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Rethink Their Value in Challenging Times**

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*A brief of the
Building Audiences for Sustainability:
Research and Evaluation study*

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“I ACTUALLY DON’T BELIEVE ANY ORGANIZATION SHOULD exist just for the sake of its own self, just for the sake of existing. But rather, what is it doing? What is its mission? What is its service to the community?” This comment was made by an associate artistic director at one of the 25 performing arts organizations in The Wallace Foundation’s *Building Audiences for Sustainability* (BAS) initiative. As the comment reflects, sustainability per se should not be an end for nonprofit organizations, but rather a means for pursuing mission-related goals. That is why, as we started our University of Texas at Austin research evaluation of the multi-year audience-building initiative, we asked leaders and staff at participating organizations why they believe it is important that their organizations continue.

That was in 2016.¹ The initiative ended in 2019. Within months performing arts organizations would face dramatically altered circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic shuttered performances around the country and protests against racial injustice challenged large established arts institutions to reform their practices in the interest of greater diversity, equity, and inclusion.² If anything, these circumstances have only increased the relevance and urgency of questions about organizational value and sustainability. Thus, it seems like an opportune moment to ask where these organizations were in their thinking before the world changed so dramatically. As we shall see, their comments surfaced challenges, tensions, and decisions about organizational value that go beyond their individual organizations and are relevant to large, established nonprofit arts organizations more broadly.³

Virtually everyone interviewed believed it was important that their organizations continue, offering passionate accounts of the value of the arts, their art forms, and their organizations.⁴ Noteworthy, however, was that a substantial portion also believed that changes were needed to remain important. This change involved rethinking the organization’s relationship with the community. Encapsulating this view, the general director of one opera company said, “We have to reinvent ourselves, never to lose our focus on being a world-class opera

company, but to understand that to be truly relevant to a city like [ours] . . . we have to change.”

Today, the scope, urgency, and the level of calls for change have amplified. And, it must be said, the BAS initiative itself, which awarded almost \$41 million to this group of relatively affluent and virtually entirely white-led group of organizations, would be questioned today as exemplifying inequities in philanthropic support that favor such organizations at the expense of smaller institutions and those founded and led by people of color.⁵ Nonetheless, these institutions do exist and continue to command substantial resources. In our final round of interviews, we are asking BAS participants about the impact of both the pandemic and calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion on their thinking, plans, and activities. We are also revisiting the question of why they believe it is important that their organizations continue to exist. At this point, in this short interim brief, we share their comments from an earlier time in the spirit of contributing to conversations and questions about future directions for such organizations.

The Organizations and the Context

As noted, interviewees’ comments strongly resonate with a set of issues for large, established arts nonprofits. Indeed, one theater interviewee immediately connected our question about why his organization should continue to broader conversations about comparable institutions, saying:

There’s folks in the artist community that think the larger institutions that were built a few decades ago should maybe, you know, crumble to the ground and allow different smaller more agile, nimble organizations to come in their stead. I tend to be on the other side of the fence of that argument, and think that these larger institutions are important and that they need to become more inclusive. And they need to figure out how to create a new business model for how they pro-

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duce theater, and how they work, and how they staff. And how they might serve the community.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the nonprofit arts were facing challenges including declining or stagnant audiences across multiple art forms, such as opera, classical music, theater, and ballet.⁶ Different ideas exist about the reasons for these trends and how to address them. Here, it bears mentioning that one line of thinking contends that organizations' failure to adapt to societal changes have isolated them from much of the contemporary public.⁷ Writing well before the COVID-19 pandemic, Doug Borwick argued that nonprofit arts organizations need to be more engaged with the community, shifting from a mindset of doing things "for," to doing things "with" communities. In his view, this is an obligation inherent in their nonprofit status. He further argues this a matter of survival, essential to reverse audience trends. Likewise, in his foreword to Borwick's book, former National Endowment for the Arts chair Rocco Landesman writes, "the days of the arts in ivory towers are behind us. . . . Not only can the arts build communities, I think we must."⁸ Consistent with this perspective is a recent Wallace Foundation-commissioned study by Zannie Voss and Glenn Voss. Examining 20 arts organizations they identified as high-performing and turnaround, the authors conclude that "community relationship development and buy-in"⁹ are key to high performance.

A 2014 study that looked at newspaper accounts of arts organizations facing closure is especially germane here. Terence McDonnell and Steven Tepper examined how these organizations and their supporters argued for why the institutions should be saved. They conclude that "high-culture" nonprofit institutions (defined as art museums, theaters, ballets, operas, playhouses, and public radio stations) "continue to view themselves and their value to society in terms of old metaphors of wealth, excellence, and distinction."¹⁰ Their appeals emphasize the promotion of excellence, talent, and professionalism, frequently using such terminology as "jewels" to praise the institutions. But McDonnell and Tepper argue that these types of appeals no longer resonate with a wide public. Instead, they limit organizations' ability to develop the broad relationships and community support required for survival.

Apparently, many of those we spoke with were beginning to see things this way as well.

Why Is It Important that this Organization Continue?

As indicated at the outset, virtually everyone in the study felt it was important that their organizations continue. Interviewees at a majority of the organizations cited reasons including the organizations' artistic quality, contributions to sustaining and advancing their art forms, offering something unique, and contributing to the cultural life of their communities. For instance, interviewees variously said: "I think the art form itself should continue and [this] is . . . one of the top . . . companies in the U.S." (dance company); "We fill an absolute need [in this city] by presenting culturally diverse artists . . . no one else does it" (performing arts presenter); "We do new work better than almost anybody else in the country" (theater company); "[This

organization] is sort of an American jewel" (opera company); and "There's nothing else like this for our main audience . . . which is the people of [this city]" (symphony orchestra). Many also spoke of the transformative power of the arts. They emphasized that the arts help people make sense of their own lives, and better understand the lives of others.¹¹

More surprising is that interviewees from a substantial number of organizations (about 40 percent) also suggested that notwithstanding their artistic excellence and contributions, changes were needed for it to remain important that the organization continue. Here, they spoke of the need for community relevance and engagement. Their comments, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, pushed the boundaries of how large, established arts nonprofits have traditionally defined their scope and constituencies. This is illustrated by another opera company that was in the midst of rethinking its mission and vision statements at the beginning of the BAS initiative. When asked why it is important that the organization continue, the opera's director spoke about its soon to be "obliterated" mission statement as follows:

If I carried on with that mission statement, I'd find it hard to justify why in a changing world we have this high-art thing, without it having a purpose in the society where we live. And so we are now talking about our [new] statement, which says that the core purpose of any arts organization is to be part of the fabric of its local community.

According to a staff member, this organization has increasingly thought about ways to be of service to its community. Examples offered by this and another interviewee from the organization involved leaving their home performing venue to go to community venues—at libraries and community centers, and at nursing homes and schools that "can't otherwise afford our program." According to a staff member involved in community engagement efforts, there has been a related shift in the organization's definition of "audiences." The definition has broadened from mainstage ticket buyers to people who connect with the institution at offsite venues. Still, this interviewee thought additional change was needed, so that more staff viewed community programs as equal in value to mainstage activities.

In another case, the artistic director of a symphony initiated a program that brought its musicians together to play with amateur musicians from the community. An interviewee said that some of the professional musicians at first questioned whether this was part of their role, and were concerned that it might diminish their artistic level. Artistic leadership championed the program, however, explaining that "it's about relationships. It's not about art. You have to measure it differently." As the program progressed, the professionals' attitudes reportedly changed as they became involved with the amateurs from the community: "It quickly became clear that these non-professional musicians . . . absolutely idolized the [orchestra's] musicians. They've become friends." For one interviewee, while it may have once been possible for an orchestra to "just play our music," that is no longer tenable or desirable.

Returning to the opera company whose director felt that they had to simultaneously remain world-class and change to be more relevant, another interviewee from the organization said:

The answer that I feel somewhat obligated to give is to say that the art form and the works that we present . . . say something meaningful and they're great art and we should continue to find ways to present them . . . There's some validity to that. I just think we're in a really rapidly evolving cultural landscape that is much more global . . . I don't think it's so Eurocentric . . . One of the things I like about [one of our new programs] is we are able to create new works and not just kind of recreating great works of the past.

As referenced in this quote, this institution broadened the scope of its programming, for instance, "to offer opera in new ways that are perhaps more resonant to cultural communities around the city," such as presenting "Mariachi operas in Latino neighborhoods." As with the previously discussed case, a shift toward a greater community orientation also involved expanding the organization's view of its audiences, from mainstage opera ticket buyers to include "any group of people who attends and participates in the events you're offering." This institution also diversified its programming for other reasons, such as by presenting musicals, that by contrast are intended to "generate a net contribution to the bottom line."

As this example illustrates, thinking about change in regard to relevance can entail a shift in the organizational conception of its artistic scope. Likewise, the executive director of one orchestra said that due to declines in the number of classical music subscribers, orchestras were faced with tough choices:

A sort of interesting philosophical question . . . orchestras have to ask themselves at this point is: . . . Are we trying really to only promote our classical subscription series? Or are we trying to offer a wide variety of musical experiences that feature this orchestra, that cater to a wide variety of audiences?

In his view, orchestras can do both. In this case, the organization mounted genre-crossing productions that brought classical musicians together with indie artists, performing both separately and in collaboration. The future relationship of this alternate programming and the traditional classical music productions remained to be resolved at the time of the interviews. Some believed that the sustainability of the genre-crossing programming depended on fully integrating it into the main season, but one interviewee cautioned that would be like "steering a large cruise liner. It's going to turn very slowly." Slowly perhaps, but writing a few years later, we now know the organization did indeed integrate and maintain genre-crossing programming.

Theaters generally expressed less of a sense of challenge with respect to the relevance of their art form per se (and some felt theater had an advantage in this respect compared with symphonies or opera). But they too commented on the need for their organizations to change even as they expressed confidence in their artistic quality. One interviewee said that until recently, to even ask about why it was important for the theater company to continue would get you "cast out." However, they are coming to acknowledge that "you can't just keep sitting on a legacy." This interviewee believes that a change in attitude is needed to "speak to the service part of what we do" and said:

It is a service to diversify an audience. It is a service to bring different kinds of people into a room together . . . How do you do that? . . . You figure out what your problem is and you fix it. And you make great theater . . . You support young artists. You support young companies. . . .

We have to model that you keep asking yourself what more can you do for people. [This organization] has had a culture for a really long time of how lucky [the city] should be that we're here . . . I don't know how long that's going to go on. Now we have to say . . . What can we do for you?

It is also useful to consider the case of another theater, whose executive director said that they had long combined art and community service in their identity, proactively pursuing community service "whether there is grant money for them or not." The executive director offered this as part of his answer to the question of why it is important that the organization continue. He added that their community service helped make the organization more sustainable, because he feels that it has given the theater a larger footprint in the community, gives them a profile of being indispensable, and makes people more willing to support them financially.

Conclusion

The question "why is it important that we continue" is always a timely one for a nonprofit organization. But the context in which it is asked changes. As it does, expectations evolve and answers may need to change. The answers offered by this group of institutions can contribute to discussions germane for large, established nonprofit arts organizations. This is a group that has enjoyed considerable advantages but that increasingly faces questions about its ongoing value and relevance.¹² Substantial portions of BAS organizations were proposing that artistic excellence is a critical, but not sufficient, ground. Instead, they said that to warrant continued importance, their institutions had to become more relevant and engaged with their communities. As one symphony interviewee quoted earlier put it, it's not enough to "just play our music."

This brief is offered in the spirit of sharing and prompting questions. While some of the organizations had respected and established programs, they are not offered as models for community engagement nor did they characterize themselves that way. However, their comments do suggest some ideas for consideration:

- Rethinking organizational value to encompass a more community-oriented direction goes beyond deploying an isolated set of activities. It intersects with how an organization thinks about itself and who it serves. As one opera interviewee put it, community relevance requires that the institution "redefine the breadth and depth of cultural service that we provide." It may also require redefining and expanding notions of "audience." Further, comments suggested that robust community engagement may require overcoming tradi-

tional hierarchies in which community engagement programs and participants are viewed as secondary or utilitarian.

- The importance of organizational leadership: In several instances, leadership endorsement was key to initiating and/or supporting community-oriented engagement. For instance, some noted community engagement work was safeguarded by leadership backing, even if many colleagues saw it as peripheral. In more than one instance, the advent of new leadership

with a commitment to community-oriented engagement spurred organizational efforts.

At their heart, the issues expressed by some BAS participants and others speak to fundamental shifts in thinking and operations that go beyond one-off programming. Most fundamentally they prompt the questions: For reasons of survival and/or values, do you need to change what you do and how you define yourself? And are you ready to do so? As organizations enter a post-COVID future, now would seem to be the time to address these questions.

Endnotes

1. This brief is based on our initial round of personal interviews with leaders and staff at the 25 organizations, conducted in late 2015 to 2016. Findings from all interview rounds will be presented in the final report.
2. See for instance, “We See You, White American Theater,” <http://weseeyouwat.com/statement>; and Michael Paulson, “Theater Artists of Color Enumerate Demands for Change,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/theater/we-see-you-theater-demands.html>.
3. The average age of BAS participant organizations was 67 years, with a median of 51 years. All had budgets of over \$1 million, and half had budgets in excess of \$10 million. Participants included theaters, opera companies, symphony orchestras, dance companies, and performing arts presenters.
4. A small number of others were more circumspect or did not necessarily think it was important. One said it was important that theater as an art form continue, but not necessarily their specific theater. Another interviewee was unsure and felt it was important not to be “too precious” about what needs to be preserved. And a third said it depends on what they do and their mission.
5. The Wallace Foundation’s recently announced next initiative, by contrast, is a “\$53 million initiative focusing on arts organizations of color” (see <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/arts-initiative-open-call.aspx>).
6. *A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002–2012*, NEA Research Report Number 58 (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2015), <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2012-sppa-jan2015-rev.pdf>; and *U.S. Trends in Arts Attendance and Literary Reading: 2002–2017: A First Look at Results from the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2018), <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2017-sppapreviewREV-sept2018.pdf>.
7. For further discussion of the subject and overviews of related literature see Francie Ostrower, “Nonprofit Arts Organizations: Sustainability and Rationales for Support,” Chapter 19 in Walter W. Powell and Patricia Bromley, eds., *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook* Third Edition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020); and Francie Ostrower and Thad Calabrese, *Audience Building and Financial Health in the Nonprofit Performing Arts: Current Literature and Unanswered Questions* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas, 2019), <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Audience-Building-Financial-Health-Nonprofit-Performing-Arts.pdf>.
8. Doug Borwick, *Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States* (Winston-Salem, NC: ArtsEngaged, 2012). On the distinction between “with” versus “for” the community, see p. 33. The quote from Rocco Landesman is from the Foreword, p. 7.
9. Zannie Voss and Glenn Voss, *The Alchemy of High-Performing Arts Organizations* (Dallas, TX: SMU DataArts, August 2020), p. 2, <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/the-alchemy-of-high-performing-arts-organizations.aspx>
10. Terrence E. McDonnell and Steven J. Tepper, “Culture in Crisis: Deploying Metaphor in Defense of Art,” *Poetics* 43, 2014, pp. 20–42. The quote is from p. 39.
11. A small number referenced engagement with current social and political issues, such as one theater that sees part of its value in promoting civic discourse and social change. While not a widespread reason overall, over half of the theaters and the arts presenters attributed their importance in part to promoting wider visibility among artists and stories underrepresented elsewhere, such as one arts presenter that said it was among the few organizations to bring international artists to its city.
12. For further discussion and overview of related literature and arguments, see Ostrower op. cit., “Nonprofit Arts Organizations: Sustainability and Rationales for Support.”

About the Author

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