

The Artist as Leader: Joe Haj



Joseph Haj recently celebrated his third anniversary as Artistic Director at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which under his leadership has increased audience attendance, fundraising and community engagement. The actor-turned-director is driven, in part, by his identity as the child of Arab immigrants and the responsibility he feels as a person of color running one of the nation's largest theaters. He is dedicated to using his position to empower groups often marginalized in the performing arts, and chooses to lead in a way that broadens the career pipeline and access to programming.

In this interview, Corey Madden talks to her longtime colleague about how his life experiences inform his leadership skills, what inspires him to be successful and his vision for the future of American theater.

CM: I'd like to go back to the beginning, before your training as an artist. Could you reflect on how your upbringing and background might have influenced your leadership style?

JH: I actually think my leadership career is a kind of repentance for the entirely misspent youth that I lived. I'm the child of immigrants. My brother is 18 months older, and we were both born in the public housing of Patterson, New Jersey. My parents were very recent immigrants and my dad was studying in New York City. It really wasn't until I had a daughter that I realized how much of a parent's job it is to teach cultural norms.

My whole young life is nothing but memories of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, wearing the wrong clothes, and behaving wildly inappropriately. I had a sense of real otherness. Being Palestinian, growing up in Miami, people thought I was Cuban. I didn't know any other Arab Americans in the very small universe that is a kid's life in this working-class neighborhood of Miami.

I was a disastrous student. I was one of those kids who went to school year-round — failed things during the year, made them up in summer school. I was lost. I mean really, truly lost. I signed up for first-period drama class my senior year in high school, because it seemed like just the sort of thing that I could sleep through. I had that one great teacher, who I'm still in touch with. She comes to see shows. I adore her. She realized just how disaffected, how angry, how lost I was. She introduced me to this art form. It was a place where all of that could be organized in a way.

That felt so big to me. It felt just gigantic. So I would wake up in the morning, shower, get into my car and drive to school for first-period drama, and then I'd go to the beach for the rest of the day. But I'd go to school for that one class, because it was so important to me.

Then, my parents. If you're Palestinian, there's doctor, lawyer, engineer. Those are the paths, and anything else is abject failure. ... I went to a community college because that's the only school I could get into. I got my two-year degree, and then I got my bachelor's degree, and then I went to graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

I remember this conversation with my dad, who I adored. My dad was one of the extraordinary human beings. One of the few real fights we ever had was about graduate school. He was like, "I'll send you to graduate school for anything, but I'm not sending you to grad school to be an actor." In his world, he didn't even know what that could possibly mean. I did, and it was fine. I think in the end they were happy that I wasn't shooting smack and steeling hubcaps.

CM: I'm hearing that there was an incredible tension between feeling angry, in a sense — dislocated, alienated and alone — and then finding a sense of meaning, and reason, and drive, but it not conforming to your parents' idea of what success was in American terms. So you were actually ahead of them, as most first-generation immigrants are. They know more than their parents. Did that drive you?

JH: I think that's right. Just hearing you describe it in those terms, it sounds like every artist's journey on some level. A sense of dislocation and a sense of place, or the pursuit of place through the art, or the art making. Particularly because I'm in Miami and my parents are Palestinian, but the story is so typical. I get bored even telling you because it's just so made-for-TV-movie narrative. But in my memory, that's actually my journey. That anger and fear ... are too easily dismissed as the powerful motivators and organizers that they can be. It took me a lot of years to learn to not lead from that place.

And it coincides, on some level, with moving from being an actor, to being a director, to being an artistic director.

CM: Tell me about that. How did the track that you took as an artist help develop you into a leader? What were those key moments and transitions?

JH: I went to graduate school but I was far behind my peers, because many of them had known since they were very young people that they wanted to be in theatre. When I went to grad school, I had seen three professional plays in my life. ... All of a sudden, I'm around these very, in relative terms, sophisticated young makers. They've been making theater in their own way for a long time, or they've been taking annual trips to New York and seeing high-level, albeit commercial, but high-level theater, storytelling. I didn't have any of those tools.

I remember getting to grad school and PlayMakers Repertory Company, which is housed on the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill. David Hammond was the artistic director. He was new at the time. I was in his first class. I remember him talking about the space, and describing it, and talking about the vomms (tunnels under the auditorium that open onto the edge of the stage). Everybody nodding and me going, "What's a vom?" I had none of the tools. Graduate school was just a nagging feeling of being behind. Everybody else was out front of it.

I went in it with eyes opened. On some level, I also knew how much I didn't know, which didn't make any of it any easier, mind you. But I knew that if I wanted to do this, I needed to learn. That's what I was there to do.

What I learned in those three years, which was crucial to everything that I was able to do since, is a discipline for the work. I learned that whatever talent is or isn't, it's not worth talking about because we have very little control about how much of it we may or may not have. The only thing that was left to me, I learned very quickly, is how hard I could work to extract all that I could from whatever talent it is that I have. I learned a habit for work.

It's a profession that selects for workers. Whatever else it does or doesn't do, it selects for people who have a gigantic capacity for work at all levels. ... There's a kind of human being who is wired for that. I have a kid like that. I never have to tell my kid to do her homework. She just does that. I wasn't built that way and I didn't know how. I had none of those tools. I learned how to work and being a person that somebody knew, if they hired me, that, "This guy is just going to go until he bleeds. He's going to give you everything that's available." That is one's own reputation as much as, "Look how talented said person is."

So that was graduate school.

CM: That's a great story. It brings to mind Bob Francesconi at the School of the Arts, who is the great acting and movement teacher who has been there for 35 years and who everybody credits with being the genius of their lives. He's also the person who, in great measure, picks the class each year. He says he looks for a certain anger and capacity for trouble, I think particularly in men, that then is channeled through the experience of being an actor.

JH: Wow. I've never heard of it that way. That's so profound and true, and it's a hard thing to test for. I recruited for nine years at PlayMakers as the producing artistic director there with my colleague Ray Dooley. A kid comes in, does a monologue and you go, "Oh my gosh. They're

talented, great timing, good voice." The hard thing to test for is, how ambitious are they? How much do they want it? Because that determines how hard you're willing to work. If you don't want it badly enough, you cannot work hard enough to do what's necessary to get you there.

Trying to find that student who's ferocious enough, who will crawl across broken glass in order to have that life for themselves, it's very hard.

CM: I remember working with Jon Jory (longtime producing director of the Actors Theatre of Louisville), who really trained my eye. He would always say, "Look for a thinking actor. Look for an unusual actor." He really inspired me to develop that gut instinct, and I'm wondering about the way in which your actor training inspired you as you began to be a director. Did you develop a kind of instinct like that?

JH: I think my gut, my instinct, is exactly right 50 percent of the time. I don't trust it, because it's not necessarily better than my mind. I've learned — and one learns by going through it many times — the places where I trusted an impulse, an instinct, versus the evidence. Then sometimes, of course, you're just sure. You just know. That thing ends up being great and wonderful. I think most the time, it is a combination of one's instinct, emotional sense, psychological sense, instinctual, whatever those non-hard things are. But I think resumes matter. I think background matters. I'm interested to know somebody's been hired by the same director more than once.

CM: Sure, no question. It's the resumes that get built up after a period of time.

JH: They declare something. In the on-camera world, you can have a really meaningful on-camera resume and still totally suck as an actor. If you have a big resume as a theatre artist, chances are extremely good that you are not bad. I'm often testing whether it's a good fit. ...

I need highly functional artists in the room, because if there is just one really misanthropic player in the room — this is my own weakness I'm describing, to be clear — it collects so much of my mind space that I suck at my job for the rest of the people who also need me to look at their work carefully, keenly, acutely.

I've really learned, and I'll often make the decision, if I have to choose between an actor who's clearly a gigantic actor but also comes with a reputation for real misanthropy, versus an artist who I really believe in, who I think also can be successful in this role, who I know to be a highly functional human being, I'm choosing the human being. Life is too short and the work is much too hard. I'm choosing artists who I can actually be in collaboration with. ...

I put people around me who can support that leadership style, because otherwise the organization is at war with itself.

CM: Going from being an actor, where you had a hunger for learning and structure, it sounds like that was one piece of your leadership development. ... I'd love for you to talk a little bit about that transition into directing shows before we move on to running theatres.

JH: There wasn't a light-switch kind of moment, but it happened very quickly.

CM: You were a very successful actor. You worked a great deal, and you worked with some incredible directors.

JH: I was very, very fortunate. And I loved that life. I wasn't leaving it with any regret. I don't even feel like I've left it. If something made sense to act in, and I had the time and I could, I would. It's not something that I feel I cut loose.

But there was a transition, and it was around the time that my wife Deirdre (Director of Full Frame Documentary Film Festival in Durham, NC) was pregnant with Samantha, who's now 17. I think part of it was, in the first nine years Deirdre and I were together prior to Samantha, I was on the road half that time. That started to feel like a less manageable life to me. As much as I enjoyed it, and as much as Deirdre and I were comfortable with the rhythms of it, I didn't want to have a child and be in that. But the larger part was that, as an actor, all of a sudden for me it started feeling very, very narrow.

I've described it as feeling like a punter on the football team. ... You come in, you do that job. Go. I just found I wanted more authorship of the event. I'd been working as an actor and I'd been blessed with a lot of great opportunities. It had gotten to the point where I was becoming that kind of actor which none of us as actors want to be. I was becoming the person that's like, "There are only four or five directors who I really trust, who reflect my own work accurately back to me, and I keep running into directors who are not those five people." I got tired of explaining plays to bad directors.

The most important thing was I kept turning down work. Really it was Deirdre who finally was like, "Listen now. If you don't think anybody else can direct plays, you ought to start thinking about directing them yourself."

That began a journey. I think what I was talking about wasn't the least bit accurate or objective. I wasn't working with lousy directors. I was working unhappily as an actor. It's not where I wanted to be.

CM: You had learned what you could learn, you were moving on beyond it.

JH: I wanted more. I had gotten to that point in an artistic journey where it was clear that I had to do something else, or become one of those very hardened and embittered and cynical actors, which I didn't want to be.

CM: I also hear that one of the ways that you evolve is through resistance, and that you go through a period of resistance or anger when you make change.

JH: I think it's true. I think I became so dependent on my anger and frustration as a fuel, which allowed me, in my perception of it at the time, to be a really good actor. The super unhealthy loop of that is like, "If I don't lead from those places, then the outcomes will be poor." ... I say it now with a certain amount of whimsy, because it's so obviously adolescent. I didn't know any other way for a really long time.

To lead from a place of love — which is the most dangerous word — to lead from that place full stop, and to realize that the work could be as good, even better, so much more pleasant for me and everyone else involved, was a learning curve of a kind. But I learned those things in an acting world. By the time I was directing plays, I wasn't leading from that place.

There are things you know as an actor that are so valuable when you become a director, beyond how to talk to actors. As an actor, you sit there at the first read and you know immediately if that director has worked as hard as you have to prepare for this first day.

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Actors always, 100 percent of the time, know when a director is not ready. I know they know if I'm not ready. They're polite, but you're not fooling anybody. I try very, very hard to never be that director. And it is one of the things that I protect more than I do my own family, more than I do vacation time, more than I do my weekends.

CM: Your practice?

JH: My practice, the creative practice. Because without it I can't be that director in the room, or I can't help anybody else be as successful as we all need to be.

CM: That's amazing. How do you do it? How do you prepare yourself?

JH: My preparation is not to have solved the play before I've gotten into the room. My preparation is to prepare myself to wrestle with the questions that we're all going to face. And the fewer of those questions that are arising for the first time in the second week of rehearsal, the better.

I read everything around a play, whatever I'm making. I read all the criticism that's ever been written about it. I spend so much of my time around classic plays. The kinds of plays I typically make, there's an awful lot of research around whatever that story is and its own history, which sometimes is many hundreds of years. I just read everything. I'm prepping "King Lear" and I'm reading everyone from W. H. Auden to Charles Lamb to Harold Bloom. I hate all of them, because of course they're wrong, but it's my ability to be able to bounce ideas and then go, "Oh. I see. Right. That's actually really smart. I need to go back and rethink how we get there." I count on those conversations with design collaborators.

CM: I was going to ask, do you do that in conversation, and with whom?

JH: For me, it's super important that I spend some lonely time with that text before I even begin conversations. ... Designers always come with ideas, because that's their job, and they've got 14 other things going on. They don't have time for you to spend six months figuring out what the play is. They're coming to the room with ideas, and so it's really good for me to have done a certain amount of work beforehand. For me, especially with a formal text and those in the public

domain, I never have a dramaturge do a cutting. That's my work. Line by line, quarto, folio. The reshaping, excising, moving it up. Of course, then, to the dramaturge about it. But at the beginning it has to be mine alone.

This goes back to being an actor, frankly. The most blissful time with a play as an actor, especially if you're playing one of the big roles, is the time between when you know you've been cast and first rehearsal. It's the only time it's ever yours before it necessarily has to be tugged away. That time is so treasured to me, and I treasure that time as a director. I try to have my assistant carve out two, four-hour blocks a week on my schedule. That often gets encroached, but when I can I protect creative time.

When I go into the rehearsal room, somehow the whole organization understands that. But me, two and a half months beforehand, going, "I can't meet with you. I know it's important but I've got to work on 'Lear,' " is such a curiosity to an organization. They're like, "Isn't that months away? How could this possibly be on your mind?"

CM: How wonderful for you to model it for people, that there's a gestational period, and that you really need it.

My only fear, my only real fear, is failing the very communities that believe in my appointment. Particularly as it relates ... to people of color.

JH: You know, I was asked by this reporter what I was afraid of in this job. I'll repeat it here, because I think it's important for this conversation. I don't scare very easily. I've made work in the West Bank, in Gaza, in a maximum-security prison. I'm up all night because of questions, but I'm not afraid. My only fear, my only real fear, is failing the very communities that believe in my appointment. Particularly as it relates, obviously, to people of color.

I think of studies that I've read that address the burden, the additional burden, of not failing. If you're a person of color or if you are a woman in one of these jobs, it is so real. I know categorically if I fail in this job, it is evidence to some people that you can't put brown people in these jobs. That's the lesson some people are going to take away, where a white guy can lose one of these jobs and be hired in the next one, and the next one, and the one after that, because their failure will be put in a larger context beyond their gender or their ethnicity. People of color don't have this advantage. ...

There are people who believe in this appointment, and my fear of failing them is way greater than whether or not "(King) Lear" works or doesn't work, right? Because ... if I do this right and if I do this well, then perhaps an elevator can be sent down for others ...

I'm super-conscious that this position comes with enormous privilege. This isn't a "woe is me" thing. But if you were to ask me what I was scared of today, it remains exactly true. There are people who believe in this appointment, and my fear of failing them is way greater than whether or not "Lear" works or doesn't work, right? Because conversely, if I do this right and if I do this well, then perhaps an elevator can be sent down for others, because it's evidence that somebody can come from a much smaller organization and still do this kind of work. ...

So the pressure to lead well, not just have better ideas, is so clear to me. It's so deeply held as an imperative of what I must try to be and do in the hope that on the opportunities side we're able to get more folks. ... We're not developing enough people. You have managing programs crisscrossing the country. There's not one graduate program in artistic leadership, I don't think.

CM: I think you've been like Jackie Robinson. You are the person who people have staked themselves in, but fundamentally if we put it all on Jackie Robinson, then the moment that he does something wrong, it's over. But if there's a whole bunch of other people who understand that he's been cast in the role, that he has the talent, but ultimately he's also in a drama, right?

You're in an American drama, the drama of being the first person of color to run one of the biggest theaters in America. I think that that's also one of the biggest conundrums: Are you your own person when you're in these jobs, or are you the possession of a community or an institution?

JH: You're simply not allowed a mono-focused point of view. You're not.

CM: You've talked a lot about the idea that there isn't really a pipeline of people who are at the level to take on these huge leadership challenges. At the same time, there are a lot of people now coming up who I think need and want to be mentored and to grow. What do you think needs to change to encourage more artists to lead, or to prepare more artists to be leaders?

JH: Speaking specifically about our journey, our discipline, meaning the theater, if you're a freelance actor or director in the American theater you are by definition a generalist. What you need to do to be an effective director for "King Lear" is very different than what is going to be required for you to be a great director for "All the Way."

Most theatre artists that I know are generalists. They have a very, very broad base of knowledge because they've been asked to stand in very different places over and over again. Some of the smartest people on the planet are designers. Just because of what they have to research in each of the places they go, if they're working broadly. I think there's something in those tools that are so necessary for a leader, because you have to have multiple intelligences to do the job well. You cannot be mono-focused in any way.

As directors, this is where it becomes utterly analogous with leadership. As directors, we get in a room. You've got 20 people sitting around a table, each who have different backgrounds, different training, different expertise playing different roles in the play. They have each done their own research and preparation, each in their own way without any guidance from you or anyone else. You're all in the room, it's Day One, and the clock starts ticking. We all know that opening night is sitting right over here. As director, you're listening, you're telling, you're leading, you're uploading, you're downloading, you're collecting all of these very different intelligences. You're mediating and managing things that are difficult between other folks in the room.

There's nothing that prepares you for organizational leadership better than being a director in the American theatre. Nothing is better preparation. I would suggest that pretty much every lesson that I know or I've learned, I've learned in a rehearsal room, in a rehearsal process.

There's nothing that prepares you for organizational leadership better than being a director in the American theatre. Nothing is better preparation. I would suggest that pretty much every lesson that I know or I've learned, I've learned in a rehearsal room, in a rehearsal process.

Despite those very challenging circumstances we all have had along the way, in the main it is the mitigating of ego. It is the compromising of position, so that we can get the scene staged so that tomorrow we can do the next thing. So that we're still on the path to get us where we need to go. And every artist in the room understands that and, if it's a healthy room, is working in service of moving this thing forward. This is exactly what organizational leadership is.

CM: The rehearsal room teaches you this shared goal right from the beginning. Everyone really understands the shared goal, but they have very distinct roles. Then there is the production of a lot of shared experiential testing and refinement of choices. People are prototyping and iterating. Then you get to a point where, being a leader, you have to say, "OK. We've done enough of that and now we have to make some key choices." Friends of mine call that the moment where time has to bend, because you don't have enough time to keep answering all of those questions.

JH: That's exactly right.

CM: Now you have to make all these decisions, and that's that moment where you have to have leadership. You have to be able to say, "The vision to get us there includes the following things."

JH: It's interesting that we often think, especially in organizational leadership, it's like, "That guy's not leading. I hardly heard from him." We sometimes feel as leaders, "I'm the leader, so I better square to the table and start talking." It's so boring, and not useful. All those things that we know but we do anyway because we get nervous as leaders and we think that's expected of us. Knowing when is at least as important as knowing what, if you're a leader of anything.

CM: How do people learn that? How do we in the field encourage more diverse artists to step up and lead?

JH: I've been in this argument with LORT (League of Resident Theatres) for so many years and it's a gigantic frustration. It was due to my pressure that LORT created a diversity task force, which I continue to serve on. There are leaders in LORT who will say it is a pipeline question, that there aren't folks in the pipeline who are ready for leadership. When we describe the kind of ambition that is required to be a leader of one of our theater organizations, especially any of our large ones, people aren't stupid. They look and go, "I don't see a path for me here, so I'm going to connect my ambition, my talent, my everything to someplace that I can get to." The glass ceiling is so patently clear in the American theater, around gender, people of color. We discussed it today. It's catastrophic.

And for women, it's the photograph of a glass ceiling. Women make up over 50 percent of the workforce at every level of our LORT organizations. Intern, part-time staff, full-time staff, management, middle management, senior management, over 50 percent. You get to executive level, 27 percent are women, and the needle hasn't budged in a quarter century. That is a photograph of a glass ceiling.

CM: It's really about, as you say, structure. The idea that we really have to and need to structure diversity, and inclusion, and equity, into the top-level decision making.

JH: Yes.

Epilogue

Joe Haj shows us how hard work, courage and intense preparation have helped him evolve from successful artist to a nationally recognized artist leader. Insights from our interview with Joe include:

- **Allow for mentors in your life.** Messages can come from unexpected people and situations. Allow that others may see more in us than we see in ourselves.
- **Drive is as important as talent.** Lots of people have abilities. It is those who will both push themselves and persevere that have a high chance of succeeding.
- **Drive is important, but so is being a good teammate.** Ego is an unfortunate side show in the arts. Good leaders recognize the need for collaboration, emotional intelligence, and partnership to produce truly outstanding results.
- **Know when you've outgrown your role.** Frustration and boredom do not serve you nor those around you. Recognize when it's time to embrace new or different leadership opportunities.
- **Prepare like a fiend.** The leader should be more prepared than anyone in the room, and yet...
- **Leaders hold the space for others.** The leader also has the courage to hold back, providing others ownership of the process. Consider the notable words from Lau Tzu, "A leader is best when people barely know (the leader) exists, when (the) work is done, (the) aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."

~Rob Kramer



Joseph Haj

Artistic Director, Guthrie Theater

Joseph Haj is the Director of the Guthrie Theater. Since his appointment in 2015, he has directed *Pericles* (also Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Folger), *South Pacific*, *King Lear*, *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Romeo and Juliet*. For nine years Joseph was Producing Artistic Director of PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, N.C., where he has directed productions of *Henry IV*, parts I and II and *Henry V* in rotating rep, *Cabaret* (with Taylor Mac as the Emcee), *As You Like It*, *Big River* (with the Red Clay Ramblers), *The Tempest* and *Metamorphoses* in rotating rep (co-directed with Dominique Serrand) *Cyrano de Bergerac* (also adapted), and many others. In addition to his work at the Guthrie and PlayMakers, Joseph has directed and performed in theaters throughout the United States including the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the New York Public Theater, the Alley, the Mark Taper Forum, the Ahmanson, Actors Theatre of Louisville, The Folger and many others. He has worked overseas in Salzburg, Edinburgh, Paris, Berlin, Venice and Japan. Outside of traditional theaters, Joseph has directed projects in a maximum-security prison, in Batesburg-Leesville, S.C., and in the West Bank and Gaza. As an actor Joseph has worked with many of the theater's foremost directors including Garland Wright, Anne Bogart (as an original member of SITI Company), Jon Jory, Peter Sellars, Sir Peter Hall, JoAnne Akalaitis, Robert Woodruff and others. Joseph is the recipient of the NEA Millennium Grant awarded in 2000 to "50 of America's finest artists" and was named by American Theatre magazine as one of 25 theater artists who will have a significant impact on the field over the next quarter century. His 2010 production of *Hamlet* at the Folger Theatre in Washington, D.C., won the Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Production. He is the recipient of the 2014 Zelda Fichandler Award and the Actors' Equity 2017 Rosetta LeNoire Award. Joseph has served on the Board of Directors at Theatre Communications Group, is currently on the Board of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers (SDC) and is a member of both the League of

Resident Theatres and SDC's Diversity Task Forces as well as the Director's Circle International. Upcoming directing projects at the Guthrie include West Side Story.