ASSOCIATION FOR THEATRE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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**ATHE 2027: Un/Rest: Restorative Leadership in Praxis, Practice and Performance**

**Virtual Conference July 26-28, 2027**
**Leadership Weekend, July 29-31, 2027, Chicago, IL**



SANKOFA, an African word and Adinkra symbol, translates to: *"It is not taboo to go back for that which you have forgotten."*

Originating from the Akan people of Ghana, Sankofa is typically depicted as a bird reaching backward to take an egg from its back, or as a stylized heart.

The philosophy of Sankofa offers us a powerful way to connect the past with the future, inspire meaningful change, and validate the necessity of confronting painful histories before we can heal and move forward. It reminds us as theatre makers, scholars, students, and leaders that looking back isn't about being stuck in the past, but about extracting lessons, wisdom, and data to build a better future.

Before we offer you the ATHE 2027 call, let us look back at the prevailing conference themes since 2023.

***ATHE 2023: Building from The Rubble, Centering Care*** *– In 2022 Detroit, Dominique Morisseau charged ATHE members and leadership to "build from the rubble." The conference theme focused on what we might become and achieve collectively when the entire field centers equity, empathy, and historically marginalized voices, as a bold opportunity to reimagine and remake ATHE for the 21st century.*

***ATHE 2024: Revisioning the Story*** *asked how we can transform the stories that surround us to reflect the change we want to see?*

***ATHE 2025: The Rea****l invited us to explore new ways to conference, meeting where the virtual and the real converge.*

***ATHE 2026: Activating Imagination in/and Community*** *challenged us to contemplate not just what we do, but how and with whom we do it, while recognizing that, in the face of growing political repression and institutional instability, our collaborations—across disciplines, communities, and identities—are simultaneously more vulnerable and vital than ever.*

These conference calls have **illuminated the continued state of political and institutional instability that has made professional and academic theatre vulnerable** to conformity and erasure. In previous years we've focused our attention towards reimagining, interrogating, transforming, exploring, witnessing, and considering the profound effects of AI and virtual conferencing – and financial destabilization – on our organization internally and higher education collectively.

For 2027, **Un/Rest: Restorative Leadership in Praxis, Practice and Performance** serves as an **invitation to *lead from wherever we are*** as we collectively reimagine the future of ATHE and its members, while also reflectively and actively reaching back to what has shaped us.

Our virtual convening, as well as the new in-person Leadership Weekend, will focus on offerings that move beyond traditional hierarchies towards approaches that are cyclical, organic, sideways, or circular. Together we will consider: **In what ways are we leading the discipline – professionally and academically – from wherever we are?**

The conference collectively will also **investigate *restoration.*** We ask not only, "What is there to restore?" but also "What do we need to become reacquainted with? **How do principles and acts of restoration challenge, disrupt, and strengthen the field?**

Finally, we will examine how both **rest and unrest are necessary components** of positioning ATHE as a pace setter in the academy, as well as theatre as essential to a thriving society.

## SUBMISSIONS

The conference planning committee looks forward to Focus Group submissions for presentations and panels that shed light on leadership, restoration, rest and unrest embodied through **praxis**, **practice** and **performance** that reflect status updates on previous conference presentations, current ideation, ongoing successes, lessons learned, case studies, and experimental undertakings.

Topics suggested by the 2027 theme include (but are not limited to):

"*heal and move forward*" – **Restorative Leadership**

- Restorative leadership as praxis and practice - WITH rather than TO or FOR
- How does administrative/classroom/performance leadership present itself and its various forms?
- How do we cultivate leadership for social change in our classrooms/rehearsal spaces through and with our students? How so with our departmental colleagues – and across the institution?
- How does leadership resist—or unintentionally reproduce—cultures of urgency, extraction, overproduction, and exhaustion? A potential inquiry might be: Who am I becoming while I am leading?
- How might leadership look shifted from hierarchical to horizontal?

"*inspire meaningful change*" – **Embodiment and Performance**

- Embodiment as an opportunity to examine what the body knows, carries, remembers, resists, and communicates. What does it mean to listen to the body as a form of knowledge?
- How might performance create space for bodies that have been marginalized, disciplined, silenced, or asked to conform?
- What does leadership look like when we acknowledge that leaders have bodies that need rest, care, movement, and restoration?
- How might disability justice and disability studies expand our understanding of embodiment, access, rest, and performance?
- What happens when we design artistic practices around the needs and wisdom of the body rather than asking the body to adapt to the practice?

"*connect the past with the future*" – **Rehearsal & Praxis**

- The rehearsal room as a site of restorative praxis: Beyond examining what we ultimately place on the stage, we might ask: What would it mean for the process of making theatre to embody the values we claim the finished work represents?
- In what ways do contemporary training methodologies prepare performers to embody political unrest, grief, or trauma on stage while providing the somatic tools necessary for physical and emotional restoration off stage?
- When we are rehearsing, we are, in essence, rehearsing for the future. How might theories and practices of performance prove a methodology for overall change in higher education?

"i*t is not taboo to go back*" – **Pedagogy & Restoration**

- How might we restore the importance of pedagogy and praxis as scholarship, as necessary to teaching, to being human in an age when education and cognitive load is continually being outsourced to AI?
- How do we rehearse, restore and revise the "canon" from what's already been done, but in ways that meet the needs of our times?
- How might scholarship be an explicit form of restoration?
- How might our pedagogy better reflect industry realities with an emphasis on labor and restorative workflows?

"*confronting painful histories*" – **Rest and unrest as Resistance**

- How might The Nap Ministry, founded by Dr. Tricia Hersey, be in conversation with theatre as a resistance to the demands on the faculty, staff, and students in higher education, where departments are asking more and providing less?
- Consider wellness, mindfulness, community building through the arts and humanism in a time of extreme anxiety, restlessness, and attention deficit. In other words: what is healing about being present with each other to create together? How do we process that experience as fundamentally different from so much of what else we do?

# STRUCTURE

**Virtual Conference:**

The content of the virtual conference will include a variety of presentation and panel formats to allow members to fully engage and participate in the virtual experience. The committee urges submissions and focus groups to engage with formats that are better suited to the virtual format, which should adhere to shorter presentations and time for more discussions, rather than a long-form "traditional" 90-minute session. Formats could include:

- Mini Lecture: Short form TED-Talk style presentations and panels
    - 10-minute solo presentation. Presenters will have a QR code shown on screen to lead viewers to explore further information regarding their research.

    - 20-minute panels with 3-5 panelists
- Legacy Leadership spotlight – Mini-talks from Past Presidents, Past Focus Group leaders, and Grad Liaisons. Where were we – and where are we headed?
- Sessions designed around inter-generational mentor/mentee presentations.
- Build the research: discussion groups based around a research theme, aimed at building a resource list for participants

We also encourage members to register individually and join others in your geographic locale using the "ATHE House" communal model for a shared "virtual conference" experience: book a local library room, use a space on campus, and participate in the virtual conference together.

**Leadership Weekend:**

The in-person portion of the 2027 ATHE Conference will be held in Chicago, IL on the campus of DePaul University, tentatively slated for Thursday evening, July 29, through Saturday evening, July 31, 2027. This professional development and collegial convening will be focused on interrogating leadership from all angles - in what ways are we leading the discipline professionally and academically from wherever we are? While open to anyone who registers, the event is capped at 200 registrations. Members can register jointly for both the virtual conference *and* Leadership Weekend at a reduced cost.

We are not currently accepting proposals for this leadership event, but rather will be curating the sessions internally. If you do have a request or suggestion of what you'd like to see at the event, please contact us.

*"go back for that which you have forgotten."*