

CHRIS CHALK

Theatre/Film/TV Actor Shares His Formula for Success



Porfirio Solorzano

by Tom Alsip

Goals. Confidence. A positive attitude. These are essential requisites for performers to succeed, according to actor Chris Chalk, who earned a Drama Desk Award nomination and a Theatre World Award for his role as Cory in *Fences* on Broadway and went on to win praise for numerous other film and TV roles, including his current portrayal of Lucius Fox on TV's *Gotham*.

His message at the 2018 SETC Convention was the same in a room full of high school theatre hopefuls on Wednesday night, in his electrifying Thursday keynote address, and in an interview with *Southern Theatre* magazine: There is no goal that is too big if you are willing to make it specific, approach it with confidence and a positive attitude, and put in the work necessary to achieve it.

"You have a question to ask yourself: What are you seeking to achieve?" he told his keynote audience. "Start to develop [your goals], because that will give you drive. You'll start to find your inspiration. You'll start to find the thing that makes you tick as you continue to explore yourself. Start, honestly, even having a mantra. I have a mantra that I use every single day. Every morning I wake up and I say this thing, and this thing was built of my dreams, meaning I know who I want to be, where I want to be, how I want to be, and how I want

the world to see me. It's the thing that focuses my day, and it is all derived from my goals."

Though goal-setting is integral to Chalk's life and success today, it took several years as a struggling actor in New York, followed by a near-death experience, for Chalk to understand the importance of setting goals and taking control of his life and his career.

Humble beginnings

Chalk grew up in Asheville, NC, where his family was, in his own words, "super-poor." His parents divorced early, and he was raised primarily by his mother, spending every other weekend with his dad until he was about 7. He was active in theatre from a young age in grade school and in the community. In school, he was put in an academically gifted class, which separated him from his friends but gave him new opportunities. At the age of 11, he began helping his mother raise his nephew, which had a profound effect on him.

"Honestly, my nephew being born kept me focused," he said.

In high school, he not only was elected student body president but also was part of a show, *Endangered Species*, that his theatre department created. The students both wrote and performed in the show, which was about people of color as an endangered species. The show was so successful it toured the state.

He never thought about college until his mother informed him that he would be going, the first member of his family to do so. He chose the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), one of the schools he had visited with *Endangered Species*. It wasn't until he got to UNCG that he realized you could act for a living. He decided that would be his goal.

Showing potential as an undergrad

At UNCG, Chalk quickly attracted attention for his work in theatre.

"Even as a young undergraduate student, Chris was someone your eye was drawn to on the stage," said Jim Wren, a professor of acting and directing at UNCG who has stayed in touch with Chalk and introduced him at his SETC keynote.

As Chalk settled in to college life at UNCG, he auditioned for and was accepted into the BFA program. Although Chalk's talent was obvious, Wren said it was other elements that set him apart. "Chris understands the tightrope of abandon and control," Wren said. "He had the ability to fall off either way,

and it's fascinating to watch him find his balance. I love Chris' ability to live in the moment ... to be present."

Chalk was cast in numerous roles in college productions and learned a lot about acting technique and scoring a role. While he received helpful training in college, he said his education would have been stronger if he had invested more in the process. "I actually tried to bomb my audition senior year because I wanted to focus on prepping for the future," he said.

He especially wishes he had learned information in college that would have been useful to him, as an African American, seeking to be an actor at the professional level. Chalk said that he had no idea what it was like to be a person of color working in theatre and never had any training or education in the diversity of theatre. Looking back, he believes it was on him to fill that educational gap, stressing in his keynote the importance of making things happen for yourself.

"Those of you that are going into university and those of you that are at university and you're sitting around like, 'Well, they're not teaching me, da, da, da,' well, you're not asking," he said.

If there's something missing from your curriculum, it's your responsibility to go to the professor and ask for more info on that topic, he said. If he had asked for

Opposite page: Chris Chalk answers a question from an audience member during his keynote presentation at the 2018 SETC Convention in Mobile, AL.

Chris Chalk: Bio and Career Highlights

EDUCATION:

BFA, Acting, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

SELECTED BROADWAY/OFF-BROADWAY CREDITS:

Fences (2010, Broadway Revival), *Ruined* (2009, Manhattan Theatre Club), *Unconditional* (2008, Labyrinth Theater Company/Public Theater), *Defiance* (Manhattan Theatre Club, 2006)

SELECTED FILM CREDITS:

12 Years a Slave, *Come and Find Me*, *Lila and Eve*, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, *The Red Sea Diving Resort* (to be released in 2018)

SELECTED TV CREDITS:

Gotham, *Underground*, *Complications*, *The Newsroom*, *Justified*, *Homeland*, *Person of Interest*, *Nurse Jackie*, *The Good Wife*, *Law & Order*

SELECTED AWARDS:

2010, Drama Desk Award nomination, Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play (for *Fences*)
2010, Theatre World Award for a debut performance off-Broadway or on Broadway (for *Fences*)



Joan Marcus

Chris Chalk (second from left) was nominated in 2010 for a Drama Desk Award for his performance as Cory in the Tony Award-winning *Fences*, which also featured Viola Davis (left), Denzel Washington (second from right) and Mykelti Williamson (right at top).

'Ninety percent of successful people are themselves. Don't be what you think others want you to be.'

more education in black theatre history, his professor would have delivered, Chalk said. "He would have been like, 'Cool. Let me teach you some. Sorry. My bad. Let's go.'"

Chalk also urged students to recognize the value of an education, noting that it is critical to keep learning throughout your career.

"I knew the importance of education," he said. "Some people think they will go to L.A. or New York and start acting. That's good. But keep learning. People may like your work, but you *must* keep learning."

New York – and a wake-up call

Soon after graduation, Chalk took the bold step of moving to New York and, like many young actors, struggled mightily. He spent two years not working in theatre at all and barely left his apartment. "I was 251 pounds, I was a doorman, in a bad relationship, and I almost died," he said.

This was the darkest stretch of Chalk's professional career. But, when asked what he would do differently in retrospect, his answer was: "I wouldn't change a thing. Because I learned a lot about myself, about my journey. All my experiences have made me who I am today."

The wake-up call that would change Chalk's perspective came when he nearly drowned while swimming with friends in a Vermont lake. After that frightening experience, he took stock of his life – and began creating goals and advancing them.

He says he thought to himself, "I'm not living my authentic life. Not only am I not being my authentic self ... but I'm not even, like, living. I am existing, and I am being tossed around. And that was the day that I decided to, like, get it together."

Chalk had already begun working as a reader for Labyrinth Theater Company, meeting great actors and seeing their work. He realized there was no reason he couldn't be doing the same thing. He set goals. He auditioned for roles off-Broadway and in TV and film. He won a small role in the movie *Rent* in 2005, began working in television and off-Broadway as well, and by 2010 was appearing on Broadway as Cory in *Fences*, starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis.

Since then, he has devoted himself primarily to film and TV roles – including his portrayal since 2015 of Lucius Fox in the popular TV series *Gotham*. His move to film and TV work was a product of his exercise in goal-setting, which included gauging



Chalk describes his road to success as an actor and answers questions from audience members at a special Wednesday night masterclass for high school students at the 2018 SETC Convention.

where he wanted to go in life and the steps needed to achieve both the career and the lifestyle he wanted.

“I’d done a bunch of off-Broadway theatre, and then I did the Broadway play with Denzel and Viola, and I was still broke,” he told his keynote audience. “And I was like, I’m not living this life. I’ve been poor. I’m done. This isn’t enough money. I’ll go back to theatre when they can afford me. They’ve yet to be able to do that.”

A positive attitude

Wren attributes much of Chalk’s success as an actor to his attitude and his approach to working. “Chris always exhibited an energy and a passion that was infectious. People wanted to work with Chris.”

In addition, Wren said, “I always hope for students to take ownership of their process ... for them to be able to give themselves permission to play a truthful action. I think Chris owns his process.”

Along the same line, Chalk urged his audience to know themselves and their processes – and embrace who they are. “Ninety percent of successful people are themselves,” he said. “Don’t be what you think others want you to be.”

Looking back on his days as an undergraduate and a young actor, he says, “There’s no reason that,

on paper, I should be on TV.”

He believes the people who get work aren’t always the most talented, but instead are the ones who are good to work with, don’t give up easily and are willing to invest time and hard work.

“Work ethic is everything,” he said. “I am not more talented than very many people, but I work really very hard, and I’m easy to work with, and I enjoy my job. And that’s why I work. There’s no other reason.”

You are enough

It’s easy to talk about being positive, working hard and having confidence, but how do you do that in an industry that is overrun with talented individuals and when most auditions end with a negative result? For Chalk, it’s about knowing you are enough.

“There are people who look just like you, that have more or less talent than anyone in this room, that are working right now in the business,” he said.

Chalk believes many of his struggles early in his life came from not setting goals for himself. “I was just turning in the wind,” he said.

He encouraged his audience to follow his lead in setting specific goals and sticking with them – and he also urged young actors to reach out to people already in the business and learn from them.

‘Everything that you are and have is an asset. Learn how to monetize it. Learn how to love it.’



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“Start interning, start sending your picture and resume, and start asking advice from everyone around you, because everyone knows more than you, and we all love to be asked questions,” he said.

Whether encouraging high school students at his Wednesday night master-class or speaking from a podium to an all-convention audience at his Thursday keynote, Chris Chalk exuded confidence and positivity that was contagious. He



Chalk talks with SETC members after his Thursday keynote address at the SETC Convention in Mobile, AL.

made his audiences laugh. He challenged them to be themselves and to be their best selves as well. He presented himself as one of them – who had made it. And he offered a hand up to those in the audience who were looking for advice, even offering his email address and promising to answer every email he received. Two weeks after the convention, he said he had heard from more people than he expected, with some writing multiple times. “I have answered every email I have received,” he said.

In a business with so much negativity and mystery about “success,” Chalk’s voice carries a welcome message of optimism.

“Everything that you are and have is an asset,” he told his SETC audience. “Learn how to monetize it. Learn how to love it.” ■



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