

Reflections from WT- Royal Brantley, WT Regents Professor of Theatre

Randy Ray: Welcome to the November edition of Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. My name is Randy Ray. I'm the director of broadcast engineering on campus, and today I am joined by the 11th president of West Texas A&M, Dr. Walter Wendler, and Regents Professor Royal Brantley. Good morning.

Royal Brantley: Good morning.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Good morning.

Randy Ray: Mr. Brantley, I want to start off, what's a Regents Professor?

Royal Brantley: Well, some time ago, the Texas A&M University system started a program, which honors who they felt were professors excelling at what they did. I was very blessed to receive that award back in the nineties.

Randy Ray: That's a big deal.

Royal Brantley: We've had several faculty members on the WT campus who are Regents Professor. Alex Hunt just recently joined the ranks of Regents Professor. Bruce Brasington, Charmazel Dudt, so it was wonderful. Karen and I got to go down to College Station, receive the award. It was nice that a system office like that would look not just at College Station, but they would look beyond at all of their branch campuses and recognize some people. So it's a nice big medallion. I'm very honored to wear it and to have that title, and there are several others on campus, so.

Randy Ray: You've been with WT, you've worked here since 1984, right?

Royal Brantley: Correct, yeah.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Did you go to school here?

Royal Brantley: I did. My undergrad in theater from WT. Graduated in 1980.

Randy Ray: Yeah. So we were here kind of the same time for a little bit.

Royal Brantley: Yeah.

Dr. Walter Wendler: He looks good for his age, doesn't he?

Randy Ray: He does, he does.

Royal Brantley: A podcast has many lies, many visual lies.

Randy Ray: Well, I owe you a big thanks, because 18 years ago you hired me. So I appreciate that.

Royal Brantley: Well, obviously it was one of the smartest things I've ever done.

Randy Ray: Did you hear that, Dr. Wendler?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah. I heard it, but I'm not believing it. We're all wearing masks, so you can't trust somebody wearing a mask, I mean.

Randy Ray: Mr. Brantley, the reason we wanted to have you here today is just talking about the odd things we're going through right now, and how things have affected you in theater. How has it affected you guys in theater?

Royal Brantley: Wow. It's a really, really long answer. I don't know how much time we have, but let me break it up into two significant answers, one that deals with production and the other one that deals with instruction. I'll start with instruction. We have been incredibly flexible, I think. For example, every class that I teach, I teach a performance-based course and I teach a lecture based course, either. I always have students on Zoom and I have students in the classroom. So I'm teaching to online students and students in the classroom.

Randy Ray: At the same time?

Royal Brantley: At the same time, at the same time. And then there are some students who they have been so ill that we've had to work independently through Zoom to meet certain assignments for performance-based class. For example, they have to perform, and this is a Shakespeare acting class. So they're performing speeches, and if they can't get it in during the class session, then we have to set up a Zoom so we can take a look at it. Zoom has certain limitations as far as seeing the entire body, but you can see what the face and the upper body is doing. You can hear, of course, what's going on with the voice. So it's been an interesting tool. So we've adapted. Lecture-based courses are a little more self-evident, because they're there and they're listening, and always inevitably they ask questions too. So what's missing is the synergy. I've been teaching so long that I really miss the synergy of all the students there, all probing that same issue in the same way.

So we've adapted, and I think it's vital that we do and continue to adapt, because every student, their health, their situation and families come into this too. Families are facing some challenges financially and with their health. Zoom gives the students an opportunity to continue to learn, even though they're away. So instruction has gone that way. We continue, of course, with as much face-to-face instruction as we can. We maintain social distancing. Masks are worn. The whole business. Production is the other significant answer, and that's really been fascinating. Of course, COVID-19 took the theater world by surprise. To this date, Broadway is still closed.

Randy Ray: I didn't know that.

Royal Brantley: Yeah, it's still closed and they keep putting it off, keep putting it off the opening. Because when you produce a Broadway production, you want every seat sold. You can't operate at 25%. You can't operate at 50%. That does not fit the financial formula. So they're not going to open until they can fill those theaters.

Randy Ray: And who knows when that's going to be.

Royal Brantley: And who knows when that's going to be. I mean, we'll see what happens.

Dr. Walter Wendler: And Royal, as a performer, playing to a house where every fourth seat is occupied is not the same thing as playing to, the energy's not there. You feed off of it.

Royal Brantley: Exactly, exactly. Yeah, yeah. That shared event, that communion, if you will, that certain theater scholars talk about, you don't have it. You don't have it. So we were faced with, well, do we even do productions this fall? I think as a theater faculty, we collaborate really well and we always solve problems. I think we teach our students that theater is problem solving, because you get a script, it's on paper, and that's chaos. You bring order to that chaos. But now, the extra level of, "Okay, we're going to do productions, but no live audiences." So what's everybody doing? Well, they have two choices. The rights holders for these productions, some of them unprepared for this, and you just can't do that show because they have no digital rights or streaming rights, and those are the two options.

Digital means you can record it, you can edit it. You can put it into a package and then make it available, like video on demand for your audiences. Or they have streaming rights, and streaming rights mean you can perform, but it has to be live, and it has to be sequential. It's a live performance captured by camera. So this semester, our first production was Vintage Hitchcock, and it streamed live performance. Second production was a musical called Theory of Relativity, and we got digital rights for that, and Mass Comm was instrumental, Mike McFarland, in helping us put that production together, filming this in someone's apartment. In fact, we even had students who were quarantined and they self-taped their songs or dialogue on their phones, and then sent that in. School of Music helped us with their sound recording studio, and we layered all the tracks to the recorded track that we got from the rights holder.

So that show was cut up into pieces, filmed, recorded, put back together and presented as video on demand for our audiences. And then we just closed Caucasian Chalk Circle, which again, we could only get streaming rights. So we had two live performances that were captured by cameras. So for the first show and the last show, we trained our students to operate the cameras. Granted, they don't have the kind of skill that let's say a broadcasting student does, but they learn very quickly their role in the production, what they needed to do.

Because again, we've got to solve problems and we want to give our students as many skills as possible. So long answers, but that's what's been going on.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Let me ask you a question, if you don't mind, Randy. Royal, on the instructional side, this movement to Zoom instruction, or maybe just digital instruction because it could be a lot of things besides Zoom. It's like a Xerox copy and there's a lot of ways to do Zoom. But the point is, are there any aspects of digital instruction that you think will forever become part of the repertoire of teaching in theater that you wouldn't have thought of? In other words, is in fact necessity the mother of invention?

Royal Brantley: Yes. I think two things. I think first of all our students, and we started this last spring and it continues to this day, they've had to do a lot of self-taping. Here's your assignment, or let's say it's their jury at the end of the semester, you have to self-tape and upload that. We should have been doing that sooner, to be honest with you, because that's the profession. If I were to step out and go back to acting, over 50% of my auditions would be self-taped. I would just record on my phone and send it in. I mean, I do voiceover work and I don't sit in front of a nice microphone like this. I record it on my phone, an MP file, and I email it to them and the job's done. So that's one thing.

I think the other thing is better digital resources for our students, and I'll use my acting III class as an example. Before the semester started, I filmed seven brief lectures on the theory that we were going to pursue this semester, the technique that we were going to use. How to handle Shakespeare's language, how to approach Shakespeare for the actor period. So I broke that down into seven lectures and filmed those. So those little digital resources have been there all semester for the students to go to, to look at. How do I handle a trochee? How do I handle a caesura? You can go right to that lecture and take a look at it. So to me, yeah, I think these are things that we've discovered that are of great use to our students.

Dr. Walter Wendler: You know, I could have used this myself in calculus, because every time I would watch the calculus faculty member do something on the board, I said, "Well, I got that. That's easy." Well, I'd go home and try to do it, and something happened between the chalkboard in my house, and I couldn't remember exactly what to do. But now with everything digitally available, I actually think it's going to increase the effectiveness of good teaching. I don't think it's going to do a thing to help bad teaching, but if you give a good lecture on some aspect of performance and it's there for people to look at over and over again, I just think it reinforces.

Likewise, if we do something that's foolhardy or not good teaching digitally, and it's there until the end of time, we've got another kind of problem. But I just think it does really, I would say electrify, but that's too close to. But it does give you an opportunity to do things differently and do them over and over again. I think we can get a tremendous positive result from some of the circumstances of the COVID-19 which we pushed back against. But I do think this lecture

capture, I think, that we're using in a lot of classrooms now, in traditional lecture settings where that lecture goes online. I think for a faculty member to look at their own lectures, I've done some and I think, "Man, I don't want to see that again. Once was enough." But the bottom line is to be able to look at it and say, "I would do better if I would not do this or not do that, or use the cadence of my words to make a stronger point or something."

If we want to be good at it, like acting, teaching is a craft. It requires a lot of precision and a lot of analysis and a lot of adjustment, and I think faculty all over our campus and other universities are going to be better, especially teachers. Better teachers than they'd been in the past after they watched themselves enough on a video.

Randy Ray: All right. We are going to take a break and we're going to be back in one minute.

Speaker 4: West Texas A&M University is proud to call the Texas Panhandle home in providing the top 26 counties with opportunity and qualified graduates is an important WT mission. From their first experience on campus to graduation date, the WT experience is a challenging series of steps that will embolden our students to reach their full potential, and then in turn go out into the Panhandle and make a difference. Quality education with a big local return is one thing you can find here at WT. For more information about West Texas A&M University, visit our website at wtamu.edu.

Speaker 5: West Texas A&M University is a student body that learns by doing and is always seeking opportunity, talented, and accomplished faculty that teach both in and out of the classroom. Programs that provide timeless information and meet the challenges of today's world. Facilities rich in technology as well as WT history. Now is the time to strengthen connections and open doors for tomorrow's leaders. Share your experience, share your heritage, share your pride.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. While I'm thinking about it, let's give a nod of thanks to our engineer, Johnny Story. We've never talked about him, and we appreciate everything you do for our podcast every time.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yes we do. As a matter of fact, we should interview him one time.

Randy Ray: He won't do it. He won't do it. Mr. Brantley, One of the things I wanted to ask you about is you have a long history of being at WT. What do you love best about WT?

Royal Brantley: Well, bottom line has always been the people for me. You cannot find a place where day to day the students, the faculty, and the staff are as welcoming, as warm, as friendly and as genuine. You just don't find that everywhere, and plus, I think when you realize that there then is this sense of we're in this together and we're going to find an answer. There are ups, there are downs. There are

challenges, there's territory. But I think ultimately there's always been a spirit here that we're going to solve the problem. So that more than anything else has kept me here all these years.

Randy Ray: Have you always wanted to teach?

Royal Brantley: It was a surprise for me, no.

Randy Ray: It was for me too.

Royal Brantley: Yeah. I mean, I didn't know. After I graduated with my MFA, I was basically looking in the Dallas area to keep working as an actor, and we were looking for Karen to get a job as a teacher. Neither thing happened, and then she got a contract to teach up here with Canyon ISD, so I came up here, and then the Dean at the time, Hugh Sanders, God rest his soul, he called me and he said, "Come work for me." I never thought about it. So I started part-time in 1983, and then full-time in '84. So it was an accident.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Did your dad teach here?

Royal Brantley: Yes. He taught voice. He taught voice lessons, opera workshops. So he directed the operas and did the music direction for the musicals that they did for many years.

Randy Ray: So you have a lot of ties here.

Royal Brantley: Exactly, exactly.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Randy, let me, I'm sorry.

Randy Ray: No, no.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I'm getting in your way with this, but Royal, you gave about four or five adjectives describing the people of the Texas Panhandle. I'm going to put you on the spot. Can you give me those again? Because there's one that I heard recently that really touched me. So if you'll give me those, I want to-

Royal Brantley: Well, I don't know. Johnny might have to play them back. I think they're warm, they're friendly. They're genuine. It's just good people. I think a lot of people don't know this, but I'm not always been in show business. I spent six years farm and ranch, and as an employee, and there was an old aggie named Don Olson, and God rest his soul, he taught me so many things. But that's where I really on a day to day basis, I mean, go to a co-op and that's really where you'll discover West Texas, but the people are the same. Those farmers, those ranchers, what they're trying to do, how they're working together, they're very genuine. They're warm, but they've got a goal and they're going to solve problems. That's

where I really stepped out of the theater world and into the world of West Texas, and you see that with people here.

Dr. Walter Wendler: You do. This is the word I heard the other day, and it was from a source that I wouldn't have assumed it would come from, but it was from a doctor of veterinary medicine, a veterinarian and a PhD, interviewing for a position here on the campus. She was Canadian, came from a small, very sparsely populated area in Alberta, north. They were a ranching family. She said, "There's something about the people here that I've discovered that reminds me very much of home." And I said, "Can you give it to me in a word?" And she said, "Yes, there is authenticity in these people." I nodded my head just like you are, just you are, Brantley. I nodded my head and I said, "Boy, that's a great word to think about the people of the Panhandle."

Because I'm an outsider. I come in and I'm eyes wide open on things here because it's all new to me, and I'm amazed by the character of the people. Everybody says that, and it sounds like just a throw away, but it's not. It is not. This young woman really did, I think, put her finger on it. There's a kind of authenticity about things, and I think you need that to be a problem solver. I mean, I think you have to. It means that you're willing to look carefully at what's there, and not try to color it or shade it or anything, but just address it somehow. Anyway.

Randy Ray: I think because of the culture of WT and the culture and just the area, I think we generally get closer to our students than maybe a lot of other places do. So I wanted to ask both of you. When you see a student that you know that you've worked with walk across the stage at graduation, how does that make you feel?

Royal Brantley: Oh gosh, I'm elated. I'm elated. I know there's some people that they just don't like going to graduation, and this is why you're getting pushback, and we'll make the segue here. But it's about seeing that person achieve that goal, and I know that I've invested four years with that person. In theater you do get close, because it's not just morning, afternoon, it's also night. It's travel. It's weekends. So you get to know the person that is learning, and when they achieve those goals and then you see them walk across the stage, I'm elated.

Randy Ray: I am with you. I love going to graduation for that very reason. We get close to them over here, too. Yeah. How do you feel like Dr. Wendler?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Very similar. Both in this life as an administrator, an academic leader, but also as when I was an architect, when I taught architecture at DallasU and Texas A&M and Southern Illinois University, I got close to the students in the same way. You work very closely. It's very tutorial instruction, just all three of our disciplines are similar that way. It's a lot of one-on-one, and you do get close to them. The concept that this student has attained, something that they aspire to and with a little nudging from you along the way, is tremendously rewarding. I mean, it really is rewarding. You can see it in the faculty at graduation, there is a sense of pride there and so on and so forth.

Again, you've not so much crafted as you would as a craftsman would shape a stone or a piece of wood or something, or a canvas, or a performance, but you've crafted something or help craft something here that basically, I don't want to put too fine a point on it or be overly dramatic, but it lives forever. It lives forever. Whatever happens to that student when they're here, even if they reject it 30 years from now. I don't know how that would happen. Let's say they did. In fact of the matter is it's still is forever, because that becomes then the backstop against which they push. So it's always there. You can't take it away. I think that's a powerful thing to be involved with, and we don't think about it enough as faculty. We're worried how many classes we're going to teach. It's an overload. We're not paid enough. By the way, not the faculty here, but there's people talk that way. I think we forget this part of it that we're actually shaping human capital.

Randy Ray: I agree. I don't forget about it, because I know what a crossroads this place was for me when I was an undergrad. So yeah. So we talked about graduation. Graduation is going to look a little different this time. Let's talk about that.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Right. We're doing another virtual graduation. It was a very carefully, I say very carefully deliberated decision. I talked with county commissioners from both Randall and Potter county. I talked with the mayors of Canyon and Amarillo. I talked with hospital administrators. I talked with the area health leaders. I talked with everybody I could, and everybody essentially the same thing. If you can do it, we were looking at three alternatives. Inside, outside, and inside would be very highly choreographed. But inside, outside also highly choreographed, and then virtual. And it too will be highly choreographed, each in a different way. But the bottom line is, they all said, "If you were asking me, I would say do a virtual graduation."

They were prophets because of the spikes in COVID right now. I read a quote in the paper. I'm not even going to repeat it, but it is just a challenge. It's really a challenge right now in this part of Texas.

Randy Ray: I think that was a wise decision.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I know it's hurtful. I've gotten emails from people, and some quite frankly a little bit mean-spirited, like I don't care, I don't understand. I do care, and I do understand, but I also, in my role, I have to look after our relationship with the community. If we expose people in the healthcare community to I'll say case loads and so on, that actually stress them beyond the point of being able to respond effectively, who have we served? We talk about engagement and serving the community. This is one of the ways we do it. And by the way, this is West Texas.

Randy Ray: Right. Well, I think it's the right decision with the way things are right now. Mr. Brantley, a lot of people may not know this about you, but I want to talk a little bit about, you've had a character on Star Trek named after you. Let's talk about that just a second. How did that come about?

Dr. Walter Wendler: I didn't know that.

Royal Brantley: Oh gosh. Well, my middle name is Rugel. It's my mother's maiden name, R-U-G-E-L, and when I worked in Dallas professionally, I had some good friends that wound up on the west coast and they were writers. It was a wonderful thing about that experience in graduate school. I was exposed to playwrights and writers. You really can't make too much of a living as a playwright, so they wind up writing for television and film. So Gene Wolande and John Wright have been out in California for quite some time in writing, and they write teleplays, and they got an offer. They pitched an idea to Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, which is part of that franchise.

So there's a character, he's a war orphan. He's a Cardassian by birth, but Bajorans adopt him and raise him, and his name is Rugal, but they spelled it R-U-G-A-L instead of E-L. So he's raised, he loves these parents who are Bajoran, and the Cardassians try to reclaim him. And he's like, "No, these are my parents. I love them." So it's a great story about adoption, about the raising of a child, what is a family, asked all those questions. So yeah, that's how that happened.

Randy Ray: I'm a bit of a nerd, and so I like Star Trek. Do you consider yourself a Star Trek expert?

Royal Brantley: I'm a Trekkie. You bet.

Randy Ray: Okay. Well this is our curve ball, and Dr. Wendler, I don't know if you've ever watched Star Trek, but here's our curve ball for it. I always throw our guests a curve ball, so here's a curve ball for you. On the original Star Trek series, on what episode did Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott save the starship Enterprise from certain doom? Do you know the answer to that?

Royal Brantley: Well, there's like 10.

Randy Ray: Exactly. That's the answer. Every episode, pretty much.

Dr. Walter Wendler: That was a soft ball.

Randy Ray: Well, I'll give a specific example. So the Enterprise incident, they steal the cloaking device from a Romulan ship, and Scotty is the one who fashions it to the Enterprise's infrastructure and enables the Enterprise to cloak and stealthily disappear before being destroyed. So there's a specific.

Royal Brantley: Yeah. Are you Trekkie at all, Dr. Wendler?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Not so much, but I was always a fan of Bones, and he would use these devices to scan people and they'd know what was, and then the other night on TV, I see this commercial where you put your two fingers on this thing and it gives you an

EKG and it cost 90 bucks. That's no big deal. Bones had one of those 40 years ago. I mean, you know. But yeah, I'm not all that much of a, I did like Bones.

Randy Ray:

All right. Well, we're going to wrap it up then. Thank you both for joining me today for the November episode of Reflections from WT, the heart and the soul of the Texas Panhandle. Please join us again next time.