

To What End Permanence? by Diane Ragsdale

In A MOMENT ON THE CLOCK OF THE WORLD

A Foundry Theatre Production

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In early June 2009 the Merce Cunningham Dance Company announced that upon the death of its iconic founder it would undertake a two-year world tour and then disband. Less than two months later, at the end of July, Cunningham passed away. Shortly thereafter, in a radio interview reflecting on Cunningham's life and work, choreographer Bill T. Jones was asked to comment on the planned ending. Jones characterized Cunningham's decision as "brave" and remarked:

I think there's a real risk in trying to keep something alive that it becomes, in fact, a museum. Now, museums are great. I'm not sure if they're great for performing arts.¹

I worked at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation at the time and served as the program officer on a significant grant to support the various elements of Cunningham's unprecedented legacy plan. It was a seminal experience that spurred me to think deeply about the rationale for permanence versus temporality in the live arts. This essay juxtaposes reflections on this topic with those on the Foundry Theatre.

Melanie Joseph, who started the Foundry Theatre, contacted me in late 2016. The Foundry was on the cusp of twenty-five and Melanie was looking for someone to facilitate a series of interviews and conversations with Foundry board members and potential leaders concerning the future of the company. I had the privilege of being tapped for the gig along with Rob Orchard, longtime managing/executive director at American Repertory Theatre and founder of ArtsEmerson.

I have known Melanie since around 2001, when I was the managing director at On the Boards in Seattle and we presented *Lipstick Traces*, a joint production of The Foundry Theatre and Rude Mechs in Austin. Melanie and I then crossed paths again in 2004 when I began working at the Mellon Foundation. In 2010 I left Mellon and ventured overseas and into academia but happily have continued to see Melanie at the occasional field convening. I have long admired The Foundry Theatre and many times publicly praised its exquisite productions and its deep, seamless commitment to both artistic excellence and social justice values.

What Price Institutions Now?

In 1969, Zelda Fichandler, the pioneering co-founder of Arena Stage in Washington, DC, wrote an essay, "Theatres or Institutions?" in which she reflected on the first two decades of the "Regional-Resident-Repertory-Theatre Movement"² in the United States. In the 1950s and '60s, these "institutional" theatres (as they were also sometimes called) began sprouting up in communities

¹ "Bill T. Jones remembers Merce Cunningham," interview, *Talk of the Nation*, National Public Radio, August 6, 2009.

² This is how Fichandler characterized the movement in her essay; others referred to it as the resident theatre movement, regional theatre movement and repertory theatre movement.

across America. This fuzzy label – institutional – was preemptively applied before most of these theatres had even reached adolescence. It signaled an expectation that – akin to museums, libraries, and other stable, valued, taken-for-granted cultural elements of mid-twentieth century American civilized society – such theatres would achieve significance and would *persist*, lasting well beyond their founders.

In her essay, however, Fichandler calls out a troubling gap between the idealized concept of an institutional theatre, which had begun to nestle comfortably into the collective consciousness of those working in the American theatre, and the actual practice of running one. She describes this discordant reality, writing:

I travel around a bit and am on various committees and panels (as few as possible, but some) and I find work that is good – spirited, personal, inventive, vivacious, specific and a lot of work that is simply there: repetitive, unoriginal, stylistically barren, coming from no particular individual vision, institutionalized. And I find myself too often restless, bored and boring in the presence of my opposite numbers, the conversation turning and then turning back with a dreary passion upon the life-and-death within subscription statistics, the cloak and dagger relationship with the Boards or heads of edifice complexes, the Name-of-the-Game-is-Grants, the gold rush for new scripts that bring prestige – as important as money to irritated egos, and the general problem of how to get from this day to the next, this week to the next, this month to the next without dying, the general problem of how to endure, how to function as part sitting-duck, part magician, and still invent.³

In point of fact, by the time she penned this passage Fichandler's theatre was better poised than most to endure. Over the prior decade Arena Stage had racked up grants totaling nearly \$2.5 million (in historic dollars) from the Ford Foundation – whose representative W. McNeil ("Mac") Lowry was the conceiver, concoctor, convener, and contributor-in-chief of the so-called institutional theatre. Moreover, Arena Stage was reaping benefits from having recently premiered an ambitious new play, *The Great White Hope* by Howard Sackler, which subsequently transferred to Broadway. The production's surprisingly successful commercial run, its Tony awards, and the sale of its film rights – while yielding zero financial returns to Arena Stage, much to Fichandler's chagrin – significantly increased the theatre's reputational capital.

Despite garnering success by both Broadway's standards and those of the Ford Foundation, in the middle of her essay Fichandler sends out a distress signal, writing:

What price salvation now? What price institutions now? If this be living theatre give us death.⁴

Perhaps because she was both sitting pretty and aware that the good fortune would not last (having recently learned that the Ford Foundation was phasing out its magnanimous support), Fichandler dared to ponder publicly the existential – to wonder aloud whether she and her peers had entered into Faustian bargains when they signed on the dotted line with the banks, the real estate developers, the

³ Zelda Fichandler, "Theatres or Institutions?," in *The American Theatre, vol. 3, 1969–70*, Martha Wadsworth Coigney, Judith Ravel Leabo, and Karl Leabo, eds. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 108.

⁴ Fichandler, "Theatres or Institutions?," 108.

private funders, the boards of directors, the internal revenue service, the unions, the trade associations, and the government arts agencies.

Fichandler recognized earlier than most that while such mechanisms of institutionalization created the promise and possibility of existence in perpetuity, they also seemed to be edging out something vital from these newfangled Art Theatres (as they thought of themselves at the time). It would take a while before it dawned on everyone that it was the *artists* and, with them, imagination and relevance.

On Absolutely Inflexible Basic Policies

When Melanie called in December 2016, we hadn't spoken in a while. She conveyed that she and the board of directors of the Foundry Theatre had been wrestling with a decision: Should the Foundry close at whatever point Melanie decided to leave, should the board hand over the reins of the theatre to a cohort of new leaders, or ...?

I was intrigued that the option of systematically shutting down was on the table for the Foundry. Arts organization deaths seem to come in two varieties: the shockingly swift kind, which leaves staffers, artists, and audiences out in the cold wondering what the hell happened; or the painfully slow kind, characterized by drastic measures and multiple resuscitations in the form of eleventh-hour appeals to stakeholders to step up with cash infusions to keep the doors open.

After hearing Melanie outline the various factors and circumstances that she and the board were weighing, I was compelled to tell her two stories. The first was the story of Margo Jones, with whom I was fascinated at the time as I had recently undertaken a case study on her theatre. Jones is widely credited by theatre historians as having formed the prototypical modern resident theatre in 1947 – just a few years prior to the founding of Fichandler's Arena Stage. Prior to starting her novel noncommercial-but-professional theatre in Dallas, Jones had not only established a highly successful community theatre in Houston but also garnered a few directing credits on Broadway.

In 1951, Jones published *Theatre-in-the-Round*, a manifesto-cum-handbook in which she outlined for would-be followers four “absolutely inflexible basic policies” that guided her theatre's operations: the presentation of classics and new plays, professionalism, a resident company of actors, and three weeks of rehearsal for every play.⁵ As I researched Jones, however, I discovered that there were actually several more values-anchored artistic practices that she strictly enforced.

For instance, she read at least one new play every day of her life starting in her 20s (reportedly, as many as one thousand in any given year). She never programmed shows that had already played on Broadway. She never hired celebrities, but instead distributed leading roles among her seasonal company members. She guaranteed every play a three-week run and never shuttered plays that were flagging at the box office. Perhaps most surprising – given that she formed her business as a nonprofit and refused to produce Broadway fare – Jones actively avoided soliciting donations from her community-at-large (beyond the startup capital needed to create her novel 198-seat theatre-in-the-round) because she feared losing artistic freedom and control.

Did I mention that Jones is widely remembered as a bit of an autocrat?

Combined, these practices (and a few others) distinguished the Margo Jones Theatre from the more

⁵ Margo Jones, *Theatre-in-the-Round* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1951), 190.

common amateur community theatres and commercial stock companies then scattered across the United States. Jones was an institutional entrepreneur who successfully crafted a new organizing logic for theatre in the country—albeit one that would not be replicated by other theatres following in her wake (despite the publication of that helpful manifesto-cum-handbook).⁶

In 1955, at age forty-three, Jones passed away unexpectedly as a result of a tragic, accidental over-exposure to carbon tetrachloride. Jones's death came on the heels of the incredibly successful premiere of *Inherit the Wind* at her Dallas theatre – one of around five dozen new plays she produced in the eight years she ran the theatre and one of about one dozen plays that premiered at the Margo Jones Theatre and subsequently played on Broadway.

The board voted to keep the theatre going and appointed Jones's associate director to the role of managing director (the same title Jones held even though she directed most of the plays). The Margo Jones Theatre collapsed just three seasons later, having by that time churned through as many managing directors. Operations sputtered to a halt mid-season following a production of *Othello* – which opened December 8, 1959 and ran for nine performances.

What had happened?

Wittingly and unwittingly, Jones's successors and the board of directors of the theatre had allowed for exceptions to her “absolutely inflexible basic policies” as well as the other defining practices of the theatre. A Broadway hit programmed here and a celebrity cast there; a flop closed and replaced with a resurrected hit; actors hired on shorter-term contracts, rather than for the entire season; programming policies officially changed to lift the constraint on new plays and classics; and (the last nail in the coffin) the decision to move from Jones's intimate theatre-in-the-round to a movie theatre that had been recently converted into a 414-seat proscenium stage.

Bit-by-bit, the economic, ethical, and aesthetic constraints imposed by Jones were lifted and the theatre lost its structural integrity. In a few short seasons, with Jones no longer at the helm, it became an altogether different kind of organization and one that was not sustainable.

I felt compelled to tell Melanie the story of the Margo Jones Theatre because it struck me at the time that the distinctive organizing logic of the Foundry was animated by a particular set of principles/practices/questions carried by its founder. Put another way, like Margo Jones, Melanie Joseph had also crafted and sustained over time an utterly distinctive theatre as a result of operating by her own set of values-anchored “absolutely inflexible basic policies.”

From its inception the Foundry eschewed the common models of nonprofit theatre (found in New York City and across the United States). There was never a season with slots to fill and never a literary manager reviewing scripts. There was also no resident company. The Foundry commissioned and developed works with an incredibly diverse range of independent artists; and it always guaranteed a production at the end of that development process, which sometimes lasted years. It produced

⁶ While historians have widely declared the Margo Jones Theatre to be *the* prototype for modern resident theaters in the US, I argue in my doctoral dissertation that while a few individual elements of the Margo Jones Theatre were adopted by later theaters the *organizing logic* of her theater did not spread (despite its success and despite Jones's efforts to encourage the development of theaters like hers in cities across the country). By *organizing logic* I mean the set of interdependent material and symbolic elements that constituted the theater's economic, aesthetic and ethical rationale.

singular works in settings hand-selected for them. It actively resisted marrying itself to a particular venue – by choice, not necessity.

What is perhaps less widely known is that Melanie, from the outset, staunchly resisted the business-art division of labor found in many arts nonprofits. She balked at the funder-mandated, field norm of hiring a dedicated managing director, marketing director, and development director as soon as one could cobble together the grants and surpluses to do so. She never wanted staff members working at the Foundry to spend their days exclusively focused on business concerns and administration. Alongside attending rehearsals and participating in the artmaking process, Melanie and her fellow co-producers wrote the grants, oversaw promotions, and created and maintained the budgets.

Among its most distinguishing features, the warp and weft of the organization were art and social justice. While these began as dyadic complements crossing in the organizational weave they eventually blended to create an entirely new and unexpected hue. Who else but the Foundry was producing an exquisite show like *Telephone*, then taking a gang of artists on an excursion to the World Social Forum, and then hosting a community dialogue about *food*? Who else but the Foundry could have created *The Provenance of Beauty*, an intimate, bittersweet journey through the South Bronx, on a bus, narrated with the poetry of Claudia Rankine?

Melanie followed no model. Like Margo Jones, she looked around and didn't see what she imagined and so she formed it, shaped it. Something beautiful emerged in the play (the Germans call it *schwung*) between ideal and material reality – something with internal coherence that stands up but that is not replicable.⁷ The Foundry Theatre is, and has been since its birth, a genuine art firm – that is, organization as work-of-art.⁸

Jumping Off the Moving Train

The second story I told Melanie was about the choreographer Trey McIntyre. McIntyre first jolted the field in 2008 by leaving San Francisco with his fledgling dance company in order to set up shop in Boise, Idaho. Six years later, he did so again by disbanding that incredibly successful company in order to pursue several writing projects and to make a documentary.

When asked at the time by Sarah Kaufman, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, why he was closing his company, McIntyre responded, "In some ways, because the business model worked, the scope of what we did grew bigger than what I intended in the first place." Kaufman elaborates:

Instead of luxuriating in a slower-paced life and working deeply on his dances, McIntyre grew immersed in administrative tasks: fundraising, crafting fliers and videos, designing the troupe's Web site, speaking at events throughout the community, leading activities at hospitals and myriad other duties that took him away from the studio.⁹

⁷ E.M. Forster writes, "A work of art ... is unique ... because it is in the only material object in the universe which may possess internal harmony. All the others have been pressed into shape from the outside, and when their mold is removed they collapse. The work of art stands up by itself, and nothing else does." E.M. Forster, "Art for Art's Sake," *Harper's Magazine*, August 1949, 33.

⁸ The notion of "the art firm" as work-of-art and the *schwung* (movement or play) between idealism and materialism is explored in depth in Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, *The Art Firm: Aesthetic Management and Metaphysical Marketing*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁹ Sarah Kaufman, "Trey McIntyre Project's Last Dance: Success Kills a Thriving Company," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2014.

McIntyre's lament echoes that of Zelda Fichandler forty-five years earlier – however, McIntyre somehow managed to jump off the moving train, to escape the gravitational pull toward organizational growth and institutionalism so often attendant with tremendous success. I can imagine that Boise (a former stomping ground of mine) felt to some extent abandoned by McIntyre's decision. Perhaps his company members, as well? Nevertheless, I cannot help but admire McIntyre's ability to walk away. Invariably, buildings, steady paychecks, endowments, egos, and other entanglements combine to make stopping incredibly difficult, even when the heart knows it is time to do so.

That said, I by no means saw closure as the only option for the Foundry Theatre. By the bye, I also encouraged Melanie on more than a few occasions to talk with choreographer Liz Lerman, who painstakingly and lovingly reengineered a company that started out in her name, existing as an outlet for her work and ideas, into an institutional collective, the Dance Exchange, so that it could transcend her and live beyond her.

Despite receiving a formal proposal from a cohort of producers poised to take over the organization upon Melanie's departure, the Foundry board opted to scale down and eventually cease operations rather than persist under new leadership. While some may mourn this development, I celebrate it. The Foundry is closing on the heels of success, having left an indelible mark and having taken time to reflect upon, document, and archive its beautiful twenty-five-year history.

A longer life should not be conflated with a more significant one. Many to this day would argue that the most influential theatre company in America was the Group Theatre, which lasted a mere decade. Its brief-but-brilliant life inspired countless others (including Margo Jones) to drink from the same source springs that fed it and to form their own companies.

When to Stop?

Fichandler was right. There *is* a price to institutionalism, a price to salvation.

Drawing on sociology and economics, Marshall W. Meyer and Lynne G. Zucker coined the term *permanently failing organizations* to describe firms that are no longer achieving their nominal goals but that continue to chug along – mere existence having, in a sense, displaced other goals. I remember reading their 1989 book of the same name several years back and wondering whether arts nonprofits might be particularly prone to this state – because they lack owners; because their goals (“artistic quality,” “fostering understanding,” “relevance”) are notoriously difficult to measure; because venue and mission quite often get shackled and then, worse, conflated; and, yes, because arts nonprofits are quite often established with perpetuity in their sights.

The decision for an arts organization to endure beyond the founder needs to be about something more than whether there is a stash of fixed assets, sufficient cash in the bank, subscribers and donors willing to renew, players wanting to play, and individuals technically qualified and desiring to take over. And this something more has to do with what it means to be a living art firm.

Dave Hickey quipped in his 1997 essay *Romancing the Looky-Loos*, “When your movement hits the museum, abandon it.”¹⁰ Put another way, when you've achieved success – when you've entered the establishment – stop and start again. While Hickey is directing his comments to artists (and itinerant

¹⁰ Dave Hickey, “Romancing the Looky-Loos” in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997), 152.

artists of a certain stripe, at that), there's something apposite in his advice for those engaged in running sui generis artistic enterprises, as opposed to show businesses that are designed from the outset to be scalable, replicable, extensible.

I recently read the book, *Art Thinking*, by Amy Whitaker. My interest was piqued by a passage in which she describes two ways that growth happens in business models: the first is through "scale," or "efficiency." The second is through "invention," or as she writes, "through the process of art, of experimentation with new forms."¹¹ I re-read the passage and thought: since the latter half of the twentieth century, growth in the US nonprofit-professional arts and culture sector has been measured primarily in terms of scale and age rather than in terms of the capacity for generating the new.

It would seem we forgot something essential about the logic of art.

Declining capacity for invention is what spurred Fichandler's 1969 essay and is, to a great extent, what motivated the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC) to disband. Notably, when asked to comment on that decision, Cunningham's longtime archivist David Vaughn remarked:

Although there is a large repertory of dances that could be revived, and the company could go on performing these for a while, finally a dance company needs new work, and there is no choreographer who could make new work for MCDC that would be of the same quality as Merce's own choreography. Also it was felt that MCDC should consist of dancers who were trained by Merce and worked with him, and once that was no longer the case the company should come to an end.¹²

It was a courageous decision. It was also incredibly wise.

Because of a bias toward permanence many US arts nonprofits in existence today have sidestepped a critical question when setting up their shops, and it is one Bill T. Jones raised in that NPR interview discussing the life and work of Merce Cunningham: "How do you pull it to a grand and classy close?"

It's a good question – at any age.

What can we learn from a handful of organizations that have successfully pulled off that feat? Here are my takeaways:

Stop when your organization as work-of-art has entered the establishment. Stop when the principles/practices/questions animating your organization have left the building with the founder. Stop when the beautiful thing you created can no longer be sustained without entering into a Faustian bargain.

Stop, so that you and others can invent anew.

¹¹ Amy Whitaker, *Art Thinking* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 246-7.

¹² The University Musical Society at University of Michigan presented two performances as part of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company final world tour. This quote comes from an interview with the company, UMS Lobby, "Merce Cunningham Dance Company: Your Questions Answered," ums.org.