

## Speech, the Kieser Award, 29<sup>th</sup> Humanitas Prize Luncheon

*Thank you, Arthur, for those generous words. They mean a lot coming from you, a friend, and a man I admire for his longtime, exceptional directing career.*

*As you know, I happen to live at the beach and every morning I enjoy the ritual of raising the shades and looking out at the Pacific Ocean. But this morning that ritual had a special significance because I remembered that the Pacific Ocean was the birthplace of the Humanitas Awards.*

*As Father Bud Kieser described it in his book—The Success of Insight—his Sunday afternoon syndicated Television series had fueled a dream of a primetime network series of movies that would communicate those same values to a much larger audience. But in spite of his enthusiasm and his formidable gift of persuasion, the network production executive he approached was, to put it mildly, cool to the notion. “A bleeding-heart show produced by a religious organization in Prime Time? I’m sorry, but no way.”*

*Those of you who have dealt with Bud know that for him giving up was out of the question. Obviously, what was needed was some creativity, some new idea.*

*“I decided to go for a swim,” he tells it. “Two hundred yards offshore, the intuition hit. Why not create a prize for the writers of the entertainment community—a prize for writing network movies that promote human values and enrich the viewers? And why single out the writer? Because I’d learned from my experience with Insight that everything depends on the script, what it says about people, the meaning it sees in life begins in the writer’s mind and heart.”*

*He didn’t finish his swim because he was too excited. And besides, he had another mountain to climb. Television was also a business and a prize required money. Whether it was luck or divine intervention (I leave it to you to decide) he broached his idea to the Lilly Endowment, a foundation known for its good works. Moved by his passion and his eloquence, in April, 1974 the Lilly Endowment approved an initial 3-year grant for the writer’s prize. And that is how it started and why, almost 30 remarkable years later, we are gathered in this room today.*

*I was a great fan of Bud’s and while you honor me today in his name, the day really belongs to the Humanitas nominees. At best, I feel a guest at the table. Still, getting such an award does engender a certain amount of looking back, of recalling meaningful moments in your life, particularly your life as a writer.*

*I was barely out of my twenties and launched in a screenwriting career when I ventured to write a first play I called Goodbye My Fancy. Unfortunately, I had absolutely no knowledge of how to market it, if indeed it was marketable at all. A top producer in New York at that time was Max Gordon. He’d done a lot of distinguished plays, and he’d just done one by my brother-in-law, Born Yesterday. As a family gesture Garson asked Max Gordon if he would read my play. “I can’t promise he’ll have an interest in it,” he said, “But he’ll give you a straight reaction and that can only be to the good.”*

*So I went to New York and was told to drop the play off at Mr. Gordon's apartment. Then I sat back prepared to bite my fingernails for a few days. The next morning at 7:30 Mr. Gordon was on the phone. He'd read my play and I was to be at his office at 2:00 o'clock. It wasn't easy to keep myself from getting excited. I could already see Goodbye My Fancy on the marquee, even hear the audience applauding.*

*At his office, Mr. Gordon sat behind a desk, empty except for two scripts. "I don't know what I expected," he said, "but you've written a good play. It's funny, it's got heart and it has something to say. I like it. Only I'm not going to do it."*

*I just stared at him and he picked up one of the scripts from his desk. "Look", he said, "Here's a new play by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber. Kaufman—I've done a lot of plays with him, all big hits. He's won two Pulitzer Prizes. Edna Ferber—I don't have to tell you about her." He picked up the other script. "And here's a first play by Fay Kanin. Now I can only do one more play this Season. If you were me, Max Gordon, which one would you do?" I gulped and admitted I'd do the Kaufman-Ferber play. He returned my script, wished me luck and I flew back to Los Angeles.*

*It took a whole year but we put a bigger mortgage on our house, my husband Michael raised some money, got some partners, and produced the play himself. We toured out of town and then opened on Broadway. The play got great reviews and was a big, rousing hit. The Kaufman-Ferber play, by the way, had opened ahead of us and closed in a few weeks. On the first Wednesday matinee when the lines at the box office were stretching around the corner on to Broadway I stood in the back of the theatre watching the performance. When it was over, I noticed Max Gordon coming up the aisle. He saw me, came over, shook his head. "I just want to ask you one thing," he said, "Why'd you have to give me such lousy advice?"*

*He was right. It was lousy advice. Looking back at it I realize that when Max Gordon asked me which play he should do, I should have said, "Do mine." Because I've learned that confidence in yourself and in your work is your greatest attribute. Confidence is catching. The producer may not do that particular play or buy the particular story or screenplay, but he'll surely remember you when another opportunity comes around.*

*And there were other lessons to be learned. I suddenly recalled a tribute dinner for Orson Welles where he sat on the podium like a benevolent Buddha while a parade of young writers and directors stood up and gave testament to the impact he had made on them. Each related studying his films and described them scene-by-scene. Welles listened, nodding occasionally, smiling. When they finished it was his turn to speak. "I thank you for all the kudos, the compliments you've given me. I appreciate them. But I have only one thing to tell you. Imitation is the denial of your own talent, of who and what you are. Get the hell out of the screening rooms. Stop looking at my movies and please—start looking at life."*

*And that cued another memory. My husband and I had written a screenplay to be produced at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. The story, very simply, concerned a money-driven businessman left with an unmanageable child after a divorce who, through the course of the film, discovered that his child meant more to him than his money. Since Willy Wyler was a friend, he was the first one to whom we sent the script. The next day he called and said, "I'm sorry but I can't do it—I couldn't even read past the first few pages." What we had overlooked was that some months before he and his wife had lost a boy child and it was too painful for him, he told us, to deal with that father-son relationship. We understood, of course, and went on to another director.*

*A year or so later, I sat next to Willy at a dinner party and quite out of the blue he said to me, "You know, I was wrong." I didn't understand what he meant, but he explained, "That script you sent me, I should have done it." Surprised, I asked him why. "Because," he said "What I was feeling—the emotion, even the pain, is what we should use to make a movie. Good movies don't come from the head, they come from the heart and from the gut."*

*In 1989, the Humanitas Awards celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> birthday by expanding its educational outreach to include a series of workshops on values in entertainment writing, led by established writers. Just last week, coincidentally, Father Frank Desiderio forwarded a letter to me from a young writer who had been in one of those workshops that I conducted.*

*"I was sitting in the front row," she wrote, "when you told about a producer rejecting a project you were proposing as too 'soft' to engage the audience's interest. 'Never accept that,' you told us, 'It's nonsense. 'Soft' is what drama is all about. 'Soft' is about character, about those moments between people that make your story live because they recognize themselves. 'Soft' is why you're a writer."*

*It seems she went back to her room and began to write something she'd been warned wasn't commercial but that she knew in her heart was a story that needed to be told. It was optioned, set up at a studio and was the beginning of her screenwriting career. And her first produced film, Frida, came out last year.*

*What a gratifying success story. And I know there are many more out there. But that shouldn't lull us into thinking it's easy, that the responsibility and the challenges have been met.*

*Just pick up the morning paper—rapes, murders, muggings, unemployment and the national debt growing and the economy shrinking, energy resources being used up at an epidemic rate, the price of a fresh peach in Los Angeles 30 cents and the cost of a heart attack in Boston \$30,000. In the face of all that, you may say, "How can I write anything that will encourage people to be hopeful, to care for and about each other, to believe that an individual can take charge of his or her life and that that life can have meaning? How can I think that anything I do can make a difference? Is that a little crazy?"*

*Well, let me borrow again from past experience. My husband, Michael, and I were visiting my mother who was ill in the hospital. Sharing a room with her was an elderly lady, Mrs. Leiberman—in her nineties, I believe. When we arrived, she was facing a crisis that stemmed from her stubborn refusal to, in hospital parlance, "Evacuate." As we entered, she was fighting off the entreaties of the last of a parade of nurses and interns who had been armed all day with bedpans, enema bags and assorted paraphernalia. The issue was obviously aggravated by the fact that Mrs. Leiberman spoke and understood almost no English and the hospital staff spoke no Yiddish. Michael, who had quite usable Yiddish, volunteered to help. He leaned over the bed, took her hand and said (I'm translating), "Little mother, I am speaking to you like a son. Anybody can see you are in pain and that you are a sensible woman. You don't like being in the hospital and you want to get out as quickly as possible. If you will take the bedpan and relieve yourself, your pain will soon pass and you will recover."*

*Mrs. Leiberman looked up at him. "What do you do?" She asked. "I'm a writer," Michael said. Mrs. Leiberman shrugged, then shook her head. "Everyone knows that writers are 'meshugenahs.'" For those of you who don't know the joys of Yiddish, 'meshugenah' means crazy.*

*Well, Michael hadn't been a screenwriter many years for nothing. He quickly amended his first draft to include a few jokes and stories about his own mother, and in the glow of empathy, Mrs. Leiberman capitulated.*

*For these almost thirty years Humanitas has been giving awards to a growing and noble company of 'meshugenahs', writers who care enough to address the difficult concerns of their times and know how to use all their craft and skill at entertaining in the process.*

*For myself, I want to congratulate and thank all of this year's nominees. They make me proud of my profession. And a bouquet to the Humanitas founders—first, for their use of that beautiful word, 'human'—and then for the vision that created these awards, the idealism of its goals and the pragmatism of its financial incentives.*

*By bringing writers out of the lonely anonymity in which they labor into the unaccustomed spotlight and inviting them to take center stage for richly-deserved bows, the Humanitas Awards honor not only today's gifted nominees, but all their many colleagues standing offstage in the wings.*

*Hallelujah!*