I thought since we are still in the glow of our recent anniversary, to talk about this thing we all love and have dedicated our lives to – Theater in America today. The Bard’s injunction to the Players was to, “hold as twere, the mirror up to nature to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” – this afternoon I hope in some modest ways to hold the mirror up to us.

In preparation for this speech I have had the great pleasure and good fortune to speak with the heads of some of our leading institutions, and to many of my professional colleagues, and I am indebted to all of them for their honest insight and wisdom.

We are a big country but our theater often feels like a surprisingly small community. Nobody, it seems, is more than six degrees of separation. This was brought home to me as I was reading through the history of the Fellows and kept uncovering my own surprisingly personal connections to the College. My first professional job at the tender age of 18 was as an actor in “Unto These Hills,” Paul Green’s outdoor Drama about the Cherokee and the Trail of Tears. My father knew the director from Graduate school and got me an audition. Months later, I made my professional debut in a grass skirt and wearing paint. Yes, my first role was in Red Face. Even then it felt a little odd, a white kid playing a Native American in a play about Native Americans set on a reservation. Years later a distinguished gentleman known to many here would become President of the Outdoor Drama Association and eventually nominate me for membership in the Fellows – he just introduced me. That fall, when I entered the Department of Drama at the University of Texas, the Chairman was Dr. Loren Winship – a founder of the College of Fellows. He retired the next year – I don’t think I had anything to do with that but there you are. My research into our history surprised me in other ways as well.

Contrary to what I had assumed, The College of Fellows was never simply an “Honors” organization – its very founding was predicated on the notion that by recognizing excellence it would foster much needed higher standards throughout our practice, and create a more positive public opinion of the Theater – professional and educational.

Some times our advocacy took on very specific issues in very direct ways. In 1978 the Fellows wrote a formal letter to the Pulitzer Committee forcefully making the case for Regional Theater and urging the committee to include plays from outside NYC in their consideration. Years later, my play, The Kentucky Cycle would win the Pulitzer prize, the first play to do so which had not yet had a New York Production. And The Kentucky Cycle would not have been produced at all without the generous financial assistance of the Fund For New American Plays, created by that visionary Roger Stevens, whose name graces this series of speeches.

If our mission was to nurture the health of the American Theater, what greater success story could there be than the impressive rise of theater programs across the country. In the early ‘60’s there were a handful of Theater or Speech departments nationwide whereas by 2000 there were more than 1,200 Universities and Colleges providing undergraduate programs. And today, I would guess there is hardly a major or even large university in the country that doesn’t have a college of Theater Arts offering a wide variety of degrees, including advanced degrees. And if last nights festival was any indicator, we have a fantastic group of students. But there are some troubling issues. Laura Penn of SSCD worries for example that we might have become too “siloed” in our teaching. Are we producing specialists but no generalists – theater practitioners who lack an ability to collaborate because they don’t really understand what other artists do?

And if these students believe these degrees will inevitably lead them to sustainable professional careers they would be sadly mistaken. In its last available report from the 2012-2013 season, EQUITY states that of its 43,000+ National members, only 40% were employed at all that year and their average employment was 17 weeks. I personally believe we are in a new golden age of Playwrights with a more diverse, more talented, larger group of playwrights than ever before but anecdotal evidence from the Dramatists Guild, whose governing council I sit on, is very troubling. Guild membership is at an all-time high with over 7,000 members but personally speaking, I don’t know a single playwright who makes a living by writing plays. Many teach. Some, like myself, write for film and TV. The Guild itself runs an annual operating deficit and only survives because – I’m not making this up – because it receives money from an obscure Northern European tax on photocopying.
This raises the uncomfortable question, for what then are we training all these wonderful, bright young theater majors? And the debt we load them up with! Years ago, I returned to my alma mater, the University of Texas at Austin, to oversee a student production of a new play of mine. The director and I were going over the rehearsal schedule and his assistant kept stopping us, saying, “Well, so and so can’t rehearse Tuesdays and Thursdays. And she is only available on Monday from 4-6.” I was flabbergasted. When I was in school you were expected to be available for rehearsals from 6 to 11 every night, seven days a week. What had changed is that the cost of education has risen so much, that almost all these students have to have a day job just to make ends meet, forget about paying their tuition. How will they pay down the debt of those considerable student loans on 17 weeks of work a year – if they are lucky?

Turning again to the Professional Theater, there is a similar mix of good news and bad. Broadway is booming. It took 100 years before we had a Bway show that grossed $1 million a week. It took only another five years before we had a Bway show that grossed $2 million a week. It only took a few years before we hit the $3 million a week mark. Last year, the season earnings were 1.5 billion dollars. But we have our own 1% problem – that tsunami of money doesn’t trickle down very far. Recently, there has been considerable unhappiness within Equity about performers who do multiple workshops but do not go on to participate in the success of the resulting productions. This came to a head within the HAMILTON company which has been producing a profit of half a million dollars a week while much of the ensemble is paid minimum. I am pleased to announce that as of just yesterday, a new agreement has been reached between the Producers and the Company to increase their participation. It is gratifying to see a play about revolution, being presented in a revolutionary style, begin to adopt a revolutionary business model. May this just be the beginning.

As a playwright, I’m afraid Robert Anderson’s famous dictum still holds – “you can make a killing in the theater but you can’t make a living.” The majority of my career as a writer, 39 years, only twice has theater sustained me on an annual basis - the two brief times I was on Broadway. But as every writer knows, the real money wasn’t so much my royalties as the film sale of my subsidiary rights.

LORT Theater also has its issues. In 1960 there were two theaters. Forty years later there were 800. But this model that worked so splendidly for so long shows worrisome signs of wear and tear. The Resident Company is a thing of the past. Season subscribers continue to shrink in numbers in favor of a more selective single show consumer model. And funding, state and Federal, is under increasing pressure. The results are hardly surprising. In Seattle for instance – my former home for 16 years – flagship theaters like The Empty Space and the Intiman declared bankruptcy and only the latter shows any signs of resurrection. Both the Seattle Rep and ACT almost folded as well, and for a period of time both cut their regular seasons in half. Even now, although stronger, they continue to struggle financially every year.

And all theaters, wherever they are, face a common problem – take a seat in almost any house in any theater and look around. There are exceptions to be sure but for the most part our audience is white and graying. Our audience is simply not very diverse in terms of age and ethnicity and as they die out, who will take their place? I would suggest that this problem in our audiences is directly related to a similar problem in terms of what we present and who presents it. Fourteen years from now, White people will be the minority in this country. Does our theater even begin to reflect this changing demographic? I think pretty clearly it does not. I would ask you to look around the room at our beloved College and make a similarly honest assessment.

Shakespeare’s injunction to the Players was to hold the mirror up to Nature. He did not mean to do so blindly. I’m pretty sure he did not mean to ape the worst aspects of our culture. I think he meant to very consciously reflect back to our audience the world we live in, in such a way as to provoke profound engagement with it. I don’t think we are doing a very good job of that. Clearly we don’t do a very good job of representing the extraordinary diversity that is the unique power and challenge of America today and that is a problem.

Does what we put on stage look like America today? If not, why should our audience? Why should I spend my entertainment dollar to attend an art-form in which I am rarely represented?

Most of us, I imagine, experienced a moment of schadenfreude at the discomfort of Hollywood’s recent OscarsSoWhite debacle but are we in any position to throw stones? Since its founding in 1947, 95% of all Tony nominees are white. Statistically, we are only 1% better than Oscar in representation of minorities. And how white is the Artistic Leadership of most LORT Theaters, most NY Theater Owners, and most NY Producers. How about the playwrights we produce and the performers we see on stage. And how male are all of the above?

The Writers Guild recently completed an extraordinary examination of Playwrights in America by Gender and Race. “The Count.” Many of you here have undoubtedly heard of this but indulge me for a minute while I repeat its not-so-astonishing results. Using data collected over three years, 20.3% of plays produced in the United States were by women authors. Women are half the population but 8 out of ten plays produced are by men. When the statistics are parsed for race, the results are even more dismal: 3.4% for women of color and 6% for men of color.
There are more productions for foreign white men, then for men and women of color combined. I think we can all agree the problem is not for lack of qualified alternatives.

“O Hamlet, speak no more!
Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul.”

Let me be very clear. I don’t think this is deliberate. And I would argue that as a group, Theater Artists are among the most self-aware and progressive people around but clearly we have a problem. And the problem is not just laziness of bad habits but an unconscious bias, so pervasive as to be essentially an institutionalized expression of racism and sexism. We do hold the glass up to nature, sometimes in ways which are frankly embarrassing. We have made enormous progress in this country. Only 50 years ago the parents of the current President of the United States would have been guilty of a Class C felony in Georgia, subject to a seven year term in prison simply by virtue of their marriage. Thank God we are past that. But as BlackLivesMatter and as Trump’s demagogic appeal demonstrates, we still have a long way to do. We have a long way to go in theater.

I like to believe that I have talent and certainly I’m hardworking and I hope that my achievements are the consequence of both but if I am honest, I have also had certain advantages of birth – gender and race – that in so many ways, subtle and profound, been contributory to my success. I started this speech listing a series of individuals that have helped me along and I used to think of their kindness as an expression of the kind of mentoring they also received when they were young, or professional collegiality, or simply as my successful “networking,” the kind of conscious working of your connections that I preach to students all the time. But it’s more than that. I mean, if you don’t have access to that network, you can’t work it. Most don’t. I’m a white American male, born in the latter half of the 20th Century. All my life I have swum in the warm, comforting amniotic fluid of Privilege. This is not only true of my life, it is true of my Art. It’s silly to protest this fact, or to insist that since I had no choice in the matter, I have no responsibility either. I do. We do. What should we do then? I believe that I should risk my privilege; I believe I should put it to work making things right.

I think theater matters because it is the only art form in which we come together as a community to share our stories in real space and time, and in doing so, reflect on who “we” are, and what we should aspire to. This is the real mirror.

I admit, this is uncomfortable stuff. And it makes for uncomfortable, even painful conversations, which is why we as a society shy away from such conversations all the time. I am profoundly convinced that the only way out is to start talking about it. To have those uncomfortable conversations. I hope today will be the beginning of one such conversation here among the College.

I’m sure that all of you in this room are, in your individual ways within your individual organizations, struggling with these same issues. But I wonder what we as an Organization are doing? I look at the College as this extraordinary collection of powerhouse artists, a kind of theatrical Nuclear Reactor, but one which sits disengaged from the grid. Should we not as a group at least engage in the great and necessary National Conversations that are beginning to emerge about Race and Gender and Privilege within the art form we love, so that not only our Art Form may endure and flourish, but so may the Republic? Might our conversations lead to some more concrete actions? And if so, what might they look like?

I think the job of the Dramatist is to ask good questions. The charge to the audience is to wrestle with the answers. In this audience, I know I am in good hands and I look forward to your response. Thank you.