



# Where Are We Now?

TCG calls together theatre pros to take the pulse of the field

BY BEN PESNER

**H**ow does one go about tapping the collective wisdom of a community? In February and March, Theatre Communications Group set out to listen to what working professionals are saying about the current state of the American not-for-profit theatre. More than 100 theatre company leaders and independent artists gathered in four cities at a series of meetings made possible with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Organizations represented included large, small and mid-sized theatres from every region of the country.

This was the third in a series of pulse-taking moments that began nearly two decades ago, when TCG published a report called “The Artistic Home” by Todd London, based on a series of gatherings of artistic directors. In 1999, a previous Duke Foundation grant enabled TCG to conduct a set of meetings with a broader group that also included managers, individual artists and theatre trustees. A white paper based on those conversations appeared in the January 2000 issue of *American Theatre*.

Seven years have passed, and it’s fair to say that the context in which theatrical organizations operate has changed in ways no one could have predicted. How has the post-9/11

political and economic environment altered the landscape for theatres, artists and audiences? What about the war in Iraq and the emergence of new technologies? What trends noted in 1999 have intensified or abated, and what new ones have arisen?

With those questions in mind, discussion facilitator Gwen Cochran Hadden prompted participants to catalogue challenges and opportunities facing our community with an eye toward articulating and, it was hoped, shaping our common destiny through open dialogue. There was no attempt to reach consensus on any particular issue. Indeed, we noted a healthy diversity of opinion and, in a few cases, downright disagreement. Sometimes the very vocabulary used to conduct the conversations was called into question. While this report makes no attempt to capture the totality of the opinions expressed, it is intended to summarize the scope of the conversations and touch on several areas of discussion that came up repeatedly—and to provoke further dialogue.

Perhaps most striking were the intertwined strands of concern and optimism voiced in all four sessions. In a time of what one producing director called “economic fears coupled with artistic fearlessness,” practitioners continue to celebrate the vitality of the art form, even as achieving



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long-term financial stability seems just beyond the reach of many organizations, and new technologies arise to create ever-more-pressing competition for consumers' attention and disposable income. Yet many participants saw these challenges as an opportunity to grow artistically, to create work that confronts and interprets the spirit of the times, and to develop new communities of audience members and artists.

## Polarization and Isolation

**A MANAGING DIRECTOR INVOKED A TOPIC THAT** resonated through all four discussions: "The polarization that is going on around the country feels so tangible." Many participants spoke of an increasingly fractured national consensus under which people coalesce into affinity groups. For theatres, that is to some extent an opportunity to identify and connect with particular audience segments. The downside is a lack of real dialogue that spans political and cultural divides. Whether or not this "desire to wall off the other side of the conversation," as one participant characterized it, is a product of with-us-or-against-us signals coming from authority figures, it has clearly taken a toll among theatre artists. "I've never experienced the American theatre being

so isolated," said one participant. A managing director spoke of how it plays out with audiences:

Years ago people liked things or didn't like them. Now they love them or hate them. I'm spending all my time writing letters, either to people who were so effusive that they demand a response, or who were so angry they demand a response. Those letters come in on the same day about the same production. There is less common ground about everything, from what we serve at our concessions to what we put on our stage.

A number of participants mentioned a growing distaste among audience members for work that questions their values. "People are very closed to having anything distasteful put in their face," said one participant. "It's really a wartime psychology," explained a playwright. "In wartime, people want to sing and dance. If you're going to give them truth, it better be in a very, very entertaining package."

But for a number of participants, tough times carry enormous potential. "We're seeing that people want to be part of something, to understand something," one participant said. A playwright put it this way: "It's a relatively dark time

in terms of the conservatism in the country, plus we have the tyranny of political correctness [on the left]. For artists, this is an opportunity to be bold, to take risks. Out of hard, difficult times can come brave new ideas.”

Indeed, many theatres are thriving in the current political climate. “We’re in really great shape,” said an artistic director. “The new American conservatism has helped sharpen our artistic focus.” He described audience growth at his theatre as “explosive.”

## Audience Growth— and Shrinkage

**NONETHELESS, FOR MANY PARTICIPANTS,** the first years of the 21st century have seen declining ticket sales and shrinking subscriber bases. After a period of rapid expansion in the 1990s, audience growth has slowed—or even reversed—for many theatres. One participant explained:

Our theatre went through a tremendous amount of growth in terms of audiences in the early mid-’90s, which plateaued from 1996 to 2001 and has dropped every year since. When this trend started I believed that we were going through a down economic cycle. I don’t believe that anymore. I think this is the result of some very fundamental shifts in society, and ever-increasing competition for how people can spend their free time. I don’t see the pendulum swinging back any time soon.

That competition might come from other forms of theatre, including a resurgent touring Broadway system that values nationally standardized product. Said one artistic director, “The audience is losing the distinction of what it means to create theatre in the community that answers to the community and enriches the community.” It might also come from various other forms of mass entertainment. Participants cited sports—“During March Madness, we cannot sell tickets because our audience is at home watching [games on] television”—and the Internet—“yet another thing for us to compete against.”

It is clear that theatres can expect little help from the traditional media. Many participants identified the disappearance of arts coverage and serious criticism as a threat to theatres’ ability to engage in public dialogue and to publicize their work. “The level of criticism in newspapers is really low,” said one participant. “We get pretty nice reviews, but I don’t always recognize the work we do in those reviews.” Others pointed out that news organizations are currently facing tough times of their own and are scaling back coverage in many areas. An artistic director commented, “The largest newspaper in town reviews visual arts in a section called ‘Arts & Books.’ That same paper reviews theatrical work in a section called ‘Movies ’n’ More,’ and the ‘n’ More’ is first restaurant reviews, followed by theatre reviews.”

## The Climate for Risk-Taking

**THE “HIT MENTALITY” HAS ALSO INCREASED OF** late. A producing director explained, “Our hits are getting

‘hittier,’ and the bottom keeps falling out of our bombs. People either go to what they hear is extraordinary, or they just don’t come.” Participants at every discussion spoke of constant pressure to deliver hit productions. “I have a tremendous obligation to be a hitmaker,” said an artistic director. “I don’t remember it being so much this way when I was sitting at the feet of my mentors. It’s an awful feeling. It has become about making both the production and the organization hits.”

A playwright referred to the “tyranny of the known title.” Audiences seem less interested than ever in taking a chance on seeing a production they don’t already have some knowledge of. “People want a name,” an artistic director explained, “whether it’s the title of the play, or a name actor.”

These issues threaten an important artistic impulse. “We are feeling a tremendous sense of pressure that every single production has to succeed, and that of course limits risk-taking,” a managing director said. Without room for taking risks, for creating work that challenges assumptions and expectations, our art form will suffer in the long term. But risk-taking can sometimes be a hard sell within the institution. Managers have adopted various strategies to address this. “Because we have institutional budgets, we don’t have to let our board and our staff think of plays as having financials. We have to get out of the notion that plays have to pay for themselves.”

Most participants spoke glowingly of their board members and lauded their institutional commitment, even as they spoke of efforts to improve communication and assure that trustees understand and solidly back artistic goals. Trustees are, admitted one participant, sometimes misunderstood. How, he asked, do we make the participating artists cognizant of the challenges of juggling financial realities? Given their ability to negotiate tricky financial situations and raise capital, successful business leaders are often a valued resource in the boardroom. But sometimes negotiating the relationship with corporate culture is trickier than it seems: “It’s a bit of a bargain with the devil. They love the arts, but their orientation is business, where you cut, you shrink, you consolidate. That has changed the atmosphere dramatically.” Finding an optimal combination of artists and businesspeople in the boardroom is essential: “We now make sure there is an artist on every board committee. There’s nothing like that personal story to turn somebody around.”

## The Economy of Making Art

**WITH COSTS ESCALATING AND A PHILANTHROPIC** universe in flux, theatres are feeling pinched on both sides of the balance sheet. “Funding is becoming more and more restricted, so we are having to find more and more diversity in our revenue streams in order to control our own destiny,” a participant commented. Others spoke of such concerns as a trend towards “flavor-of-the-month funding;” limited attention spans of corporations and foundations; and the reluctance of some to cover less glamorous yet vital expenses, including personnel and facilities costs.

As government support has decreased, participants stressed the need to rejuvenate political will in our favor—or find new sources of revenue. Some called for political activism; others bemoaned complacency on the part of the arts community. “I am struck by how easily things are taken away from us,” an artistic director said. “If we don’t think about political advocacy, we’re just going to be spinning our wheels.”

Meanwhile, numerous overhead costs have grown astronomically in the past five to ten years, such as rising utilities and facilities expenses. Companies in California have been hit by a spike in workman’s compensation premiums. A universal concern was the rapidly escalating cost of health insurance. “Health insurance is a life-and-death problem for individual artists,” one administrator noted with alarm. “[Actors] take jobs that they don’t necessarily want to take because they need to get their health insurance weeks,” a managing director said.

As costs increase, theatres grapple with competing economic priorities: producing quality work, paying staff and guest artists, keeping theatre accessible by managing ticket prices, maintaining facilities, and so on. How resources should be allocated among these areas was a topic of much discussion. To some, a fundamental balance has become skewed: “The ratio of administrative costs to artistic has gotten out of hand.” Others focused more specifically on the inability of theatres to adequately compensate employees and visiting artists: “In essence we’re subsidizing the theatre on the backs of those who are creating it.”

Entering the profession as an actor is “the equivalent of joining a monastic life in the Middle Ages,” one participant suggested. How many actors, he asked, are able to earn \$40,000 a year? Later, he took a more extreme position:

A lot of smaller theatres are essentially hobbies for professional artists. You build a nice place for professional artists to work, but you can’t make a living there. [These theatres] have a great facility and pay the actors \$300 a week, so the actors have to work somewhere else to survive. I think that’s killing things.

Over and over again, participants spoke of their desire to increase compensation for artists, craftspeople and administrators. The inability of professionals to make a living in the field—let alone pay off student loans incurred while pursuing undergraduate studies and, especially, professional training—is a challenge for the theatrical ecosystem in every part of the country. “In [my city], there is not a single company that pays artists anything close to a living wage,” an artistic director asserted. “So the young talent is generally leaving town.”

However, another artistic director expressed some ambivalence about this topic. “It’s an age-old question about whether you need money to make art—some [artists] do, some don’t,” he said. There is a trade-off: “Does raising budget size in an attempt to pay artists really help the state of the art, or does it lead to artistic compromises and an inevitable distancing from one’s community?”

Still, companies are coming up with creative solutions to address the situation. An artistic director described a successful program at his theatre:

We started a resident company program where we are paying artists a stipend to live and work in our community. They don’t have to work with us exclusively, but they have to be involved in every single one of our productions in some capacity. That could be as an artist, or helping to stick labels on postcards. We’re encouraging them to work at other companies to make more money. All of the four residents have been able to quit their day jobs.

“An increasingly elaborate menu of activities is turning the theatre company into what one participant called a ‘cultural town hall.’”

For mid-career artists, prospects for future can be particularly uncertain. “I have been doing this for 27 years,” a playwright mentioned. “I woke up one morning and realized, I have no pension. I have no health care. I have to figure out a way to have my future taken care of.” Another writer commented, “It’s great to be an artist in America when you’re young. But nobody wants to take responsibility for artists when they grow up.”

A top-of-mind issue for a number of participants is how artists contend with the demands of organizational leadership while continuing to practice their craft. How can theatres assure that the artistic identities of their leaders remain intact? As a practical matter, is the distinction between institutional needs and artistic ones a valid one? An artistic director addressed this question: “My managing director thinks it would be great if I didn’t direct any plays next year, if I just raised money. But it’s important that we not only articulate our vision as intelligently as we can to the Rotary Club, but also that we do so on stage, so that people can see what the vision is.”

There may be room for more productive problem-solving opportunities within the current freelance system. Several participants expressed frustration with talent agents and wondered whether their clients’ perceived best interests and the theatres’ are as divergent as some agents would like to make it seem. Others commented that rigid union practices can be a hindrance, and called for embarking on more collaborative relationships with collective bargaining organizations.

## The Artist Drain

**A LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCE OF THE FIELD’S** difficulty in supporting theatre practitioners is an exodus of artists and craftspeople who leave to seek out more lucrative employment elsewhere. An artistic director said:



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We do a lot of commissioning of young writers who have the potential of being extraordinary playwrights. Some of those very young writers are now being offered a lot of money in Hollywood. We hope that they are going to come back, but now we have some commissions that are three, four or five years outstanding.

A colleague responded, “We need to think very seriously about how we attract the next generation of artists, not just playwrights. What do we have to offer them that they don’t get from working in Hollywood?”

The problem extends to organizational leadership as well. “I’m 35 and I want to start a family,” a participant explained. “I’m honestly asking whether that’s possible with the salary and the hours I have to work. Can I stay at my theatre? Can I stay in this field?”

As they looked to the future, participants warned that the supply-and-demand equation between theatre practitioners and job opportunities is out of whack. How, asked one participant, will we support the vast number of newly minted MFAs who enter the field each year? “We are generating so many young people in our various training programs, with no idea where they are going to go. What work is there for them? We have to figure out a way to support them.” Several participants owned up to being torn between a desire to support young artists and the recognition that their entry into the field means increased competition for limited grant money.

## R&D and New-Play Development

BECAUSE MOST COMPANIES CANNOT COUNT ON ticket revenue to cover the cost of developing new work (nor should they necessarily have to), theatres’ ability to invest

in new plays and new musicals depends on contributed income. Nurturing new work involves risk-taking; it is what the industrial world calls R&D—research and development. Yet it is a challenge for which theatres struggle to make a case. Funders understand R&D, but not for the arts, one participant said. “They may not understand that development takes place over time. It requires a process, and it is a commitment you make to the artist.”

It is a mistake to separate play development from audience development, some cautioned. New work can grow audiences and deepen an institution’s connections with them:

We have made new work out of a commitment to connecting to artists who are making work that reflects or speaks to those communities. It’s bringing people in—in droves. I think new work has the power to do things we are bemoaning in the theatre.

Getting that message across to funders is imperative—and so is articulating it within the board room. One artistic director spoke about conceptualizing the need for R&D in business terms:

We have been talking about a creative capital fund. That has struck a chord with some of our donors. We get them to think about it as an innovation fund, an entrepreneurial fund that allows us to do R&D that may then create a new income stream for the theatre. It may come from a new play that takes off at the box office, but it’s more likely to be from the new audiences.

As many theatres continue to find ways to devote their resources to developing new plays and musicals, nagging concerns arise about the best ways to serve writers and their work. Are theatres investing enough resources? Are enough new works being produced? Is development a pathway to production, or a substitute for it? Looking at these questions from the writer’s perspective, one participant took a dim view of how the situation has changed over the past five years:

Some of the conduits for getting involved in theatres have closed—developmental organizations, labs and literary offices. The way that the largest majority of plays get into production at theatres is by playwrights actually knowing the people who make the decision. Playwrights feel that the biggest obstacles to getting their plays produced are that they don’t know the people who make decisions, or they are kept at bay by them.

At a different meeting, a colleague from a writers’ organization said:

A handful of writers get produced in a big way, while most writers get developed. That's a real problem. I am not arguing that writers are developed to death. Writers need development. But new-play development programs at a lot of theatres are substitutes for productions.

Another participant was far less sanguine. "Plays are no longer being workshopped to death. They are just not being workshopped."

Still, according to one playwright, though it's hard to get work done, the results can be invigorating. "Once a theatre takes that chance on [a new work], I have never felt more supported as an artist. The enthusiasm of everybody involved is amazingly fulfilling. It's what keeps me going."

Given the discussion that has surrounded this issue in the past several years, it was not surprising that many institutional leaders have addressed it head-on. "We had a radical response five or six years ago to the workshopped-to-death syndrome," said one artistic director. "We started refocusing all of our developmental work on plays we were committed to fully producing, and it led to us producing more world premieres and engaging more deeply with writers. But it also meant that we were not getting to know as many writers."

## Production and Co-Production

**WHAT HAPPENS TO PLAYS ONCE THEY ARE produced?** By emphasizing new work and young artists—what one participant referred to as "the cult of the new"—are theatre companies neglecting important work, and failing to support the artists who create it, after the initial production? "As an industry we have a responsibility to playwrights not just to put work on the stage for the first time, but to pick up those plays for the second or third time."

One participant identified a partial remedy to break down the syndrome that some have called "premiere-itis." "I am seeing a really positive trend in the new-play world: really good partnerships happening among institutions." Yet as theatres explore various types of collaboration, concerns inevitably arise. "Co-productions are incredibly destructive," said one. "They demean the community by turning professional companies into road houses that are emulating the financial structures of Broadway tours, which suck a lot of money out of the community." There was also discussion about how co-productions affect artists. One participant pointed out that "actors who are lucky enough to get those jobs get more weeks to work, but there are fewer jobs to be had." Another concern: "At least once a season I'm putting my own craftspeople out of work, because a show that we're partnering on originates somewhere else."

Co-production is just one model for collaboration. "We need to learn how to share the limited resources in increasingly creative ways, instead of fighting over them," said an artistic director. Many participants spoke of successful partnerships between larger institutions and smaller theatres invited to perform under their roofs. It's good for both sides, said a managing director. "There is a responsibility in being the largest theatre [in your city]."

As another artistic director pointed out, "Our theatre has historically not been good at new-play development, so a route that I am taking is to invite in smaller companies that are very skilled at new-play development." Similarly, a producing director said:

It's not a financial or practical decision since most of the companies are using [our space] for free or next to nothing. A lot of it is motivated by my feelings of inadequacy regarding cultural diversity. I feel ill-equipped as a person, as an individual artist to create projects that address communities that are not my own. I feel like a fraud if I try to push the programming in that direction, and yet I know that it needs to happen.

## Diversity and Self-Identification

**AS THE PRECEDING COMMENT SUGGESTS, THE** topic of diversity is a complicated one. For some participants, cultural diversity is at the very source of their institutional identity, while others framed as a challenge the desire—or responsibility—to achieve greater diversity on the stage and in the audience. Some mentioned the front office as well. There was much discussion of various initiatives theatres have undertaken to foster diversity, but there was no consensus on how best to proceed in this area, or even how to define diversity.

One of the challenges that became apparent during the meetings was an issue of vocabulary. The commonplace distinction between "culturally specific" and "mainstream" rankled many participants. Some questioned its validity while others seemed to take it for granted. What, in fact, is a "culturally specific" theatre? And what does "mainstream" really mean?

There was also much discussion of the value of cultural specificity, and whether diversity and specificity are in fact opposites. How does diversity play out at theatres of color and other companies devoted to producing works by and/or about individuals from a specific cultural group? What can so-called mainstream theatres learn from them, and vice versa? What about theatres that do not easily fit into these categories? And how can "culturally specific" theatres avoid being marginalized? Opinions varied; some were offered tentatively, others forcefully. Their spectrum was broad, suggesting that this will continue to be an area of fertile discussion, even if it causes some soul-searching.

One of the most probing questions was whether so-called "mainstream" institutions actually tend to be more diverse or less diverse than "culturally specific" ones, in terms of staffing, programming and audiences. Many participants affiliated with culturally specific organizations—here again, vocabulary is an issue, as terms like ethnic-specific, culturally based, identity theatres, niche theatres or theatres of color can be applied to different sets of organizations—were quick to assert that at their institutions, cultural specificity does not preclude diversity. "We are called a culturally specific organization, but we don't operate in that way," said the artistic director of a Latino theatre. "We are very inclusive." At

another meeting, a colleague from across the country asked, “How many people in this room believe yours is a mainstream theatre?” To those who raised their hands (a majority of the participants present), he said, “I hate to tell you this, but you are culturally specific as much as we are.” Throughout the meetings an unstated question hung in the air: Would it be more accurate to refer to “mainstream” theatres as “white” institutions? And if so, is that kind of locution divisive?

Whatever its practical value, the impulse to categorize has its limitations. One participant decried a tendency in the funding community to steer ethnically specific theatres away from applying for grants that sustain artistic excellence in favor of ones that foster diversity. The distinction between working with a particular community and being artistically strong is insulting, she said. Or, as another participant put it, “Virtuosity versus inclusion is a false argument.”

## Talking About Race

**A SIMILARLY COMPLEX NEXUS OF ISSUES CENTERS** around race. Perhaps most urgent among them is whether the community as a whole is meeting the needs of artists of color and institutions that focus on their work. And if the needs are not being met, what should be done about it? “You have so many African-American theatres that are closing,” one artist said, because they cannot surpass the budget threshold necessary for foundation support. Another participant pointed out that the persistence of “slot mentality” at “mainstream” theatres continues to limit opportunities for artists of color.

An artistic director broached the topic of the unintended effects on other institutions of “mainstream” theatres’ efforts to diversify their programming:

A lot [of artists] would rather take a new play to someplace that is going to have more local and national visibility than my company, or one of the few other remaining black companies in the country. That worries me a lot. One of the ramifications is that it is left to the so-called mainstream theatres to determine whose work is valid, and whose is not. And, let’s face it, those theatres are run by and large with no black people on the artistic staff, or maybe one person of color.

She went on to speak of her shock at hearing a white colleague ask her if there is any future for black theatres. As more work by and featuring African Americans appears on “mainstream” theatre stages, the colleague wondered, wouldn’t black companies eventually disappear, as did baseball’s Negro Leagues? “My *nightmare* is that we will become obsolete,” she replied—and pointed out that once Major League Baseball’s color barrier fell, “we had 40 or 50 years where, yes, there were black ballplayers, but no black managers, coaches or owners.”

A playwright offered a different take: “That also means that theatres that call themselves Latino, Asian or black have got to open up the space as well.”

It is abundantly clear that theatres take many different approaches to negotiating around the hazard of ghettoiza-

tion as they embrace the value of ethnic specificity. Two examples: A veteran independent artist urged a colleague to “grow beyond just being the ‘black theatre.’” And the artistic director of an Asian-American company said, “I will argue to my death that there is something valuable about being culturally specific. To me, community is not a subscriber base. It’s specific. It’s culturally tied.”

## Context and Community

**NO THEATRE EXISTS IN A VACUUM. THERE WAS** much talk at all four meetings about how theatres define, speak to and connect with their communities:

We are trying to figure out a way to penetrate more deeply and more broadly into the community. We need to get better at talking about what we do and why it should be of value to them instead of asking them to come to us.

Being a theatre leader can mean taking on the mantle of a preacher, evangelizing about the transformative value of live theatre. Or of a politician:

Five years ago I didn’t feel I needed to be at the theatre every night. Now everything we are doing is an attempt to build intimate, personal, unique partnerships with every person who walks through the door. I feel like I’m on a political campaign to get the votes to support the mission, to gather a series of affinity groups to build a large enough constituency to stay in office.

During the session in which that remark was made, participants returned again and again to the idea of the theatre leader as a politician on a campaign. The work would not be possible without the buy-in from the constituents. But endless campaigning takes a toll on staff resources, and leads to fatigue.

Theatres are engaging in ever-deepening conversations with their audiences that involve more than just the presentation of a play. One participant noted a trend toward “concierge theatre,” which he defined as “the idea that we need to be talking to every individual audience member before the event, after the event, and sometimes during the event.”

And so theatres are devoting more and more resources to concocting an increasingly elaborate menu of activities surrounding production. This trend, which seems to have picked up steam over the past decade, is turning the theatre company into what one participant called a “cultural town hall.”

“If we can make the theatre a destination where things happen before the play and after, if we can change the way we do our talkbacks so that they involve deep, deep engagement, that’s going to be exciting, and people will come back,” a playwright said. “If we just say, ‘come in, see a show, go home,’ it’s just not enough.”

For some participants, this change has unwelcome side-effects: “It’s been so many years since the work could speak

for itself. We constantly have to contextualize it, and that's how we get valued as artistic directors. Being an excellent artist is on the bottom of the list."

Still, most participants seemed comfortable with the notion that destination activities do not substitute for the art; they surround and sometimes enhance it. "The only way we have an opportunity to say we are unique, that we are intrinsically valuable, is in what happens before and after [the show]," an artistic director said.

From a practical point of view, this might mean changing what facilities look like, and what happens inside them. A managing director gave an example: "We are looking at redeveloping our public spaces so that they are more about conversation and comfort and interaction than they are now. The idea is to make them more active, more alive." Another participant suggested that we take our cues from successful corporations:

We need to be looking at these buildings, and the nature of going to the theatre. It has been such a Calvinist experience. Think of how Barnes & Noble reinvented the American library, or Starbucks reinvented the coffeehouse. We need to look at how to make those opportunities happen.

For one artistic director, it might also be a question of semantics—and thus identity. "I have heard people say, 'I don't like theatre, but I like what you do.' I proposed to my company that we should take the word 'theatre' out of our name."

The impulse to redefine and reposition theatre may be a response to observations such as this one:

There is a young audience, but it's not in the traditional form. They're not in theatre spaces. I'm working with a group of young people that does cabaret work in bars. They are hugely popular, with a following. But the minute they do it inside a theatre, ticket sales plummet. It's not just the barrier of price, but some kind of conceptual barrier of what's my space, what's my scene.

A recurring theme articulated throughout the conversations centered around the many different overlapping constituent groups that theatres interact with, including artists, audiences, neighbors, donors, other theatres. In some cases theatres have redefined who their community is. "A lot of people think that the artist should be the priority," said one artistic director, "but I think that ultimately the community is most important. If you bring the community into your 'church' they become your stakeholders. And once they trust you, you can do the art that you want to do."

The act of going to the theatre is an act of asserting one's culture—whether or not as defined by ethnicity—and theatres thrive on the energy and sense of mission that comes from serving a particular community:

My community is the men and women that work in the bodega around my theatre, the men and women that

come from the Islands and want to see their stories reflected. For me the challenge is to take quality theatre and filter so that my community gets it, and sees themselves reflected in it—and at the same time, to move us forward as a people. There is all of this synergy happening. Is it being funded? No.

One participant from a company in an affluent, suburban area noted that conversations about audiences can sometimes cast them as an obstacle, not a partner. "We have been talking about how much we don't like our community, how it's much more conservative, much more scared, and wealthier than it ever used to be," she said. She explained how her company has refined its engagement strategy:

**"Young artists may be pursuing their craft in unexpected locations, and speaking in new ways to a different public."**

Every letter that comes in gets not just a letter back, but also a phone call and a meeting, so that we really understand their difficulty with the work they just saw. It's exhausting, and I don't know if we can sustain it. But I also see that there is a lot of artistic work that can come out of this long-term.

At least one company has reemphasized reconnecting with stakeholders, and has redefined community so that the emphasis is emphatically local:

At my theatre, we have relieved ourselves of having to validate ourselves through the eyes of the theatre community. I don't see myself belonging to this national picture. What excites me is to go back to my community, find out what they are doing, what they are excited about.

## **Touring**

**THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE UNIVERSE FOR** theatres that tour has changed over the past five or ten years. "The money for touring is just not there," said one participant. Yet for many companies, taking the show on the road is an essential aspect of their work—for both economic and aesthetic reasons. "We started touring a year ago. Touring generated income for us in a dramatic fashion. It also generated new relationships and allowed conversations about our aesthetic to happen." Another participant was able to take a longer perspective. "Few things are as important in terms of the growth of the company as touring," she said. "It's the one program that yields more in terms of artistic development, and energizes the company. But it's very hard to sustain a touring program given the state of the presenting field at the moment, especially if you're ensemble-driven."



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The disappearance of state and federal subsidies for touring has had a devastating effect on the economic underpinnings of ensemble companies:

It was the way for ensembles to live. If you only do one play a year, touring is the way to support the work. There was a time we could take three or four months and create a show. Now it's a four-week rehearsal period for a brand-new play, which means you are opening raw, unready [work].

With subsidies gone, presenters must depend to a larger extent on box-office revenue, and are thus less willing to take risks on booking challenging work. "There is a comfort level with dance that does not exist with noncommercial theatre," said one artistic director. Another commented, "We've had to tour our safest work...but we also count on international touring, and international festivals don't want safe work. So we're in a bind."

The economy of touring has become nearly unworkable, regardless of the size of the company. "Our tour fell apart this year," explained the managing director of a large-budget theatre. "We have people wanting product, which is unfortunately what we have to call it, but we can't charge them the amount it would cost to build the tour." This is another area in which participants called for a fresh look at how we can work with agents and unions to come up with more sensible economic models.

Touring is not dead; it is different. "The kind of touring that exists now must be lavish or bare-bones. There is no middle ground anymore," said one participant. Few companies can afford to compete with commercial tours and their high production values. On the other hand, bare-bones productions

are in demand. "Solo artists tour because there is enough money for solo artists to tour," one participant pointed out. Another concurred: "It's causing us to redefine ourselves as theatre artists."

The picture was not entirely bleak. One company reported success with a tour—their first in 20 years. The managing director explained that corporate sponsorship enabled the theatre to bring a show to other cities. This and other theatres have been exploring whether forging such relationships make sense.

## Revisiting Models

### THERE IS NO SINGLE MODEL FOR

how to build and maintain theatre companies—and their leaders are taking a fresh look at some of the conventional assumptions about administrative structures. "I find the two-headed leadership of artistic institutions profoundly troubling," said one participant. "If you have a pair of co-CEOs that report in a mutual status to a board of directors,

ultimately there's going to be a point at which those two people's success is mutually exclusive." Another participant questioned the 501(c)(3) business model. She suggested that a fee-based revenue scenario might be a better paradigm for some companies.

Optimal organizational size was on the minds of numerous participants from smaller budget-size companies, especially those who are experiencing rapid growth. "In theatres that are artist-driven, there is often a fear of how to create financial growth without creating so much overhead that the risk-taking is at risk," one participant explained. Another spoke of the challenge of "reverse diversification": keeping the core audience and vision intact as the company's profile grows. Companies sometimes tread carefully as they grapple with fundamental questions of their identity:

Our identity is based on a counterculture, underground, non-institutional way of operating. When we reach the point that we have to institutionalize to some extent to create efficiencies, to get the kind of money that we need to support the new work that we are trying to do, and to reach out to the communities we are trying to reach, does that mean that we compromise the core of our identity, the very thing that has been successful?

During the building boom among not-for-profit theatres that began in the 1990s, many companies acquired new spaces, built theatres and made major capital improvements. Facilities can motivate stakeholders, provide a creative home for artists and give companies a greater degree of control over their own destiny. Yet a number of participants articulated concerns tied to issues around the physical plant. "The first thing you learn when you are expanding is that you have to

completely rethink your operations,” said a producing director, “and that’s an enormous thing to do when you are trying to focus on a program or a mission.” He warned of the “damage of capital projects” that has resulted in over-expectation of theatres’ capacity to manage facilities that are too costly for their organization, and to attract enough ticket-buyers to fill them.

Other concerns emerged as well. An artistic director wondered whether artists are better served when theatres put their resources into creating spiritual homes. He posed a similar question about audiences: “Is it really better [or] easier to reach large audiences in a large, institutional setting?” Another participant suggested “buildings can be barriers,” especially for theatres trying to reach nontraditional audiences.

## Measuring Up

**A NUMBER OF HARD QUESTIONS SURFACED IN THE** discussions. One was whether we as a field are doing a good enough job of matching our aesthetic to the vision we are becoming increasingly sophisticated about articulating. One participant challenged his colleagues to take an honest look at themselves and their work. “We have become very good at articulating artistic ideals,” he explained. “We are passionate, we are committed and we have made enormous sacrifices. It would be very gratifying to know that we are meeting our artistic ideal, or at least that we are getting closer than we did in the past, but I don’t think we are. We cannot afford to admit how mixed the results are.”

Another participant framed his concern as a question of leadership. With the pressure to fundraise and reconstitute the theatre as a cultural town hall, who gets selected to lead the institution—and on what basis? What happens when the politician is better at politics than at the thing he or she is campaigning for?

Those leaders who are able to be articulate about their theatre are listened to and heard by the funders, the critical community and their boards of directors. But often, there is a lot of conversation in the theatre community about if they are so articulate about their work, why isn’t the work better? We artistic leaders need to get better at articulating. Otherwise the charismatic politicians will become the artistic leaders of theatres, and I don’t think good art comes out of that model.

The question of whether our aesthetic fails to live up to its own promise is a touchy one. A playwright pulled no punches:

The reason the American theatre was such a vital place up until about 20 years ago was because the audience would walk in and have an incredible experience. You have got to give them something to come to. It’s not happening, except in very small companies. You have educated your audiences to accept only those things that are considered by the *New York Times* to be legitimate. If that’s the audience you want, that’s the audience you deserve.

She went on to say that the question is a failure to push boundaries, develop new talent. “If you’re going to have an American theatre, you’ve got to take some risks. You’ve got to support the artists who are making that happen. There is a very exciting pool of artists in this country. You’re not seeing them because you are not looking for them.”

## Looking Ahead

**ONE AREA OF NEAR-UNIVERSAL OPTIMISM WAS** echoed by an artistic director: “I am incredibly encouraged by the young generation of theatre artists coming up.” Those artists may be pursuing their craft in unexpected locations, and speaking in new ways to a different public. “A lot of reinvention is happening at the fringes,” a Midwestern artistic director reported. Many artists are creating work that is redefining theatre in response to exciting and sometimes perplexing changes in the cultural and technological landscape. “We have a whole new generation that’s coming up, and they are communicating in ways that half of us don’t understand,” another artistic director said. The rise of interactive technology has already created what another participant called a “seismic shift” in notions of “story creator” and “story receiver”:

We are accustomed to audiences as receivers of what [stories] we decide should be told. But between creating their own playlists on iPods, and going on MySpace.com, and creating truthful or fictional biographies, an extremely literate generation is creating characters, constructing narratives. How do we create experiences that allow them to make narrative with us?

This goes to the very definition of theatre. “It’s time to break the mold,” one participant urged. The call for new thinking permeated all four discussions. “We are trapped by our very particular way of looking at what theatre is,” said one participant. “We haven’t explored where we want to be, who we want to be and what we want to be doing, in a world that is completely different from when we started doing it.”

How can organizations best respond to these changes? Remain fluid and open to new ideas, one artistic director said. “The best we can do is to continue to be a bridge. Stay flexible.” Another participant said, “The way we dealt with smaller audiences at our theatre was to produce more. It’s clear that we are living and working in embattled times, but I think that this sense of embattlement is a great opportunity for us to reinforce our mission.”

That opportunity may be precisely where our future lies. “‘Politics,’ ‘passion,’ ‘dream’—those are hard words in this country to deal with, but that’s what brings people to the theatre,” a playwright said. “This is the most exciting time we could possibly be in. We have got some decisions to make, and they’re hard. But it’s going to be incredibly exciting.”

**Ben Pesner has been writing about theatre and editing theatrical publications since 1987.**