

A Collective Vision for a Future in the Arts through Community and Civic Engagement Programs

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ABSTRACT

The arts have the power to effect change and animate democracy by demonstrating the public value of creative work that contributes to a larger social good. In this accelerated moment of radical change, the arts are being more consciously used as a way to engage communities around achieving civic goals and to create positive connections. A major tension in the field right now revolves around how to galvanize our collective resources and knowledge toward building a more sustainable future for theater at large. This article centers the use of civic and community engagement programs as one prominent and effective method that can foster synergy with communities that arts organizations and theaters engage and seek to engage. Many theaters are using community engagement programs to ignite community conversations and address past inequities. A case study highlights how one regional theater, Mid-Sized City Theater (MCT), a pseudonym, used community and civic engagement programs to

promote reimagining their organization as a civic institution and to rebuild relationships with their community. The pursuit to improve relationships between theaters and communities using community engagement programs is one way this sector is working to address historical inequities for cultural workers, artists, and participants in the arts.

The arts have the power to effect change and animate democracy by demonstrating the public value of creative work that contributes to a larger social good. In recent years, there has been increased focus on how “art can allow us to develop a new shared understanding of the world that. . . can move the barometer of social change towards equity and justice” (Desai, 2020). Traditionally, the arts have roots in social and civic justice, which have been used to accelerate and inspire learning around social justice issues (Murphy, 2002). However, the global pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020 deeply impacted the American theater in myriad ways, and had a direct correlation to an unraveling seen across the entire landscape (Paulson, 2024). A major tension in the field right now revolves around how to galvanize our collective resources and knowledge toward building a more sustainable future for theater at large. It is time for theater to employ new strategies to address systemic issues that we simply can’t ignore or wash over with positive euphemisms. Theater at large needs to pivot away from a business model that was created in the mid-twentieth century in order to create solutions for its continued survival. In this accelerated moment of change, where consumers have prioritized participation in purpose-driven organizations, success in the arena of civic engagement is inextricably tied to the overall success of any arts organization (Benoit-Bryan & Jenetopolus, 2021).

Theater is facing an industry-wide epidemic of loss. Over the last 4 years, a large number of cultural organizations and theaters across the United States have closed their doors permanently, unable to sustain their business in this current climate (Paulson, 2024). The stakes are high, we are grappling with the continued existence of the American theater. I will center the use of civic and community engagement programs as one method that can positively impact the

restoration of this sector and its relationships with the communities they serve and seek to serve. The notion of community itself is also evolving, “One of the challenges in this reinvention of community is the place within it of the arts and engagement with the arts, traditionally at the heart of many community rituals and celebrations” (Finneran & Anderson, 2019, p. 22).

Historically, in the arts sector there has been some confusion, resistance, and a lack of cohesion about the term community engagement. For the purpose of this article, I use a definition of community engagement from Americans for the Arts: “Activities undertaken by an arts organization as a part of a mission strategy designed to build deep relationships between the organization and the community in which it operates for the purpose of achieving mutual benefit” (Johnson, 2019).

Values-driven civic and community engagement work in the arts has risen in its stature and can no longer be considered secondary to the work of theaters and arts organizations. A connection has been drawn between the potential benefits of this work as it relates to the prospect of affecting community sustainability (Moldavanova & Wright, 2019). To strategically design the way forward, I believe that theater as a sector will need to use civic and community engagement work as one prominent and effective methodology that can foster synergy with communities they engage. The very nature of the relationship between arts organizations and communities continues to shift:

It aspires to looking beyond the stages...and instead to interrogate how these theaters engage in a range of ways with their communities, framing the theaters not just as entertainment, but as leaders, framing the participants not just as audience but as members of a community of practice; and framing the practice not as alternative...but as core to the operation and policy of these theaters. (Finneran & Anderson, 2019, p. 24)

There are numerous benefits, both ethical and practical, for the pursuit of a civic- and community-focused arts agenda. Borwick (2012) asserted that arts organizations, for practical and ethical reasons, need to be more deeply connected to their communities; he contends they can accomplish this, demonstrating ways in which engagement can aid organizations. Many theaters are using community engagement, civic

engagement, public programs, outreach and/or impact programs, to ignite community conversations, address past inequities and to repair and rebuild relationships with communities that have been historically excluded from a given theater, or theater itself.

I conducted a case study in which I analyzed how one regional theater, which I will refer to as Mid-Sized City Theater (MCT), a pseudonym, used community and civic engagement programs to promote reimagining their organization as a civic institution. Engagement programs are important components of programming developed and implemented by MCT while undergoing a significant shift in its mission. MCT was transitioning from being a predominantly producing and presenting organization to becoming a civic institution. As this study commenced, the new vision for MCT was to capture the collective imagination and build community through joy-filled theatrical activities that lead to a greater understanding of ourselves and each other. It was a notable and weighty shift for an arts organization to move toward becoming a civic institution that intended to use community engagement programming as a tool to support building community. Building community partnerships is fundamental to the success of engagement work, “Partnerships are one way through which we can combat some of the challenges of a liquid modernity, but also make theater programs beyond the main stage relevant and engaging for non-traditional audiences” (Finneran & Anderson, 2019, p. 26).

These varied terms (i.e., community engagement, civic engagement, public programs, outreach programs, impact programs) carry with them a variety of connotations, which were described as demeaning by several of the people I interviewed. Rhianna (a pseudonym), the strategic partnership consultant, addressed this when asked how she felt about the term “community engagement.” She shared that she preferred to “talk about showing up for the community and having an impact. So, I’ll use community impact ideas.” She described MCT’s community impact as “a level of engagement” and “a reciprocal term.” She added, “I don’t dislike it [community engagement]. I just think people overuse it.”

Another staff member at MCT, Luisa (a pseudonym), the director of artistic partnerships and innovation, also took issue with the term community engagement and how it is used interchangeably with the term outreach:

I tend to not use the word community engagement or even civic engagement. I'm not super interested in arguing about what words are right or wrong, but those words don't usually come out of my vocabulary when I'm talking about what I'm doing. And I would say it's maybe part of the way that the field talks about that work is why I tend to not position myself inside of it because often the field talks about community programs as, it's sometimes called outreach. . . I think they're not intended to be interchangeable. . . it's the White institutions reaching out to the Black and Brown audiences and trying to get them to do something. And that just does not feel like a relationship, ever. I don't want a theater to engage me as a Brown person myself. So, I tend to not use that phrasing.

Clearly, the ambiguity around how these terms are seen through the lens of racial equity has not been adequately addressed in the theater field or by the institutions using the terms. Borwick (2012) frames this debate:

Most outreach that is undertaken is done “for” the community, assuming that the arts organizations understand what art the community needs. To be effective, successful engagement must be done “with” the community based on reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships with the organizations or communities being served. Indeed, the very word “outreach” implies an unequal relationship: the “outreacher” is central and those “reached” are peripheral and in need of service. (p. 33)

Hager & Winlker (2012) assert that the arts sector seeks to promote civic engagement to advance connection and challenge assumptions. As a recent Culture Track report demonstrates, the cultural sector has an inclusion problem (Benoit-Bryan & Jenetopolus, 2021). Owing to the convergence of the pandemic and racial reckoning, arts organizations, no matter their size or geographic location “need to be in genuine dialogue with their audiences, participants, and communities as they decide how they can contribute and serve” (Benoit-Bryan & Jenetopolus, 2021). Paradoxically, the diversity in the principles and objectives driving this work, in addition to varying practices of implementing this work, have contributed to the

wide-ranging definitions and intentions of this work in practice (Mutibwa, 2017). Clara (a pseudonym), the director of artistic producing, aligned with Luisa's earlier point in our second interview:

Community engagement now sort of encompasses pretty much anything under the sun. It's a really useless term, I think. But importantly, it has become synonymous with Black and Brown people. It's synonymous with poor people and synonymous with the POC [people of color] leaders creating these initiatives.

The term community engagement itself has been racialized and endowed with negative connotations from the perspective of several staff members at MCT, due in part to how predominantly White institutions have used engagement as a tool to build relationships with communities of color. The lack of clarity in defining this work impacts our ability to advocate for it.

To build relationships with various communities, both in and outside of the arts sector (i.e., internal and external), MCT first needed to address what community means to them, which communities they are already engaging with, and the communities with which they wanted to build new relationships and partnerships. In an interview with Serena (a pseudonym), the artistic director, we discussed her perspective on whether MCT has a coherent understanding of the community it serves:

What we see in other people's mission statements referring to "the community" . . . the plural, pluralizing communities [in the mission statement], was an attempt at making visible that we have many constituents and many communities that we should be engaging with. . . but, you know, it's more nuanced than that. And I think our job is to find the nuance. And so, my experience of MCT is that we're getting a better understanding that we have multiple constituencies, and that they sometimes have or often have divergent opinions and needs.

There has been a swell of sentiment that supports the notion that Americans no longer view arts and culture organizations as interdependent actors in systems that support their communities (Slover Linett, 2022). The ethos has shifted and there is now a demand

to have our arts and culture organizations work with communities to create substantive public value (Slover Linett, 2022). More specifically, the public's desire for rootedness takes many forms, such as collaborative decision making and a desire to see more artwork that is a juxtaposition between professionally produced and community created productions. Rootedness and cohesion are vital in creating a common vision for a collective future in the arts. In the interview process, it became apparent that this is easier said than done, due in part to the misalignment of terms and practices that differentiate outreach and community engagement work. This points to a growing need for intersectional awareness and the eradication of silos. "The siloing we have witnessed...of different disciplines and sectors has done little to prepare our education sector, theaters and our community for the looming challenges that will require citizens to be skilled collaborators" (Finneran & Anderson, 2019, p.27).

A pursuit to improve conditions and connectivity between arts organizations and communities is one way that this sector is working to address equity, justice, and opportunity for cultural workers and participants in the arts. The multidimensional approach of engagement work in the arts has demonstrated capacity to respond to social justice issues and human suffering in a creative and connected way. Cultivating a broader sense of community and working together at MCT to enact the mission shift toward becoming a civic institution, became a unifying force that brought staff together around these efforts. However, there was an exodus of staff and board members who felt strongly that this shift was too far afield from the founding mission.

One of the largest contributing factors that leads to building positive connections between an arts organization and the communities it serves, or aims to serve, is trust. Trust building is a reciprocal process that demands consistency over time. The discovery process for building consistent and trusting relationships with communities happens through meaningful connections and collaboration. It also happens through the building of equitable pipelines for staff, artists, board members, and community partnerships. Slover Linett (2022) frames trust-building as a three-step iterative cycle of 1) consistent action that 2) meets community needs and is 3) communicated as evidence. The world of theater and the arts are fascinating and productive laboratories for innovation and change.

For trust building to be impactful, a collective agreement around terms and practices must be reached through a reciprocal process between partners and communities.

The arts are a conduit for equity and are a place where we can be most inclusive. The conventional positioning of a theater or performing arts organization is to produce and present live performances. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and activist, reminds us that the culture itself seeks to either maintain or transfigure social structures (Freire, 1992). Arts organizations do not necessarily make community or civic engagement integral to their mission. However, in ongoing cultural equity conversations, the notion of community and civic engagement programs as ancillary is rooted in limiting beliefs that belong to another era. The findings in this study demonstrate an arts and culture sector that is hungry for relatedness, meaning, and innovation, against the backdrop of a shifting landscape. Arts organizations must now be compelled to frame priorities around the possibility of creating a social transformation, toward just and equitable conditions in the arts. Many arts organizations have made this shift toward including civic and community engagement programs as essential components of their work and needed to remain relevant in the current cultural landscape.

The racial reckoning of 2020 served as a catalyst for deep reflection and fundamental change in the arts and culture sector as it pertains to equity and inclusion (Parker-Pope, 2021). Rahm Emanuel, former chief of staff for President Obama, famously issued what is now known as “Rahm’s Rule” in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste” (Weidinger & Sprunt, 2022). The pandemic’s pause allowed arts organizations to make progress on the longstanding challenges of inequities in this sector, finding positive opportunities in a time of crisis and not letting it go to waste. It is time for arts organizations to take actionable steps that go beyond the performative statements made in the wake of George Floyd, inclusive of shifting the value proposition of engagement work in this sector. This response will also require a repositioning of leadership and power structure dynamics.

The cultural paradigm of exclusionary practices in the arts and culture sector has a long and sustained history as old as the injustices of slavery and segregation (Walker-Khune, 2005). It is critical that arts organizations shift this narrative to “rebuild the structural economy and moral economy at the same time” (Joseph, 2024). Shifting the

narrative will also allow innovation to continue around the use of theater and engagement work as a means to bring communities together. It will contribute to addressing the industry-wide challenge of ever-diminishing theater audiences. Reframing best practices through an antiracist lens is something that all arts organizations need to implement, inclusive of areas such as leadership, staffing, programming, and finances. Systemic racism, also labeled as institutional racism, is referred to as a “silent opportunity killer” and defined in the arts and social justice as “the blind interaction between institutions, policies, and practices that inevitably perpetuates barriers to opportunities and racial disparities. Conscious and unconscious racism continue to exist in our society” (Grantmakers, 2009).

Community and civic engagement programs have long been used to address social change. Borwick (2012) describes community engagement as a mission strategy to build deep relationships of trust and understanding, through which outreach can expand. There is an assertion here that arts organizations, for practical and ethical reasons, need to be more deeply connected to their communities. Borwick (2012) maintains that arts organizations can accomplish this by demonstrating ways in which engagement can aid organizations in achieving that goal: “There are numerous reasons, both moral and practical, for pursuit of a community focused arts agenda both for arts organizations and for communities” (p. 26). Values-driven civic and community engagement programs can no longer be considered secondary to the work of arts organizations. With a goal of creating dialogue with communities around various social issues, community engagement programs are being used by arts organizations to address the challenge of differentiating between relational and transactional processes (Grams & Farrell, 2008).

Leadership must also reevaluate budgets and fundraising strategies to support the development of new roles and programs with designated budget line items. Without financial support, mission statements that espouse a commitment to community and civic engagement are meaningless. Audiences and communities want alignment between their values and the organizations they support, as do the cultural workers who are the backbone of this sector (Slover Linett, 2022). This reframing will motivate arts organizations to invest in community engagement, staff, programs, and civic initiatives. Equitable resources will need to be allocated to actualize programs that fulfill

their new mission statements. This new model for an equitable future, for any arts organization, places engagement at the center. How the arts community works to solve and address the fundamental needs of workers, artists and community members requires deep reflection, experimentation, and collaboration. However, these processes must happen concurrently for more holistic success in the arena of change management (Cameron, 2018).

For an organization to make civic and community engagement programs as relevant to their mission as the art that they create and produce, those changes will need to be supported by the board and leadership. It is critical that those changes be represented in an organization's strategic plans, with capital that demonstrates those core values. Arts based civic and community engagement programs provide demonstrated benefits in addressing issues of social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Grantmakers for the Arts characterizes the lack of diversity in the arts and culture sector as “one of the most important issues for the cultural sector to address in the twenty-first century” (Cuyler, 2015). Cultural workers have a responsibility to audiences and communities to listen, to strive to understand, and to respond through creative innovations. The recommendations offered here focus on one aspect of the social impact of the arts—their influence on community and civic engagement. A desire for change, or for doing things differently, generally comes from a place of dissatisfaction or in response to some kind of pain (Schein, 2017).

Cultural workers and arts researchers will continue to seek ways to make meaning of how our society has been altered by the pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020, and how those seminal events have impacted the American Theater. Dias & Sayet (2018) discuss how theater may function as a space for needed healing industry-wide. Theater and the arts will continue to be vital as a place to exchange ideas and to confront the multiplicity of human experiences. Community and civic engagement programs will continue to be utilized to understand and represent the full range of the diversity of our lived experiences. The arts are and always will be a place for truthful expression. Communities will continue to congregate in shared spaces to create new experiences collaboratively and communally. Theater will always find a way to embrace curiosity and openness, and to encounter other visions of truth—and through that, a better understanding of who we are. When we trust the wisdom that lives and

resides in those who are marginalized to tell their own stories on their own terms, theater can continue to evolve for our audiences and our communities. Theater will continue to operate as a catalyst for change that will help advance and progress our society, and I will continue to be hopeful for the reimagined future that we are building together.

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