Theater Management Knowledge Base

Interview

YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA

SHELDON EPPS

Conducted by Edward A. Martenson
May 16, 2016

Sheldon Epps was the Artistic Director of Pasadena Playhouse from 1997 to 2017. Prior to the Playhouse, Epps served as associate artistic director of the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego for four years. In addition, he was the cofounder of an Off-Broadway theatre called the Production Company. He has directed plays and musicals at theatres such as the Roundabout Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club, and the Goodman Theatre, as well as television episodes of such series as "Frasier" and "Friends."

SHELDON EPPS: In my senior year of high school, I gave up the idea of a law career and decided I wanted to be an actor. And after my parents got up off the floor, they said, "Well that's okay, but you have to go to school. You have to get a degree. You have to go to college." I only applied to three schools. I applied to Syracuse University and got in. I applied to Yale and was on the waiting list. And I applied to Carnegie Mellon University on a dare, because it was one of those places that auditions hundreds of people and only takes a few, and I got in. I accepted going to Carnegie Mellon University, and then got into Yale, but decided to go to Carnegie. And that is significant because this career path that I'm about to tell you about has to do with a lot of people that I went to school with. My being a director as opposed to an actor, I believe, is significantly influenced by one of my Carnegie classmates, in this story I will tell you.

So, I went to Carnegie, and actually graduated, which was in and of itself quite a feat because most people who go to Carnegie as actors either leave in second or third year, or ask to leave. At that time, there was a lot of attrition at Carnegie. But I made it through one way or another, and I graduated. I worked at the Alley Theater in Houston three or four times over the course of the next few years, and worked as an actor in many regional theaters, and also in New York. I did some commercials and was on a soap opera for a little while, but never had a substantial New York career. My career as an actor was mainly in regional theater.

It was a challenging time to be a classically trained actor of color. That was the nature of the training at Carnegie: classical training for the American theater. It was preparing you for a life in a company at a theater. By that time, there weren't that many companies in the American theater, and there are fewer now. So it was a tough time for an actor of

This interview was conducted by Edward A. Martenson and edited by Ashley Chang, and was prepared as the basis for discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described.

color to be classically trained and to have those aspirations. Even though I was a working actor, I was a somewhat frustrated working actor, because there were certain auditions I was never going to go to. Or if I went to those auditions, there were certain things I was never going to be considered for. I would go for that audition for *Romeo and Juliet* and read for Tybalt and have the director say to me, "Can you make it a little more urban?" Yikes, exactly. I had a lot of frustrations, and I had similar frustrations to what every actor has, in trying to make your career when you have no control.

Several of us who went to Carnegie were having that frustration at the same time. So we got together and started a theater. We literally over the course of a summer had a loft and a basement, and we dug out that basement and recreated that loft to be a 75-seat theater on West 18th Street in Chelsea, when Chelsea was a very dangerous neighborhood, not nearly as chic as it is now. And we started doing plays. I don't know how we did that. We didn't have any money. We didn't know anything about running a theater. Three of us were actors. One was a director. So I don't know how we did it. But somehow, will, ambition, and hubris can get you very far in theater. So we were able to start this theater and get it going rather successfully. The work was greeted really quickly as being good work. I think it was primarily because we had a club to call on: other people who graduated from Carnegie. We had really good designers, because we would call the people we worked with at Carnegie and beg them to come and do a set. We had really good sound technicians, stage managers, and actors, because we would ask other people that we knew from Carnegie to come and join us. There actually was a little bit of a sense of a company there, in that we used so many Carnegie people.

Beyond my getting to do a lot of roles that I wanted to do because I was actually one of the producers of the company, one significant event was that in the third or fourth year that we ran the company, our director was a gentleman named Norman Rene. You may not know Norman's name, but you probably know Craig Lucas, who got very successful. Craig at that time was a chorus boy in *Sweeney Todd* who has aspirations to be a writer, so Norman and Craig started to work together, and they did *Blue Window* and *Prelude to a Kiss*. *Marry Me a Little* was the very first thing that Craig both helped to conceive and write and was in. He used to run after his performances of *Sweeney Todd* to act in performances of *Marry Me a Little* in our tiny little theater. Norman came to me at one point when we had trouble finding directors that we really loved. He said, "You know, Sheldon, when I direct you and we have an argument, I usually think that you are right. I certainly would never admit it to you at the time. Both of us being Scorpios, I know you understand that. I would never admit to you that you are right, but I usually think you are right. You notice that two or three days later I will come back and do what you suggested, only make it my idea"—another great Scorpio trait. So he said, "I think that means that you think like a director. So instead of us only trying to get people in here when we don't know know them and don't like their work, why don't you direct some of these things? Then at least I can come to you right away and tell you honestly and directly what I think is working or not working." And I said okay, and very modestly chose to direct *Midsummer Night's Dream*. But it came out all right. Shortly after that, I did *Blues in the Night*. I started working at other off- and off-off-Broadway theaters and worked at Playwrights Horizons and MTC. And so I woke up one day and noticed I had been a director for a long time, and was actually paid to direct, and had a career going, and did not miss acting at all. I said, I guess I'm a director now. Following the call of the universe, I said, I think I'm a director now.

Fortunately, *Blues in the Night* went to the McCarter and to Broadway, and got a Tony nomination in a slim season. It was nominated for a Tony and that gave it an imprimatur that allowed it to be in London, where it was, in a not-so-slim season, nominated for an Olivier Award and ran for almost a year in London. Then it was done in many regional theaters. I got to hop around a lot of regional theaters and worked in a lot of great places. Then, wisely, I said, I'm not going to do that anymore, because I know people who got stuck doing one big project forever, kind of like James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. That can happen to a director, too, if you only end up directing one thing, making a lot of money, forever. I wanted to stop that, and let it be known that I wanted to direct other things, and I wanted to be known as a director who is not a black director but a director who had the good fortune to be a black man. A very subtle

but important distinction. And many people were not interested in hearing that, and would still call me to do *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. But there were some who said okay, Garland Wright being one of them. He brought me to the Guthrie to do *Death of a Salesman*, and many other places. Cleveland Playhouse said, "Come and do *Philadelphia Story*." And when I told somebody I was doing *Philadelphia Story*, they said, "Oh, is it a black version of *Philadelphia Story*?" I don't need to talk to you anymore.

So I started a very good career as a freelance director in a lot of great places. I had significant work as a director, as a freelancer, which is a very wonderful, creative, but exhausting life. Bouncing around from city to city, going someplace for six to eight weeks doing a show, then going back home and repacking your bag for a week, and then going to the next place where you will stay in an apartment that has only white walls. I went to the Guthrie and got to know Garland Wright, who was an exceptional man both as a director and an artistic director. Shortly after that I went to the Old Globe Theater and worked with Jack O'Brien, who was an exceptionally gifted artistic director and director in his own right, the total opposite of Garland Wright in terms of personality and texture and tone and color, could not have been more different than Garland. But great role models and mentors for someone who wanted to have a career in the theater. After my first production at the Old Globe, through the auspices of TCG, I got something called the National Theater Artist Residency Grant. That was a chunk of money given to a certain number of artists that allows you to be in residence at one of the major theaters in America for 4-6 months a year, and enough of a cash cushion that you didn't have to worry about what you were going to do for the rest of the year. So Jack and I decided that, out of that, we would create the position of associate artistic director, which he had never had, even though the Globe is a huge three-theater complex with an incredible amount of work going on. He never had an associate artistic director. I said, "Why haven't you ever had one?" He said, "I could never trust anybody." A vote of confidence, I guess.

I got to the Old Globe and, more or less, Jack left. He was having his own commercial theater desires, and so, pretty much two weeks after I got to the Old Globe, he left for a long time to do *Damn Yankees* on Broadway and, as a result, many other things after that. He pretty much said, "You've got it, honey. Just do what you think I would do if I was there. I'm only a phone call away. Call me if you need me but try not to call." He left. So, I got this incredible experience of getting to be in the driver's seat at a major theater. I could pick the meetings I wanted to go to or didn't want to go to, working with the artists who came into the theater, not choosing the programming but certainly working with Jack on season programming and all of that. Tom was the managing director. I had a very good time at the Old Globe. Then the grant ran out. While the Globe was willing to keep me on as the associate artistic director, I was feeling itchy to move on. I didn't really know where I was going to go. But I decided that I was going to leave.

Now, around about that same time, Pasadena Playhouse, which had a rocky history, was finally in a position to hire, after not having had an artistic director for many years. What I left out was that, during my freelance career and during my time at the Globe, I would direct as a freelancer for Pasadena Playhouse at least once a year. So when certain people in power found out I was leaving the Old Globe, they said, "Would you like to come back as artistic director?" Knowing that they did not have an artistic director for 4-5 years, I said, "Well, I'm going to do better than the person who hadn't been there, so why not?" What I knew was that Pasadena Playhouse had a beautiful physical facility, really one of the most wonderful theaters physically in America. It was in a great theatrical community, with great resources in terms of the actors, but also designers, and great audience resources, if they were called upon. So I said, "Yes, I will come and do that," and, having had my graduate school training as an artistic director at the Globe, I felt prepared to do that. I took that job in 1997.

Pasadena Playhouse at that time, to be completely honest, was not a very good theater. It had the resources that I'm telling you about, but other than being open, it really had no distinction. It was not well-respected, either in its own community, the LA community, or the national community. The work was not very good. The work was certainly not varied. And nobody knew that it had been around for a long time. It was established in 1917, so it's going to have its hundredth anniversary next year. It

was closed for a long time from the late 60s to the early 80s, and many people didn't know that it reopened. And when it reopened, for a short time, it reopened without much distinction, to tell you the truth. It was a theater ripe for reinvention and ripe for the use of the resources that I mentioned.

What I did have was the experience of having worked in a lot of great theaters. Not on the staff necessarily, but during that freelance period, I had worked in a lot of really great theaters. The Guthrie being one of them, Arena Stage, and I visited a lot of great theaters as an NEA side evaluator, which is really a great training. You get to go someplace for three days and just be a fly on the wall without anybody knowing who you are. You get to walk around and look in everybody's business, and talk to the artistic director, the managing director, and the development director. I didn't know that I would be able to recreate Pasadena Playhouse into a great theater. But I knew what a great theater could be, so I made that my aim. And I do know without a doubt that it is a greater theater now than it was when I got there. And I know without a doubt that it is a theater that has had moments of greatness. There are times when I've been able to sit there and say about the work on the stage that it is as good as it can be. That's a really gratifying thing.

Part of the greatness, and this is a larger topic, of what we've done over those twenty years is to stop being a theater that did the same play all the time. Here's what I mean by that. The period that I went to Pasadena Playhouse as artistic director, the theater was always producing a play that could be described this way: a naturalistic 4-6-character play with one naturalistic set in which those 4-6 white people think they are funny. So *Same Time Next Year*, *Same Time Another Year*, a lot of Neil Simon plays. As an ongoing constant diet, that was not my idea of the way to make great theater. They did not seem interesting theatrically to me. One of the reasons I decided to go to the Old Globe was that the first time I was at the Old Globe, Jack O'Brien just opened the original production of *Damn Yankees* and was going into rehearsal the next week for *King Lear*. I said, now that's my kind of theater, where the artistic director has that kind of range and ability. So I wanted to change that.

The other thing I wanted to change was that, all too frequently when I was there as a freelance director and in my first days as artistic director, the theater is a beautiful open courtyard, a Spanish-style theater, and I would sit in that courtyard, and, I kid you not, I would be the only person under 60 and the only person of any color going into the theater. 99.5% true. That on every level was something that had to change, because that audience one way or another was soon to disappear, and it was not a terribly interesting audience. So, with the programming, with outreach to community, with education, with board support, all of that, people asked me what I'm most proud of during my 20 years at Pasadena Playhouse. What I'm most proud of is that you will never go to a performance of Pasadena Playhouse and not see any people under 60 and only see white people going into the building. On most days, not all days but most days, you will see a very diverse audience, and on many days you will see a much more diverse audience than I see at most theaters in America. So that's the history.

I don't think it's less strong—but it's not a whole lot stronger—than the American theater. The American theater is largely managed and directed by—meaning the artistic directors and managing directors of the major, non-ethnic-specific theaters in our country are—white people, and all too often by white men. Certainly at the Alliance Theater and some other places, there are leaders of theaters who are women, but it is all too white a field, including the major institutional theaters in New York City. It's shameful, frankly, that after all of these years, you can't look at a major non-profit theater in New York City and find a person of color in any leadership position. I mean, that's shameful. That's a dirty little secret that doesn't get talked about even as non-specifically as I'm talking about it right now. Maybe in a few minutes, I'll talk about it more specifically. But that's kind of shameful. It's a combination of things. It was certainly my choice and desire, as I said, not to be a black director. To have that brand of desire theatrically was my choice. Other people could make other choices and they do. There are highly respected directors in our country who only want to direct black material, and that is fine. But that was not my choice, my desire, and in many ways my life had not prepared me for that in any way. My life prepared me to do what I have done, which is August Wilson *and* Noel Coward. To have

that kind of breadth is refreshing and exciting to me. So the desire has to be there, but the opportunity has to be there.

During my freelance career, at one point, an artistic director called me and said, would you like to direct *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*? It's a play I really like, obviously by a writer that I think is brilliant. I said, "What else are you doing in your season?" They went through a whole list. I said, well, I'd like to do *Uncle Vanya* instead of *Ma Rainey*. That person literally said to me, "Hmm, you know that's a good idea. You'd be a good director for *Uncle Vanya*. But if I hired you to do *Uncle Vanya*, that would mean I'd have to have two black directors in my season." This person, who actually wants me to come work at their theater, still said that to me. After a long pause, I said, "Do you realize what you just said to me?" He said, "Well no, what?" I said, "Put it this way. Have you ever said, or would you ever say to anybody, if I hire you, I'm going to have to have two white directors in my season?" They were flabbergasted that they actually said it and didn't think of it in that way. All too often, the pipeline is about not racism but a lack of open consciousness, as I call it—a lack of thinking more broadly. That lack of consciousness is difficult to attack as pure racism. But as a racial effect on things, it keeps artists of color restricted and leaders of color restricted. I think you'd have a hard time going to any theater in America that's trying to hire a managing director or an artistic director who would admit to you, "We will not have an artist of color here as a managing director." That's not what they will say, and that's not the problem. The problem is that they don't think about it, and those who help them to hire people also don't think about it. Those three or four search firms don't have the contacts, such that they would call you and say, "I want you to go and manage Seattle Repertory Theater." If they know you, they will call you when East West Players has a job available, and that's fundamentally wrong.

We as people of color have to keep knocking on the door to change that. My associate artistic director is a woman named Seema Sueko. Seema is Asian and Muslim, a brilliant woman, a wonderful director. A job came up recently, and I said, "I want you to apply to be artistic director at this theater." She said, "Why, are you trying to get rid of me?" I said, "No, but I want you to apply." She said, "Why do you want me to do that?" I said, "I know the person who has this particular search firm will never call you for any theater unless they know you. That won't happen. So I want you to get into that race whether you want that job or not, so you can get to know that person, so that at least when another theater comes along that might interest you, he won't have the excuse of saying, 'I don't know Seema.' And based on what I know will be the conversation between the two of you, he will have to call you, because you are prepared to run many theaters in America, and he will never call you unless he knows you. So you've got to get in that race." The pounding at the door to free that pipeline up is still certainly radically necessary.

EDWARD A. MARTENSON: The way you've described this, the difficulty is twofold. I wouldn't want to call it a chicken and egg thing, but it's twofold. There's indifference or ignorance on the side of the people that control the jobs. Then on the other side, among African-American artists, there is the question of whether they make the same kind of choice that you made, of whether to have the range or whether they want to do culturally-specific work in culturally-specific places that are usually small.

When a theater that has an $18 million budget is looking to hire a new leader, they want that person to have worked in a large theater. They don't want somebody who worked on a practical level, they want someone with an understanding of what it takes to run a big theater. It is different on an administrative and business level. The problem is that those who have chosen to make their careers doing ethnically-specific work and working in ethnically-specific theaters are generally working in smaller companies. So when those big jobs come up, the point of rejection is not that you're black, you're Asian, you're Latino, whatever, it's that you've never worked in a larger company. It's the route to the job that also exacerbates the problem.

So the pipeline is actually cut off in both ways. For the pipeline to be full of possibility, both those problems would need to be dealt with. We need more people who want the jobs, and more people who want those people.

Yes, and we need more people who will hire people of color in the mid-stage position to prepare them for the big job. We need more people to do what Jack O'Brien did for me.

My observation, and I don't know whether you agree with this, is that fewer and fewer theaters have those jobs.

That's true. The other problem is that those jobs, for budgetary reasons, are the jobs that get cut, the associate artists. Artists on the staff as budgets diminish—the first thing that suffers is the art, all too often. Just look at rehearsal time.

I agree with you that that's an echelon of jobs that disappears. The logical point of advancement for the leadership jobs isn't as much there anymore. So that compounds the problem.

But as theaters look to the necessity—not the desire—but the necessity of reflecting their communities, I believe that's going to have to change. Because audiences are too smart. They're not going to buy your genuine desire to reflect the community unless you also reflect the community in your offices.

That makes total sense. We talked about people that want to do culturally-specific work in culturally-specific places that are small. It sounded like you agree that the differences between a larger organization and a smaller organization are real, and that could keep us down. So how do we get rid of that? Because not everybody is making the kind of choice that you did.

We have to find the funding for large ethnically-specific theaters. One could say that Chicago should have a big Black theater, that Seattle should have big Asian theaters.

So why do we have Negro Ensemble Company?

Why do we have Negro Ensemble Company? Why do we have Crossroads Theater? It's sort of there, sort of not.

These are not all funding problems.

No, they're not all funding problems, but they are administrative problems. They tend to have administrative challenges and/or related resource challenges that eventually do affect funding, that somehow drive these artistically very worthy and very important art organizations out of business. I can't answer your question about why, but I can tell you it's a tragedy. Somebody said to me quite seriously, over the course of my time at Pasadena Playhouse, certainly one of the things I did was more work by African-American writers and artists of color, also Latino. Not until recently have we started on the path of doing more work for the Asian-American audience, and we're late in the game doing that, I admit it. But when we started doing more work by and for African-American audiences, those were enormously successful. In my twenty years there, eighteen of the top-selling shows in the history of that theater are works with appeal to the African-American audience. Somebody said quite specifically to me, you should turn this theater into a black theater. You should make this the first big black theater in America. And I thought about it. Suddenly, the flip side of that is that some people thought I was doing that anyway, when I was only doing one or two plays a year by African-American artists. "Too much black work. There's all this black work." I said, "Well the next work is a Noel Coward play, and the next play after that is a Tom Stoppard play, so I don't really know what you're talking about."

STUDENT: That happened at Syracuse and the Alliance. He had invited Irene Lewis from Center Stage in Baltimore to come down to direct a show, and she decided to do some non-traditional casting, and he yelled at her and said, "What, are you trying to get me fired? I can't have African-American actors on my stage except in certain plays. I'm not turning this theater into something else."

In my third season—I never actually get these calls, but I get told that people say these things—I was told that a subscriber said, "I'm not re-subscribing because the theater is doing too many black plays." I said, "Give me his number." I called him and I said, "I understand that you're not going to renew your subscription because you think there is too much black work on this stage." Pregnant pause. Finally he said, "Yes, that is true. I think you're choosing too many plays about black people in this season." And I

said to him, "Well, there was one last season, and in this announced season, there is one, so if you think that's too many, I don't want you to come here anymore. Please do not re-subscribe, because that is not going to stop. The choice is for you to accept the fact that that is what this theater is going to be, or for you not to come here anymore." That man has now been subscribing for another seventeen years, and thanks me every time he sees me. He comes up to me and says, "Thank you for not letting me make a really bad choice. I've learned so much."

I saw an interview that you did where you were asked whether the process that you use to choose a play by an African-American writer was different than the process that you use to choose other plays. You said, "No, it wasn't. It's whether the work is good." When we were talking before this meeting, you used the phrase, "Doing work that's worthy of being noticed, that's worthy of attention." I think that relates to everything you were talking about, but it certainly relates to the plays that Pasadena was doing before you arrived.

Pasadena Playhouse at the time that I started was largely ignored in the field—either not known or not respected, not admired. I think the phrase I used was the *Death of a Salesman* phrase, which is that I felt that it was my job to make it a theater to which attention must be paid. The most effective way to do that would be to do work that was good, work that was interesting and exciting, and new work, not work that was just a recreation of somebody else's work or work that had been done with great success either on Broadway or off-Broadway, last year or last season, and not to recycle that same group of plays that I described to you, or plays that were similar to that. I wanted to create excitement in the building. Pasadena Playhouse is the same building that it was when I got there. There are a lot of things that need to be repaired, but it's not the theater that has been changed radically. We haven't surrounded it with a beautiful wraparound or redone the theater or built a great second stage. But I believe that the theater is more vibrant because of the electricity of the work that is done on this stage by all of the artists.

And in many ways, that's all my job is as the artistic director: to provide a safe place for people to do great work. Just provide them the space to do great work, and then try to find them the resources to do it. Imagination is one of the resources, and people understand that in a LORT theater. You can ask a great Broadway designer to come and work in your theater. They know they're not going to get the same thing they get on 45th Street. Frequently they love the challenge of the imagination that must be brought to the work to make it as exciting as it is on 45th Street. So the building, the physical structure, the hard surfaces of the theater have not changed. What has changed is the work on the stage and the choices involved, from the choosing of the play to the actors to the director to the designers, to make it a more vibrant and exciting theater. And, equally important, the connection to the audience and the community. Pasadena Playhouse is a more exciting, more interesting theater because not everybody who comes to see the work is over 60 and white. I frequently say it's like having a great dinner party. I would not want to go to a dinner party like this with twelve people who were exactly the same. I guarantee that's not going to be as good a dinner party as twelve people who are really different. This table would be a really interesting dinner party. This table all too often does not look like the American theater. I'm shocked when I go to the Roundabout Theater. I'm shocked when I go to MTC that I am often the only person—now, 20 years after what I talked about with Pasadena Playhouse—of color when I go to these theaters. It shocks me that it's still true. And maybe I should expect it, but I expect and hope. Forget about it socially, emotionally, politically, all of which are important to me. I'm shocked on a business economic side that they're not smarter than that. That they're not realizing the necessity, not the desire but the necessity, for developing new audiences. If you're going to develop new audiences in American cities right now, I think inevitably those new audiences will be audiences of color. I'm not a big economist or anything like that, but if you're not actively doing that, you're missing a big market share of your audience. That's just dumb. I am shocked that they haven't quite figured that out. I see that same audience, and I see a lot of empty seats around too, sometimes, unless there is a big star on stage. I'm shocked that more people have not recognized the economic drive of it.

STUDENT: There are a lot of rich, white people.

Are there a lot of rich white people in New York City of your age who go to the theater and, more than that, support the theater? That's the important question. Are there a lot of young, rich, white people who are in the habit of going to the theater and supporting theaters? Maybe not so many. I don't see them when I'm there. So listen. Some of those faces of color that have come to my theater to see the work on stage and see their lives reflected on the stage are now also donors. I don't ignore that. In fact, I celebrate that. I'm very grateful that that's true.

STUDENT: My interest lies in the idea of creating an audience that reflects the country. It makes it a more interesting conversation and a more interesting artistic experience when the audience is not all 60-year-old white people. Other than programming, are there other things you do that have contributed to audience diversity, and is it maintained throughout the season, or does it depend on what the show is?

Two very good questions. I'll answer them in reverse. It's not maintained throughout the season as much as I wish it was. But it's maintained throughout the season more than it used to be. Are there as many faces of color at the theater when we do a Noel Coward play or a Shakespeare play as when we do an August Wilson play? No. But over the course of the twenty years, are there consistently more faces of color in the audience for everything that we do? Yes. Because people fall in love with going to the theater. They come for the August Wilson play, but they say, "I like being here," so they come back for other things and subscribe. Getting to that audience beyond the choices of the program is the most important thing you have to do. And that takes a lot of money, but it also takes a lot of going literally out into the community. The theater is not an "if you build it, they will come" field. It never has been. It used to be, when we started, what I call the "castle on the hill" mentality about theater. We're here making great art, and if you have any sense at all, you will climb the hill to get to us. Well, they did that for a while and then they stopped doing that. So in general, theaters are much more market-focused. But if you do this kind of work, you have to specifically go to those communities. You have to remember that there's been, for a long time, no great sense of invitation to the table. You've got to convince people that you mean it, number one, by making the choices, but also by having a conversation with them. Because of our history of diversity on the stage and off and in our audience, we just got a very big grant from the Wallace Foundation to develop a relationship with the API community in Los Angeles, and it's a big community. That grant is very helpful and it has ensured some success already. But the total systemic integration and ongoing integration, literal integration between the theater and the community—that is an ongoing battle. There is also Seema, who I spoke about before. She has an aesthetic, which is really about her personal desires, but it affects marketing, called "consensus organizing" for theater. There is an article in *American Theater Magazine* about what all of that is about. It's about her theory of mutual self-interest between what a community wants and what a theater wants that causes the two to come together. Designing an audience is also what she is sometimes doing. We design the costumes, lights, and sets. But she'll go to a director early on in the process and say, "Help me design the audience that you want for this theatrical experience, and then I will go out and get it for you." But you can google her to find out about it.

GUEST: How do you envision your partnership with the managing director? What is your philosophy about it? How do you cultivate a strong partnership?

How do you find a great relationship?

GUEST: I have no idea.

Then you know the challenge. Because a lot of it is that. I'm going to give you a quote that is the optimum of it. It's a wonderful managing director, a wonderful man, named Peter Coleman, who is one of the great managing directors of all time, at Center Stage in Baltimore for many years. He said, "What is this managing director job? What is that? It is the artistic director's job to dream, and it is my job to make the artistic director's dreams come true." Wouldn't you like to find that in a relationship? I think that's wonderfully poetic and I wouldn't mind that. Something on the way to that is my ideal about that partnership, which is a relationship, which is a marriage. It's about sharing a vision, sharing a dream, sharing a belief about what the work is, and

the way or ways you're going to get to achieve those visions and dreams. That ideally is the relationship between an artistic director and a managing director. It's conversation. It's real listening. It's often just saying "let's try" rather than "no." The best managing directors I've had and seen are all about "let's see what we have to do to make it possible," as opposed to "we can't do that." The good relationships, the strong marriages I've had with managing directors are, "tell me, let's talk about, let's try to figure out how we can make it happen, and we may not be able to, but at least let's try," as opposed to, "you can't do that." Not to aggrandize him because he's here, but Ed had that good relationship with Garland Wright, and I was able to watch that and hear from Garland about that kind of partnership. That's what you want. You want it to be a good marriage where you don't fight, you don't argue, you might talk it out. There's a wonderful term that Cameron uses. "You might have a lot of creative abrasions." I'm all for that. But the rubbing up against mutual needs, mutual interests, mutual jobs even, that emerges in something that's creative, other than abrasion, that sparks and makes things burn in a glorious way—that is what you want. But it's also an artistic director's job to have some view of the overall, and not just to say, "I want, gimme gimme gimme." Are there bad managing directors? Yes. An artistic director that behaves that way is a bad artistic director.

STUDENT: I wanted to ask about your board of directors over the twenty years. How did you take them through the transformation? Did their composition change?

The board has transformed over the twenty years because it's been twenty years, so yes. I think I snuck up on the board. I don't think that a lot of things that I felt or a lot of visions that I had about the theater were things that I articulated or laid out in some PowerPoint presentation when I got there. They were just things that I started to do, and like some of those subscribers, some board members went away. Some board members were not on board with some of what I wanted. Some board members weren't on board frankly with attempting to be a great theater. With this nice little cozy community theater, don't raise too much money, don't worry about too much money. That's kind of okay for some people. But I'm not okay with that. So those who were meant to be in the room, who embraced what I've done, have stuck it out, and some went away. Some have gone to other theaters, quite successfully. I will say—related to the thing that I was saying before about the economic drive—whatever they may have felt deeply about audiences of color being in the theater with them, they could not argue with the numbers. Success will get you a long way with a board. I don't know how my life would have been different if I went to Yale. If my initial efforts in the area of diversity had been rampant economic failures, it might have been quite different, to be honest.

STUDENT: Could you speak about your journey of being in an industry that has not strengthened that much in its pipeline of people of color having opportunities? You spoke with great generosity and perspective about what's going on. I'm getting frustrated just hearing about it. What has kept you moving forward despite the incredible challenges?

I'm sure that some of it is arrogance. I grew up a black man in America, not all that far away from the Civil Rights movement. Injustice in America is something that I have viewed and been victim of in my lifetime. I grew up in Los Angeles, which was not segregated—or not officially segregated. But I used to spend summers in North Carolina. I remember being told, "You can't use this bathroom." I'm old enough that that was not a law, but the custom. "You can't come in this door." My victimization in that way at an early age gave me the strength to fight it throughout my career, and to say to that person on the phone, "Do you realize what you just said, and do you realize how wrong that is?" And to knock on doors and say, "You will let me in." We talked about the big boy system in the LORT system. I said, "No, you will not do this behind closed doors. You will not have this little side meeting without me here, or expect me not to talk." Can you imagine, expecting me not to talk? And to understand that I actually do know words that you do not know. Sometimes you have to show off a little bit. Sometimes you have to have a multiplicity of aspects, which make it clear I am your equal. I expect to be treated that way professionally. Socially is something different.

MARTENSON: You speak so eloquently about it.

That's a gift from my father. He was a Presbyterian preacher.

Was your upbringing challenging in this way? Or did you have a good childhood?

I had a great, wonderful childhood, with parents who encouraged me to be Obama, parents who said, "Don't let the fact that you are a black boy at that time or a black person in America stop you from dreaming. You can do whatever you want. It will be your fault if you let color get in your way. It will be your fault." Toni Morrison once said the greatest thing on Charlie Rose. Charlie said, "Here you are, Toni Morrison, Pulitzer Prize winner, great author, but I'm sure you experience racism in your life even now." She said, "No, I don't." He said, "What? What do you mean you don't experience it?" She said, "I don't experience racism anymore because racism is the racist's problem. So when I feel that coming towards me or I hear that, I exit the room in whatever way is necessary, and leave that person there to heal their own illness." That was very instructive to me. I am not the n-word because you said it. You have a problem for having used that word.

STUDENT: "The Pipeline" sounds like a horror story, but it's an evocative word because it's something that was built in the industry—the idea that it takes you from point A to point B. Certain people can be in it and certain people are outside of it. I'm curious: are we just not that creative about leadership and the way these organizations should be run? Have we just built a never-ending cycle where that's the structure? Isn't there a lack of creativity in that?

So much of arts, performing arts, and certainly theaters' existence, is based on money—not the work itself, necessarily, but the very existence of the company. The lack of enough money, which in most cases there is such a lack, creates fear. Fear creates a resistance to change. The system of running theaters that has been in place since these theaters began is still sort of there. The structure is sort of the same. There's an artistic director and a managing or executive director. That org chart has been the org chart for a long time. As the economic realities become more and more pressing, I think the fear of change is going to change. There will be new ideas about structure, about management, about all of that. I think a lot of it has not been resistance for resistance's sake, but, "This is what we're doing, this is how you do it, let's not change it, if you make a change the whole house might fall down." Well, if the house starts to fall down anyway, you better make some kind of change. You better do something. If the things start to crumble around you and the chandelier comes down, you better do something. In the arts in America, particularly in theaters, we're seeing a lot of crumbling houses. Even some of the big ones that keep a good face on it. If you really talk to people, there are a lot of cracks in the plaster. I think that openness to new ideas, change, new thinking and all of that, is going to become more prevalent for survival's sake. I don't think it's a lack of imagination. I think it has more to do with fear of change.

STUDENT: Do you think that's also part of the reason why there are so many white people as leaders of these organizations?

Yes. Not that many people have done what Pasadena Playhouse has done and hired an artist of color to be the leader, and been okay.

STUDENT: What do you say to a board who says, "We just hired the best person, who happened to be a 48-year-old straight white man?"

I'd say, "Who else did you look at? How many women did you look at?" These questions need to be asked. "How many people of color? Did you hire the best person for the job, or did you hire the best person that you talked to? Maybe you didn't talk enough. Maybe you didn't look enough." Again, they never said, "I don't want to talk to him." That's where it goes back to the search firms. Boards generally talk to who's put in front of them. "Here are the candidates I think you should talk to." That's usually how it works. Now you may have to say to your search firm, "Don't bring me eight white men." It can work that way, too. Obviously in the case of my board—we're now doing a search—the board didn't say that. But I really think that search firms have a lot to do with it. That's a challenge.

MARTENSON: Lloyd, when he first took over the school and the Yale Repertory Theater and needed a managing director, chose me. I believe your

managing director is white. This is a pattern with managing directors. What's up with that? This is true at the Public, this was true at the Alliance.

As I said, I'm happy I hired an associate artistic director and created the resources, begged and pleaded for the resources for an associate artistic director who is a woman of color. Our marketing director is Asian. Our general manager is half-black, half-white. But yeah, maybe I should have taken more responsibility in that. Let me give you a more honest answer. I think my pushing for a black managing director would have been too threatening to the board and to the community. We let that crazy black man be the artistic director because he is an artist, and we don't talk to him that much about money, and all that kind of stuff. But the managing director, the person I give the check to, I don't know about that. It would have been a problem.

I believe that totally, and that was probably the case with the theaters I mentioned. That makes me question the choice that Bill made at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Nobody is more strongly committed to that in every aspect than Bill is, so that's interesting.

STUDENT: There's also the idea that you have to do the job in order to be hired to do the job.

MARTENSON: I don't want to be coming down on Bill, but his managing director had not done the job.

STUDENT: I think there's probably more of a through-line and opportunity for people that have run smaller organizations, whether they were culturally-specific or not. They're being overlooked in a way that they're not given the chance to show they can do it in a larger place. That seems like a clear opportunity to put those people in front of the people doing the hiring.

MARTENSON: Personally I don't totally agree with you that there's that difference between large and small. I think if you're good at small places, you'll be good at another place. Anybody going into the Guthrie—it'll be much bigger than the thing they've done before.

STUDENT: The job descriptions are different. In a smaller organization, you're more likely to do a lot of different things. Admissions officers for colleges might think, they all got As, but whose high school is more competitive, which evens the playing field.

Well, maybe, but the thing you said about leadership of a large theater—the very worst thing you can do as the leader of a large theater is to be silent. You better be interested in and active in every department of your theater, and knowledgeable, too. Take it on yourself even if you are development director to know what the marketing department is, to know what production is. If you're going to step into that managing executive director job, you want to care about everything and everybody at your theater equally. One of the biggest lessons I got from Jack O'Brien was that he made everybody at the theater feel incredibly valuable and like the most important person working there. He was great at that, and that takes a lot of energy, but he was really good at it. Great lesson.

Sheldon needs to take the train back to New York to see shows because he is a Tony voter.

I'm on the board of the stage directors union, so everybody on the boards of all the major unions are Tony voters, as well as many people from all over the country who are presenters of work. They often say that the voting is skewed not by us so much as by the presenters of work that want something to be the Tony-winning show that is coming to their theaters. I think everybody is going to vote the same way, at least in the musical categories. Shocking, I know.

STUDENT: I admired your generosity in stepping down from your position. That's something we don't see very much in leaders of important theaters these days.

Until they're forced out the door. Again, in observing some of the great theaters, I saw people who stayed too long at the fair, and I didn't want to be one of those. I believed that twenty years is a long time, and any company needs a new and different vision after a certain amount of time. I've had the wonderful opportunity to fulfill mine, and to feel really good about having fulfilled it. So I'm fine about moving on.

Is there a diverse candidate pool?

It has been fairly diverse, although in the final round, this was interesting: I had to fight for there to be a woman in the final round. There was an enormously qualified woman who I felt was somewhat threatening to many on the search committee because of her strength, and so they started to back away from this strong woman. I had to create a little bit of a fight about that. That was what I sensed as she was being pushed out of the final few candidates. What I said was, "Have you realized that there are no women in this final group, and is that something that you feel good about doing?"

Well, thank you. It's great to talk to you all. I enjoyed the conversation.