

This speech was presented at the annual dinner of Barter's Porterfield Society, a group of patrons who have committed to giving some form of bequest to Barter Theatre. I say this for two reasons: 1) It is a speech, meant to be delivered through speaking, and not necessarily a literary work meant to be read again and again. Although it may stand-up to being read and scrutinized, it is really written as a speech for impact and impression; and, 2) You must read the entire speech to get its full impact; do not stop halfway through as you may miss the point. Heaven forbid, don't take any of these quotes out of context. It is meant as a whole and not for its individual parts. Enjoy!

Reality, Truth & Dreams

Porterfield Society Speech on Sunday, November 6, 2011

By Richard Rose – Producing Artistic Director

From Robert Porterfield's Original Handwritten Memoirs:

The impossible came and went. Barter Theatre took root, survived the first season, the second season, the Depression, the tornado, the Board of Education. It survived the people who have given the southern Mountains the name of the Bible Belt. It even appears to be surviving the postwar economy....

It is one of the inexorable laws of the theatre that you can never stand still, that you must either grow or decay, and I want to keep on finding new dimensions to explore. And more than that I want to perpetuate the dream and make it multiply. Keep theatre in the Virginia Highlands as a mirror of truth as it was and is and should be, and make it last longer than one man's mere lifespan. In other words, defeat the old antagonist of Time.

Is it impossible? ... Margo Jones had a great dream for a theatre in Dallas, and she fulfilled her dream with a vital, exciting theatre. Then one day I read in the newspaper that Margo Jones had died, and the next year the Margo Jones Theatre was dead.

Will that happen to Barter Theatre? I'd like to think not. I'd like to think my work is not as mortal as myself. I'm hanging on to ... the hope(s) that Barter Theatre will prove to be more than bricks and mortar, and that what it is will outlast me and my generation, perhaps even the next generation and the one after that.

I don't know what new directions the theatre will take. But in front of the Old Opey House just beneath the marquee are two plaques I had painted the first summer we moved in, and I hope they will stand as long as the building stands, proclaiming my testament of faith.

"This building erected in 1830.

"The original idea of Barter Theatre was to bring together the hungry actor and the farmer with a surplus of produce.

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It seems appropriate to begin a speech to Barter's Porterfield Society with a quote from Robert Porterfield. I have said most of those very same things myself during my almost twenty-year tenure here at Barter Theatre. The hand painted plaque that Bob writes of has been replaced by a more permanent one, which still carries his exact words. A second plaque was placed on the building in my first year here, which reads:

THE PURPOSE OF BARTER THEATRE

Our Artistic Intent Is

- To dedicate our work to the betterment of the human spirit, and to the enrichment of the human soul through laughter, tears or a smile;
- To challenge the thoughts of intelligent people, and to reflect honest society through experiences that are both familiar and new to us;
- To add insight to the hidden, and to bring depth to the obvious, through images and visual stimulation using the best of contemporary theatrical devices;

And, Ultimately,

- To touch the hearts, to challenge the minds, and to reach the souls of all who enter Barter Theatre's doors, young and old.

With great frequency, folks from all over the world read these plaques and are so inspired that they make sure to take photos of each of them and frequently pose beside them so that they may live on in their memory.

Barter's staff and Board of Trustees have further dedicated themselves to the following:

The Overall Purpose of Barter Is...

- To encourage public interest in the performing arts, particularly the art of theatre.
- To elevate the standards of appreciation by providing an opportunity for the general public to observe, enjoy and study the finest in theatrical art, both classical and contemporary.

- To offer the best possible productions of this art by presenting the finest theatrical artists.
- To encourage public interest in new theatrical endeavors that are relevant, universal and of good entertainment value.
- To provide opportunity and encouragement for young people to observe and learn the performing arts; And, to participate in them.
- To provide an artistic atmosphere and training program for individuals interested in all aspects of the performing arts as a profession.
- To assure the human resources and financial assistance for the foregoing to flourish in perpetuity.

I was going to speak on the topic of “Renew” this year; partially because the Fall and holiday season is all about renewal of donations, patron passes for the following year the renewal of Barter’s commitment to our patrons through the announcement of the new season and the renewal of Barter’s patrons to Barter through donations and ticket sales. Also, because as I pass these plaques almost every day on my way to give my curtain speech, I find myself frequently taking just a moment to remind myself that we must continually renew our commitment to the purpose of Barter Theatre both as laid out by Robert Porterfield – the continued sustenance of Barter Theatre and the ongoing effort to “combat the evil that would destroy culture and enlightenment of the world....” And to renew our mission to work for the betterment of the human spirit, to challenge thought and reflect honest society, to bring insight and to make sure all of this touches the lives of our patrons in a positive and fulfilling manner.

Plus, I really believe that we could use some renewal in this nation. We’ve watched what has been commonly referred to as “The Arab Spring” – Spring always being the time of renewal as the new growth arises from the frozen earth – and one can only hope that sometime soon we will experience “The U.S. Spring” and we will once again renew our commitment to each other

through cooperation, compromise, and courteous debate in this country for the benefit of the whole instead of the desires of a few.

The “Renewal” speech was going to be an inspiring and moving speech; trust me.

Instead, I seem to be fixated on “Reality, Dreams and Truth”; So, Renewal will have to wait for another year.

Now there are many topics about which folks seldom like to speak: POLITICS used to be one such topic, but we seem to be fixated about politics in this country at present thanks to 24/7 news; so the subject of politics being taboo, except where we disagree and cannot learn to have a civil discourse, seems no longer to have the stigma in public conversation it once possessed. TAXES seem to be a totally open topic for discussion as we all seem to agree that we are taxed too much so that is an easy conversation upon which to rally conversation in public. We still don't like to talk about RELIGION publically for obvious reasons. DEATH seems to be a subject we all like to avoid, especially we Baby Boomers who believe that we will live forever and really don't care anyway what happens after we pass.

But the subject that seems to be the most avoided in our discourse in this country is TRUTH, REALITY and DREAMS. TRUTH, because we have become experts at bending facts and information to suit our individual needs and desires and to make our point as if there is no other perspective; REALITY, because we so totally believe that the only reality in existence is our own – we have lost the sense of empathy and understanding for our fellow human beings and how they might see the world; And DREAMS, because we are cynical about obtaining what we have come to find out is not ever quite so wonderful as it was in our imaginations. When you live in a world of high expectations and instant gratification, it is very difficult to ever see the true realizations of your dreams.

We have turned TRUTH into factual sound bites as if truths can be merely measured by statistical information. We've turned REALITY into artificially produced TV programs. And we've reduced DREAMS into measurable goals rather than into the inspiring paths they are intended to be.

The arts in this country are under economic siege; or are they – TRUTH or fiction? Not a small question, really. While it may be true that arts organizations throughout this nation are struggling through extremely difficult financial conditions, some of that issue may be the responsibility of the arts organizations themselves? The REALITY may be that we have too many arts organizations for this country to support. The TRUTH may be that arts organizations may have unsustainable financial models; Maybe the arts should be remodeled? And the possibility of all of this is that the DREAM of why we create art and the purpose of art as outlined in the opening of this speech has been lost in the never ending effort to build organizations and institutions rather than inspiring the public and pursuing the DREAMS upon which we created our organizations in the first place. What is the TRUTH of this? What is the REALITY? And where is the DREAM motivating it all?

There is one item that has been of interest to me for several years now, one which has motivated Barter's most recent campaign entitled THE BRIDGE TO BARTER'S FUTURE. Just from observation, I would conclude that there have been more theatre buildings of mammoth size – I'm talking \$80 million to \$180 million buildings – built in this country over the last five years than in any other time that I can remember. This was reported most effectively, if unintentionally, by Theatre Communications Group, a national service organization for the theatre industry, in their publication of 2010 TheatreFacts, which examines annual trends in our industry. TCG reports that theatres around the nation were generally seeing a reduction in

employment of staff and actors, a decrease in subscriptions and some of the lowest levels of working capital in theatres around the nation since they have been tracking such statistics. Yet, they also reported that the nation's theatres have seen substantial growth in new, improved and/or expanded facilities.

This seems like a very contradictory situation to me. But it reflects our current culture in funding and the disconnect between DREAMS and REALITY. I will share a brief conversation that I had with a funding entity as it relates to one such theatre of national prominence. The DREAM of this theatre, if you will allow me to use that term, was to become one of the premiere theatres in the nation from which plays could be developed that would, then, move either into the commercial marketplace or to other theatres around the nation. The REALITY they perceived that they were experiencing is that their current facility did not allow them the capability to fulfill that dream as it's size, shape and configuration was not compatible with other theatres. A couple of hundred million dollars later and with a new facility, this theatre now found itself unable to develop or produce much, if any, of the new work that it set out to do because the burden of the new facility: Depletion of donor funds, exhaustion of fundraising staff and donor willingness, and the resources needed to operate within the new and expanded facility – to name but a few of the problems – eroded the possibility of fulfilling their dream because now they did not have the resources to produce and develop new plays and they were forced into producing more commercially viable works in order to fill the seats of their new facility, which was proving too expensive for them to operate within. The TRUTH may have been that they were not necessarily in need of a new facility at all to fulfill their DREAM and the REALITY of the new facility directly collides with the path they needed to follow to move forward.

We have seen this trend throughout our nation; Colleges around the nation have raised – continue to raise – billions if not

trillions of dollars for endowments and buildings and, yet, they are cutting academic programs reducing the “non-essential” departments such as art, theatre and literature, cutting faculty, and reducing the liberal arts requirements of their students in favor of other, more lucrative departments such as athletics or the research driven and grant rich science and medical programs. Cities build libraries that they cannot staff or do not have the ability to properly fund. Those are truthful statements. I think there would be very little disagreement in this room as we all know of colleges and cities that have done those very things. And, trust me, I have nothing against buildings; but we must be sure we are building for the right purpose guided by a combination of the DREAM, the REALITY and the TRUTH of the situation.

So let me, this late in the game, take one minute to define what we mean by REALITY, DREAMS and TRUTH as doing so at this moment might lend understanding to what I have presented thus far:

REALITY is largely defined as “the world or state of things as they actually exist...something as it is actually experienced or seen...a real thing or fact.” In philosophy, reality is defined largely as “something that exists independently of other things from which all other things derive.” Good luck with that definition. And we all know that to the person who has “experienced” an alien abduction, that abduction is reality. REALITY, unfortunately, is perception and lies in the mind of each and every one of us regardless of how much we try empirically to define it. God is very hard to prove and yet He is a reality to many. So, for tonight, you have been stuck with my REALITY as I am relating it to you. Sorry about that, but it’s all we have as humans. The theatre does the same thing; We look at Reality and reflect it back to you in hopes that it will connect and affect or influence your view of reality and together we will make the world a better place as a result of that connection.

DREAMS are a much more difficult concept to describe and I, for the purposes of our discussion here, will eliminate the nightmares and nighttime dreams of Freud, Jung and psychoanalysis and put forth more the notion of dreams as a series of images, ideas, and emotions that take form in a “state of abstraction” – and I do love the notion that dreams really do exist in a form of a state of abstraction rather than being translated into goals which must be achieved by a certain time in a certain way. I believe in an approach to dreams in the same way that the Jewish Rabbinical Tradition approaches the midrash – and I ask forgiveness of any of our Jewish friends for the oversimplification of this notion – in which the purpose is to evolve, discover and debate the meaning rather than seek a totally dogmatic result to the teachings. As this relates to DREAMS, this means that we are constantly striving to realize the dream and not simply to achieve a result. The DREAM never dies. Such is the case with Robert Porterfield’s DREAM; we must never let it die. My favorite definition of DREAMS, “A condition or achievement that is longed for; an aspiration.” The implication being that it might or can never be totally achieved but must be striven for at all times.

And, of course, TRUTH, summed up best as written by Aaron Sorkin and delivered memorably by Jack Nicholson as Col. Nathan R. Jessp in A FEW GOOD MEN, “You can’t handle the truth.” Or, as I have heard Howard McElroy, former Barter Board President, current Member of Barter’s Board of Trustees and passionate advocate for Barter Theatre, along with being a close friend, say to me on many occasions, “Your problem is you tell the truth. Nobody, nobody wants to hear the truth.” There is much truth in that. We often translate truth as merely facts; but, again, we have become experts on manipulating facts to suit our needs. I love the definition of, “That which is in accordance with fact or reality.” Wow; we already know that reality can be highly influenced by perception and fact can be manipulated. At one time TRUTH had the meaning of “fidelity to an original or to a standard or ideal.” But as ethics and beliefs have changed, so has

the standards of truth. My preferred definition is, I suspect, more modern: "Consistency or sincerity in action and character." While noble, however, that's totally a judgment call by some on the outside looking in. So, all we are left with is facts, which is a poor measure of truth as even fact demand interpretation.

So what have REALITY, DREAMS and TRUTH to do with Barter Theatre? On one level, it would be easy to assume, probably nothing. We are an art form that, even when presenting actual events, do so through fictional representations. Our REALITY is fictional representation at best. We certainly put forth the TRUTH entirely from our own perspective with facts that are not always fully presented or almost never without significant interpretation. And DREAMS are expected to be a way of life for us, so we are often dismissed negatively as dreamers.

But as an art form, we are highly driven by all of the above. As for REALITY, as Shakespeare so eloquently said, our job as theatre artists is "...to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature..." Now that mirror was never meant to be a literal reflection of the surface, but a reflection of all that appears in the mirror including that which is behind the façade and underneath the surface.

As for DREAMS, we are constantly seeking dreams – ours and others. We seek to fulfill in every play the dream of the author, the dreams for the characters in the play, and the dreams of the artistic collaborators for each and every production.

TRUTH: Well, I will say that the vast majority of theatre truly does believe in some form or manner that there is a fidelity to an original, a standard or ideal" essential to the make-up and meaning of being human. All theatre artists strive for "truthfulness," which is most easily defined as something that is most in concert with the audience on both a recognizable and understandable level of common experience.

That is REALITY, DREAMS and TRUTH on the artistic side of our work. How about on the organizational or institutional side of Barter Theatre? This is where these three subjects take on an entirely different meaning as the perceived TRUTH about Barter, the REALITY of operating our organization and the DREAMS that motivate our decision-making begin to conflict one with another from a public perspective and from our own perspective.

Let us deal with the conflicts that we at Barter run into between TRUTH and REALITY from the public point-of-view. The TRUTH is that Barter, by comparison with its colleagues around the United States, raises, in proportion, much less of its annual revenues through contributed income and proportionally much more of its revenue through tickets sales. The nation's average for professional theatres is 55% contributed income – Barter's is 23%, for tickets sales as a portion of total expenses the nation's average is 32% - Barter's is 62%. Those are facts.

Now there is a fact of another kind that demonstrates the disconnect between what people believe about Barter Theatre and what is factual – the TRUTH – about Barter. Much of the public believes that since Barter Theatre is The State Theatre of Virginia, that we are, therefore, employees of our great Commonwealth. Of course, as you all know, we are an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization who is funded by the Commonwealth of Virginia by less than 1.5% of our annual operating budget.

We have heard many times over that many believe that Barter is wealthy and therefore not in need of support; that the Town of Abingdon is a wealthy town and that because we attract 163,000 people through our doors every year we must be rolling in money. The TRUTH is that Barter's programs on average almost always cost more than we are able to take in each and every year. And in our current economic times where the need for free tickets from the schools for those students who are on the federal free lunch program and where poverty and

unemployment in this region have just landed our market the label as one of the top ten poorest areas in the United States, means that Barter is always extremely volatile in its annual operations. Between the beginning of October and end the December, Barter Theatre must raise \$410,000 toward closing its income gap for our 2011 Season. The income gap is the amount of money we must raise to meet all of our program expenses minus the money raised from ticket sales, corporate sponsors, government entities and foundations and other earned revenues. Don't panic. I know this sounds like a large number; But this is fairly typical one for Barter to have to raise each and every year in the last two or three months of the calendar. We will strive to raise every penny needed. The point here is to understand that we are not wealthy but work very hard each and every year to maintain a balanced budget.

So TRUTH, that collective understanding of what the public perceives to be true, and the REALITY of the operations of Barter Theatre are in direct opposition. Understanding the funding paradigm that Barter charges for tickets – has an admission price – therefore Barter's need to fundraise is diminished – is difficult as the public believes the TRUTH about Barter to be something entirely different, i.e. Barter is wealthy because it does sell tickets, or charge admission. And, yet, colleges do not seem to have the same difficulty with a similar paradigm: Colleges charge tuition – a lot of tuition if you think about it. Sit in a lecture class of 150 to 500 students at a major university and add up the cost of tuition per student credit hour and the number of students taking that class; the numbers are very favorable for the college. (I understand the arguments of having to fund other programs by having such large classes, etc. We have the very same issues here at Barter. This is a good comparison.) Yet Americans still donate to their colleges at record levels each and every year. And very few point to the fact that the colleges and universities have a large source of earned revenue from tuition, bookshops, student services, housing, and earnings from endowments. I would

contend that Barter, unlike colleges, has failed to let the TRUTH be known about the funding necessary to meet its programming needs. And the TRUTH is that Barter is a significant economic, cultural and educational driver in this region. The REALITY is that we must have sufficient annual funding to accomplish the programming that everyone has come to expect from us.

We at Barter and all of our advocates must do a better job of allowing our patrons and donors to understand our funding needs, in order to strive for the DREAM that Robert Porterfield laid out for us:

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Barter Theatre pledges itself to combat the evils that would destroy the culture and enlightenment of the world, by giving the best of its strength and devotion to the cause of truth, beauty, and the spiritual nourishment of the soul.”

In the end, the importance of our gathering tonight is that you – the members of the Porterfield Society – have placed an importance and value in your lives on Barter Theatre and understand the historic, cultural, educational and economic role that Barter holds in our region. I am reminded of a conversation that I’ve had recently with a prominent local businessman. We were about to enter a business meeting and this gentleman stopped me to tell me that some friends had recently taken a trip to New York and had attended some Broadway shows while in New York. He said that the first thing those friends said to him about their New York experience is that of all the shows they saw on Broadway, they did not see anything better than the shows that they experience at Barter Theatre. In their opinion, even coming fresh from their Broadway experience, Barter’s

productions were far superior. They ended by saying to this gentleman that the region really does not understand what a gem we have in Barter Theatre and how lucky we are that Barter is here. Of course, you understand this. And you have committed yourselves to the long-term existence of Barter. For your wisdom, your support and your generosity, I am grateful.

Now, the TRUTH is that I should have delivered to you the speech on renewal. The REALITY is that you are stuck with these ramblings that I delivered to you tonight about which to think. The DREAM is that, despite the above, Barter will continue to be stronger, continue to strive, continue to exist for many generations to come despite anything I might have said here tonight and that we will continue to combat the evils that would destroy the culture and enlightenment of the world.

Thank you for your commitment and dedication to Barter and for being a member of Barter's Porterfield Society. And never let REALITY get you down, always let TRUTH be your guiding principle, and strive for your DREAMS beyond what anyone is capable of imagining.

Good night, thank you for attending and be well so that we may see you here next year.