

# The Bucket Brigade: ATHE President's Address, 2013

*Henry Bial*

It is a distinct privilege for me to stand up here today and address you as ATHE's president. I am honored by the confidence that you've shown in voting for me, and if you didn't vote for me—well, I'm honored to represent you anyway. More than honored, I'm humbled to take my place in a tradition that includes so many great leaders, some of whom are with us this morning: Mark Heckler, Jill Dolan, Donna Aronson, Karen Berman, Suzanne Burgoyne, Steve Peters, and, of course, Bill Doan. Can we have a round of applause for these distinguished leaders?

This is my eighteenth ATHE conference in a row. As some of you may know, the number 18 carries a special significance in the Jewish tradition. It is the sum of the numerical value of the letters in the Hebrew word *chai*, which means "life." Now I'm not going to say that ATHE is *life*, or even that ATHE is my life, but I will say that ATHE has defined, guided, and shaped my *professional* life since I was a shaggy, smart-ass graduate student. So it's a special joy to look out now and see so many of the colleagues, so many of the collaborators, so many of my students, so many of the near and dear friends that I've met along the way. I went through the conference program book last weekend, and between people I've worked with, been on a panel or committee with, shared a drink or a meal with, it's something like 25 percent of the people here. (And the other 75 percent, I'll get to you.) And for the grad students and emerging scholars out there, let me add that a goodly portion of that 25 percent are people who at one time or another chose to not hire me or to not publish me, or to not come to my panel. I mention this not to be all "How do you like me now?" (well, maybe it's a little bit of that), but mostly to say that one thing I've always valued about ATHE is that this association reminds me that those of us who are committed to theatre in higher education are not competing with each other—we're cooperating with each other for a cause in which we all believe. And it's that cause—to support and advance the study and practice of theatre and performance in higher education—that I want to talk to you about today.

Under ATHE's bylaws, the president-elect serves a two-year term, so I've had a lot of time for people to ask "Why would you want to serve as ATHE's president? How do you have the time?" By which I understand them to mean, "Why would you do this when you could be out teaching, doing research, and making art?" Here's what I tell them: "I have a full bucket of water. I drew it from the well to slake my thirst, to wash my hands, to water my plants. But now my neighbor's house is on fire. What would you do?"

And I say, think of the service given by some of the great figures in our profession: Jill Dolan, who was president-elect of ATHE when I first joined, who brought her considerable critical skills to bear on how we think about our field. Mark Heckler, who was president when I joined ATHE—he's now president of Valparaiso University, but returns every year to ensure the future of our field by anchoring our Leadership Institute. And think of the late Marvin Sims, who before he was taken from us too early, served as president of ATHE and the Black Theatre Network at the same time. Think about the individuals from the professional theatre: Burgess Meredith, who was president of Actor's Equity; Arthur Miller, who was president of the literary organization PEN; Jane Alexander, who was chair of the NEA. Now I'm not in that league and I don't expect to be, but these are some of my inspirations. These inspirational figures weren't great because they served, they served because they were great, because they would not hoard their water while the village burned.

And once again, my friends, the woods are burning.

In 2003, more than fifty million people attended a live theatre event in the US. In 2010, it was forty-five million.<sup>1</sup> The woods are burning.

In 1975, one-third of US faculty positions were adjunct or nontenure-track; today, it's closer to two-thirds, and those numbers are increasing.<sup>2</sup> The woods are burning.

In 2008, states supported higher education at an average rate of nearly \$8,500 per student; in 2013, it's less than \$6,200.<sup>3</sup> The woods are burning.

Can ATHE, by itself, reverse these trends? No. But we've got a bucket and we intend to use it.

What resources do we have, and how can we use them to support and advance the study and practice of theatre and performance in higher education?

As the many fabulous panels, performances, and workshops this weekend have demonstrated, we've got expertise. We've got creativity. We've got a thousand people and more who are passionate about what they do. We've got groundbreaking artists, insightful scholars, exceptional teachers. As theatre-makers, we have a tried-and-true means of reaching out to our communities. As teachers, we have the opportunity to develop and shape the next generation of theatre artists and audiences. As college and university professors, we have a voice and a part to play in the transformation of higher education.

You know all this. You live it every day. And I'm not here to tell you how to do your job. I'm here to tell you that ATHE can and must provide a way to bring us together as collaborators, not competitors. This isn't going to be easy, it isn't going to be fast. ATHE is a large and complex organization that represents a diverse group of constituencies. Beyond the walls of the association, the field of theatre in higher education is even more complex, from one- and two-person theatre departments in small colleges, to PhD programs at research universities, to stand-alone drama schools and everything in between. For nearly thirty years, ATHE has been a place where all of these constituencies are welcome, where faculty and students from around North America and around the world can gather to learn from and support one another. And we've done a good job at this task. When we survey our members, when we ask you to tell us how we're doing, the overwhelming majority of you report that ATHE is giving you what you need.

Whether it's our conference programming, our journals, our white papers on tenure and promotion, our professional-development opportunities, it is clear that to the degree that the people in this room represent the study and practice of theatre and performance in higher education, ATHE is supporting and advancing the heck out of it.

But what about the people who aren't here? And I don't just mean the conference attendees who aren't at this meeting or the members who chose not to join us here in Orlando. What about the hundreds, perhaps thousands of people engaged in the study and practice of theatre and performance in higher education who don't belong to ATHE? Raise your hand if there's someone you work with in your home department who doesn't belong to ATHE.

Now, I asked for a show of hands not because I want you to go out and hustle up new members (though, you know, you should), but simply to show how far we have to go. And it's more pronounced than that: as of January of this year, less than 40 percent of all US institutions that grant degrees or certificates in theatre or performance studies were represented at ATHE by even one member.<sup>4</sup>

Well, our mission is *not* to support and advance the study and practice of theatre and performance in a little less than half of higher education.

It's time for ATHE to do more, to behave less like a club and more like a government. To speak to, with, and for the whole field, not just the people in this room. It's time for us to bring our expertise, our creativity, and our passion to bear on the larger issues facing our field. It's time for a bucket brigade.

We must continue to serve our members, and we will, but we must also find new ways to help our members serve the field. In the past, we've done this through our advocacy efforts, our partnerships and affiliations with like-minded organizations: ASTR, BTN, AATE, KC/ACTE, Americans for the Arts, and, more recently, MLA, NAST, USITT, LMDA. We should continue those efforts, and we will. But we also need to recognize that no other group covers the same territory we do. Scholarly organizations don't fully address the everyday challenges of producing theatre in an educational context, nor should they. Theatre festivals don't address the crisis in scholarly publishing, nor should they. Focus groups do what they do, and they do it well, but they don't speak to the whole field, nor should they.

Only ATHE has the size, the scope, the resources, and the mission to serve the whole field, to support and advance the study and practice of theatre and performance in higher education. "Only *you* can prevent forest fires."

As your president, I'm committed to finding ways that ATHE can become a resource for the entire field, not just the percentage that attends our conference. In particular, I see us moving more decisively into the realm of data collection and analysis, and therefore into gaining a greater understanding of the full shape and texture of theatre in higher education. Those of you at the front end of your careers know how important this is. You're facing an uncertain job market and a profession that is certain to undergo radical changes over the course of your twenty, thirty, or forty years in the field. You deserve some hard facts about the situation, and ATHE can and should help you discover them.

For those of you who hold administrative posts at your home institutions, you know that in the current budgetary environment, data is the coin of the realm. As income inequality surges, while public investment in higher education plummets, colleges and universities are being asked to do more and more with less and less. It's not enough to be good at what we do—we also have to prove that we're good at it in a way that fits on the dean's spreadsheet. Everyone in this room knows that theatre and performance in higher education provides a high return on investment for students, for the university, for society. You've lived it—ATHE can and should help you prove it.

Or maybe you're coming up for tenure, or promotion, or just trying to figure out where you and your colleagues fit into the larger field, why your work matters, how you can do more. Maybe you're ready to give something back, and you want to know where and how your contribution can do the most good. ATHE should be helping you figure out where you're needed the most, where you can stand in the bucket brigade.

Finally, ATHE needs more information about the field so that we can better target our own strategic-planning process. How can we set goals, plan action steps, and even *know* if we're advancing our mission if we don't know where we are as a field, if we don't know the full measure of the challenges we're facing?

Now this isn't to suggest that the future of our field is all some kind of numerical balance-sheet exercise. As Einstein said, "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."<sup>5</sup> But we must recognize that in the next decade or more, supporting and advancing the study and practice of theatre in higher education is going to require not just passionate advocacy, but passionate *evidence-based* advocacy. And who else but ATHE can help provide that evidence?

Toward that end, the governing council has dedicated resources toward increasing ATHE's capacity for data collection and analysis. It's not going to be easy—few things worth doing are. But

we're already at work identifying what we can learn by mining existing data sources, such as the National Council for Educational Statistics IPEDS data, the SNAAP (Strategic National Arts Alumni Project), and our own member surveys, as well as figuring out what data we want and need to go out and collect ourselves. For example, we've begun a pilot project to analyze faculty job postings in theatre and performance studies from the last hiring cycle to find out how many vacancies there were, what kind of credentials and specialties were most in demand, and so on. As these inquiries begin to bear fruit, we'll be sharing the results with you via the ATHE website and other channels of communication. If you'd like to be directly involved in this effort, I encourage you to contact me directly at <president@athe.org>. And if a representative of ATHE should come to your door with a clipboard (metaphorically speaking), I hope you'll answer. I hope you'll stand up and be counted.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy the remainder of this superb conference. Enjoy the company and comradeship of old friends and new, share your ideas and feelings freely, and take this opportunity to refill your bucket. You're going to need it.

### Notes

1. Roland J. Kushner and Randy Cohen, *National Arts Index 2013*. Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2013. 65.
2. American Association of University Professors (AAUP), "Trends in Faculty Employment Status, 1975–2011" <<http://www.aaup.org/issues/contingent-faculty/resources-contingent-appointments>> (accessed 1 July 2013).
3. Phil Oliff, Vincent Palacios, Ingrid Johnson, and Michael Leachman, "Recent Deep State Higher Education Cuts May Harm Students and the Economy for Years to Come." Report, 19 March 2013, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington, D.C.
4. Comparing ATHE membership rolls to U.S. Department of Education statistics on degree-granting programs in theatre, we find that only 325 of the 919 US theatre programs were represented in ATHE as of 1 March 2013.
5. In preparing this text for publication, I discovered that the quotation, while often attributed to Einstein, is "probably not by Einstein." See Alice Calaprice, ed., *The Ultimate Quotable Einstein*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010. 482.

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