



Artist As Leader: Vivienne Benesch

In spring of 2020, when the play “Birthday Candles” by Noah Haidle opens on Broadway, its director, Vivienne Benesch, will join a tiny but august group of women who have both acted and directed on Broadway. The artistic director of PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, NC, since 2016, Vivienne is currently steering the renowned regional theater through its “Legacy/NOW” season celebrating the centenary of its founding. She is a staunch advocate for gender equity in the field, and in its 2018-19 season, PlayMakers reached a milestone few other theaters have achieved: All of the plays in the season were directed by women.

In this conversation with Corey Madden, Vivienne discusses how the mentors who helped shape her successful start as an actor also taught her invaluable lessons about how to lead and mentor others in her directing and producing career. She is also candid about how she has negotiated and learned from moments when she as a leader in pursuit of a vision has demanded more of her staff than they might have been prepared to give.

Corey Madden: Could you tell me about your artistic background and your training and how they influenced the way you lead?

Vivienne Benesch: I’m one of those people who’s known what I wanted to do since I was five. I was incredibly blessed that I had artists and art all around me

growing up. My mother's side of the family, my mother and grandmother, were both modern dancers, and on my father's side of the family, my grandfather was a museum curator and my grandmother was a pianist. And my grandfather on my mother's side was an architect-turned-one-of-the-first-interior-designers who really sort of made that into a career.

There was such a highly developed sense of the esthetic in my family. But that also came with a huge amount of judgment, judgment of me — which I sort of had to deal with in my youth, adolescence and throughout my adulthood — that I now try to use for the good and for strength as an artist and certainly as an artistic leader.

I wanted to act, direct, teach and be a criminal lawyer. [She laughs.] Those were all the things I knew from a very early age. I actually desperately wanted to be a dancer, but I have flat feet, and that was over very quickly. I kept injuring myself, and that was never to be. So theater sort of came in. But directing and acting certainly were always inextricably linked until I felt like I needed to start making choices.

And I am very blessed to have had incredible mentors in my life. The first of those is a woman named Rebecca Guy, who was my high school acting teacher. I like to say that every step in my career is thanks to her, until the job here at PlayMakers Repertory Company. She brought me as a student to the Chautauqua Theater Company when she was running it. It was my summer there after my senior year at Brown when she said, "You know, you can do this professionally, but you should know that the best training for both acting and directing, if you happen to be lucky enough to do both, is the actor's training."

So under her advice, I went to graduate school at NYU as an actor. Halfway through, I remember thinking, "Oh my God, thank God I made this choice. This was exactly what I needed, what I wanted." And for my first six years out of school, I really was mostly acting. And I always say of my acting career, it was on the very good side of realistic. I worked a lot. I was sort of known as a classical actress, but then my first agent said, "Oh, no one's going to know what to do with you for at least 10 years. Go to the regions. Go work." And I did. And I feel very blessed that that happened, whereas so many other people said, "No, I'm going to stay in New York and try and see if the big TV show or the film career happens." And they then stopped working for so long.

Six years later, Rebecca Guy called me up again and said, "You need to start directing again." And I said, "Yeah, I do." And she brought me to Chautauqua to direct "The Skin of Our Teeth." That was in 2001, in August before September 11th. I remember working on that particular play right before September 11th really

woke me up to the power that a story has for us to help process what is going on in our lives, both on a global and most intimate way. That was the first time that that connection hit me so, so hard.

And from there, I just started directing and acting again, directing mostly educationally at NYU, at Juilliard, up at Brown. Then, again, Rebecca called me and said, “I’m retiring from Chautauqua. You should apply for this job.” It seemed like the perfect thing because it was a wonderful summer festival and a conservatory and would allow me to continue acting and directing the rest of the year. What I learned is, it doesn’t matter if it’s a three-month or two-week festival or a year-round theater; it’s a year-round job.

And that was really the beginning of my movement into leadership, being the artistic director at Chautauqua Theater Company. First, I was a co-artistic director with my then-partner-in-life-and-work, Ethan McSweeney. We did that together for five years, and then I took it over on my own from there. I was at Chautauqua for 12 seasons.

Joe Haj, who was my predecessor here at PlayMakers Rep, had brought me down to direct. I had come down and directed three times. And so when he got the Guthrie Theater job, he called me up and he said, “You should consider applying to this.” I never would have expected I’d wind up in the South, but I’d had such great experiences directing down here and wanted to see what it meant to be in dialogue with the community year-round on an ongoing basis. And it felt like a great fit. It also has a conservatory and the professional company side-by-side, and that felt absolutely right. And so now I am about to, in about a week’s time, celebrate four years here.

Corey: Congratulations. That’s wonderful!

Vivienne: Thank you.

Corey: Talk a little bit more about the specifics of your having been mentored at a young age and then also how mentoring works for you today. What do you see is motivating that in you, and also what’s important to you about it?

Vivienne: I think what I experienced at a young age — and I recognize how lucky I am for it — is that someone like Rebecca Guy saw the possibility in me. It wasn’t just encouragement; it was a challenge in the best way. To challenge with support. To challenge and say, “If you fail, it’s OK, but leap. Go. We’re here, we believe in you.”

And to be able to instill that confidence in someone, especially at a young age, is like 80% of what's necessary, right? You can learn a lot of the rest of it, but that self-confidence to take the risk to fail is everything. And you have to know that people are going to believe in you and love you on the other side.

Corey: How did your mentors teach you to become a leader?

Vivienne: Another mentor is Zelda Fichandler. I was lucky to be at NYU's graduate program while she was running it. Every year she would start with these sort of talks to inspire us all. And they really did. I hear there's a book coming out of many of them, so I look forward to that. But the one that I remember from my first year, she said, "You are here to train to investigate the thousand possibilities of who you are, not to hone the three that you may be lucky enough to be asked to use for the rest of your career."

And that to me has been a guiding principle for me as a teacher, as an artist and as an artistic leader, because transformation is related to the act of bravery, right? You don't know what's possible until you go there. You can inspire someone, and then they go so much further than you ever believed they could. If you only hone the few things that you know you're good at or that people tell you you are good at, you are actually limiting not only your own experience but all the people's experience with whom you work.

So I like to think — even when I'm planning a season, when I'm planning a season and thinking of it as a journey — that, sure, a lot of audience members who come and see the six mainstage shows don't necessarily feel the journey that I do. But I pay a huge amount of attention to that because I want them to have a variety of experiences. Because I don't know what's going to move them. Everyone has their own triggers. Everyone has their own triggers for joy, triggers for resistance, and in a world of everything that trigger means these days — it's probably a little bit of a hot word to use, but actually it's right — the arts are triggering, and artistic leaders should trigger but do so responsibly.

And so the thousand possibilities of who you are, I'm trying to ask that of the artists that I work with, the administrators I work with, as well as the audience.

Corey: I hear in both the mentorship associated with the beginnings of your career and also with how you've carried it forward that you actually have a much more expansive and much more curious and open style of leadership.

Vivienne: I try to. The word collaboration is a great one. The style, the impulse to collaborate is the most exciting one for me. I would say people say of me that I am collaborative to a fault. I think I heard Larissa on the podcast with you talking about,

the best idea in the room is the best idea. I agree with that completely. I think my talent is knowing what that is, being able to go, yes [snapping her fingers] and then taking that there.

The thing I love most about leadership is the alchemy of bringing people together to create and giving them the space where they feel excited to do so. And I feel that the artist in me, the actor and the director, that it comes from that base, right? It comes from the “yes, and” imaginative work that you learn in improv where you can’t negate someone else. You have to accept it and take it on.

Corey: How do you use that spirit outside of the rehearsal room when you’re engaging stakeholders who aren’t necessarily artists?

Vivienne: I think the first thing that I have encountered personally at this point is, people always find my enthusiasm both, I think, a very positive thing, but also they are a little like, “Hmm.” Just a little wary about it. “Really? Is she going to make the hard decisions?” I generally do have a positive, enthusiastic outlook. I’m genuinely inspired by the work. But when you’re in those budget meetings and marketing meetings and development meetings or talking to a playwright about why they should let you develop their next piece, it’s about listening as much as it is about all that enthusiasm and energy.

So I think that’s the other side to all of that, being energized as a listener. I think about the training. Is it possible to teach how to listen? I think you either have it or you don’t. And really good actors do that. And I would like to posit that a really good artist leader can do that, which is to take the listening deeply and then be able to transform that into the work plan, into the execution of a long-term vision that is super important. It’s really the combination of those things. And it’s something that I wrestle with. I’m better and more set on it on certain days and certain months and certain shows.

Corey: I’d love for you to talk a little bit about how gender does or doesn’t impact the way that people perceive you or how you lead.

Vivienne: I haven’t had, I would say, the struggles that I have seen others legitimately come up against. From a young age I was given opportunity and took it and because of good mentorship and support was able to do that. So on that level, sometimes I don’t have an anger that is personal about that, but I do have a huge surge of energy that I want to put behind amplifying and advocating for women’s voices, whether it’s students, designers, playwrights, actors. When I see disparity and lack of opportunity, I want to be someone who can change that.

And that's been one of my central tenets coming here, in my four years here to be able to proudly say, "At minimum parity. Sometimes better than, but at minimum parity." With writers, with directors. To have been able to see that — if you take that adage that the keys are in your pocket or in your bag, and so just keep looking if you can't find them — if you keep looking, you will find them. That is the attitude that I have tried to adopt without saying, "Oh I couldn't find the right person."

Corey: So accountability is a big part of what you can do as a leader even though in a sense you don't feel that gender really impacted you directly in the same way that maybe it might have affected someone else?

Vivienne: That's exactly it. So I feel that my activism is in how to give opportunity. And that has also been true then along the lines of equity and inclusion at this moment.

Corey: Can you talk about a leadership challenge you've faced in recent years?

Vivienne: So one of the things that happens here is a show can be hugely successful and yet it was one of the hardest things on the company, the getting there, the process, the question, "Was the process worth the outcome?" And generally if you're an audience member, you come and go, "Yes it was. Of course it was! Oh my God, what a fantastic show. Look at the risks you're taking. Look at the artistry that was on display. And you're making us think!" And you're like, "Good. Hey, Viv, you're doing exactly what you said you would do."

And then you come to your meetings with the constituents inside your company who made it happen, and they're exhausted. They're frustrated. They don't necessarily think the product was worth the process. That hasn't happened a lot, but it happens. And it's going to continue happening. I have to continually remind myself of the resilience I need, the need to get more sophisticated — that's not the right word — more mature in allowing that to happen. You go into your postmortems, your debriefs, and you need to let your staff unload. You need to listen to try to decipher what is actually possible change and what was just an experience of, "You know what? We don't always love our work." Sometimes it's really hard.

So, that has happened three times in my four years. People who know me are going to be going [laughing], "What shows has she done? What has she done?" And that's OK. Three times where there was a product that we should have been proud of. And the first time it happened, it was a gigantic success for us. And I was so disheartened. I was so sad that the pride that I had for the work was not shared

by the company. And that's going to happen. So three out of 18 shows is not too bad, right? It's not too bad.

I'm now quoting, but I think it was a quote of a quote of a quote so I don't know who to attribute it to. "Being tough in the face of something tender and being tender in the face of things that are tough." Manipulating between those two things is the job. And the days where you just want to be tender, and you curl up and say, "This is too much," I have learned to know that it's going to pass. That's the only thing I can say. I no longer take it as the end of the road or the end of my career. I sort of go, "OK, what can I learn from this? What can I take forward?"

How can you have some wins, when you are able to get in and help something get better? Those are great moments. Those are again mentorship moments. With a young director. Or with an audience member who writes a really nasty letter and you write back or you call and you have the conversation, and by the end of that conversation they have completely forgotten, not forgotten, but put aside the thing that they were furious about because they are genuinely moved that you want to have the conversation. You can't do that for hundreds of people, but when you have the time to do that occasionally, it's a really rewarding moment.

Corey: At one point in my career, I said that I was done with the drama in drama. I think that it was a leadership moment for me where I realized that it didn't help me to react dramatically to this turbulence. I think that what I hear you saying is that as a leader you've gotten to the point where you go, "Actually I'm the person who's the navigator in the boat. And if I rock the boat a whole lot in reaction to the turbulence, I'm not really navigating."

Vivienne: You speak so well about these things. I think that's absolutely right. Knowing when to lead from the front and when to lead from behind and just push and see what needs to happen. It's really important to distinguish those two things, to have an ability to know what is the real capital D Drama where I have to step in and say, "No, not OK." What's great is that when that happens, people are still like, "Oh! Oh, Viv! We don't see Viv like that a lot. Oh, wow!" So it's still effective, right? The people who use that every day, it no longer becomes effective.

Corey: You are about to direct on Broadway. When plays get to Broadway, there are usually many more cooks in the proverbial kitchen. How are you ensuring that you remain the leader of the production?

Vivienne: What makes it OK — the attention, the number of cooks in the kitchen — what makes it OK and that I keep reminding myself of is I knew this play in its infancy, and I feel like I have co-parented it with Noah Haidle through its development. So I try to not think of it any differently than continuing to tend to the

play. The hardest transition is really that both Chautauqua and especially Detroit were small rooms, and now we're on the American Airlines Theater, this large, expansive proscenium, and transferring the delicacy of the play to this big space has been the thing that I get most nervous about.

But that's really what I'm concentrating on. And you get like, "Oh, are you nervous? Or you are you this, or are you that?" And yes, I will be directing some starry names and things like that, but I'm not letting that come in. I'm just tending to the delicacy of the play. I think five years ago I would have been so much more freaked out about what this is, thinking, "Oh, this could change your life!"

I'm happy that my Broadway directing debut is happening after 50, because I don't feel like that. I've seen way too many people for whom it changes nothing or it goes really badly. For me, if you take care of that story, it will turn into other stories. And you deal with that when that comes along, or you come back and you are very, very lucky to come back to an amazing theater that is a home where you get to tell stories year-round.

Corey: What needs to change to encourage more artists who maybe don't feel like leadership is in their future to step up and lead? What do you think that we need to be doing to change their opportunities?

Vivienne: Well, first of all, I think we're in a moment where the multiple-hat-wearing artist is now expected to a degree. I'm not saying that there's anything wrong if you have your one specific passion, not at all, but the expectation and the allowance that you can be good at more than one thing and that those can actually help each other and be part of each other is the currency now.

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So what I would say is, "Don't see your separate passions as competing with each other. See them as feeding each other." Just by their intersection, they are going to turn into more than just the art itself. Whether that's about the business of your art, whether it's about the way you need to communicate it, what platform it exists on, how you amplify your own artistry by necessity becomes a quality of leadership that I don't think we used to have control over. We were told as artists, "Go do your thing and wait till someone tells you, 'Oh I want to produce you doing this.'" Now for all the obvious reasons there is practically the expectation that you are the producer of your work as well.

Corey: I know you got great advice as a young person, but looking back, is there any lesson you wish you'd received?

Vivienne: It probably sounds like a total cliché, but clichés are that for a reason. Trying to adapt into what you think people want or the idea of success or, “Oh, this is the journey I should be on,” all those those things that take you away from your authentic voice. If I could push those away 20 years sooner, I would. I really wonder, would I be the artist I am today if I hadn’t had those struggles? I don’t know. So part of me is like, “Well, every singular artist’s journey is going to be different.” But I do wish I had gotten the advice that “Your journey may not look like anybody else’s, and that’s perfectly fine.”

Epilogue

With an infectious energy and enthusiasm, Vivienne Benesch is a model of the passionate artist-leader. Key lessons from our interview with Vivienne include:

- **Balance “challenge and support.”** A leader’s success is most sustainable when they can 1) balance building relationships of trust, respect and rapport with 2) clarifying expectations, setting boundaries and holding people accountable.
- **Have a bias for possibility.** See more in people than they see in themselves and help them accomplish more than they ever thought possible.
- **Utilize transferable skills.** Time again in this series, artist-leaders describe the powerful benefits of listening. Artists often work on developing this and other core skills in their training and process. Don’t undersell these gems; rather bring them into your leadership realm.
- **Know your standards.** It can be easy to forget to communicate what is expected, acceptable and non-negotiable. Illuminate the container for your team to work within, and then get out of the way.
- **Be adaptable.** Situations are always changing, and the leader needs to recognize the context. Be prepared to fluctuate between making tough choices that may upset some constituents and providing space for people to push back.
- **Curate your story.** It’s easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees. Stay focused on your role and responsibilities from moment to moment, day to day, and project to project. Small steps feed the narrative of your life.



Vivienne Benesch

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, PLAYMAKERS REPERTORY COMPANY

Vivienne is a company member and Producing Artistic Director at PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, N.C., where she has helmed productions of “Life of Galileo,” “Leaving Eden,” “The May Queen,” “Three Sisters,” “Love Alone,” “RED” and “In The Next Room” for PlayMakers. For 12 seasons, she served as Artistic Director of the renowned Chautauqua Theater Company and Conservatory. She has also directed for the Folger Shakespeare Theatre, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, Trinity Repertory Company and Red Bull Theatre, among others. In 2018, she directed the world premiere of Noah Haidle’s “Birthday Candles” for Detroit Public Theatre and is directing it again this spring on Broadway, starring Debra Messing. As an actress, Vivienne has worked on and off-Broadway, in film and television, at many of the country’s most celebrated theatres. Vivienne is a graduate of Brown University and NYU’s Graduate Acting Program. As an educator, she has directed for and served on the faculty of some of the nation’s foremost actor training programs, including The Juilliard School, UNC-Chapel Hill’s Professional Actor Training Program, Brown/Trinity Rep MFA Program and at her alma mater, NYU’s Graduate Acting Program. She is the 2017 recipient of the Zelda Fichandler Award given by the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation.