

lifeline



T H E A T R E

Big Stories, Up Close

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September 20, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my honor to write in support of Professor Janet Haley. I was first introduced to Janet in June of 2011, when I directed her as Madame Pernelle in *Tartuffe* at the Michigan Shakespeare Festival (MSF). This past summer, I was privileged to work with her again at MSF, directing her as the Princess of France in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Anyone familiar with Janet's work already knows of her powerful command of language and text. She brings truth into every word she breathes onstage, and has a remarkable ability to transform the dullest prose into living poetry. For purposes of this review letter, I will focus instead on some other areas of her work.

While both comedies, the two MSF productions I've mentioned were quite different in tone and style, especially in regards to Janet's specific roles. *Tartuffe* was performed in a physically stylized Restoration manner and Janet's place in the piece was on the extreme outside end of the presentational curve. She was the first character the audience met and she single-handedly drove the entire first scene; it was up to her to establish all of the physicality "rules" of the production in a few scant minutes. She shone in this role, embracing all of the physical demands of the show while grounding them in a commitment to the truth of her character's needs. Her energy was strong and sharp, her voice explosive and powerful, and she dominated the stage with a razor-focused directionality of movement.

When we began the rehearsal process for *Love's Labour's Lost*, I laid out a very different set of physical challenges for her: in the piece, I was looking to contrast a bombastic "New World" America feel for the men of Navarre with an "Old World" sensibility for the Princess and her court. I asked for elegance, softness, femininity, and delicateness in their movement. I wanted flowing motions, graceful curves, and for the ladies to "flock" in an almost bird-like fashion when they traveled. I wasn't sure how Janet would tackle this challenge, given that we had only worked together in an environment in which I asked essentially the opposite of her. To my delight, she excelled beyond my hopes.

Janet began her physical work from the inside out, starting with an insightful series of questions and observations about the history and needs of her character, along with those of her fellow companions. Then, as the leader of her little flock of four ladies, she knew she would need to find a way to take the stage and display authority, but she couldn't do this in a forceful or domineering way (as she had in *Tartuffe*) without compromising the qualities I had asked her to embody. So, rather than "putting on" some artificial leadership persona, she focused on her scene partners and built trust with them. She shared with them, she gave focus to them whenever possible; she helped to reinforce their needs and their moments of strength, and this attention to the rest of her flock manifested itself in an ease and

eagerness in the part of the other ladies to cede power and focus to Janet when it was time. She crafted a command of the stage in a very organic way that would not have worked for Madame Pernelle.

As Janet continued to work on her physicality for the show, she not only cultivated elegance of motion in ways that were natural to her, but she observed in her companions the types of movements that were natural to them, embracing them in herself and encouraging them in others. She eschewed direct lines in her crosses and gestures. She experimented with circles and curves and turns. When she caught herself using sharp directionality or aggressive movement qualities, she stopped herself and would try something new. Throughout the process, she kept challenging herself to find new ways to embody the physical life demanded of her, so that by the time *Love's Labour's Lost* opened, she had built an entirely new physicality for herself, one which she was able to inhabit with ease, leaving herself free to focus her energies on the text and her character's needs. It was a delightful transformation, rich and subtle, and a big change from the equally impressive physical work she did in *Tartuffe*.

Janet also has a wonderful gift for personalizing her characters and bringing their inner lives into the open. One of the big challenges of *Love's Labour's Lost* is the emotional change-on-a-dime in Act V when the news of the French king's death reaches Navarre. This is a huge "problem" to solve when directing the play, and one which rests heavily upon the shoulders of the actress playing the Princess. I never doubted Janet's ability to feel the depth of emotion required in that moment, but the challenge for me as a director – one which I shared with the entire company to help me address – was how to lay the groundwork for that eleventh-hour change during the silliness of the preceding hour and a half. Janet heard this challenge and she owned it. A couple of weeks into rehearsal she started toying with a necklace as she worked. As mired as I was at the time in the logistics of staging, fighting, dancing, and singing, I was only able to pay passing attention to what she was building. Just as I was ready to get back to her and dig into what she was working on, we had a run-through of the show and I was floored by what I saw. She had devised a locket for herself, one which she empowered as containing the image of her ill father. At key moments throughout Acts II through V, she handled the locket, she subtly referenced it, she shared it with her companions. It became a piece of her as vital as a limb. Then, when Mercade arrived with news of her father's death, she only had to raise a hand to clasp the locket and, with a single motion, her loss was given the crushing weight of powerful, specific personal history. By the time the moment of shock passed and Janet allowed her character to express her emotions with the text, she did so atop the groundwork of an inner life already laid bare before the audience. It was a moment of sublime beauty.

The final aspect of Janet's work I want to touch on relates directly to that anecdote. I have only worked with her in the MSF environment, which is similar to other festival processes I've experienced. There are only a few weeks of rehearsal, and each show only gets a scant number of days per week. Everyone's attention is split and there's not enough time to finesse every tiny detail the way one would always like. In that type of rehearsal situation, a director depends on actors like Janet. She is a true leader: her work ethic and example inspire everyone around her to step up their games. She takes ownership of the smallest challenge and develops it in ways a time-crunched director would never be able to otherwise explore. She gives everything of herself to her scene partners. She protects the needs of the play as much as she does her own part in it. She brings her "A game" to every rehearsal, and is never afraid to either fail or succeed. She is an inspiration.

My artistic life has been invigorated by my two opportunities to work with Janet, and I have witnessed firsthand the wonderful way in which fellow cast members and audiences respond to her. With their in-depth exposure to her leadership and artistry, I am certain that the lives of Janet's students are continuously challenged and enriched. I hope the University of Michigan at Flint will continue to value her talents as highly as I do.

Please feel free to contact me with any further questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert Kauzlaric". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Robert Kauzlaric

Ensemble Member: Lifeline Theatre (Chicago, IL)

Freelance Director (Wilde Award Winner for Best Comedy: *Tartuffe* 2012)

Freelance Playwright (Joseph Jefferson Award Winner for Best Production-Play: *Island of Dr. Moreau* 2008, New Adaptation: *Island of Dr. Moreau* 2008, and New Adaptation: *Neverwhere* 2011)

Freelance Actor (Joseph Jefferson Award Winner for Supporting Actor-Play: *Around the World in 80 Days* 2003 and Ensemble: *Around the World in 80 Days* 2003; After Dark Award Winner for Outstanding Production: *The Mark of Zorro* 2008)