

Today is a very special day. You are leaving the cocoon of school and entering into the sunlight of life. You are looking forward to the struggle that is sure to come, the challenge of making your mark on the world. I'm pretty sure that all of you feel you have something wonderful to offer the world through your talent, and I hope that you get a chance to share that magical portion of yourself with audiences throughout your lives.

I'm a theatre person. Although I've done movies and TV, I grew up wanting to do theatre. I was in my first play when I was 7 years old. The Children's Civic Theatre of Atlanta, where I grew up, was founded and lead by a remarkable woman, who would put on one play each year for children, and all the parts were played by children too. I was in The Sleeping Beauty, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, The Wizard of Oz. and East of the Sun and West of the Moon -- all performed by children. Once you reached the age of 13, you couldn't participate any more. She held the auditions in the central library, and every single child that showed

up and actually stood up in front of the room was written into the play. The smallest children would be a flower say, with just a few words or a song, and as you grew older, you would get to play bigger parts. It was a labor of love, completely non-professional, and a wonderful, fun, learning situation for all the children involved.

Some of you may have been performers in school -- grammar or high school. And all of you now have come through the AMDA courses, acting and singing and taking classes; learning, growing, loving what you were having the chance to learn and experiment with, deepening your appreciation for what it takes to be really good at what you do. And now it's time to go out and do it!.

Well, the first thing I want to say is that you must carry all that you have been doing here with you for the rest of your working lives. You must love what you do. You must experiment with your own parameters. You must never cease growing and learning. Become a sponge for

knowledge -- and exercise the discipline that is the cornerstone of craft.

I think discipline is a misunderstood word today. We live in a very free society, and school, life itself, is not as rigorous as it once was. The rules have slackened in a lot of areas. But the artist must always respect the discipline of his craft. The perfection of that craft is the work of a lifetime. A true artist never stops honing his craft. The architect Corbusier said, "Technique is the foundation of expression." and that is true for all the arts. Watching other experienced artists can be a good way to learn, and if you work with someone you particularly admire, ask them if they'd be kind enough to give you pointers from time to time.

I like to watch old movies for clues about behavior and language usage. Style is a difficult word to define -- it involves an outward presentation of the self, and is sometimes quite conscious and artificial. At other times it

is introverted. But style is required in some plays, and without it, the play or performance doesn't ring true. So studying the style of a period, or of other actors, is a way to broaden our understanding of how to approach various texts and roles.

Over the years I have found it very helpful -- and fun -- to read historical novels to get a feeling for period. A Shakespeare play is made more rich by reading a historical novel about the period he lived in, for instance. When I was in *Henry IV* last year, for instance, I read a novel about Katherine, the wife of John of Gaunt, from whom the Henrys in the play descended. It's also an easy way to pick up on the mores and social customs of a time -- what was permitted and what wasn't. Now I am about to do "The Rivals," by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and I am going to read a biography of him, that will not only tell me about him and his thoughts when writing the play, but also about the time he lived in that he is satirizing in his play.

But some of your most important growing will be private -- between you and yourself. You've been given tools here, and when you use them in a job, you will begin to find out what works for you and what doesn't. If you are smart, you will continue to read scripts of every variety, to increase your knowledge of the medium and dramatic literature. Theatre is a language medium, just as film is a visual one. If you want to do theatre, then language, words, are what you need to love and cherish.

One of the hardest things to do as an actor is to continually believe in yourself. If you have trouble getting a job, it's easy to lose faith in yourself. Perseverance takes courage then. If you keep learning, and keep the flame of commitment burning in your heart, you will eventually succeed. Some of you may be like me, destined to be more successful at an older age. I was never an ingenue. And I had to come to terms with myself as a character actor at an earlier age than most.

And it's simply amazing how many talented people there are in the world. So much of what we are finally able to do is just plain luck. I've heard luck defined as the crossroads of preparation and opportunity. Being in the right place at the right time AND being prepared. The harder you work, the luckier you are. Luck: Laboring Under Correct Knowledge.

Becoming a real actor takes the courage to be ruthless in your assessment of yourself. You must know your strengths and liabilities, just like any business would need to do. After all, part of getting work is marketing yourself, in a way. So you need to take stock and decide what of yourself is the best to share and show.

I have always thought that meditation was a wonderful tool for the actor. True power as a actor comes from a still center. It is an anchor for whatever you want to do or become. I sometimes liken it to driving a car. For those of you who don't know about a stick-shift car, you have to

pass through Neutral to put the car into any gear. So with yourselves. If you move from a neutral center, you can freely move into any gear of yourself. But if you are stuck in gear, you cannot easily move to another gear. So meditation, of any kind, centers you and deepens awareness, another essential tool of the actor.

Talent comes in many forms. Some is vibrant and engaged with life. Some is retiring, thoughtful, and searching.

There are so many ways to express oneself or a role. We can approach from the outside or the inside, but the only important thing is connecting with an audience. The job is to tell a story, no matter what medium you are working in, to assess the most efficient way to convey what needs to be conveyed for the audience to join in your imagination's creation.

Acting is hard work. It can be psychically, emotionally, and physically draining. It's important to take care of your instrument -- your body and voice. Some roles need the

devotion of an Olympic athlete -- the diet, the sleep, the exercise -- to be successful. So, take care of yourselves. Be mindful of your well-being. Respect your self, and respect your soul. Remember that it is your soul, too, that you put into your work, not just your heart and mind and sweat and tears.

Ethel Barrymore, a great American actress, said, "You must learn day by day, year by year, to broaden your horizon. The more things you love, the more you are interested in, the more you enjoy, the more you are indignant about -- the more you have left when anything happens."

If you are lucky enough to have the support of your family in your pursuit of an acting career, be very thankful. It can be a hard life in terms of security, and the support of family is a safety net when difficult times come around.

So here you are, embarking on a life's work -- to tell the stories that make us encounter ourselves and know

ourselves. You have the chance to “hold the mirror up to nature” as Hamlet said, to show us who we are in all our many facets -- our greed, our generosity, our altruism, our selfishness -- and above all our love, the myriad ways that human beings connect with one another in love and out of love. Embrace this task; it is a noble one. But never forget the ancient theatre adage: remember your lines, and don't bump into the furniture.

Congratulations to you all! And my best wishes for your happy and successful careers.