

O'Neill Spotlight on: Jeff Janisheski, Artistic Director of NTI

As the new Artistic Director of NTI, how will your personal philosophies about teaching and theatre inform your leadership?

From my experience, the best teachers I've had and best theater artists I've worked with all share two similar traits. First, they listen deeply – to their students, the ensemble of actors and the text – and ask the kind of questions that will unlock something, provoke a dialogue or address the obvious issues. Second, they create an environment – in class, the rehearsal room and on stage – that engages everyone and allows their imagination and creative energies to flow. Listening, asking questions and building an environment where creative action can occur – that's the essence of my work at NTI. I'm always trying to sense what needs to shift or change – in student's own work, in our classes, our curriculum and with the organization of NTI itself.

What are your backgrounds in education and theater?

In theater, I've had a rather eclectic artistic journey. I started training in 1986 in both theater and dance at Amherst College. After graduating, I moved to Japan where I studied traditional *Noh* theatre and contemporary *butoh* dance for three years. I moved back to the States and started teaching and directing theater – which led me eventually to get my MFA in Theater Directing from Columbia University. After Columbia, I was Associate Artistic Director at Classic Stage Company in New York where I helped produce shows with an incredible array of talent, including Walter Bobbie, Zoe Caldwell, Alan Cumming, Richard Easton, Martha Plimpton, the SITI Company, John Turturro and Dianne Wiest. Because of the diversity of my career – combining theater and dance, avant-garde work and classical theater, and New York and international experience -- I can connect to students in a wide variety of ways.

Teaching has been a core part of my career and I've been doing so regularly since 1996. I was an adjunct professor at Dowling College, Fordham University and Smith College, and have led workshops at many colleges over the years – including Colgate, Columbia, NYU and Yale. Over the years, I've also created or co-founded a number of educational programs and schools, including: a new dance center in Massachusetts for children and adults; an international dance/theater festival in New York with workshops and performances; and, at CSC, an education and outreach program that brought Shakespeare workshops to high schools throughout four of the New York boroughs. Education has been so central to my career because I believe it's essential for the next generation of artists to be trained and mentored.

Do you have a favorite genre in which you enjoy writing, acting, and/or directing?

For my acting and directing classes, I choose scripts based on whatever the students need to work on at that point in their development; the genre or style of the plays varies widely depending upon the individual needs of the students. When I choose a play to direct, however, I have a simple requirement: I have to deeply connect to the material. There has to be a burning need for me to work on it at that time.

In my directing classes, I ask the students: "Why direct this play? Why direct this play *now*, at this specific moment in time?" Directors have to come up with a deep reason that drives them in working on a project – which could be a personal, political, philosophical and/or artistic reason.

In what direction do you plan to take NTI as an institution?

NTI is such a strong training program that there is not a huge amount to change. Instead, I'm working with the teachers and staff on focusing what is already an impressive curriculum through extending the amount of time for certain classes and broadening the workshops offered (e.g. by having a *Producing for the Theater* workshop). I'm also planning on widening our selection of international companies and schools that we partner with, for those two-week trips that the NTI students take abroad each fall and spring semester. Another element I'm focusing on with our staff is increasing our marketing and recruiting efforts in colleges and universities.

What is your guilty pleasure of the moment?

Kung-Fu Panda, the animated DreamWorks film featuring Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, Jackie Chan and Angelina Jolie, is my new guilty pleasure. It's hysterical and mystical. It's a great lesson in never giving up...and in what the secret ingredient of noodle soup is.



Mr. Janisheski in 2008
at the O'Neill.
Photo Credit:
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