

**The Emerging Leader Preconference
of the Americans for the Arts Annual Convention**

**Preconference Theme –
Emerging Leadership: Vision. Action. Evolution.**

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Keynote address:

Emerging Leaders – You May Just Have to Make It UP!

presented by

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*Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!*

*You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.*

*You're on you own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.*

*You'll look up and down streets. Look 'em over with care.
About some you will say, "I don't choose to go there."
With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,
you're too smart to go down any not-so-good street.*

*And you may not find any
you'll want to go down.
In that case, of course head straight out of town.*

*It's opener there
In the wide open air.*

*Out there things can happen
And frequently do
To people as brainy
and footsy as you.*

*And when things start to happen,
don't worry. Don't stew.
Just go right along.
You'll start happening too.*

*OH!
THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!....*

Good morning. That was Dr. Suess, one of my favorite writers and a great example of leadership and innovation. I shared that excerpt to remind us that it starts with the art and that you must always remember to take yourself wherever you go.

My name is Kenny Leon. Thank you, David Dombrosky for that eloquent introduction. Thank you, Robert Lynch, Mara Walker, Jamie Bignall and the entire Americans for the Arts staff for extending me this kind invitation. Because of the Americans for the Arts' impact on the arts and the community, I knew that I needed to be here today – somewhere between directing the world premier of Toni Morrison's opera, *Margaret Garner*, in Detroit, directing a Seattle Repertory Theatre workshop for a pre-Broadway gospel musical, directing the second phase of *Margaret Garner*, in Cincinnati, directing August Wilson's newest Broadway-bound play, *Radio Golf*, in Los Angeles, and serving as artistic director for True Colors Theatre Company in Atlanta and DC – somewhere in there, I knew I needed to be here with you. This is important. As the Emerging Leaders of Americans for the Arts, you are important to our present and our future as you build on legacy that's over 40 years strong.

There's something powerful about being in a room of individuals filled with youth and vigor and vision. I can feel your strength and your energy just standing here. Thank you for sharing this time and this space with me.

I salute and applaud Americans for the Arts for being bold and audacious in your mission. You have stated that you are “dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts.” To do that, you must continue in your role as catalysts that draw us out of our comfort zones and pull us toward the horizons that you see in your dreams. Congratulations on your recent merger with the Arts and Business Council – now that's what I call a power marriage, sort of like Donald Trump and Oprah Winfrey tying the knot. Needless to say, we expect even bigger and better things from you now.

You have asked me to speak on subjects that are synonymous with your name – leadership and innovation. And so I have chosen for a topic: **Emerging Leaders – You May Just Have to Make It Up!** For the next few minutes, it is my goal to challenge you to be the best you, to inspire you to fearlessly move toward your dreams, and to dare you to lead us all to our collective next level.

You will be reminded to know yourself, remember the basics, allow yourself to be inspired, do what you know to do, and make the rest up.

The first thing I want you to do is to check your compass and your starting point.

Your personal compass serves as the source of your leadership and innovative spirit.

My source rests in my grandmother and my mother.

When I was a child, I lived with my grandmother in Tallahassee, Florida, deep in the country. We chopped wood, killed chickens, and reused the same bath water in a foot tub. We had an outhouse and the minister came only on the 4th Sunday. There were not a lot of amusements that deep in the country. There were no Nintendos, Play Stations, Game Boys, Palm Pilots, or Blackberry's. But there were cars passing by. My grandmother and I would sit on the porch and as a nice car drove pass, whoever could speak the fastest would claim it – “That’s my car!” When a not-so-hot vehicle drove by, the race was on to say “That’s your car!” My grandmother would take the newspaper and make up stories just by looking at the pictures. Every now and then I wondered if the paper really said what she was saying, but it didn’t matter. The simple things provided hours of entertainment and fueled the imagination.

One of my greatest joys through the years has been sharing the theatre with my family. My grandmother gave me a lesson in the power of diversity and leadership when she attended her first live theatrical production. On that particular night, my

grandmother was one of very few, if not the only, African Americans in the audience for the Alliance Theatre Company's presentation of T-BONE AND WEASAL.

During the play, when a character made bad choices, my grandmother would say "Oh, no" and "No, baby, don't do that." At intermission, people were asking, "Who is that lady?" I told them, "That's my grandmother. Don't mess with Mamie." She had broken the ice. After intermission, the rest of the audience joined in, "Oh, no, baby, don't do that."

I watched my mother approach life with an awe-inspiring courage; she was determined and persistent as she worked things out for herself and her family. She had me when she was just 15 years old. Not too long after I was born, my mother married my step-father and moved to the big city of St. Petersburg, Florida. As I mentioned, I stayed with my grandmother during my early years, but eventually joined my mother and siblings in St. Petersburg. She worked two full-time jobs and I never heard her complain. She was committed to providing for her family and doing whatever it took..

Years later, when my grandmother passed, I remember not really crying before or during the funeral, where I had the honor of speaking on behalf of the grandchildren. But on my drive back to Atlanta, I began to weep as I remembered the laughter and all the life lessons given to me by my grandmother.

Everyday I'm trying to live a life that is worthy of my grandmother's memory...a memory clear on values, clear on spirituality, clear on respect, clear on purpose, and clear on passion. She'd say, "Be passionate about what you do ...learn to love your work and be passionate about it." She taught me to laugh, to think and she said crying is okay. And it's in her spirit and with my mother's strength that I stand before you today. They taught me to believe that all of us are brothers and sisters; that age and race should not separate us; that we all bleed the same blood and age is nothing but a number. So when you see me and the choices I make, you see Mamie and my mom. You too are challenged to be aware of what's driving you. The key is be the real you and to lead and innovate from there. Always take yourself wherever you go.

Next, don't forget the basics. My list is not exhaustive, but these few will take you very far.

People look for leaders with **integrity** – where your words and your actions match and the image you portray is really who you are. People want to know that they can trust you.

William Shakespeare reminds us, "Better three hours too soon than a minute too late."

Prepare, prepare and then prepare again.

Better to do a few things with **excellence**, than a lot of things okay.

Clear communication solves it all.

Be decisive and action-oriented. You must own your decisions and not be afraid to make them. I tell young people, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” So to our emerging leaders, when you come to a fork in the road, take it! Then own your decisions. Some will be good. Some will be bad. Some will be life changing. Some will go unnoticed. The key is to decide and live behind and with the decision. If you have to change courses later, if you have to apologize, even if you have to find new employment, don’t live in fear of decisions. Another of my mottos is “Sometimes, it’s better to get forgiveness than permission.” Hallmarks of true success include controversy, setbacks, and struggle and some of you out there are playing it too safe.

Build and maintain good relationships. The possibilities of your future are being shaped right now in ways you cannot imagine simply by creating respectful, mutually beneficial, long term relationships. There’s a classic song that goes “People make the World Go ‘Round.” It’s still true.

With the basics well in hand, gain insight and inspiration from others within the arts world and outside of the arts world.

A personal inspiration for me is a leader who was neither appointed nor elected to any public office, but literally moved the masses and pricked the consciousness of our nation and beyond. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words still speak to me today and challenge me to think of what the arts can do for this country and the world as we find ourselves more and more polarized. I say the arts have a vital role to play in fulfilling the mandate of Dr. King's not so famous speech called "Loving Your Enemies:"

Now for the few moments left, let us move from the practical how to the theoretical why. It's not only necessary to know how to go about loving your enemies, but also to go down into the question of why we should love our enemies. I think the first reason that we should love our enemies... is this: that hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. (tapping...) It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil. And that is the tragedy of hate, that it doesn't cut it off. It only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. Somebody must have religion

enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love.

We know Abraham Lincoln mainly for his political life, but he offers some practical advice on being innovative to reach your goals. If what you need is not supplied, you may just have to make it up. In a letter to a friend, he wrote:

Now, as to the young men. You must not wait to be brought forward by the older men. For instance, do you suppose that I should have ever gotten into notice if I had waited to be hunted up and pushed forward by older men? You young men get together and form a “Rough & Ready Club” and have regular meetings and speeches...Let everyone play the part he can best – some speak, some sing and all [holler.”]

Perhaps your inspiration may come from understanding some of our arts leaders a little better. Today’s dynamic creative environment demands versatility. But so did 16th Century England during the time of one Mr. William Shakespeare. The Bard is known mostly for his writings, and many are aware that he was an actor. What you seldom hear discussed is the fact that he also invested in real estate at an early age, was part owner of the Globe Theatre, and was a highly-respected business man. I’m sure you are aware of others who have merged a love for the arts with an aptitude for business.

Part of what drew me to Atlanta when it was time to go to college was the fact that Maynard Jackson, the city's first African American mayor, was in office. As I learned more about him and eventually got to know him, I was absolutely amazed by his ability to lead. His vision, wisdom, and innovative spirit continue to shape the city -- long after he left office and even after his recent death. To give you just a clue of his impact, I share with you the poem written by Maya Angelou that I read at his funeral.

*When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down in tall grasses,
and even elephants lumber after safety.*

*When great trees fall in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses eroded beyond fear.*

*When great souls die,
the air around us becomes light, rare, sterile.*

We breathe briefly.

Our eyes, briefly, see with a hurtful clarity.

*Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines, gnaws on kind words unsaid,
promised walks never taken.*

Great souls die and our reality, bound to them, takes leave of us.

Our souls, dependent upon their nurture, now shrink, wizened.

Our minds, formed and informed by their radiance, fall away.

We are not so much maddened

as reduced to the unutterable ignorance

of dark, cold

caves

And when great souls die,

after a period peace blooms, slowly and always irregularly.

Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration.

Our senses restored, never to be the same, whisper to us,

They existed. They existed.

We can be. Be and be

better. For they existed.

Whatever your source, allow yourself to be inspired.

So you've got your compass set, you've covered the basics, you've learned from the leadership of others, now it's time to keep both eyes open, get a good grip on the steering wheel and Live, remembering that sometimes you may just have to make it up.

I experienced that at the Alliance Theatre Company at the age of 34. When I was named as artistic director of that \$10 million a year theatre company, I did not know how to run a theatre. But I knew that I was good with people. I knew I had a passion for getting people in the community to come together. I knew my grandmother had raised me to be non-racist and non-sexist. I knew that theatre could be a very powerful vehicle. So I knew that there were things that I was good at. I built on those things and I hired people to do what I was not so good at – like dealing with the numbers. But I took the time to learn something about everything. I respected the basics and sometimes I just had to make it up as I went along. I'm happy to say that the during my 13 year tenure, the Alliance's reputation was enhanced, we were honored with being selected to originate Elton John and Disney's *Aida*, and we were able to increase African American participation from less than 5 percent to approximately 25 percent of our patrons.

When it came time to start True Colors Theatre Company in Atlanta, I had the Alliance experience under my belt. But I had never started a theatre company and I didn't want to just go on gut feelings, so I interviewed a number of theatre leaders who had experienced great success serving diverse audiences only to see their theatres suffer in the long run and sometimes go out of business. I discovered that often the companies had all artistic leadership and little or no business leadership at the helm of their organizations. Not wanting True Colors to suffer the same fate, I enlisted the help of a long time friend and ally, Ms. Jane Bishop, former general manager of the Alliance. I wanted someone who was as passionate about the business side of theatre as I was about the art. That has proven to be one of the best decisions I've made. Together, we made up a theatre company based on the idea of building generational and cultural bridges. Our mission is to preserve the Negro American classics and branch out from there to be a culturally diverse powerhouse.

Our inaugural production in October 2003 was August Wilson's FENCES. If you've seen the show you may remember Troy's speech to his son:

Like you? I go out of here every morning...bust my butt...putting up with them crackers every day...cause I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw.

(Pause.)

It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house...sleep your behind on my

bedclothes...fill your belly up with my food...cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight right here...before it go along any further...I ain't got to like you. Mr. Rand don't give me my money come payday cause he likes me. He gives me cause he owe me. I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you life! Me and your mama worked that out between us. And liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain. Don't you try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you. You understand what I'm saying, boy?

Since FENCES, we've produced a multi-cultural version of STEEL MAGNOLIAS; Langston Hughes' TAMBOURINES TO GLORY with all new music; and an all-youth, very diverse rendition of THE WIZ as our contribution to educating and engaging our young people. In addition to Atlanta, we have established ourselves in Washington, DC, where we are the resident theatre company for the Lincoln Theatre, with plans of adding a third city. Jane and I work very closely together to ensure that True Colors strives to remain fiscally sound and small enough that every individual who works there can be heard, be accountable, get better at what they do, and live out True Color's values – Boldness, Laughter, Abundance, and Respect.

A few of you may have heard about a *little*, life-changing project I was involved in last year in New York. Prior to my Broadway directorial debut with *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*, I had portrayed Walter Lee once and had directed the play twice. So I was very familiar with the beauty and the wisdom that Lorraine Hansberry had woven together in this ahead-of-its time masterpiece. It still remained important for me to know that this particular production would match my personal vision of contributing to a world that is inclusive and respectful. It was also important to me to find a way to bring this classic alive for the youth of our nation. The producers brought me into the process very early, made me a part of the team, and gave me full control over casting decisions. Phylicia Rashad was a natural choice to give Lena a fresh portrayal, showcasing both her strength and sex appeal. Phylicia's work was noted with a Tony Award, as was Audra McDonald's portrayal of Ruth, Walter Lee's wife. As I looked for a Walter Lee, I wanted him to be someone who would open the play up to a new generation -- someone who understood both sides of the America's economic equation. Well-known acting coach, Susan Batson suggested Sean Combs. He auditioned for me three times. It became apparent that all his instincts were right. Once cast, he proved to be one of the hardest working people I've ever met. He worked after hours and slept very little. He had a replica of the set built at his home so that he could rehearse beyond the scheduled rehearsal time. Phylicia, Audra, Sean, Sanaa Lathan, Bill Nunn and the entire cast, all worked well together and were crucial to breathing new life into *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*.

The marketing campaign was innovative and comprehensive – it took on more a community-building approach than you normally see on Broadway. Once the show started, word of mouth moved to a feverous pitch.

The results...

RAISIN recouped faster than any play or musical on Broadway in 2004.

It broke house records at the Royale Theatre for eight weeks in a row.

It won two Tony Awards and was nominated for two more.

It was the second most financially successful play of all time on Broadway – in terms of how much it grossed per week - second only to the revival of 'Long Days Journey Into Night' with Vanessa Redgrave, which had the benefit of both a higher ticket price and a more traditional Broadway audience built into it.

RAISIN attracted a richly diverse audience with a very strong representation from the African American community. Grandparents and grandchildren, young, middle aged, professionals, celebrities, everyday people...RAISIN speaks to the possibilities of theatre.

It was a great opportunity to continue framing our story.

I just directed my first opera – *Margaret Garner* with libretto by Toni Morrison and score by Richard Danielpour. Margaret Garner is about a mother who was a slave that was willing to kill her own children rather than have them return to bondage after a failed escape attempt. Toni had seen A RAISIN IN THE SUN and trusted me to

tell Margaret's story with dignity. As my first opera, there were plenty of things that I didn't know. But I knew what I knew and that I was willing to work hard to figure out the rest. At times, it was awkward to lead in an environment where others knew more than I did. But I remembered to keep the main thing the main thing – we were telling a story – and I let that guide me. I approached this new world with respect and, as needed, I made a few things up. For instance, I brought in a choreographer, something that is not usually done in the opera world. The performers were quite excited because they are not accustomed to moving that much during the show. MARGARET GARNER played to sold-out houses in Detroit and is experiencing huge advance sales in Cincinnati. And Toni is smiling.

Emerging Leaders – You may just have to make it up!

Remember that Americans for the Arts was once just an idea,

- the League of Resident Theatres was created so that professional theatre could be seen outside of New York;
- there was once no Romeo and Juliet
- Everything you see in this room started in someone's imagination.

And now we look to you for your leadership, your innovative ideas, and for your willingness to make it up -- if you have to.

*Oh, the places you'll go! There is fun to be done!
There are points to be scored. There are games to be won.
And the magical things you can do with that ball
will make you the winning-est winner of all.
Fame! You'll be famous as famous can be,
with the whole wide world watching you win on TV.*

*Except when they don't.
Because, sometimes, they won't.*

*I'm afraid that some times
you'll play lonely games too.
Games you can't win
'caus you'll play against you...*

*But on you will go
though the weather be foul.
On you will go
though your enemies prowl.
On you will go
through the Hakken-Kraks howl.
Onward up many
a frightening creek,
though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak.*

*On and on you will hike.
And I know you'll hike far
and face up to your problems
whatever they are.*

*You'll get mixed up, of course,
as you already know.
You'll get mixed up with strange birds as you go.
So be sure when you step.
Step with care and great tact
and remember that Life's
a Great Balancing Act.
Just never forget to be dexterous and deft.*

And never mix up your right foot with your left.

And will you succeed?

Yes! You will, indeed!

(98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.)

KID, YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!

So...

be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray

or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,

you're off to Great Places!

Today is your day!

Your mountain is waiting.

So...get on your way!

Thank you for sharing your space and time.

(Pause.)

I must share with you Maynard Jackson's favorite poem:

Determination by *Ella Wheeler Wilcox*

*There is no chance,
no destiny,
no fate,
Can circumvent or hinder
or control
The firm resolve of a
determined soul.*

*Gifts count for nothing;
will alone is great;
All things give way before it,
soon or late.*

*What obstacle can stay the
mighty force
of the sea-seeking river in its
course,
Or cause the ascending orb of
day to wait?
Each well-born soul must win
what it deserves.*

*Let the fool prate of luck.
The fortunate is he whose
earnest purpose never swerves,
Whose slightest action
or inaction serves
The one great aim.*

*Why, even Death stands still,
and waits an hour sometimes
for such a will.*