



The Artist as Leader: Norman Coates

Veteran lighting designer and UNC School of the Arts faculty member Norman Coates has been shaping the minds and talents of future Artist Leaders for more than 25 years. His creative projects have had a profound impact, from his lighting design on national and regional theatrical productions; to his leading role in the lighting of the White House portico for Halloween in 2015 and 2016; to his Winston-Salem Light Project, a now decade-long labor of love that illuminates architectural landmarks around the city each year. A gifted artist, educator, social entrepreneur and innovator, Norman strives to make the arts visible beyond the theater, and uses his craft and creativity as a way to improve the quality of life of everyone in a community.

In this interview, Rob Kramer explores how Norman's upbringing, artistic training and classroom experience inform his teaching and leadership style, and drive him to inspire young artists to make the world more beautiful.

Rob Kramer [RK]: How did your childhood, your background and your upbringing inform what you became as an artist leader?

Norman Coates [NC]: My childhood experiences were based on becoming independent really young. That was by happenstance of family and, I think probably, just how my thought patterns worked. I wound up being able to make friends with lots of different groups of people. I was never necessarily in a group, but I was touching a lot of groups — whether it was the preppy or the greaser, I was OK with both, and both were OK with me. Part of what happened is that I found it easy to speak up in situations. I was never afraid of sitting in the background ... but I was never reluctant to speak up or try and move things forward. I think that I got here through a really strict core of just wanting to be independent.

RK: How big was your family?

NC: I was from a small family. I was the youngest by several years. My father passed away early, so my mother had to work. I was a latchkey kid before latchkey kid became a thing. I would have to come home from school or whatever I did and cook dinner for my mother and me. Even prior to that, when my father was still alive, I was the kid who wanted to be out of the house. I didn't want to be in front of the TV. I wanted to be playing basketball. I never was a loner necessarily, but at the same time, I never needed to be connected to any specific group. I was always fine being alone as a kid, and I was fine being with people.

RK: Did you have access to the arts or did anyone encourage artistic exploration as a kid?

NC: In junior high school, artistic, to me, was about being able to draw or the visual arts. Some of my friends were pretty good visual artists. My seventh-grade art teacher was a wonderful woman. Even though I wasn't great in class, we got along well. My mother always loved shows and show business. My brother actually had a beautiful voice, and took voice lessons, and was a great singer. I, on the other hand, tried guitar and saxophone, any number of other things, and in the end I wanted to run up the hill or run down the hill, or be outside. I was kind of a daydreamer as well. I spent a lot of time in the park just looking out dreaming, or playing imaginary games in the woods with the other kids.

RK: You fostered an imagination.

NC: Yeah, as opposed to fostering ability to play the sax, which would have been kind of fun.

RK: Where did your current path show up for you?

NC: It happened in an odd way. My mother used to drag me to New York to see shows. We'd always see the Christmas Pageant at Radio City. She would always go up and see musicals with groups. In high school, I knew kids who were in the drama club and I would go to see the shows. In college, I jumped around a little bit, but I had an English literature teacher who made us go see, of all things, "Waiting for Godot." It was by the National Theatre Company, and it was a brilliant production. For whatever reason, whether it was the philosophy courses I was taking in combination with the English courses, in combination with my mindset at the time, I was just

blown away by it. I felt like I was the only one in the audience, and the whole thing was being done for me.

RK: A light bulb went on?

NC: Yeah. It was one of those moments of like, “Oh, I get this. Why does everybody think this is so obtuse? I completely get this.” It seemed like the whole thing was for me. I even had a date that night, don't know that I paid much attention to her. It fit into my imagination as a kid anyway. I would build toys, then destroy toys. I would build models and then I would create car accidents and wrecks and burn them. I would build model ships and put them in the river and have pirate games and watch them float away. I always had this imagination that led toward those kinds of things. I perhaps should have gone into film. ... I always wanted to. For whatever reason, that play triggered the idea of play and the idea that these were live people in front of other live people, so that it was the experience of being alive in every aspect. It really just threw me over the edge.

RK: Where does the lighting design fit in, in terms of that storytelling component?

NC: Well, I started studying theater because it was like, I need to know everything I can about all of it. I need to know about acting, and directing, and the scenery. I found that I kept slowly gravitating toward lights. Then there was a moment when I realized that all of the big moments in my life, or those seminal moments of growing up, I remember what the light was like. I don't remember the scent. If there was a song playing, I'm not hearing it. But I remember what the light was like.

I remember the light in the room when I had the measles on my birthday. I remember a time when I had a horrible fever, and I woke up feeling well, and I went outside, and the quality of the light that night. I remember standing at the top of the park, which is pretty much the highest part of the county that I grew up in, and looking over the river at the town across the way and thinking about where my life would lead, and how I really wanted to be in New York at some point in my life. I was 12 years old. What I remember is the atmosphere in the light. So it made sense all of a sudden, but it happened much later. It was never conscious. All of a sudden I was lighting, and then somewhere down the line I realized ... it all fits now. It just flowed naturally at the time.

But for me, the production was always the thing. I never saw that I'm a leader. I saw that I need to get things done, and I just plow ahead. Everything, to me, is always like getting a show on.

RK: Beautiful. How does your background, your arts training and the career you forged inform how you lead others?

NC: I never think of myself as a leader. I think that I just try and get things done. If it's a design for a show, and I have a team that I'm working with, it's always about getting to the goal and then adjusting what I need to do for whoever I'm doing it with. I never thought of it as leadership in the purest sense, or that I'm the boss. As a lighting designer in theater, of course you're the head of the department working with somebody else. But for me, the production was always the thing.

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RK: In the arts we're very project-oriented.

NC: That's how I think all the time. I find it frustrating when it's not that way. I find myself holding back from wanting to say, "Well you know, I work in show business, and if we say we're going to open a show at 8 p.m. on Tuesday, we open a show at 8 p.m. on Tuesday, so where the heck is my" whatever it is. My expectation is that you're going to deliver what you say. For me, it's always about the goal and how we get to the goal. What do we need to do to get there? I think that I suffer somewhat, in terms of leadership or my ability to lead, when that independent streak holds me back, because I am the person who will, if progress isn't being made, I'll just ...

RK: Do it yourself?

NC: Do it myself. Or I'll take on more. Or I'll bypass somebody — and this can be bad, and I have to catch myself all the time in school — who's really trying to learn, when I need to be more patient.

RK: You mean with a student perhaps?

I always remind myself that art education and theater education in general, to me, is completely about controlled failure and allowing students to keep failing until they find it or fix it. ... It's taken me a long time, but I try and only deal with process now, and not deal with product. That's helped me a lot.

NC: Right, exactly. Let them have that experience. I always remind myself that art education and theater education in general, to me, is completely about controlled failure and allowing students to keep failing until they find it or fix it. ... It's taken me a long time, but I try and only deal with process now, and not deal with product. That's helped me a lot.

RK: That's an interesting idea on how the student can help reflect back to us what we most need to work on ourselves.

NC: Which is pretty much always the case. I see it a lot.

RK: Do you get inspiration working with excited young students?

NC: I do. As a cyclist you'll get this: There are times when I feel I'm at an endless uphill, but then all of a sudden there's a moment where you're crested.

RK: Feels like you have 'no chain,' as they say.

NC: Yeah. Those are great. It really is a ride in that sense.

RK: When do you feel like you're in your flow when you're working with young people?

NC: I really like when we're doing project work, where they're presenting projects and where I'm spending more time guiding a conversation than I am directing the conversation. There are moments where I get incredibly enthused about things that I know they're not enthused about right now — things that involve the history of lighting, or the history of art, or images in art, and taking all of art and bringing it back around to light. Looking at a Caravaggio painting or even looking at a Rothko, and trying to say, "How does this work in light?" Eventually they get there. Somewhere in senior year that pops in, and then all of a sudden it's really exciting when they get those correlations between the fact that an artwork is communicating and what it's communicating.

I love those moments when everybody's come in and everybody's prepared. It may be a reading assignment, or it may be something as simple as some sketch work, but when it's all there and we can discuss it or we can allow them to really look at one another's work and get engaged in that way. I think that's when it really works the best for me.

RK: From a project standpoint, I know recently you all had the opportunity to light the White House.

NC: We've done that twice now. Once we projected on it and once we lit it.

RK: How was that experience for the students? How did you engage them, from a leadership standpoint, in those moments? Or was it more the autonomous, "Let me get this done."

NC: The first year was, "Let me get this done." The projection year actually threw me over to being sort of the story creator and producer. In that sense, I actually worked with a lot of alumni, as opposed to current students, for the creation end. That really allowed me a freedom that I don't have at school all the time, in that they knew me and I knew them, and I was able to work toward or with what were their strong suits to make that product. I tried to shield them from the other technical aspects. The first time was a bit of a struggle getting all the parts together, and getting the time to get the projections and the modeling on the White House. That was exciting because I had a former student who was the projection mapper and software guy. And I had three former students who were creating content. I just had to sit back and worry most of the time that it was all coming together. That was really a great experience moving to a leadership position, as opposed to being the designer and having to do all the work as well as lead a team. I was only leading the team.

RK: What was different for you? What did you notice?

NC: I noticed that I was far more nervous. Having that big picture all the time was a little nerve-racking. But I noticed that I was able to negotiate what amounted to three separate artists coming together to create something that was cohesive. Each of them had a different style of content creation, and came at it from actually three different schools in a way. One was a guy who'd been working for a while and used found stuff. Another guy wanted to create stuff, and the third guy was somewhere in between. It was interesting trying to pull all those styles together and to find out who would do the transitions, or who would do what parts.

RK: What is that like to lead other artists through their creative process?

NC: I actually like it a lot. When I'm working on a show as a designer, one of the best parts for me is really the conversation that happens before the design: "What is the play about or what is the piece about? How are we approaching this? Where does this fit in all of art? Where does this piece work together with the artist statement in all of time and all artists? Where is this in that big world? And then, how do we tell the story?" That part is really enjoyable — just the creation of the ideas. The rest of it is craft and tedium in a way. Working on these projects is fun and energizing in that sense. Working on the White House project was wonderful because I could rely upon these three artists to get the work done — not necessarily on time, but get it done.

RK: The White House is such a different project from something like the light project you're doing for Winston-Salem. For readers of this interview who might not be familiar, do you mind giving a little context about that project?

NC: The project that we will be working on next year will be our eleventh Winston-Salem light project. It started by trying to take the interest of someone who wanted to donate to the school, and donate to the lighting program, and align it with what we did. Their interest was in architectural lighting. We started out by lighting buildings. My interest was projecting on buildings, even 10 or 12 years ago. I kept trying to push these two things together. Initially, it became about trying to get people to look at their environment in a new way. One way to do that is just light it. You look at a building all your life, and then all of a sudden you walk by and it's red, it's new. "Oh my God, what happened?" That's kind of a gross example. We were much more subtle than that.

As that developed, and as my interest in wanting to project on buildings also developed, I was looking at how do these two things work? How do we create art in public spaces that is energizing, informative, can communicate, and can bring people together? This opened a whole new world for me.

As that developed, and as my interest in wanting to project on buildings also developed, I was looking at how do these two things work? How do we create art in public spaces that is energizing, informative, can communicate, and can bring people together? This opened a whole new world for me. That first Winston-Salem light project, and it's still our mission, was to create public art that brings people together and encourages them, by virtue of the work, to re-look at their environment and what an urban environment could be.

RK: You've just developed an LLC. One of the trends we're seeing a lot of in these interviews is this natural bent that artists have toward being entrepreneurial. What took you out of the traditional teaching and work on campus to this innovative look at engaging the town in a town-gown relationship, and using art in a different medium?

NC: It ties together all kinds of things. I've never stopped designing professionally. As a member of the United Scenic Artists, you're an independent contractor your whole life, so this combination of teaching and designing had always been happening. Then all of a sudden adding this new thing of going out into the town.

At about the same time, I was wanting to project on building and light buildings. One of the local commercial real estate agents, a fellow named Bob Hoffman, kept nagging me to meet with him. He was entirely focused on the idea that downtown should be re-lit. To unify the city, it needs to be lit. Of course, that makes perfect sense to me.

RK: The two of you came together with common ideology.

NC: We came together with common ideology, and he kept pushing for me to do things. I started doing these art projects, and now, after 10 years, the city's beginning to say, "Oh, we could light the city." All of a sudden, the connection of doing public art has transformed from, "Hey, would you like to light our building?" to, "You want me to light your building, now I need a company that I can do this with. We can turn this corner and bring what is the ultimate aesthetic to a downtown, which is what it looks like at night when people are there." It's about the light, how the streets are lit. If you go to Florence, or Rome, or Paris, or any number of cities, the way their streets are lit and the way our streets are lit are completely different. The feeling at night is completely different. We all love that feeling in Europe. The fear here is the endless, "Well, we've got to be safe." It's like, "Oh yeah, OK. You know, we could make it bright enough and pretty enough that we have both." They're not exclusive things. That's how I think all those things found their way together.

RK: Do you see yourself as an entrepreneurial business owner? Or do you see yourself as still the lighting guy who's got another project to do? How does this inform how you view your work?

I have trouble seeing myself beyond being this guy who has crazy ideas that I want to do, and how do I get them done.

NC: I have trouble seeing myself beyond being this guy who has crazy ideas that I want to do, and how do I get them done. The idea of being a leader or being an entrepreneur, being some important member of the community, doesn't strike me in any way. I've had people come up to me and say, "You're a local celebrity." And it's like, "No I'm not. I'm just this guy who goes home like everybody else, and every once in a while gets to watch an episode of 'Game of Thrones' and catch up, because I'm too busy to see it when it might air." All I see is how I am going to get the next project done. What contacts do I have to make? Where do I get the equipment? Can I get the students up to speed in time? How do I make sure that they're getting the learning experience they want?

This has become a class now as well. That's added to the class load, but it's also become a way of guiding students. I'm the producer. The students have to do all the work. One student has to do the books and take care of finances. One student has to come up with marketing. One student has to be the scheduling person. So I lay that all out, and I sort of sit back and watch them flounder around, and then try and push them to hit target dates. My goal in this is that in the end, once you leave here, your whole life you're going to have to learn on your own and you're going to have to find all these things that help you as an independent contractor. Or you're going to have to do your own books or have to market yourself.

RK: College doesn't give students a lot of training in how to be their own business manager.

NC: Yeah, and they're learning to do it on their own with a little guidance from me. I'm learning to do it on my own, so we're all in this together.

RK: I hear the excitement in your voice, the passion you get from it. Is there a trickle down effect, in terms of gaining willing followers from the students? Do they get excited by your excitement or impassioned by the opportunity?

NC: It's varied from year to year, and the dynamic of a class, how they're going to work together, is always unpredictable to me. For the last three or four years, I've let the students try and come up with an idea. We'd spend a whole term doing ideation around what it is that interests them. That works and doesn't work, depending upon the class dynamic.

This year, for instance, I changed gears a little bit and said, "OK, here's your topic." The previous year, the project that we just did, the students had an idea and we kept working on it, and working on it, and working on it. There became a point when it was financially impossible, and they bit off more than they can chew. At that point, we completely changed gears and I handed them a book and said, "OK, this is what we're going to do. Let's figure it out." I think they all turned that corner and weren't frustrated by it. They were actually kind of relieved ... and that energy built back up. This was the 100th anniversary of the signing of the armistice for World War I, so we did a piece on war.

RK: You finally get to do your war piece.

NC: I got to do my war piece. It was interesting ... and they got enthused. In fact, they set up Skype and Google Hangout meetings through the summer to get storyboards done, which I've tried to encourage in other years and this year this group grabbed at.

RK: As leader, what's your role with students who are highly engaged, highly motivated?

NC: It's not unlike the role of a director. It's really to try and keep the vision unified and in front of them somehow so they don't get distracted. War is such a complicated subject obviously. We sat down on one of the first days and literally traced every war, they wanted a timeline of historically recorded wars. After pages and pages and pages of a history line of wars, they sort of got the flow of it and the idea of it. Then we start looking at what's going on today and how that is or isn't different from what was actually going on during World War I and through World War II, and all those little conflicts that had been going on prior to those wars.

We had all these other topics that have bled in. They all took parts of the story, and my goal was to make sure that we told the story cohesively and got from each student's part to the next student's part in a smooth way. And to not worry about, at least with this topic, who we might offend as we talk about or have discussions around nationalism or other topics that could be current.

RK: You set a vision for the students, giving them space to do their own exploration about what inspires them or what they're curious about, while at the same time creating a container to keep the trains running on time. As an artist leader, what are the key attributes that you would say are most useful?

NC: In a project like this, one of the things that I've found is trying to always have the big picture. It's the idea of allowing the artist to get really involved, or each student to zero down to some real minutia, and let them get there for a while, but then to all of a sudden pop their vision back out so they see the big world again. I find that I'm always trying to keep the big picture in mind, while allowing all the minute exploration to go on. Because sometimes in those trips down those tunnels, there are little gems you pick up along the way that you wouldn't have by just keeping the big picture open. Sometimes those lead to side tunnels that take you into giant caverns that you never had perceived. It's this really interesting balance of trying to allow all that freedom and that juice to happen, and then to pull back and look, and go, and pull back and look.

RK: I hear that there's a real need to be attentive and listen and pay attention to them, not just drive your own agenda.

NC: Right, which is hard for me. I'm always sitting back and trying to say to myself, "Just listen for a little bit longer. Let's see where this goes."

RK: It's such a core skill.

NC: Sometimes students will head down paths that I assume where they're headed, and I'm not always right about where they're headed. I have to let them get through what is a narrowness of vision. It's just because they're young and they lack a larger experience or a larger world, or they haven't seen, or they haven't read one thing or another. At what point do you push them toward those things, and at what point do you just try and let them move in that direction to discover some things ... and to think outside of the narrow and the immediate. That's something that I try to do as a teacher all the time.

RK: Do you find the conversations with students today different from 10 or 20 years ago, in terms of what type of life experiences they bring and the technology that they have now?

NC: In some ways they're essentially the same. They're young, they're engaged and they jump to conclusions.

The technology thing is interesting and that's changed things. It's less of, "Go read these paragraphs from this book," because we can grab that in class a lot faster from the internet. That comes in kind of handy. But they still bring — everybody does this and we're spending our whole lives fighting it — all the experiences and prejudices and viewpoints that they've had through their lives to whatever the topic is at that moment. They've just had fewer experiences and less exposure. Emotionally, they can sometimes get there quicker than I can, or do an emotional tie in to a character quicker than I can, because I'm trying to think of the psychological aspect too much. It's finding how to shift that or how to get there.

RK: What, in your opinion, needs to change or adapt to encourage more artists to start thinking of themselves as leaders as they're developing in their careers?

What is wonderful about studying theater — if you're studying life through plays — is it forces you to try and understand the human condition. Understanding the human condition enables a sense of closeness to the world that should engender the idea of leadership ...

NC: What I am trying to get them eventually to look at, and Andrei Tarkovsky talks about this, is the similarities between art, science and religion. They're all trying to find the answers. Artists tend to try to find the answers by painting out the solution or writing the play. Religion tries to find it by going through the religious text and finding the emphasis in the text. Scientists do the experiments. ... What is wonderful about studying theater — if you're studying life through plays — is it forces you to try and understand the human condition. Understanding the human condition enables a sense of closeness to the world that should engender the idea of leadership, that should engender the, "If I want to make things right, or I want to do things, or I want to engage the public, I can do that, and I can find a way to do that." The next tools are really those tools of leading other people or getting other people to join you. In theater arts, as soon as you reach any level, whether you're a lighting designer or set designer, you have to lead other people to get the job done. You've got to learn how to do that.

RK: What are the core skills to do that, which you've learned over time?

NC: For me, the first one is honesty. I think that I'm honest to a fault. There's times when I say things that I shouldn't say, when I'm just being honest, but it's, "Oh, they didn't need to hear that."

I think another one is setting the idea that we're all working toward a goal and we're all in it together. There's that, "I'm open and I'm going to listen if you have a better way to get me to that goal." I think those sort of basic things work really well for me.

My students are always amazed when they first work for me professionally, outside of school, whether it's as an assistant on a show or in some other capacity where I'm designing as a scenic artist. It's like, "Wow, I always thought you were so mean." It's like, "No. I'm just mean around you because I want you to get better."

In theater you're going to hit a wall in a project. You have to make sure that everybody that's come along with you, they don't have to be your best friend, but if you want to get around, or over, or through the wall, you need them all. They'll be there for you if you treat them right. If you joke with them, allow them to joke, keep them on target, keep them directed, give them the sense that they're getting things done. Give them the sense that they're contributing to the product. And when you hit that wall, they're there for you. That's what really makes you go over the top with a lot of projects, I think.

RK: You've learned those skills as you've grown as a leader and an artist. Is there any advice you wish you had received early in your career that you would give to the next generation of young artist leaders?

NC: Life is much shorter than you actually think it's going to be when you're 18 or 21 years old. It seems like it's really long and expansive. I wish I would have spent just a little more time focused on expanding that life base when I was younger, and not being so absorbed in my culture at the time. ...

Goethe said, "Every day absorb one good piece of art, one good piece of music, one good piece of writing." Every day, find something of quality that you wouldn't normally do, and a new one every day. You'll know so much and you'll have grown so much.

Epilogue

Norman Coates has a passion to teach, to help young people grow as artists, and to make a positive impact in his community and the world. Social innovation and entrepreneurial leadership lessons we can take from Norman include:

- Adapt to the given circumstances. Effective leadership includes observing human nature and adjusting to the situation or context. Otherwise, people won't listen to you.
- Remain goal oriented. Working with and through others is a core leadership skill, but it gets you nowhere without a vision or sense of direction.
- Allow room for failure. For people to effectively learn and grow, they need to feel safe to make mistakes.
- Hold the space for others. Good leaders recognize that people have their individual styles and strengths. Let people use their talents, and focus on how to blend those into an effective outcome.
- Social impact is part of the game. Artist leaders see opportunities where their work can create significant positive change for the community. It's more than art for art's sake.
- Be honest and treat people well. Be up front about where people stand, what their contributions can be, and how you can support them in achieving their goals.