

Voice and Company

By Scott Kaiser

[The following speech was delivered by Scott Kaiser, Director of Company Development for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, at the Voice and Speech Trainer's Association Conference in Ashland, Oregon on July 26, 2008.]

Welcome to Ashland!

As I look around the room, there are so many familiar faces that I'm happy to see again. But there are also a lot unfamiliar faces that I look forward to getting to know over the next few days.

I wanted to start by thanking a few people that have made it possible for *all* of us to be here today.

I want to thank Nathan Field, William Ostler, John Underwood, Nicholas Tooley, and William Ecclestone.

I'd like to acknowledge Joseph Taylor, Robert Benfield, Robert Gough, Richard Robinson, John Shank, and John Rice.

I want to express my gratitude to Augustine Phillips, George Bryan, William Sly, Richard Cowly, John Lowin, Samuel Cross, Alexander Cook, and Samuel Gilburn.

And I especially want to thank William Kemp, Thomas Pope, Robert Armin, Richard Burbage, John Hemmings, Henry Condell, and William Shakespeare.

These are the names of the 26 "principal actors" in Shakespeare's plays as printed in the First Folio of 1623.

You'll notice this is not a list of directors, or dramaturgs, or designers. It's not a list of donors, or board members, or corporate sponsors. It's not a list of departmental chairs, or deans, or provosts. It's a list of *actors*.

We wouldn't have the First Folio at all if it weren't for a couple of actors—John Hemmings and Henry Condell—putting it together some seven years after Shakespeare's death.

I read these names to remind you all of what has nearly been lost, is nearly extinct, in the American theatre, and that is *company*.

Without a company of actors, there would be no Shakespeare.

There would also be no Moliere, no Brecht, no Lorca, no Odets, no Tracy Letts.

But this is not the Tracy Letts Festival, it's the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. So let me talk a little bit about the way we do things here in Ashland.

Now, you're going to hear a lot of superlatives about OSF while you're here.

You'll hear how we're one of the oldest theatres on the continent, dating back to 1935 when our founder, Angus Bowmer, produced *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* for Ashland's Fourth of July celebration.

You'll hear how we have one of the biggest operating budgets of any theatre in the United States: \$26.7 million.

You'll hear how we present 785 performances of 11 plays in true rotating repertory—four by Shakespeare, and seven by other playwrights—over a ten-month season.

You'll hear how we host over 400,000 audience members, most of whom, like you, come from hundreds of miles away.

You'll hear how we've presented Shakespeare's entire canon three times going on four.

So, yes, we have a long history, a huge staff, a devoted audience, and very deep pockets.

But that is not, in my mind, what makes us a great theatre. Because there are other companies in this country with long histories, big budgets, large staffs, and devoted audiences.

What makes this institution truly unique in the American theatre is our *repertory acting company*.

OSF has one of the largest acting companies in the United States, if not the world.

Currently, as I speak this, there are 102 actors on contract with the company, including Equity, non-Equity, young performers, and understudies.

But this is a gathering of voice professionals, so many of you are no doubt asking yourselves: What does "company" have to do with voice and text work?

Well, after 18 seasons with this company, I can say with great confidence: everything!

Because maintaining a great classical repertory company means a commitment to a set of *values* that makes great voice and text work possible.

Because we are a true rotating repertory company, we value actors who are transformational, adaptable, versatile, and multi-talented.

We value actors with strong craft, at home in a wide range of performance styles.

We value actors who use body and voice skillfully and expressively to convey a wide range of human thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

We value actors of intelligence, who possess an ability to interpret and illuminate the meaning of classical texts to a contemporary audience.

We value actors who understand the rigors of performing in rotating rep, and strive to maintain a healthy voice, body, and mind to meet those challenges.

We value actors who understand that the acquisition of acting skills is a continuous, career-long process, and are committed to their own long-term growth as performing artists.

We value actors who are comfortable with many different ways of working in the rehearsal process, and are open to feedback from many different points of view.

We value actors who are collaborative, who treat their colleagues with respect, and honor the diverse abilities, qualities, and achievements of the people they work with.

We value actors who strive for excellence in their work at all times, and are willing to risk failure in the pursuit of it.

And because these are our values—the values that make performing eleven shows in rotating rep possible—“company” has come to mean something truly exceptional at OSF.

Company means that our actors typically play two or three roles in a season, as well as understudy several other roles in the rep.

Company means that an actor with a lead in one show will be supporting his or her peers in another.

Company means casting with an eye towards artistic growth—challenging actors to acquire new skills, to play against type, to strengthen their craft, to grow as performing artists.

Company means casting for variety in our repertory, so that our actors can play in an August Wilson in the afternoon, a Shakespeare in the evening, and a world premiere the next day.

Company means striving to give each of our performers a chance to perform in all three of our venues—The New Theatre, The Bowmer, and The Elizabethan Stage—to improve their skills and strengthen their craft.

Company means that there are no “stars” here—we don’t import Daniel Radcliff or Katie Holmes to help us fill seats. Rather, we make a commitment to the actors who have made a commitment to us.

Company means taking company bows at curtain call, so that every actor who performs onstage, who makes a contribution to the art, shares the accolades with his or her peers.

Company means that most of our acting company returns from season to season, allowing us to make a commitment to the long-term growth of our actors as artists.

Company means that what our actors learn on our stages doesn’t go back to New York or Los Angeles when the show closes. That artistic growth stays here and becomes part of our resources for the next season.

Company means treating actors like artists, rather than commodities—artists that need opportunities to grow, to stretch, to learn, to develop their craft in a fully professional setting.

Company means investing in the long term growth of our actors by providing classes in voice, text, rhetoric, improv, yoga, tai chi, stage combat, aikido, fitness, Alexander Technique, and Feldenkrais Method to the actors—all at no cost whatsoever to them.

Company means providing the support of superb voice professionals, many of whom are in this room right now—like Andrew Wade, David Carey, Ursula Meyer, Jan Gist, and Sara Phillips—to work with our actors.

Company means these professionals are referred to as “Voice and Text Directors” here, not vocal coaches, as a true reflection of their important contributions to a production.

Company means that voice and text work is fully integrated into the process of making theater from pre-production to closing night.

Company means that the Voice and Text Director is considered a vital part of the production team, has a respected place at the table, and enjoys an equal voice, alongside the design team, in collaborative conversations with the director.

Company means that, for Shakespearean productions, the Voice and Text Director often has a hand in preparing, editing, or adapting the text, in collaboration with the director and the dramaturg, to advocate for the actor’s point of view.

Company means maintaining a constant presence in the rehearsal room to support the actors, and to encourage the full expression of the language of the plays through the actor's voice.

Company means employing whatever method best serves the actor to meet the artistic challenges at hand, rather than adhering to a rigid methodology.

Company means developing new plays from the ground up, with actors as the heart and soul of the process, just as in Shakespeare's company.

This includes the new Black Swan Lab, our program to develop new plays with actors and playwrights working together in an empty space.

It also includes *American Revolutions*, our newly minted program for actors, playwrights and historians to collaborate on 37 new plays in the next ten years based upon events in American history.

Finally, company means a commitment to diversity and inclusion that our audiences can actually see on the stage in our productions.

Why do I talk so passionately about company?

Because I believe it's important for us to remember that, for centuries, company—troupes of resident actors—served as the main conduit for the transmission of the craft of acting.

It's important for us to remember that, for centuries, the art of acting has been handed down from actor to actor, through the generations, in an unbroken chain.

Only recently has this chain been broken by the emergence of the actor as a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market.

Only recently has this chain been broken by the rise of the director as auteur.

Only recently has this chain been broken by the spread of producers, casting agents, talent agents, publicists, and all the other middle managers that come between the actor and the work.

It's important for us to remember this, because we, as voice and text professionals, are a kind of replacement link in that chain, providing actors with the mentorship and guidance that has been lost with the downfall of company.

And while the rest of the industry conspires to infantilize the actor, to profane, steal, or usurp the voice of the actor, in an art form that rightfully belongs to the actor, I believe we must do everything we can to create a theatrical culture that empowers, supports, and nurtures the actor—a culture of company.

In my mind, Teddy Roosevelt said it best in a speech he made in Paris in 1910:

“It is not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong man stumbled, or how the doer of deeds might have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred with sweat and dust and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, if he wins, knows the triumph of high achievement; and who, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat.”

Thank you.