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# TOWARD CULTURAL INTERDEPENDENCE

*The Fourth Phase of the Performing Arts in America*



A Position Paper Issued by the  
Association of Performing Arts Presenters

January 2002

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### Introduction

Human society and the performing arts were born at the same moment. From earliest times, rites of performance have given meaning to our world. From the first dawn of democracy in the city-states, theaters have provided a space where communities can literally play out their deepest problems.

The living interaction between performers and audiences still beats at the heart of our society. For that reason, it is crucial to know that the landscape of the performing arts in America has changed dramatically, and is continuing to change, in ways that have been little remarked or understood.

The Association of Performing Arts Presenters issues this position paper to draw the public's attention to these changes, and to help channel them into a new and productive course.

The position paper seeks

- w to define today's field of arts presenting;
- w to demonstrate that a new cultural interdependence is developing in this field, among artists, managers, producers, presenting organizations, and communities; and
- w to insist that this new cultural interdependence must be encouraged and supported—for the future of the arts, for the well-being of all Americans, for the realization of the most life-enhancing potentials of globalism.

**Defining the field:** Arts Presenters has joined with the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (DDCF) to sponsor the first nationwide survey of performing arts presenters: the organizations that bring audiences together with musicians, dancers, actors, and other artists who create live performances.

America now has as many as 7,000 organizations—large and small, urban and rural—that present the performing arts. Bringing live performances to some 6 million Americans each week, and generating revenues at the rate of nearly \$5 billion annually, these organizations are both a cultural force and an industry.

The Arts Presenters/DDCF survey gives us our first overall picture of the way these organizations function, as

- w a vital *creation and distribution network* for live performance;
- w a collaborative *communications channel* between artists and audiences; and
- w a *civic force* engaged in the work of building community.

The survey, conducted by The Urban Institute Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy, demonstrates that presenting organizations

- w constitute a relatively new field, which has emerged only over the past four decades;
- w predominantly operate on a not-for-profit basis;
- w function successfully on many different models (e.g., small budget, large budget, “hosted,” free-standing); and
- w contribute significantly to urban, suburban, and rural communities alike.

Most crucially, the survey confirms the anecdotal experience of professionals in the field, who have noted that today’s presenting organizations

- w offer audiences the benefits of a global outlook, by presenting artists and works from a multitude of cultures; and
- w increasingly engage in *creating* works, as well as in disseminating them.

**Toward Cultural Interdependence:** Going beyond its survey of presenting organizations, Arts Presenters has convened a series of forums throughout the United States, in which it has polled the performing arts community as a whole. Participants in the forums represented not only presenting organizations but also touring artists, artists’ managers, producers, and funders.

These professionals identified critical changes within the categories of diversity and globalism; leadership; sustainability and infrastructure; and audience development.

Of all the issues that were raised, one stands out as pre-eminent: *New working relationships are developing in the field of arts presenting, and old divisions are breaking down.*

In the past, artists, producers, and managers were viewed as suppliers of a product. Presenting organizations were the buyers. Today, we are witnessing an important but little-heralded systemic change in the performing arts: the realization of *cultural interdependence*.

In this new paradigm, creativity begins with the insights and inspirations of artists but does not stop there. The creative impulse spreads through all dimensions of the performing arts network—among managers, producers, presenters, educators—all of whom are now deeply engaged with the artists in the process of making the work and interacting with the audience. Cultural interdependence is a distinctively American way of looking at artistic creation—and because the performing arts in America are now global in outlook, it is also a paradigm with profound implications for the performing arts throughout the world.

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For presenting organizations, cultural interdependence is not only an opportunity but also a challenge. Drawing on a profound, ever-expanding knowledge of the arts, presenters must create imaginative, illuminating seasons. Drawing on an intimate knowledge of their own communities, presenters must make these seasons meaningful through far-ranging initiatives in education and programming.

And what holds true for presenting organizations is also true for artists, managers, producers, and educators. All of them are being called on to play multiple roles and forge multidimensional alliances, to create *an experience of the performing arts that both reflects and illuminates the world*.

**A Call to Action:** On the basis of its findings, Arts Presenters issues a Call to Action, to speed the development of cultural interdependence as *the fourth phase in the history of the performing arts in America*. This call goes out to the performing arts community as a whole, to government and community leaders, and to all citizens—those who are already concerned, and those who are not yet aware of the crucial role of the arts.

The Call to Action addresses serious needs and challenges. Chief among these is the erosion over the past two decades of the system that once gave support to America's artists. But even though the gravity of this problem must not be underestimated, the more significant aspect of the Call to Action is the context in which it is made.

Through its research, Arts Presenters has confirmed that *performing arts organizations often enjoy surprising resilience*. They are now more global in outlook, and more participatory in nature, than ever before; and they have spread throughout America in a network that serves rural communities, cities, and suburbs alike.

These findings demonstrate that an arts community that achieves true interdependence will have the strength and leadership ability to cultivate America's cultural landscape for the better.

## **Three Historic Phases in the Performing Arts, and the Fourth Phase to Come**

The field of performing arts presenters began to emerge only recently, with the first burst of activity taking place in the 1960s. This position paper therefore documents a relatively new field, which is still coming to maturity.

Historically, the development of this field represents the third phase of performing arts activity in the United States.

The first phase took place when America was still by and large a rural nation, served by a variety of traveling entertainments: vaudevilles, burlesques, minstrel shows, Chautauqua events, itinerant acting companies, and touring musicians.

The second phase may be dated from the 1910s and '20s. In those years, America's population shifted decisively to the cities; film, radio, and recordings gained dominance as entertainment media; and the older circuits for live performance began to wither.

One response to these changes was a grassroots initiative called the organized audience movement, launched in the 1920s in communities throughout the Great Lakes and Eastern seaboard. Hungry for live performance, local residents began to raise money in advance for three or four not-yet-specified events and then hire the artists. The success of this movement led to a proliferation of volunteer organizations and performing-arts guilds; provided fresh opportunities for impresarios; and established a key institution, the not-for-profit subscription series.

The third phase of performing arts activity began in the 1950s and gained impetus in the '60s. Demographics had shifted again; people were flowing to the suburbs, and the core areas of cities were falling into neglect. The creation of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts provided a dramatic new institutional model for the nation, one that wed the not-for-profit performing arts to a mission of urban renewal. This model would be replicated many times in the coming years, as cities sought to spark economic revival through the creation of *civic arts centers*.

A related initiative came from the *community arts movement*, which developed in the 1960s as a great variety of small, community-based groups began to spring up around the country. The movement drew encouragement and support from the National Endowment for the Arts (established in 1965); state and local arts councils, many of them formed in the wake of the NEA; and in-kind govern-

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ment subsidies, which made possible everything from internship programs to the takeover of old, abandoned firehouses or churches on Main Street. By 1980, the NEA was giving support to some 700 arts presenting organizations in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Finally, and crucially, America's colleges and universities have played an increasingly vital role in presenting the performing arts. For more than a century, of course, universities have played a key role in creating and disseminating the performing arts in America. But especially in the period after World War II, this activity has become crucial to artists and audiences. Major performing arts centers have been built on campuses throughout the country; and these centers typically perform multiple functions. They are *incubators* of new work, offering much-needed residencies to artists and providing context for their audiences; they are *educators* of young artists and future audiences; they are *presenters* of live performance; and they are *catalysts* for cultural awareness in their communities.

Today's field of performing arts presenters took shape primarily from these emerging community-arts groups and from the newly built, nationwide circuit of campus and civic arts centers. This history helps to explain some of the chief characteristics of performing arts presenters, as documented in the survey:

- w not-for-profit organization;
- w sense of public purpose;
- w commitment to diversity (in culture, subject matter, and artistic form);
- w multiplicity of function; and
- w non-hierarchical, networking relationship to other organizations in the field.

As the largest, most inclusive membership organization serving this field, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters first joined in a nationwide assessment in 1988 with the study *An American Dialogue*, carried out by the National Task Force on Presenting and Touring the Performing Arts. Through that initiative, the nation's performing arts presenters began to get a collective sense of their mission, direction, and needs.

Now, through the 2001 survey and forums, Arts Presenters has put together the first comprehensive picture of the field.

This survey does not merely show what the field is today. *It also points the way toward a fourth phase in the performing arts in America, revealing the direction in which the field can, and must, evolve.*

## **Major Findings of the Survey**

The Arts Presenters/DDCF survey produced information about topics that included diversity and globalism; leadership; sustainability and infrastructure; and audience development.

In sharp contrast to a much-reported conclusion of a recent RAND study—*The Performing Arts in a New Era* (2001)—which depicted smaller and medium-budget organizations as struggling, the much broader-based Arts Presenters/DDCF survey disclosed unanticipated strength in the field. *It is now apparent that small- and medium-budget organizations have surprising resilience and flexibility.*

The following are major findings of the survey:

### **Diversity and Globalism**

- w The network of presenting organizations is now spread across America more evenly than ever before. In the 1960s and '70s, new presenting organizations were established mostly in the cities. In the 1990s, the locus of new activity shifted to the suburbs. Today, about a quarter of presenters are located in big cities, 35 percent are in small cities, and almost 40 percent are in suburbs and rural areas.
- w Presenters in all locations—rural, urban, and suburban—book international artists. About two-thirds of presenters in all categories of location book artists from outside the United States.
- w Similarly, presenters of all budget sizes now book international artists. Even among organizations that operate at the lowest budget level (below \$100,000 a year), about half present artists from outside the United States.

### **Leadership**

- w The sense of mission does not vary with budget size. About half of all presenting organizations, large and small, report that they select programs primarily for artistic or cultural merit, with financial goals as a secondary consideration.
- w Presenting organizations in all budget categories also maintain full-time artistic and production staff. This finding confirms that presenters now see themselves as artistic directors of their organizations. They are increasingly engaged in commissioning and producing works and offering creative opportunities to artists.

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### **Sustainability and Infrastructure**

- w The great majority of arts presenters operate on small budgets. Small organizations (annual expenditures under \$500,000) outnumber medium (\$500,000 - \$2 million) by 3 to 1. Medium organizations outnumber large (over \$2 million) by 2 to 1.
- w Presenting organizations in all budget categories are more likely to own their primary venue than to rent it. Nearly two-thirds of presenters own their venues.
- w No matter whether they have large budgets or small, presenting organizations derive about 38% of their revenues from ticket sales and about 43% from contributions.
- w Although large organizations have greater financial resources—such as endowments and asset reserves—they are also more likely to be freestanding. Smaller organizations are more often “hosted,” meaning they operate within another entity (e.g., a university, church, or community center).
- w Through their hosts, smaller organizations often enjoy resources and benefits that larger presenters must pay for out of their pockets. In this way, many smaller organizations close the “capability gap” with their larger counterparts.

### **Audience Development**

- w Medium-size organizations typically do more than their large-budget counterparts to get in touch with audiences. They also use nearly as many vehicles for audience development—surveys, brochures, education programs, Web sites, etc.
- w Although almost all organizations collect contact information for audience members, smaller and medium-budget organizations are more likely than large-budget presenters to monitor the audience’s satisfaction (60-66%, compared with 44%).
- w Medium-budget organizations lead the way in collecting demographic information. Some 70% of them use this research method, compared with 30%-36% of smallest- and small-budget organizations and 55% of large-budget presenters.

In sum, the survey has documented *an ongoing transformation of arts presenting organizations*. These organizations are increasingly global in their outlook and increasingly creative in their mission, which now includes commissioning new work, developing innovative seasons, and interpreting the performing arts to their communities through a wide variety of outreach programs.

## **Major Findings of the Forums**

Beginning in June 2001, with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, Arts Presenters began to survey the field as a whole through a series of forums convened in cities throughout the United States. Representatives of presenting organizations, touring artists, artists' managers, producers, and funders gathered for group discussions in Madison, WI; New Orleans, LA; St. Paul, MN; Louisville, KY; Tacoma, WA; Seattle, WA; New York, NY; New Paltz, NY; Keene, NH; Phoenix, AZ; San Francisco, CA; and Los Angeles, CA. At these forums, Arts Presenters asked participants to identify the changes that are most critical in today's performing arts field, and then to discuss their experience of these changes in the context of the survey's findings.

As it did with the survey, APAP grouped the responses in four categories: diversity and globalism; leadership; sustainability and infrastructure; and audience development.

Many challenging issues came to light in the course of the forums—especially those that were held in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. The sense of distress in the arts community, as in America as a whole, cannot be minimized. However, as the participants exchanged views and compared their experiences, one overriding theme emerged: *the desire to overcome old barriers and to achieve greater co-operation*. It also became evident through the discussions that *this cultural interdependence is already starting to be realized*.

The following concerns, which were repeatedly identified by forum participants, explain the need for this new cultural interdependence and point the way toward its potential:

### **Diversity and Globalism**

- w There is increasing difficulty in presenting risky or innovative work, since funding for artists and presenters is being cut and the audience's disposable income is shrinking.
- w The homogenization of American culture continues ("Broadway and Disney dominate our field"), despite the growing diversity of America's population.
- w There is a need for diversity of boards and staff, as well as presentations and audiences.

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- w There is an increasing need to deal with visa applications and other I.N.S. paperwork, because of recent legislation and because so many international artists lack U.S. management. Artists have experienced increasing difficulties in securing visas in the wake of September 11.

### **Leadership**

- w There is a need for performing arts presenting, “an invisible field” in the United States, to be better known and understood.
- w There is a need for this mission-driven field to compete against commercial entertainment for resources and audiences.
- w There is a need to achieve a balance between educational and audience-appeal missions.
- w There is a need to maintain aesthetic vision during a period of growth.

### **Sustainability and Infrastructure**

- w A decline in government and corporate support has affected both individual artists and not-for-profit presenting organizations.
- w There is a need for a better balance of funding between earned income and contributions.
- w The difficulties faced by artists’ managers, producers, and self-producing artists have a ripple effect on presenting organizations. The difficulties faced by presenting organizations affect managers, producers, and self-producing artists in return.
- w The field is now relying more heavily on statewide presenting networks and regional arts organizations.

*(continued)*

### **Audience Development**

- w There is a need for new forms of partnership in programming, education, community outreach, and fundraising, involving groups and individuals not previously engaged.
- w There is a need to make up for the loss of arts education at every level, from elementary school through college, which harms both audience development and artistic development.
- w There is a need to improve the quality (and increase the supply of) of teaching artists.
- w There is a need to involve new audiences by developing new, non-traditional venues.

Of course, a dozen wide-ranging discussions cannot be summed up in a few words. But it is possible to characterize the tenor of the conversations, especially as they developed throughout the course of each forum.

Over and over again, Arts Presenters heard this message:

*The performing arts community can meet its needs and challenges, but it can do so only by embracing a creative change. The system of cultural interdependence that is now emerging is crucial for the continued artistic and civic vitality of America.*

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***For more information about Arts Presenters  
and the National Field Assessment,  
please visit Arts Presenters' website at  
[www.artspresenters.org](http://www.artspresenters.org)***



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