

Stop&Listen

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS KAIL
+ KENNETH L. ROBERSON

BY KENNETH L. ROBERSON

Director/choreographer **Kenneth L. Roberson** and director **Tommy Kail** have helmed two Tony Award-winning shows that upended the definition of the American musical—Kenneth as the choreographer on *Avenue Q* and Tommy as the director of *Hamilton*. But that's not all that the two artists have in common. Both have long associations with New York City-based theatre company SAY, the Stuttering Association for the Young. Originally founded in 2001 by director Taro Alexander as Our Time Theatre Company, SAY's work with young artists who stutter has grown to include speech therapy, a camp, and online resources—including a blog—in addition to its core programs encouraging young people to write and tell their stories theatrically and musically.

As SAY approached a milestone anniversary, SDC Journal brought Roberson and Kail together for a phone conversation about their work with the company—Roberson as a board member and Kail as a mentor. They found many experiences—including a shared artistic spirit—in common.

KENNETH L. ROBERSON | Thomas, when I last saw you, I think it was the closing party of *Avenue Q*.

THOMAS KAIL | That sounds right. The first closing, because it will never close otherwise, right?

KENNETH | I love that—from your mouth to God's ears.

I'm glad you were able to join us. I'm excited; this is a great opportunity for us to talk about what we've done in the past, to remind us of giving back, of sharing and receiving. You know this marks the 15th anniversary of SAY? Which you and I first knew as Our Time, but we're going to use the organization's new name from here on: SAY.

THOMAS | I did know that.

KENNETH | How did you first get involved with this group?



Camp SAY photos c/o SAY



THOMAS | It was rather random, which is how many good things happen. In 2012 or 2013, I was walking down a street in Manhattan and bumped into Noah Cornman, who was working for the organization. I knew him from his previous job when he was working making cast albums. He started talking about his new job, which I thought sounded wonderful.

Noah and I had a mutual friend in common, Anika Chapin. A few days after I ran into Noah, I was talking to Anika, and she started telling me more about the [SAY] program: she had gone down to their summer camp and spent a lot of time there. It just seemed like something that I wanted to continue to investigate. I loved the idea of using the power of theatre to bring people together. It's something that I believe in deeply.

So I got in touch with Noah and asked how I could participate in some small way. And that's how it began—a chance encounter on a Manhattan street.

KENNETH | Wow, that's great. Had you had prior experience with actors who stutter?

THOMAS | I certainly have. And my job as a director and as a human being is to make sure anyone—and whatever they might struggle with—feels comfortable to do the work. That's it. That's all I care about.

When Noah started talking about the organization, when I talked to Anika, and then, eventually, when I got to meet Taro Alexander and some of the other folks at SAY, I realized *that* was at the core of this organization. And I was amazed that I had not found them earlier; it felt like they were so in sync with many of the things that I thought were necessary and powerful about being a part of the theatre community.

KENNETH | Can you describe one of the productions that you directed with them?

THOMAS | Sure. My function with the group, I think, was one where I wanted to just be a support or a ballast in any way that I could. When I went to meet with them, I just said, "How can I be useful?" There are certain things I can do. I'm happy to find some sort of support role in a rehearsal process.

So that's where it began. I worked with one of the young students who was in the graduating year of the program, before he left high school and went to college, and who had written and directed a show.

That's where I initially found myself: going through the process and working to develop the script, helping set up a rehearsal, having conversations about what it meant to run the room, or being around a bit as he was

staging the play. To me, that was how I could contribute in a way that could be a little bit meaningful.

But also, part of my job in my life *outside* of that building was trying to do something very similar, which is to support an artist so that they can stand and do the work themselves. I've always felt that if a director makes a show and they need to be there every day the show is running, then they haven't necessarily done their job well. It needs to run without them. It needs to be able to function without them. That's how I approached it when I was working with [SAY] on that first project.

KENNETH | This is great, Thomas. You used the word "support," which I like. You *support* them. In which unique ways were you supported by these actors who had a unique way of speaking? What did you take away from the work you did with them?

THOMAS | There's an insistence and movement in this city and in the theatre—we're always moving—hurdling quickly, trying to get some kind of results. We have to finish a task. We have to stage the show. We have to get the script to *this* place. We have to keep on meeting these deadlines and these structures of time that in some way are real and other ways are arbitrary. We have to be ready *here*, because the theatre is ready. *That* feels like a real thing that we're moving towards. But we often manufacture this feeling.

I think that because my job as a director is to try to communicate one idea to a very disparate group of people and make sure we all know what story we're telling, and [that] we're all moving in the same direction, I think I took for granted that speed and acceleration was necessary for that. That it *had* to be done quickly. [Working with SAY actors] caused me to just *stop and listen* and realize that things take the time they need to take. That's something that, early on, some very smart people told me, which is that these things we think we have to achieve—we have to get here, we have to do this—that sometimes the best thing to do is just slow down and investigate. I can always find more opportunity to incorporate this idea. I found myself really struck by that.

I was working on the programs where the students were both writing and directing the work. I was very impacted and moved by the stories that the students decided to tell. Each of them, in some way, was about being heard. Each of them was about the feeling of isolation when they weren't able to express themselves in the way that they wanted. I was genuinely opened up by this idea of what it meant to be a 17- or 18-year-old and write with such clarity and precision and specificity. As I do with any other piece of writing that I admire, I wanted to

find a way to help someone actualize it. It was enormously edifying for me to be there. I'm sure that what I was able to absorb was greater than [what] I was able to give out.

KENNETH | So this experience was a reminder to you of what the word "time" can really mean—how long things would take and/or the length of time that we assume a certain idea would take to develop. So it's very interesting that you mention time. With me, it seems to manifest in having the time to speak my words. But it seems that you found the time to listen. [Do] you think your listening was enhanced by this experience?

THOMAS | Absolutely, without question. And understanding that the ability to communicate and the space that needed to exist to make sure that someone was *able* to communicate an idea needed to be preserved, no matter the time. That's what one *should* do.

KENNETH | Did you have an opportunity to coach any of them in the form of rap? Did this happen often?

THOMAS | It didn't for me. Most of the work, if not all of the work I did, was in plays without musical form. It was almost exclusively dialogue.

KENNETH | Did this experience with the kids carry over directly to your work with fluent people?

THOMAS | Yes, I'm certain that it has. A lot of the things that I find myself working on are about folks who in some way don't feel heard, whether that's a group living in upper Manhattan that is not often represented on stage or it's a group of upstarts starting a revolution. When I did a play about a football coach, same thing: a football coach is someone who is trying to communicate, who is trying to find a way to reach his players.

Hamilton is about someone who is trying to find the right words to express an idea. It's the exact same thing. I find that the experience of working at SAY reframed and refocused so much of the work I had already been doing and allowed me see it in a new way.

KENNETH | Have you had experiences during auditions [when] you suspected that the actor was a stutterer?

THOMAS | Yes. The audition process is one where I'm always trying to, in some way, work against the strange situation we find ourselves in. There are some people sitting on one side

of a table and someone else who has worked their whole life and now has to come in and has two minutes and 30 seconds to do something, to prove their ability. I find that slightly ridiculous and unfair to everybody involved. In those auditions, I try, as best I can, to create an environment where there is room to play because that's actually closer to what the optimal relationship is in the rehearsal room.

KENNETH | Right. And do you remember any specific auditions where it was obvious an actor was working through a stutter, or that he had a severe stutter and needed more time with the text to finish the audition? Have you had any of those experiences yet?

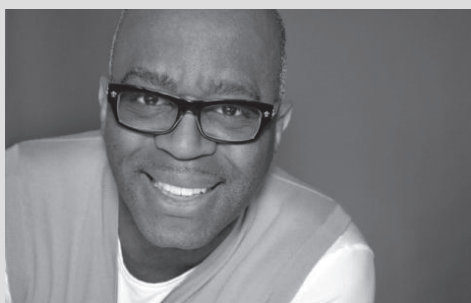
THOMAS | Yes, a few. I would say that I'm more aware of it happening after I had spent my time with SAY.

KENNETH | Wow, you just answered my next question for me. One last question, Thomas. What are your hopes for the young people with this organization?

THOMAS | That they understand how important their voice is. That they know they will be heard. That they can find people in their lives and communities who understand that it just takes them a little more time, but that what they have to say is of equal value to anybody else.

KENNETH | Great. I'm glad to have this opportunity with you. On behalf of people who stutter, I very much appreciate that you felt the need to share your wealth of knowledge with us. You're making me realize that words are time, and vice versa, and you were able to use your time and your words to help us with our growth. I really appreciate that.

THOMAS | Well, the same was done for me. That's how I know that whatever that chance encounter was I had with Noah was meant to be. And I think very fondly on the first Broadway opening I was ever invited to. It was your show—the opening of *Avenue Q* on July 31, 2003. What I love about this community is that it puts us in the same room as a year ago, and here we are, quite a few years later, having a chance to talk. I've admired your work, and I have such vivid memories of seeing it on that stage. Getting to know you a little bit back then made it feel like it was right in front of me. That it was possible. And if you worked hard, something like that could be attainable. So I've always felt connected to you and appreciative of your work. I'm honored to have spent the time I have with SAY.



They Wait, You Finish

BY **KENNETH L. ROBERSON**

"They'll just have to wait until you finish saying what you got to say," my mother would exclaim every Easter and Christmas season during my grade school years, when it was mandatory that I recite a speech for the church program.

I stuttered then—as I do now—and since that time, I have had people wait for me to finish saying what I had to say. My family and school teachers were my major support during those important years of development, years that, even as a child with fluent speech, are challenging enough. So I survived these formative years somewhat intact. There was no place in my tiny agrarian town of Thomson, Georgia, for me to go to speech therapy. If there was, it was a secret to me—and the segregated South was expert at keeping things under wraps. However, in 1972, while a junior in high school, after schools finally integrated (yes, I know *Brown vs. The Board of Education* was 1954; my State of Georgia took its sweet time in upholding the law), I was able to see a speech pathologist for one summer. It was better late than never. Because of my experience of finally having speech therapy and knowing its importance, I became eager to help young stutterers avoid such late attention. Decades later, the opportunity to do just that shows up.

In walked Our Time (now known as SAY—the Stuttering Association for the Young), an organization that gives formalized support through arts programs to young people who stutter. I could not help but give an enthusiastic reply of "Yes!" when asked to be a part of the SAY family. I was eager to serve and sat on the board of trustees for four years—time well spent.

I think it was around 2004 when I'd caught an interview with fellow stutterer Taro Alexander, founder and president of SAY, speaking about the organization on NY1, a 24-hour news show unique to New York City. These lucky young people have the opportunity to gain confidence and character via the performing arts (acting, writing, singing, and dance) under the curriculum of such an institution as SAY. The youth had after-school and weekend programs

for their theatre workshop and rehearsal time when they were preparing for a production. Some would even get to go into the studio to record their original songs with Musical Director Everett Bradley, who was recently the musical director and house bandleader for *The Meredith Vieira Show*.

I found myself tearing up during this segment on Taro; I knew how defeating it could be for a young person when struggling just to get out one syllable. I obviously felt a connection to these youths. The feature on NY1 left me wanting to find Taro Alexander and lend a hand in any way that I could.

Be happy about what you ask. Not long after that item aired, I was on a break from choreographing an event for the Actors Fund when a young man approached me; he produced CDs featuring theatre music. He knew Taro and thought that I should, also, because he saw that I stuttered. It was like an angel tapping me on the shoulder. My reply was "Yes and yes!" He set up a meeting for Taro and me, and we clicked instantly. I was so impressed with this man, his passion, and his vision for this young organization.

For Our Time's annual gala, Taro honors adult stutterers who have made a positive difference in their professions. These high-profile adults show the kids just what one can accomplish in spite of issues with speech, in turn serving as role models. Some of the honorees have been national conservationist Dr. Alan Rabinowitz, David Seidler (best known for his screenplay of *The King's Speech*), and former Chicago Bulls forward Bob Love. And, in 2005, yours truly. I was the third recipient of the Hero Award. Obviously, I have a special affinity for those honorees who are in the same profession as me, Bill Withers and **Austin Pendleton**, to name a few. Director/actor Mr. Pendleton was the first person to be honored, and this annual event has been going strong ever since. Spring 2017 marks the 15-year anniversary of the gala.

Speaking of performers who also stutter, there are forms of performance that are easier for us to express in than others; sports, dance, and (for some reason) singing on stage can be lumped into this group, but acting is another story. The actor who stutters has to come up with tailor-made tools that will aid in getting through the already inherently stressful audition. I would walk into the audition room and state right off the bat, "I stutter." Just reciting these two words relaxed me into fluency of speech. This can be compared to swinging that closet door wide open and outing oneself into truthfulness.

I was blessed to work with directors who were not put off by actors like myself, and on some occasions, I would get offered roles without

even having to audition. For instance, I was called in to The Public Theater to pick up a script for a showcase production of *The House of Lear*, an adaptation of *King Lear*. I got my package and called Reggie Jackson, director of the play, to mention that I was missing a copy of the music to use to choreograph to. After two beats, he said, “Doll, you *in the play*.” I was cast as Cornwall. My stomach turned with fear as my ego jumped up and down with joy! I was a bumbling bag of mixed emotions.

I had begun to have nightmares about acting in this play. This was not a job where I would have a few lines and dive into a tap routine. Oh, no—this is the holy William Shakespeare. Don’t mess with Bill. Now, again: the director knew how to deal with me as an actor with unique qualities, and he proved this during the first table read. I can still see the look of disbelief on the faces of the other actors when they heard me stutter for the first time, while the director remained unruffled. He and I knew that in less than an hour, my nerves would befriend me again as I progressively got better.

On another occasion, I was cast as an understudy in the Broadway musical *Oh, Kay!* Legendary producer David Merrick agreed for me to cover the non-dancing, non-singing role of the detective. The show was in previews and, as is so often the case, they had not gotten to rehearse the understudies. One night, before I could say “kick ball change,” I was literally snatched from the wings after the opening dance number and tossed into a Theoni V. Aldredge custom three-piece suit, resplendent with wide-brimmed fedora. The detective looked better than this actor felt. I cocked the hat to one side, for this was the only control I had in this scenario. All went well, and I was on for two nights. The stuttering was minimal and, by the second night, had dissolved into the land of mundane fluency.

My career as a Broadway thespian was short-lived. Acting-spacting! Deep inside, I knew that I would be on the creative side of things in theatre, though it took me a while to accept it. In the early 1980s, record producer Tony Valor—who produced a disco act I was in—told me that I would become a choreographer. What? Was he crazy? I had not been in New York City for a good year, yet I *knew* that I would have my first Tony Award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical by the age of 27 (27 just sounded like a good age), so what in the world was he talking about? Did not *anyone tell him* that he was in the presence of Ben Vereen, the Sequel? Well, of course, Tony was right in his prediction about my future. The truth shall set you free.

I did indeed end up as a Broadway choreographer on the Tony Award-winning musical *Avenue Q* and on *All Shook Up*. I

have also directed and/or choreographed at many regional theatres—Alliance Theatre, Arena Stage, Baltimore Center Stage, and Pasadena Playhouse, to name a few—and have choreographed for film and television too; John Leguizamo’s Fox TV series *House of Buggin’* immediately comes to mind. In addition, I am a professor of practice in the Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance at Indiana University. The department gives me time off to continue my career in commercial theatre—the best of both worlds.

Intense speech challenges do arise in the midst of my self-proclaimed stance of “make them hear you.” One has downs with the ups. About three years ago, as part of a series of talks for National Public Radio, actor and director **Ruben Santiago-Hudson** called me in to participate on a panel discussing music and movement in August Wilson’s plays. That evening, while being interviewed during the panel, my tongue, breath, and mouth chose not to cooperate. Fluency had flown out of the door. It was like an out-of-body experience. Shocking! I could not take control of the reins; the horse was out of the barn and would not come back. No fedora or Shakespeare text to save me, except for the fact that what I had to say trumped my delivery. Knowledge is always a friend.

I am happy to have had my parents’ voices in my ear, saying, “This too shall pass.” Well, it did—kind of. Who would have thought that National Public Radio—operative word, “radio”—is often podcasted and available to a wider audience? Lord, the world got tricks!

Looking back, I have to truly embrace what was authentic for me. At that time, it was not the best speech available, but it was all I had. Taro is reminding his kids that good enough is just that: good enough. The youth of SAY are given a place to retreat during such times of discomfort. A safe space to discuss, cry, and reboot. This is just another reminder of how important this organization’s work is.

As I write this piece, I think about my contribution to how others relate to people who stutter. I think of my actions, especially while in a rehearsal or a class setting. To ease my feeling, too often I exhibit a cavalier reaction to my stuttering. Most pressing is that I may have, via these actions, caused harm to the plight of others with the same speech issues but who may be less thick-skinned than me. The inherent “ham” gene that I carry as a performer did not attach itself to everyone’s DNA. This I must remember.

The downs and ups of our unique way of speaking is riding a roller coaster in and out of fluent speech. For the younger me, it was about trying to keep my arms in the car. Taro

and the kids at SAY have a chance to raise those arms much higher than others like them have had a chance to.

I took part in a performance workshop for SAY some years back, teaching dance and improvisation. The workshop ended with a Q&A. The kids mostly wanted to know about my experiences as a performer who stutters. One young man, about to burst from the confines of impatience, brought this profound day I’d had with the kids back down to basics. He said, “Excuse me, but how long did it take you to grow facial hair?” There we were, just like everyone else.

Being in a room filled with stutterers was awesome. It was my first time in such a homogeneous environment. There was a real sense of family: looking into each other’s eyes and seeing a shared need, a common desire to speak without self-interruption. I also noticed *such* a diverse group of kids in that room. Speech disfluency does not discriminate. SAY does not turn any kid away. Hence, those who can’t afford the services are as welcome as anyone else.

Since my first involvement with SAY, many other services have been added by the organization: Camp SAY—an American Camp Association-accredited program—is a summer camp for kids and teens who stutter. Camp SAY not only gives attendees a break from the outside world; they are changing and building confidence through community and empowering activities. The bucolic surrounding doesn’t hurt, either. Individual and group speech therapy have been added since my first introduction to SAY. Also, their latest addition is the innovative Storytellers Program, where teens write and share their unique stories with others. At other SAY events, I have gotten to catch up with some of the youth that I worked with hands-on, and I am pleased to note that they and many other alumni are thriving after aging out of SAY, working in fields that span theatre, journalism, law, and science, for a short list.

Writing this recollection of my life experiences through the lens of speech, egged on by my connection with SAY, is a reminder of the fortitude of the human spirit. With volunteers, board and staff members, instructors, and the like, youths who stutter can call SAY that wise old friend with a mother’s wit: you speak, they wait, you finish. **SDC**