

Twenty one years is a long time to be in one place,

especially when you are a self-described gypsy. And it feels like only the beginning. This honor means so much to me. My work, my art has always been important. But where I hope to have the most lasting impact is what I can offer in terms of mentorship, partnership and advocacy. For that work to be acknowledged I am eternally grateful.

I feel like this award is whispering to me “keep going.” I have so many people to thank for this whisper of quiet confidence. So many of you. The Jeff Committee first and foremost for their unending support of my work all these years, for friendly faces on opening nights and beyond. I treasure your keen eye, dedication, and passion for the work that often matches that of its creators.

The whispers from the beginning, from Anthony Moseley and Sandra Delgado and my Collaboracion co-conspirators. From the companies who nurtured and challenged me: Strawdog, who said yes to Chekhov year after year; Redtwist who also thought a “Pillowman” that only 22 people could see at a time was a good idea and so many more. The amazing artists I have collaborated with over the years, who have watched me make mistakes big and small and told me to “keep going.”

For the whispers I didn't always hear, or didn't know were speaking to me. Sometimes you have to be brave to hear the whisper. In particular to Martha Lavey who taught me that I have something to say and how to say it.

The whispers from my colleagues, who spearheaded me standing here- Keira Fromm, Jason Gerace, Joanie Schultz and Damon Kiely. Who know that it takes a village and how much stronger and more open and more creative we are when we stand together. From my art partners: Jack Magaw with whom I've collaborated on 21 shows from Redtwist to the Goodman, California to New York; Mark Montgomery who will read Ivanov with me every few months for several years and always begin with me; Caroline Neff who will walk and drink whiskey and talk acting and stories at any hour of the day. Literally any hour. And many more whose whispers push me to dive right in, stand up straight, urge and urge and urge. Find your people.

The whispers from my hundreds of students, from Columbia to DePaul to University of Chicago to School at Steppenwolf. So many of you are in this room tonight, (have babysat my children!) and you have no idea the gift you give me, what you have taught me.

And the whisper from home, from the amazing father of my children Lance Baker (incidentally our second date was 16 years ago at the non equity Jeffs) and from my two spirited curious and passionate children Noah and Delaney.

It's the whisper of quiet confidence that we all need. All the time. I want to give you this whisper.

Listen for it when you don't have the courage to approach that artistic director, casting director, director, actor, boy you have a crush on, parent you have always feared, friend you need to be honest with...

Listen for it when you need another shot, another chance at that audition side, that scene, that tough conversation you had yesterday.

Listen for it when there's a door that needs to be knocked down, kicked in—a door you feel is closed to you because of your gender, your age, your race, your religion. And when that door finally opens—and it's gonna open—hold it open. We must hold it open. This is our work.

Listen for it when the other voices get too loud, when the inner critics and editors tell you you aren't enough, you can't do it, you'll probably fail anyway, why try. Retune your frequency to hear this lower hum, this whisper as it urges you gently along.

Listen for it when you want to take a risk, make bold choices in your work, get married, make babies, move across the country, travel abroad, fall in love.

You cannot separate the words Chicago and Theater and Community. Look around. We aren't called the city of Big Shoulders for nothing. Sometimes you get to stand on those shoulders but it's even more rewarding to get to *be* a part of those big shoulders. Seeing your students flourish in a professional environment, watching a play your recommended to a director come to life under their skillful guidance, observing a theater company you saw plant the seed grow into its own powerful entity. Listen for the whisper. It is speaking to you.

Thank you.