disciplined life, and the hours make it hard to have friends outside the business.

It takes a lot of commitment to endure the ups and downs, the constant unemployment, the ravages of playing with your emotional nature, the time and effort dedicated to keeping fit and flexible, as well as

pushing outward and always expanding one's boundaries -- physically, mentally, and spiritually.

However, I can attest to the fact that it is worth it, and the pay-off can be glorious. The indescribable feeling of being at one with the audience, leading them, using yourself to the height of your power, your whole being totally focused and clear is a transcendent one. It's addictive. Once we have tasted that delicious experience, we want to have it again and again. And we can, night and night, doing a play -- creating in that space we share with the audience, breathing the same oxygen. Theatre is the only place people come together voluntarily to think and laugh and cry and grapple with what it is to be alive and human.

Although it is hard today to think of anything more

dramatic than what we have recently lived through, what we do does help people to acknowledge their emotions, their attitudes, their fears and hopes, their foibles, their silliness, their altruism, their own divinity. We have the opportunity to help people see how magnificent it is to be a human being. That's a calling worth pursuing.

So keep faith with yourselves, keep learning and growing, and keep believing in your purpose. But above all, always keep in mind that great theatrical adage: Remember your lines, and don't bump into the furniture.