

Legal Name

Cornerstone Theater Company

Project Title

To host Eisa Davis at Cornerstone Theater Company to imagine and explore new approaches to build demand for theater

DDCF Grant Number

2013229

Project Progress and Successes

The opportunity to have actress, playwright and singer Eisa Davis in residence at Cornerstone Theater Company was extremely beneficial to the organization. Through participation in community engagement activities, workshops, and focus groups, Eisa explored ideas around building demand for theatre among teens through online engagement and gamification. Eisa's presence in company, ensemble, and board meetings helped to focus the company's goals for deeper youth engagement and provided a new perspective on best practices for our social media strategies and impact.

Eisa's year in residence was spent gathering, participating, unearthing and listening. Eisa and Artistic Associate Daniel Penilla attended the Games4Change Conference in New York in April of 2014. In October of 2014, Eisa participated in student workshops around Cornerstone's production of California: The Tempest in Arvin and in early 2015 she conducted game based workshops with students at ARTes High School in Pacoima and at Los Angeles High School for the Arts in downtown Los Angeles. During the school workshops she explored games to play during the course of community immersion or during a performance. Specifically for the touring adaptation of The Tempest, the students created a cultural map with people identifying with Team Prospero (love to win), Team Caliban (hate to lose) and Team Ariel (just wanna play). Once the students find out who it is that they identify with beforehand, then the gamers is more excited and engaged when that character comes on stage.

Eisa also spent dedicated time with two of our Board members, Steve Huot of Blizzard Entertainment and Yosi Sergeant of Taskforce PR. Through one-on-one conversations she was able to learn about their professional prospective on gamification and Cornerstone's online presence.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of Eisa's residency was her functioning as a potential agent of disruptive innovation. Her questions and provocations really put our company members in the sometimes uncomfortable position of considering alternate ways of thinking about our processes -- really grappling with how we can do the grassroots, person-to-person handshake work of engagement, or the equivalent, via the internet without it becoming mere marketing or manipulation; how we can think about our work in terms of "play" or "game" and thus be more methodical in considering and anticipating outcomes. We write "potential" because the effect of the conversations is just beginning to be actualized in our internal dialogue and planning, but we are optimistic that this

residency will continue to bear unexpected but very productive fruit.

Upon completion of the residency, Eisa submitted a journal of her thinking to Cornerstone that mapped her yearlong journey. She writes: "It is undeniable that Cornerstone could only benefit from creating a steady, robust online presence with a fertile sense of identity and values, and to that end company members and community participants would need to be active contributors to the social media narrative. In order to keep the institution relevant for the next generation, that generation must become active in the company, both appreciating the extant work and evolving it in their own way. In my view, and according to a newly proposed Cornerstone vision, in which artistic expression is civic engagement and access to a creative forum is essential to the wellness and health of every individual and community, online and youth engagement are clearly critical to long term organizational health."

The residency success can be measured by the fact that Eisa Davis's voice and attendance in Cornerstone's artistic engagement and meetings has created company awareness around youth and online engagement. Her findings and the conversations throughout the residency have positioned Cornerstone for the next step to apply for the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Building Demand for the Arts: Implementation Grant.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

Coordinating schedules with a prominent working artist proved to be a challenge. Due to both Eisa Davis' and Cornerstone staff member's dedication to the project we were able to overcome this challenge and find pockets of time to dedicate to the residency, offering Eisa high engagement with youth through California: The Tempest and scheduling her to be in residence for key company meetings.

As a company with a daily practice of community engagement and art making, it was a challenge to define exploration and keep within that scope. Early on in the process, we struggled with how to measure a successful artistic residency without an artistic product. Midway through the residency we were able to take a step back and determined that our plan to build an online game that engaged youth was beyond the scope of exploration. The Cornerstone team, led by Artistic Director Michael John Garcés and Managing Director Megan Wanlass, refined what we wanted to learn, and how Eisa's exploration might unearth these answers. The team asked Eisa to help focus and educate the company on ways that we might use gamification to further our mission, vision and youth engagement objectives. After the goal was reevaluated Eisa's conversations, questions and listening became directed and defined.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

Ideally we would have begun the residency with the exploration goal clearly articulated and a schedule for the year laid out. This process takes dedicated time, but having shared expectations and objective with the artist including clearly defined benchmarks would have helped to shape the residency from the onset rather than mid-way through.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

Please access the following link to view a video Eisa Davis made for the reporting phase of her residency with Cornerstone: <https://vimeo.com/126458853> (Password = gaming).

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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