

Living in the Struggle: Our Long Tug of War in the Arts

Diane Ragsdale

This talk was first presented on 27 May 2013 in Canberra, Australia at the annual conference for the Australian Performing Arts Centers Association (APACA). For permissions please contact Diane Ragsdale at diane.ragsdale@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION - WELCOME

Good morning. It's terrific to be back in Australia. A lot has happened since the last time I was here in October 2008. Among other things, in 2010, I left my job at the Mellon Foundation in New York and moved to the Netherlands to marry a man I had been dating long distance, a Dutchman named Jaap, with two wonderful daughters. And that same year I started a PhD program at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. So, now I am lecturing and studying in a cultural economics and entrepreneurship program.

My arrival in the Netherlands, a country that historically has been renowned for its generous support of the arts and culture sector, coincided with drastic cuts to the arts budget. I was there for the initial shock and disbelief as arts groups tried and failed to rally support from the general public to protest the cuts. Over the past year, as the cuts have gone into effect, I've witnessed talented artists migrating to other countries and watched as arts organizations that have been, since their existence, able to rely on government support respond to sometimes dramatic cuts. Some have simply closed their doors because they had no way to quickly fill the gap left by government on such short notice.

The challenging times for arts organizations continue in the UK, across Europe, and in the US. From what I read in the newspaper it seems that the arts (and the economy generally) are faring better here, and I'm happy to hear it. I hope that the arts increases stick come September.

Before I launch into this talk, it's probably important to acknowledge that, after three years locked in an ivory tower in the Netherlands, mine is, admittedly, *still* a US perspective as I spent a majority of my career (20 years) living and working in the arts and culture sector there. I hope that hearing my reflections will, nonetheless, prove to be valuable. More importantly, I look forward to hearing your perspectives. Where do we share challenges, opportunities, and circumstances? And where do they diverge?

PART I: ON MISSIONS, MARKETS, MORALS, AND MICE

So, I don't know if any of you read this, but a study was published in Germany a couple weeks back that garnered the following statement in one newspaper:

“Markets make us less moral.”¹

We've long suspected, of course, that this is the case. As the article suggests, one need only point to slave trading as an example. Or, more recently, perhaps the fact that people in the US have been known to trample each other to death in order to be first in line to buy a limited number of flat screen television sets at an unbeatably low price.

So, I want to tell you a bit about this experimental study. The researchers put participants into three groups. The first group was simply presented with two options: accept the death of a lab mouse and receive ten euros; or forego the money and the mouse lives. They were shown a

¹ <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/d-brief/2013/05/15/markets-make-us-less-moral/>

picture of the mouse and a video of the process that would be used to euthanize the mouse. In this scenario 46% of people said they would allow the mouse to be killed in exchange for ten euros.

In a second scenario—a bilateral market with one buyer and one seller—the seller was given the mouse and told, “the life of the mouse is entrusted to your care” but you can sell the mouse to the buyer (for a negotiated amount up to \$20) and the mouse will be killed. In this scenario 72% of sellers said they would allow the mouse to be killed in exchange for money.

The third scenario was a multilateral market, with multiple buyers and sellers, and the percentage selling their mouse was slightly higher still: 76%.

The researchers then ran the experiment with *coupons* instead of mice. In this scenario, in contrast to the scenario with the mice, the percentages were the same across all three groups. What the researchers make of this finding is that the marketplace effects, in particular, “moral decisions” rather than “neutral decisions.”

So, why am I raising this study? Are we here to talk about immoral behavior by arts organizations? Well ... no, not *exactly* ... *but* I would characterize this as a rather existential talk ... it is concerned with our necessary missions ... and our ubiquitous free market economy ... and on the different directions they so often seem to pull us.

So, let’s begin by defining a couple of terms.

First, what do I mean by *market*?

Most obviously, I mean the market economy in which we operate and the marketplace in which there are buyers for the goods and services that you provide: whether that be governments, ticket buyers, sponsors, venues, distributors, rich people who make contributions, foundations, agents, or your peers and the press (who don’t pay you money, but do pay you attention, which legitimizes you and creates economic value).

But that’s not all ... I’m also referring to the influence of a *market logic* on society-at-large. As Harvard professor Michael Sandel asserts in his 2012 book, “What Money Can’t Buy,” we have shifted from having a market economy to living in a *market society* in which *market thinking* and *market values* have “come to govern our lives as never before.”²

And what do I mean by *mission*?

Well, what I *don’t* mean are the various artistic programs that you run. You do not exist to present an eclectic season of work by some of the most celebrated artists from Australia and around the world. Presenting that season is not your mission; it is your strategy for achieving your mission. Adapting Tony Judt, I would say your mission “ascribes purpose to your actions in

² Sandel, Michael (2012). *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. (p. 5)

a way that transcends them.”³ Your mission is your “social value”.⁴ I imagine some of you—particularly producing companies or artists—might be asking, ‘What about art for art’s sake’?

I do not think your mission is art for art’s sake.

A few weeks back a friend of mine, Russell Willis Taylor at National Arts Strategies, suggested that I listen to a couple of TED Talks by Alain de Botton, which I promptly did. In one of these talks, *Atheism 2.0*, he called art for art’s sake a “ridiculous” idea. It was a little shocking, actually, to hear.⁵ He then explained his characterization, saying:

The idea that art should live in a hermetic bubble and should not try and DO anything with this troubled world. I couldn't disagree more.

In a similar vein, I would suggest that you exist not for the sake of art, but for the sake of its *matteringness*—its relevance—to this troubled world.

Relevance, by the way, should not be conflated with drawing huge numbers of people through the door. Selling lots of tickets can be great—it’s not an indicator of mediocrity as we sometimes assume in the arts; on the other hand, neither is it necessarily an indicator of mission accomplished.

We are accountable for making sure that art matters.

We are accountable for *caring for our mice*.

PART II: SOMEBODY BETTER CALL THE ART POLICE?

So, let’s say for argument’s sake, that our mice are the artists we exist to support and the communities we exist to serve. A logical question might be “which mice”? Who do we exist *for*?

In other words, how shall we define art, artists, and our communities?

I want to spend some time on this, as I’ve noticed that *this* is often where the conversation about relevance goes, or stops, or turns pear-shaped, or where people just get prickly.

As I may have mentioned, when I moved to the Netherlands I started a blog called *Jumper* and early on wrote a post called, “[Somebody better call the art police](#).”⁶ I was, essentially, challenging another blogger who wrote a post asking whether, in the US, we may be at risk of “defining the arts down” by which she meant are we expanding (and thus lowering) our notions of what qualifies as “art.”

In particular, she questioned the inclusion of the gastronomic arts in a grade school arts curriculum and the poor quality of small town arts festivals. Her main object of critique,

³ See Ivey, Bill (2012). *Handmaking America: A back-to-basics pathway to a revitalized American democracy*, p. xxxiii

⁴ See Phills, Jim (2005) *Integrating Mission and Strategy in Nonprofit Organizations*

⁵ http://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0.html

⁶ <http://www.artsjournal.com/jumper/2010/12/somebody-better-call-the-art-police/>

however, was an exhibition at a well regarded art museum in the Midwest featuring professional photographs documenting the local hockey team, called the Sabres. It's perhaps important to note, this was a sports town.

I felt that she was behaving snobbishly in her automatic dismissal of these activities and made two points:

The first was that it was, in fact, possible to find great art outside of urban metropolitan areas.

My second point was aimed at challenging the notion of artistic hierarchies and the assumption that work made by amateurs, or work that is popular or commercial, is necessarily of lower quality or worth. I wrote:

If we want to reach new audiences we may need to stop hammering so hard on the idea that Bach is intrinsically better than Björk, who is intrinsically better than my brother, who plays in a pro-am banjo club in St. Louis. Does it take anything away from Bach if I also consider both Björk and my brother's banjo playing to be artistic?

There was quite a bit more to the post – but this was the gist of it. In response I received more than 25 comments and I want to read just a few:

- A guy named **Jim** was the first to weigh in, writing: *Nonsense Diane, do you at least know the difference between your attraction to your brother's banjo, Bjork and Bach. Nothing is taken away from Bach it's you who suffers. ... Art is not for children, seniors, prisoners or the disabled. Art is an intelligent adult decision by people who thrive on the sublime, in my case the visual.*
- **Tammy** countered: *I wonder if those that enjoy the privilege of a good education realize the position of those without. Speaking as one of the under-educated, we tend to survive on instinct and common sense; neither of which is much help in understanding and appreciating fine art. At some level we realize that there is a difference between the mural on the monster truck and a Picasso. But if we've begun to refer to the mural as "art," what is that, if not an opening? Maybe even a plea for help in understanding what all the fuss is about?*
- **And one more—Sharon** weighed in towards the end of the debate to write: *I understand the concern about quality, about defining "art", but as I see arts non-profits struggle to stay open for their ever shrinking audiences, can we really afford to be less than generous in our ideas? ... As artists/arts organizations, let's open our doors as widely as possible and invite people of all ages, sizes, and colors each holding on to a different understanding of art to share in that experience. As difficult as this can be, this democratization of arts is imperative if we want the arts to not only survive but thrive.*

Sharon's last point is an important one.

Awhile back I was asked to write a post for a debate on Arts Journal.com called [Lead or Follow?](http://www.artsjournal.com/leadorfollow/)⁷ The question posed to the bloggers: Do artists and arts organizations need to lead more or learn to follow their communities more?⁸

My thesis: You can't lead if no one is paying attention to you.

At least in America, it feels as though we've disregarded the larger part of society for so long that they don't really think about us. They've moved on. Who needs theater when you've got HBO?

Much of what we defend in the name of *art for art's sake* is quite often art for the sake of recognition from our peers, our contributors, the press, and others in the inner circle of the art world.

Shall we content ourselves with reaching this inner circle? Simply write-off the rest? Or do we believe it's important for what we do to be part of the cultural zeitgeist? In an era in which there appears to be declining interest in some forms of art, should we be fighting harder than ever to maintain and advance a clear artistic hierarchy? Or as Sharon suggests is it time to be more democratic in our conception of what is art, how it's made, and who it's for?

There is a theater in the US, the American Repertory Theatre, that seems to be trying to tackle this issue head on. For years ART was one of the more avant-garde producing "art theaters" in the US. A few years back the theater hired a new artistic director, Diane Paulus, who recently directed *Pippin*, and *Porgy and Bess* on Broadway, and a few years back, *Hair*. She immediately began to shake up the programming in the interest of making stronger connections to the students at Harvard University, where the theater is housed—students that, for the most part, had very little relationship to the theater when she got there. This was her mandate from her board—to build stronger ties to the university, to increase audiences generally.

Among her strategies, in her first year, she took the old black box theater and converted it into a nightclub, put in a disco version of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and let people eat, tweet, take photos, and drink while they watched the show. She also presented a site-specific mashup of *Macbeth*, called *Sleep No More*, by the British company Punch Drunk.

What were the results? She doubled attendance at the theater in one year. 20 year olds didn't just show up, they showed up in droves, repeatedly, for the same show, bringing new friends with them each time they returned. Diane Paulus is serving up theater fare that is appealing to 20 year olds. At the same time, quite a few longtime subscribers walked away citing that the theater had lost its way. And more than a few staff members, as well.

I look at something like that and my *first* thought is: "OK, clearly some latent demand ... clearly something about space and relationship to art that we can learn from here." However, rather than being curious about this amazing growth in audience, and what it might say about changing tastes and the changing nature or definition of theatre some theater leaders in the US were highly critical of Diane Paulus. They wrote off what she was doing as pure commercialism. They

⁷ <http://www.artsjournal.com/leadorfollow/>

⁸ <http://www.artsjournal.com/leadorfollow/2012/01/if-this-is-leading-what-is-following/>

suggested that her attendance numbers in the nightclub should not be counted towards her annual theater attendance. In essence they were challenging whether a disco version of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in a nightclub setting could count as art.

The error I see on the part of critics in both of these examples—the hockey team art in rural America and the disco *Midsummer Night's Dream* in a nightclub—is that they seem to derive from an automatic bias that anything that is clearly commercial (i.e. popular and profitable) or community-based is not art. Clearly, greatness can be found in the subsidized, commercial, or amateur art realms. (And, of course, so can mediocrity.)

Having said this, the lines between the sectors exist for a reason. Subsidized mission-based organizations have an obligation to society that we must pay attention to. We need to be willing to check the *motives* for our programming choices, existing as we do in this free market society in which exhibitions with photographs of hockey teams attract more sponsorship dollars than exhibitions of lesser known works by obscure artists, and disco Shakespeare in a nightclub does a heckuva lot better at the box office than the confrontational play about immigration.

These are moral decisions and they are not easy. The choice of what to program, where, at what price, for whom matters a great deal.

In another TED Talk, Alain de Botton says that we tend to think we can be successful at everything but this is not possible. And thus pursuing success in one area requires admitting what will be lost in another.⁹ What are our metrics of success? We each have to determine this and be honest with ourselves about it.

We're not crazy to lose sleep over this stuff.

At least that's what I tell myself on a regular basis.

What would be more disturbing is if we stop losing sleep over this stuff.

Which is, perhaps, our greater problem at the moment.

PART III – THE LONG TUG OF WAR

Speaking of losing sleep over stuff, did I mention I'm working on a dissertation? I don't recommend it for anyone over 40. It's one of the hardest things I've ever done.

At any rate, speaking of lines between the sectors, my research is on nonprofit theaters in the US like ART, which I just mentioned, and the evolution in their relationship with Broadway, with the commercial theater, over the past 60 years. I want to tell you a bit about this because I believe it bears relevance to our topic today.

Resident theaters were producing theaters formed in the mid-twentieth century as an *alternative* to the then dominant commercial model in the US. The ideals of the movement called for nonprofit professional theaters to be set up in cities across the US, to reach the people with great

⁹ http://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_a_kinder_gentler_philosophy_of_success.html

theater. Each of these theaters would have an acting company in residence and would produce a range of plays typically not produced by the commercial world (the classics and serious dramas, for instance). Here's what one of the pioneers of the movement, Zelda Fichandler, recently said about the founding of the movement:

What drew us to the way we went? What was the vision, the inciting incident? Actually, there was no incident, no high drama, there was simply a change of thought, a new way of looking at things, a tilt of the head, a revolution in our perception. We looked at what we had – the hit-or-miss; put-it-up, tear-it-down; make-a-buck, lose-a-buck; discontinuous; artist-indifferent; New York-centered ways of Broadway, and they weren't tolerable anymore, and it made us angry. ...

The fabric of the thought that propelled us was that theatre should stop serving the function of making money, for which it has never been and never will be suited, and start serving the revelation and shaping of the process of living, for which it is uniquely suited, for which it, indeed, exists. The new thought was that theatre should be restored to itself as a form of art.

Nobody was looking for us, peering through the window, watching for us to come to relieve the boredom and unawareness of their lives. It was we who had to teach and persuade them to want what we wanted to give them. And we had to insist on it for their own good, but, really, for our own, if we were honest enough to admit that. ... Nobody called us, but we came.¹⁰

For a time, the ideals of this great, revolutionary movement held and the lines between these two sectors were clear. In the late 1970s and early 80s, however, in the face of increased competition and the loss of government and private funding, resident theaters began to shift their practices here and there. And as they did so, they began to field criticisms for no longer upholding the “alternative” ideals they were formed to uphold.

As an example, I recently came across a newspaper article from 1992 about a tumultuous period in the tenure of Arnold Mittleman, artistic director at the Coconut Grove Playhouse, a resident theater based in Miami. This theater's first production was the US premiere of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The article opens with a terrific line:

Like the village that surrounds it, the Coconut Grove Playhouse has lived to middle age in more-or-less constant tension, its stage the locus of a long tug of war between art and commerce, spiritual ideals, and materialistic forces.¹¹

How true and familiar that feels ...

The long tug of war between art and commerce, spiritual ideals, and materialistic forces.

¹⁰ <http://www.howlround.com/address-to-the-stage-directors-and-choreographers-society-in-celebration-of-the-third-annual-zelda>

¹¹ Rowe, Sean & Almond, Steven (1992). Coconut Grove Playhouse Feature Story. *Miami Herald*, 11 March 1992.

The article then focuses on the tenure of Mittelman, who joined the organization as its second artistic director in 1986 and was, at first, hailed as a “savior” pulling the organization out of financial trouble. Before too long, however, some of Mittelman’s methods of salvation began to raise eyebrows. He was criticized for failure to take artistic risks; failure to provide local artists with a place to hone their talents; for having overtly commercial producing ambitions; and for receiving excessive compensation and perks. There were comments in the newspaper article like this one ...

“What we need is someone who is developing more than tried-and-true box office successes. If you’ve got a state theater that’s also supported by contributions, you ought to be less worried about selling tickets and take some more risks. As it is, we’re looked upon as a sort of cruise ship on terra firma.”

The Coconut Grove Playhouse was not alone. Other theaters were also fielding such criticisms.

Towards the end of the article, Mittelman defends his actions on the basis that the world of regional theater had changed significantly from what it was even a few years before. He asserts that achieving those original ideals—supporting a local company of actors and producing “serious” fare (rather than musicals)—was no longer the goal of his theater or a majority of resident theaters.

In essence, he describes an evolution in resident theaters and suggests that he is being judged against a standard set at a different time, when the environment could support the ideals of Zelda Fichandler and the other pioneers of the movement.

The evolution Mittelman described in 1992 has continued apace.

In the “long tug of war” it seems that *art* has ceded quite a bit of ground to *commerce* and that many of our *ideals* have eroded in the face of larger economic, social, and cultural forces in the world.

We have witnessed a long creep towards commercialism in the nonprofit sector in the US generally (not only in the arts), in part, because this is what the American system seems to encourage. What happened to resident theaters? Perhaps it was the same thing that happened to nonprofit hospitals and other social service organizations? In his 2003 book *The Resilient Sector*, Lester Salamon addresses the evolution of the nonprofit sector in the US in the face of loss of a host of other pressures.¹²

What he asserts, provocatively, is that US nonprofits have proven to be extremely *resilient* in the face of such pressures, but that the strategies they have employed to survive have, over time, moved them in the direction of the market and farther away from their missions, what he calls their “distinctive purpose.”

¹² Salamon, L.M. (2003). *The Resilient Sector*. (P. 86)

Salamon ultimately argues that a better balance needs to be struck between the things that make nonprofits special and the things nonprofits need to do in order to survive (pp. 75-87).

Reading Salamon, it seems that the much heralded *resilience* that many of us have achieved in recent years has perhaps required us to un-tether ourselves from our missions.

How do we bounce back from drops in revenue in the US?

Present a musical rather than a classic. Replace large cast play with a small one; an unknown title with a well known one; or better yet, just book a comedien. Find a corporate sponsor and produce a sensational exhibition of some kind. Hire a celebrity and charge top dollar for tickets. Start *renting* more and *presenting* less. Block book more shows and end up with a season of *convenience* (that looks an awful lot like everybody else's season), rather than a season of *distinction*.

In other words, temporarily suspend your ideals. Coping mechanisms. Tactics to enable short-term survival. Understandable when there are sudden shocks to the system. What's problematic, however, is when coping mechanisms become long-term strategies... a new way of doing business ... when we change our practices, and then (consciously or not) change our goals, values, and metrics of success to align with them.

This may be the price of resilience.

Today, it seems that the theater world, by and large, takes-for-granted that the largest regional theaters in the US will send musicals to Broadway and hire their actors out of NY rather than locally and pay their artistic directors pretty hefty salaries. But as the article on the Coconut Grove Playhouse suggests, it wasn't always thus and, at one point, gave us pause.

Over time, the goals of many arts organizations in the US have changed.

And I would assert that some have them have become *permanently failing organizations*—a term coined by Meyer and Zucker to describe companies that are no longer achieving their goals, but continue to persist anyway in a low performance state.¹³

Why, one might ask, would boards and leaders want or allow organizations to persist in a low performance state? Because high performance strategies often entail taking risks, risks that might lead to outright collapse - something those that depend on an organization (for livelihood or reputation) want to avoid at all costs.

When I first read about *permanently failing organizations* it struck me that it would be rather easy for long-established cultural organizations to drift into a permanently failing state. Why? Permanence is often an explicit goal of arts organizations. Mission and goals are notoriously difficult to define and measure in the arts. And it is often quite difficult in the subsidized arts sector for up-and-coming innovators to access the resources and attain the recognition and legitimacy necessary to give the most established institutions a run for their money.

¹³ Meyer, M. & Zucker, L. (1989). *Permanently Failing Organizations*.

In a similar vein to Meyer and Zucker, Clay Shirky warns us that when persistence of the institution begins to supersede all other organizations goals, the institution shifts from being an “enabler” to being an “obstacle.”¹⁴

We need to be concerned about low-performance persistence. About becoming obstacles or ‘nonprofit arts zombies’, to use the phrase coined by Brian Newman.¹⁵

Moreover, we need to be concerned that we may be trying to sustain failing institutions at the expense of a high performing ones.

Or trying to sustain opera companies, orchestras, theaters, and dance companies at the expense of sustaining artists, creativity, culture, and broad and deep engagement with the arts.

What do I mean by that?

IV – SACRIFICING OUR MICE TO STAY ALIVE

For many of us the battle has shifted from trying to achieve our ideals to trying to keep cranking along year after year. But when we succumb to persistence for the sake of persistence we do so at the expense of the artists and communities we both exist to serve, and depend upon for our meaningful existence.

We may be winning the battle to survive but losing the war to remain relevant.

How?

Let’s start with *artists*:

I think we sacrifice artists to our ongoing persistence when we fail to provide a space for artistic experimentation or for content that is difficult or otherwise challenging.

Or when we fail to invest sufficient time and resources to support craftsmanship at the highest level, and enable high quality work to be created.

Or when we fail to take the time to understand the work and provide adequate context for it.

Or when we fail to say hello to artists when they show up to work in our venues *because we have no relationship with them*.

A few years back when the economy tanked it was depressing to me how many organizations made it through first by cutting back on the number or size of productions. In fact, a field colleague mentioned to me that most organizations she knew of were trying to hold onto their marketing and fundraising staff at all costs. I thought this was perhaps purely a matter of money: marketing and development staff are revenue generators. But then she commented that the administrative staff of an arts organization are like “family” and that it is, thus, very hard to let go of them.

¹⁴ http://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_on_institutions_versus_collaboration.html

¹⁵ <http://springboardmedia.blogspot.nl/2011/02/nonprofit-arts-zombies.html>

It occurred to me when I heard the comment that in large institutions artists are, quite often, not part of the family. In the US artists are frequently jobbed in and out (living quite precarious lives) and it's the administrators who have a "home" with a full time salary and health benefits. Or even if artists are on salary, they are quite often perceived to be at odds with management, and vice versa. And I'm not referring only to organizations during labor disputes. We put people in separate parts of the building, work on different schedules, dress differently. Walking through an arts organization one can sometimes feel two, quite distinct, cultures crossing from admin over to production.

A few years back I was referred to as being "pro-artist" by the head of a resident theater and it was meant to be a derogatory term. I thought, "Hmmm, When did being "pro-artist" make one an enemy of resident theaters? When did large theater institutions begin to see their own interests as threatened by the interests of artists?"

I think it happened when we began to see art and artists not as the creators we exist to support, not as the soul of our institutions, but as commodities ... Or perhaps as suppliers on the other end of a market transaction.

We have achieved some of our resilience, I would argue, by taking artists out of moral center of our institutions—where we feel beholden to support them in some way *and* where they can influence our values and goals, and question our motives and means on a daily basis.

When we do this I think we risk decaying from the inside out.

And what about our *communities* ... what are some of the signs we may be sacrificing them to our ongoing persistence?

We let down our communities when we, likewise, begin to see them as markets to be targeted rather than communities to be served.

Or when we default to commercial programming we don't really believe in, knowing we could produce something more important, more meaningful.

Or we fail to develop a bridge to those who didn't come from the right families or go to the right schools and we fail to help them develop a relationship with art.

Or fail to reflect the diversity in our communities.

Or fail to do work that has anything to do with the lives and values of the people in the place where we live.

Or adopt programming, marketing, and pricing strategies that increase the economic and social divides within our communities rather than counter them.

Or content ourselves with reaching a shrinking inner circle, and tell ourselves that the world is not good enough for us and there is nothing to be done.

Or we program cookie-cutter, formulaic seasons that will appeal to the middling tastes of our middle class subscribers ...

That last one is common in the US ... where we have a long history of subscription. And it's easy to succumb to.

It's a version of Clayton Christensen's *Innovator's Dilemma*.¹⁶ We build up a significant base of loyal, donating subscribers upon whom we depend for annual operating support and then fear of losing them leads us to over-serve them (what we think they want) at the expense of broader relevance (on the one hand) or artistic risk-taking (on the other).

The problem is not simply that the work is homogeneous, it's that it can become a kind of Pablum (which is a sort of bland baby cereal). In January of this year, at the Under the Radar Festival in New York, artist Taylor Mac presented a talk called: *I Believe: A Theater Manifesto*, in which he wrote:¹⁷

I believe it is hard to find works of consequence. I believe in works of consequence and hope to make all of my plays and performances works of consequence. I believe if something doesn't happen in your play that changes all the characters, players, and audience then it isn't worth doing.

Rather than *resilience* at the price of mission we need to pursue *relevance*—responding to the changing needs of artists and the changing needs of our communities.

Rather than *obstacles*—narrowing the conceptions of what is art, how it's made, and who it's for—we need to be *enablers*—brokering relationships between people and art and between people through art.

Rather than allowing ourselves to drift into a *zombie* state—*permanently failing* in our goals—we need to recognize that persistence cannot come at the expense of performance. Setting aside our goals, our ideals, and settling for mediocrity is not acceptable.

The larger point, perhaps, is that we cannot content ourselves with merely transacting with our communities or our artists.

Our job is to be patient and exist in a long-term, dynamic relationship to both.

This is the work of a lifetime, not a three-year grant cycle.

We need to look at the community and ask ourselves: “What does this *community* value? Is there some part of this community that is clearly being overlooked by the arts? Where are our artists

¹⁶ Christensen, C. M. (2000). *The Innovator's Dilemma*. **From Wikipedia:** First published in 1997, Christensen suggests that successful companies can put too much emphasis on customers' current needs, and fail to adopt new technology or business models that will meet customers' unstated or future needs; he argues that such companies will eventually fall behind. Christensen calls this "[disruptive innovation](#)" and gives examples as diverse as the personal computer industry, milkshakes, and steel mills.

¹⁷ http://taylormac.net/TaylorMac.net/Thoughts/Entries/2013/1/10_I_Believe%3A_A_Theater_Manifesto_by_Taylor_Mac.html

and communities struggling? What kind of art is *not* being done here? Who is *not* showing up? Where's the *gap* artistically and socially?

That's your sweet spot. Go there, with courage, and make works of consequence.

V – ON BEING GOOD PLUMBERS

In the US, today, one in three people lives below the poverty level. You'd never know it walking into most arts organizations, which seem to be completely immune from that reality.

What is needed today is different than what was needed 50 years ago, or even 30 years ago.

And *need*, not *want*, is the operative word.

In that same *I Believe* manifesto, Taylor Mac wrote:

I believe theater is a service industry. It's like being a plumber and theater artists are blue-collar workers who wear better clothes, for the most part.

I believe theater artists should be students of humanity

I believe, to learn what your audience needs, is the job

But caution that sometimes we confuse need with want.

Giving our audiences what they want is not the job

Sometimes giving them what they want is a fringe benefit or happy accident but it is not the job

I believe you may be saying to yourself, "That's very presumptuous of him to think he knows what the audience needs". But I believe if I were a plumber you wouldn't think it was presumptuous of me to say my job is to learn what your plumbing needs. You would say I was a good plumber.

We need to be good plumbers.

We may be trading in experience goods, but we're not Disneyland.

Rather than doing what's *popular*, we need to do what's *missing*. What's *needed*.

Existing as we do in this *market society*, I would suggest that our strategy should not be to give in to the changing world as much as to respond to it. Not give in to a market logic – but be a countervailing force.

I'm a big believer in the approach of the Slow Food Movement and their cultural revolution through food.¹⁸ We could learn a lot from them and the strategies they have utilized to challenge the growing dominance of the Fast Food industry. In contrast to the arts, where we often make people feel intimidated and inadequate, there is no shame in not knowing the difference between arugula and swiss chard; and being part of Slow Food never requires that you step foot in an expensive Michelin-starred restaurant. Slow Food is interested in changing the relationship of people to food.¹⁹

Ipads, just like McDonalds, are not going away – thus we must work smarter and harder to achieve our goal of changing the relationships of people to and through the arts.

We are in the middle of a decades-long tug of war.

If the winds were on our side at the beginning of this tug of war, it seems they have shifted. It is harder and harder for us to defend the existence of our organizations on any level except, perhaps, economic impact (and we need to be very cautious about going down that path).

I don't believe we win this tug of war by dropping the rope—by denying our missions or denying this market society. We win by figuring out how to stay in the struggle. The struggle is our mission.

Though, when we are tired after 20 years in the trenches, it sure can be tempting to throw down the rope. As we drift into middle age many of us let go of our ideals ... We need to watch out for this when we are laboring in pursuit of something greater than ourselves. And I'm talking to myself as much as anyone else in this room.

Safeguard your mice.

The stakes are high as we wake up each day and make choices about what to program, where, at what price, for whom. And what we decide today changes our future, not just our present. We are contributing to the future environment we will face with the choices we enact, today.

Look over your shoulder and see whether you have drifted over the past 5, 10, 20 years from where you started as an organization, or a leader, in the tug of war with material forces. If you've ceded too much ground, if your purpose is no longer visible as you glance over your shoulder, then you might need to find your North Star, your vision, again.

There's a saying that my husband frequently uses (in reference to himself): "WEED NEVER DIES." I gather it is a phrase that has come to have many interpretations, the most obvious that pesky or wild people are often hard to deter or suppress.

¹⁸ See my essay in Borwick, Doug (2012) *Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States*.

¹⁹ <http://www.artsjournal.com/jumper/2010/12/slow-food-a-model-for-the-arts-and-culture-sector/> and also <http://www.artsjournal.com/engage/2011/08/slow-food-engaged-arts/>.

I like this saying.

Here's the thing about weeds: they are rarely cultivated, much less fertilized, but they show up anyway. And they are unapologetic about it. They are often quite hearty. And their strategy is to overwhelm.

I sometimes think what we need is to overwhelm this market society with bold, ambitious art. And we musn't be apologetic about it. We musn't wait to be asked.

Remember Zelda Fichandler's words:

Nobody was looking for us, peering through the window, watching for us to come to relieve the boredom and unawareness of their lives. It was we who had to teach and persuade them to want what we wanted to give them. And we had to insist on it for their own good, but, really, for our own, if we were honest enough to admit that. ... Nobody called us, but we came.

Which is another way of saying, "We are here to give people what they need, not what they want."

One more thing: we may be required to dress in suits and dutifully write our business plans, but we need to be careful that in doing so we don't forget who we are, we don't lose our identity and purpose, the things that make us distinctive, and disarming, desirable, and indispensable and ... and, sure, even a little crazy sometimes.

We weren't meant to blend in. Though we may be *in* it, we are not *of* this market-driven world ... we in the arts.

The late, dark lady of American letters, Susan Sontag, once wrote: "Existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past, present and future."

Existence is more than breathing.

It's more than functioning.

It's mattering.

Go forth and continue to matter to this troubled world.

Thank you for your kind attention.