

SUSTAINABLE THEATRE: AN ANALYSIS OF THEORIES AND PRACTICES

By

Calder Arthur Johnson

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Calder Arthur Johnson

Approved by the Master's Thesis Committee:

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Maria Bartlett, Major Professor Date

---

Jody Sekas, Committee Member Date

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Dr. Elizabeth Watson, Committee Member Date

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Mark Baker, Graduate Coordinator Date

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Chris Hopper, Dean for Research and Graduate Studies Date

## ABSTRACT

### Sustainable Theatre: A Holistic Analysis of Theories and Practices

By

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This thesis is a qualitative analysis of techniques and theories for creating a more sustainable mode of production of live theater. In-depth, one-on-one interviewing is the primary research tool employed. Groups that interviewees have been drawn from include theatre practitioners, sustainable living advocates, academics in related fields, and local artists. The thesis research model is intended to be participatory and responsive.

Emphasis has been placed on the formation of on-going relationships and dialogue with interviewees throughout the research and writing process.

For the purposes of the thesis, sustainability is analyzed using a set of three distinct conceptual categories.

- Ecological sustainability – Reduction of waste, energy consumption, and use of toxic materials.
- Economic sustainability – Reduction of costs while maintaining production quality, providing living wages for artists, and ensuring the long-range financial viability of theatre companies.
- Social sustainability – Creation and maintenance of stable and functional intra-company social relations, expanded partnerships with surrounding communities, promotion of artistic diversity, and the production of social capital.

Each category has also been divided along a microscopic to macroscopic gradation, in order to best identify collected areas of issues. These areas are examined separately, as well as the particular synergistic relationships between them. The objective has been to create a working analytical framework that enables a holistic yet systematic examination of sustainability issues, and may serve as a resource for any continuing research or practical implementations involving the sustainable production of live theatre.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of this thesis has been a long and convoluted trip. And just as this process is winding down, the future seems split wide open and filled with possibilities. All of the twists and changes in the rest of my life that have accompanied this project, from when it was only the smallest germ of an idea to my setting down these words, have been beyond any reach of my prediction. So it is only fitting to dedicate this work to all those most constant and best companions. In particular, but in no particular order: Eli, Ben, Marc, and Jabari, many thanks for your friendship. Also, to the shepherds of my efforts, Maria, Jody, and Elizabeth, many thanks too. You've been both advisors and friends. But most of all, and above all else, this work is dedicated to my mother. The only words I can write are to say there are no words for what her support has meant.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The modern word ‘Theatre’ comes from the Greek, *Theatron*, or ‘Place of seeing.’ For thousands of years of human history, it was a place where people saw stories acted out right in front of them. Story-telling is an act as old as the human race, and up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was something that had to be done *in person*, whether it was a half-dozen tribal members relating stories around a fire, or fourteen thousand Greeks watching a play at the Temple of Dionysus (Brockett, Ball, 2007). However, the act of story telling fundamentally changed over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with first the invention of cinema, followed by the radio, the television, and now the Internet. All of these recently developed mass media have allowed a relatively limited group of storytellers to reach audiences across the entire globe, completely changing the economic and social equations of the performing arts. In the wake of all of these changes, the medium of live theater has struggled to redefine itself in order to remain relevant in a world increasingly inundated by mass media. Where once live theatre was one of the few entertainments available, it is now regularly attended by only a slim segment of the population (Bradshaw, Nichols, 2002). This has led to an increasing number of artists, performers, and academics over the last century debating exactly how live theatre may survive, thrive, and justify its existence through contributions to society in an ever-changing environment.

The debate over survival and the course of the future is not unique to theatre or the arts in general. The concern for survival has spread to all levels of society since the rise of the environmental movement during the last century. As more and more of the population has become aware of the dangers of over-consumption and the non-sustainability of the current industrialized and petroleum-driven society, greater attention has been paid to alternative lifestyles, lifestyles that will not endanger humanity's future and the rest of the planet's biodiversity. The environmental and bioregionalism movements of the 1960's and 1970's gave birth to the sustainable living movement, a movement which premised that a truly successful approach require the integration of social and economic issues together with ecological concerns, resulting in systems that appropriately address all aspects of human society and its place in the natural world.

The focus of this thesis is upon the intersection of two questions: First, how theatre companies may successfully adapt to changing economic and social conditions, and secondly, how societies may modify their structures so that ecological sustainability is harmoniously incorporated with economic and social vitality and justice. The intent is to describe an analytical framework by which, through examination of their own practices, theatre companies may discover workable solutions to the former question, while serving as practical examples of responses to the latter.

The rest of this chapter will concern itself with necessary preliminaries such as the review of relevant literature, an overview of the research methodology, and an introduction to the location and individual participants that make up the case study upon which the rest of this work is based. Chapter 2 will lay out the analytical framework

which creates the groundwork for everything that follows. This framework is what has been used to code and synthesize the resulting data of the research, as well as being intended as an analytical tool for theatre companies to examine their own particular contexts. Chapters 3-5 will explore each of the three major facets in the framework, while Chapter 6 will describe particular ‘bridging’ concepts between the three areas, while also providing concluding thoughts.

### Literature Review

The specific challenge presented in writing a coherent and effective literature review for this research work is the sheer breadth of the materials cited. A proper approach has required examination of research on ecological, economic, and social topics, as well as finding those works that have already attempted some synthesis between the fields. As such, this thesis has cast a wide net in search of sources. The intent of this literature review is to note the specific works of research in each area that have been particularly definitive or helpful, and to highlight some general trends throughout the entirety of the research, as an exhaustive treatment would be nearly impossible to accomplish, but would also be intensely cumbersome for the reader.

The existing body of literature on ecological sustainability is dauntingly extensive, so for this thesis the focus has been on works that were both general and contemporary enough to provide a solid background on the subject, particularly bearing in mind that the target readership includes theatrical professionals who may not have training in the relevant academic fields. Of particular use in this regard is *The*

*Sustainability Revolution* (Edwards, 2005). While primarily focusing on issues of sustainability from an ecological perspective, Edwards successfully inter-relates all three pillars of the modern sustainability movement into his work, and it is recent enough to include most major developments on the topic.

When it comes to literature on ecological issues in theatre, there's a much different situation. The preponderance of materials concerns themselves on how theatre may serve as point of discussion or advocacy on these issues, instead of focusing on the sustainability of individual theatre company's practices. On this topic, the literature is quite scant, although it is in the process of growing. Aside from a smattering of journal and magazine articles, the most notable work is *Greening Up Our Houses* (Fried, May, 1994). While, understandably, the focus of the book is on the ecological soundness of theatre practices, it also attempts to include some commentary on social and economic issues as well. The fact that this book stands nearly solitary indicates a distressing lack of serious research and analysis being done in this area.

A far greater body of research exists on economic issues related to theatre, a significant product of the financial struggles that have been endemic of theatre throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> (and now 21<sup>st</sup>) centuries. The seminal work that all theatre professionals should take the time to familiarize themselves with is *Performing Arts; The Economic Dilemma* (Baumol, Bowen, 1966). Baumol's and Bowen's book on the evolving economic structure of the performing arts has been so significant as to greatly influence the course of public funding for the arts throughout the 1970's and early 1980's. Other literature tends to either likewise focus on issues of economic structure

and survivability (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Novak, 2007), (Sponberg, 1991), (Vogel, 2007), (Voss, et al., 2007), or analyze theatre's contributions to local economies (Cohen, Schafer, Davidson, 2003).

The existing research on the social impacts of theatre is also quite extensive, and the great majority of this literature is closely focused on three specific areas: The evolving field of community-based activist theatre (Leonard, Kilkelly, 2006), the effects of a rapidly developing media environment on participation levels in the live performing arts (McCarthy, Jinnat, 2001), (Bradshaw, Nichols, 2004), (Larson, 2003), and the usefulness of arts education (Psilos, 2002), (Taylor, 1999). There is also a relevant and rapidly growing number of publications on the more general topics of social networking, social capital, community building, and the related roles of public gathering places (Putnam, 2000), (Halpern, 2005), (Oldenburg, 1999). The academic concept of social capital is still in its relative infancy, with corresponding skirmishes over its appropriate meaning and usage. But it is a concept that is beginning to have greater and greater intersections with the arts and culture sectors (Putnam, 2003), and familiarity with the related body of literature is worthwhile for any theatrical professional.

The relevant literature is prolific but also somewhat disjointed. While much of the more recent work done on sustainability issues is moving towards a more holistic, inter-related approach, when it comes to the theatre and the arts and culture sectors in general, there have only been a few tentative and isolated steps in this direction. This is not to detract in any way from the progress accomplished by these more specific bodies of research, but it does reveal a shortfall of work being done on synthesis between all of

the relevant academic areas.

### Research Methodology

The bulk of independent research presented in this work consists of a series of nineteen in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with a variety of participants from the area of Humboldt County, California. Each of these participants were chosen on the basis of being either a professional, academic, or avid amateur practitioner of live theatre in the area, or being a non-practitioner who brought some specific expertise to issues of sustainability as well as an ‘outsider’ perspective on how these issues could relate to the practice of theatre. Selection was conducted via a convenience sample, and in several cases, discussions in one interview led to the discovery of another desirable participant, resulting in a snowball sampling.

While initially implemented, a standardized interview protocol was discarded in favor of using individualized protocols tailor-fit to each participant, kept deliberately loose enough to allow for any additional lines of questioning on emergent tangents. While this lessened the capacity for quantitative comparisons, the depth and breadth of the qualitative data benefited greatly. Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and were recorded with the consent of the participant. Later, these recordings were transcribed and a copy of the transcript sent to the participant for input and approval. Finally, each transcript was coded, using the analytical framework described in the following chapter.

## Introduction to Humboldt County, CA and its Theatrical Community

For a relatively rural and isolated area of California, Humboldt County possesses a remarkably vibrant arts scene, including a diverse theatrical community. Humboldt County is home to at least three performing arts centers, several community theatres, a collection of other theatre programs and companies, and one internationally-known school of physical theatre. For a county more than 300 miles north of San Francisco and containing a population of only 126,000 people, the performing arts existing in this level of concentration is a notable characteristic.

Additionally, since the 1960's, Humboldt County has garnered a reputation as a center of progressiveness when it comes to issues concerning environmental conservation and social justice. Humboldt County is also a place (like many rural areas) that has been undergoing a profound shift in its economic configuration, moving from a traditional timber and fishing based economy towards a still uncertain future.

Each of the nineteen participants in the interviewing process for this thesis is a person who works and lives in Humboldt County. In this way, the results of these interviews constitute as much of a case-study of theatre in Humboldt County as a source of general insight on topics related to the practice of theatre and the sustainability movement. There are many qualities to the theatrical community in Humboldt County that make a study of it significant to anyone interested in sustainably practiced theatre. Several of these qualities have to do with the area itself: A pre-existing reputation as a population that as a whole espouses sustainable values, A rural economy in the midst of changes, and an often-overlooked but important collection of diverse social groups,

including conservative long-time residents, liberally-minded relative newcomers, college students attending the local university, and large populations of native Americans and Hispanic immigrants. And then there are the qualities of the theatrical community itself, particularly its numbers and its diversity in the face of the common struggle for economic solvency in a rural area.

Through the course of this work, there will be many quotes provided from various interview participants. Wherever applicable, it has been the intent to allow the individual voices and insights of the participants to be heard. Considering this, the last article of business before moving on to further chapters is to introduce each of the participants, so they may be more familiar to the reader:

- David Boyd – Director of the Redwood Coast Energy Association.
- Bernadette Cheyne – Chair of the Humboldt State University Department of Theatre, Film, and Dance.
- Jackie Dandeneau – Co-Artistic Director of the Arcata Playhouse and member of the Dell’Arte International Company.
- David Ferney – Co-Artistic Director of the Arcata Playhouse and member of the Dell’Arte International Company.
- Michael Fields – Producing Artistic Director for the Dell’Arte International Company and School of Physical Theatre.
- James Floss – Professor of Communications at Humboldt State University, regular director and actor in community theatre, and past board member of several local theatrical organizations.

- Heath Houghton – Local actor.
- Dr. Dan Ihara – Professor of Economics at Humboldt State University and Director of the Center for Environmental Economic Development.
- Libby Maynard – Director of the Ink People Center for the Arts.
- Marilyn McCormack – Former Artistic Director of the Ferndale Repertory Theatre.
- Scott Menzies – Co-Director of the Independent Business Alliance.
- Jabari Morgan – Director for local teen theatre.
- Jean O’Hara – Former Lecturer for the Humboldt State University Department of Theatre, Film, and Dance.
- Jody Sekas – Professor of Scenic Design for the Humboldt State University Department of Theatre, Film, and Dance.
- Tisha Sloan – Former Production Manager for Dell’Arte International Company and School of Physical Theatre.
- Dr. Elizabeth Watson – Professor of Sociology at Humboldt State University.
- Carol Wolfe – Artistic Director of the Vagabond Players, a children’s theatre program.
- Xande Zublin-Meyer – Director for local teen and community theatre.

## CHAPTER 2

### A SUSTAINABLE THEATRE FRAMEWORK FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

Before engaging in a study of the elements of a sustainable practice of theatre, it is important to clearly define what is meant by *sustainability*, particularly in light of the evolution the term has undergone in the past few decades, now touching upon a broad range of topics. While the most common associations made with sustainability concern issues of environmental degradation, the concept has come to embrace economic and social aspects as well. At its most general the modern sustainability movement is about creating healthy, vital, and enduring systems, whether those systems are fundamentally ecological, economical, or social in nature. Indeed, a key premise of the sustainability movement is that these three areas are inextricably interrelated, and must be addressed as parts of the larger whole of human civilization. A useful visualization is to imagine each of these areas as a triangle, which then can be combined into a three-sided pyramid representing the entirety of a truly sustainable system. (See Fig. 2.1)

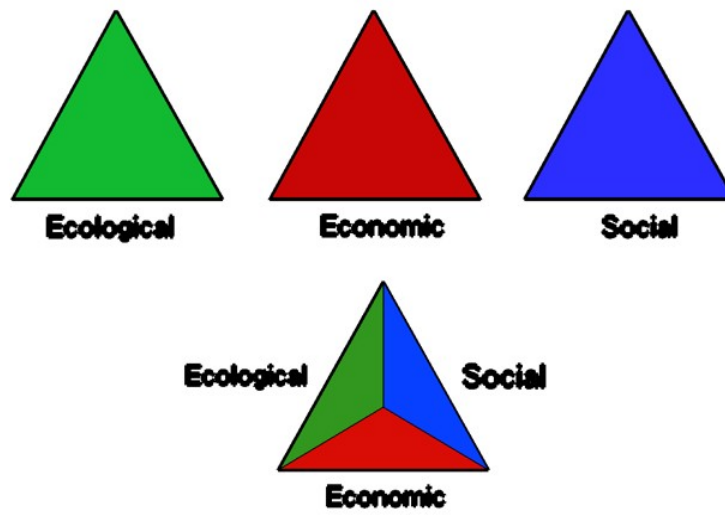


Figure 1

The Three Basic Areas of Sustainability in the Analytical Framework

*Ecological* sustainability, the most significant and high profile aspect of the modern concept of sustainability originates from the environmentalism movement, which in turn first began to emerge in the USA in the Transcendentalist movement of Thoreau and Emerson (Edwards). The Transcendentalist valuing and respect for the natural world arose in contrast with the rapid industrialization of the Western world occurring during the same period. This would serve as a predecessor to prominent conservationists such as Muir, Roosevelt, and Leopold in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the publishing of Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring*, the environmental movement began to truly come into its own, as more and more of the general public became aware of the detrimental effects human activities were having not only the rest of the natural world, but also on themselves. Finally, as recently as just a few years ago, there has been another shift in consciousness and a renewed public concern over the threat of global warming, causing many to re-evaluate short-term gains versus long-term costs:

...it seems to have entered the mainstream, so it's not a fringe activity or a narrow segment of society...It seems like it's passed a tipping point of general acceptance, although it's hard to generalize throughout. I think that higher energy prices and a greater awareness of climate change has caused people to make it part of their calculations, not just an add-on.

**-D. Ihara**

The area of *Economic* sustainability is where a significant evolution between the traditional environmentalist and sustainability movements can be seen. Whereas the traditional environmental movement has often been characterized as either ambivalent or even antagonistic towards economic concerns, the sustainability movement underscores the importance of a prosperous, dynamic, resilient, and just economy in order to create a

high quality of life for all. Instead of positioning environmental and economic concerns as diametrically opposed, the sustainability movement posits that they can and must advance arm-in-arm, and that in fact, technological and social advances towards ecological sustainability can have positive effects on economies, as opposed to purely detrimental ones.

Completing the triad, *Social* sustainability is an element that has significant history of its own, and has converged with the other areas of sustainability just as rivers join together. The roots of social justice movements go as far back as the first societies, with recent and highly significant examples such as the anti-colonial movement of Mahatma Gandhi and the civil rights movement in the United States. The goal of such movements has been to move societies towards the ending of oppression and violence, with each citizen healthy and actualized. The convergence into the other streams of the sustainability movement has highlighted the necessity for ecological and economic justice if true social justice is to be achieved, as well as the effectiveness of large social movements in creating truly sustainable societies.

It would be impossible to elaborate every detail of a body of work so vast and holistic as the sustainability movement, but there are a few key aspects of the sustainability philosophy that are worth elucidating: First, that a truly sustainable society is free of ecological degradation, poverty, oppression, and violence, and that a sustainable society does not bequeath these burdens to future generations in order to meet the short-term needs of the present. Secondly, that social change comes from not just political leaders in a top-down fashion, but from individual people, businesses, and other

organizations making positive changes and integrating themselves into larger grass-roots movements towards sustainable systems.

Theatre has always been a way for people to present and create discussion around all of the issues described above. But it is not the intention of this work to be an analysis of how theatre can be an observer and commentator on the sustainability movement. Instead, this is an exploration of how theatrical organizations can become more sustainable in their own operations, not just for the betterment of society as a whole, but also for their own well-being and longevity. One of the early proponents of sustainable business practices, John Elkington, distilled the three aspects of sustainability into what he called the 'Triple Bottom Line': (Edwards, 2005)

At its narrowest, the term 'triple bottom line' is used as a framework for measuring and reporting corporate performance against economic, social and environmental parameters. At its broadest, the term is used to capture the whole set of values, issues, and processes that companies must address in order to minimize any harm from their activities and to create economic, social and environmental value.

The aim of this work is to create an analytical framework that may assist theatre companies in assessing their own operations and protocols, "in order to minimize any harm from their activities and to create economic, social, and environmental value."

It is possible to use these three aspects of sustainability to form the bedrock of a practical analytical framework, but as can be seen from the above discussion of these aspects, they are also extremely broad in their purviews, which can make them seemingly obtuse and vague at first glance. A functional framework intended to elucidate a 'whole set of values, issues, and processes' for sustainable theatre production must be not only

encompassing but also *specific*. For example, take the aspect of environmental sustainability and all of the potentially pertinent discussion points: Environmental education and marketing, energy use, waste generation, toxins in the workplace, just to name a few. All of these themes, as well as the themes present in the other aspects, are relevant to the framework of sustainability as a whole, but taken in their 'raw' form they are too much an inundation of disorganized theories and information. Here it is desirable to introduce an additional layer of granularity to the framework by dividing each of the three areas into macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of scale. These three levels are as follows: (See fig. 2.2)



Figure 2

Micro-to-Macroscopic Levels of the Analytical Framework

1) Macro-level – Community. At this scale, we examine the relationship between theatrical companies and their surrounding communities. The exact definition of ‘community’ in this case can be somewhat mutable, particularly when discussing economic issues such as funding streams (where the relevant definition of community goes as high as nation-states). But in most cases, the particular technological limitations of the medium place a specific geographical border around a given theatre’s community, although this is also not a hard and fast rule. For the purposes of this work, we will generally define ‘community’ as the public that is served by and in turn supports a given theatrical organization.

2) Meso-level – Company. The focus of this level is the internal operation of individual theatrical organizations, which is the most important unit of analysis in this work, and serves as the hub of the other two levels. This level also includes examination of inter-company relationships, particularly companies operating in close geographical proximity.

3) Micro-level – Creator. Each theatre company is in turn made of individual performers, artists, technicians, and administrators. These people are not only members of their theatrical organizations, but also members of their larger communities. This level analyzes the impact of various processes, practices, and values at both the Community and Company levels upon individuals working in the field.

Now that the parameters of the analytical framework have been laid out, examine Figure 2.3:

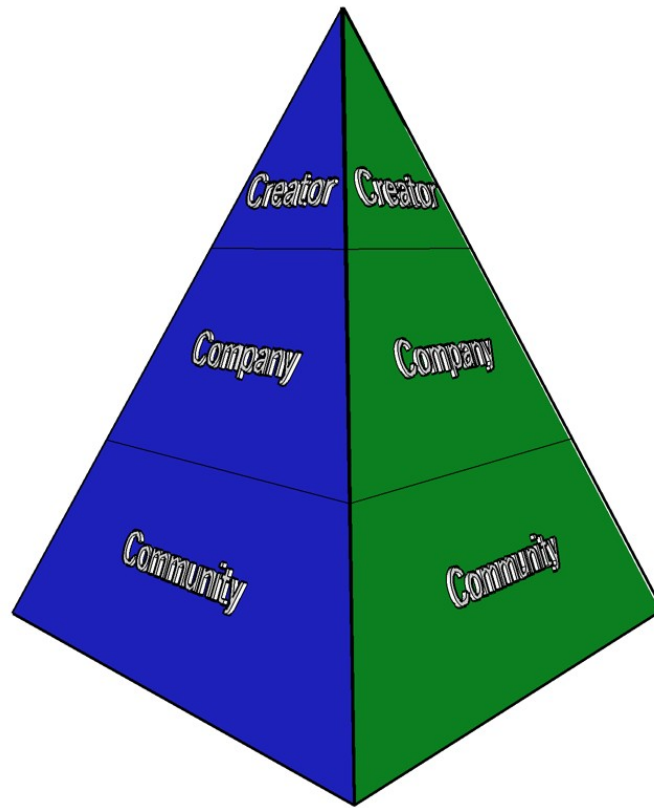


Figure 3

3-D Model of the Analytical Framework with Areas and Levels Combined

As seen before, the three aspects of sustainability are laid out as the faces of a three-sided pyramid. Just as an actual pyramid requires all three sides working in concert to create a stable shape, so are all three aspects of sustainable processes theoretically and practically inter-related. The vertical axis of the 3D model contains the 3 levels discussed in the previous paragraph. At the base of the pyramid is the Community level. As the pyramid rises, we pass through the Company level, finally arriving at the Creator level at the peak. With these three aspects and levels incorporated, the model is divided into nine specific areas, each area being the intersection of an aspect and level, for example: Ecological sustainability at the Community (Macro) level, or Economic sustainability at the Creator (Micro) level. These areas provide the basis of the analytical framework, and each will be explored in further depth in following sections. The rationale for representing the framework as this 3D model, rather than simply as a three-by-three grid, is to visually underscore the inherently holistic quality of sustainability. While being able to divide down to these particular areas is useful for organization, it is vital to not forget that they function as part of a larger system. (Incidentally, the three colors of the figure are not arbitrary. Red, green, and blue are the primary colors of visible light. If the entirety of a sustainable practice is visualized as a ray of light, it can then be broken down into three distinct yet fundamentally linked concepts.) To sum up the above, the 3D model of the analytical framework is meant to serve as a useful visual illustration of two concepts: a) the framework is intended to take a very general concept such as sustainable practices and divide it into manageable and specific areas for closer examination, and b) the model is a reminder that all areas of the framework are part of a cohesive whole, and

is also a metaphor for their inter-relation. All three aspects of sustainability must be accounted for in a balanced system, and individuals rely on the support of organizations and communities while simultaneously communities and organizations are the aggregate formations of individual choices flowing ‘downwards’.

Before moving directly into a more specific exploration of these analytical areas, it would be helpful to lay out some of the other basic theoretical principles that have been integrated into the framework:

1) A sustainable practice is synergistic. The ‘Triple Bottom Line’ concept of sustainable business arose in response to the numerous negative externalities created by purely-profit driven business models. Likewise, it would be shortsighted to pursue any of the three areas of sustainability without any concern for negative effects on the others. It is undesirable to attempt to create a sustainable system purely through compromise and sacrifice, no matter how well intentioned. Some degree of compromise is necessary in any system, but the greatest gains will be found by concentrating on innovation, improvement, and the discovery of emergent synergies between the different areas of sustainability. One quick example: Many theatre groups, particularly smaller ones, are often strapped for the necessary financial resources to purchase set materials and meet other production expenses. Saving and reusing whatever materials they can will not only alleviate their financial burden, but also reduce their waste stream. Thus, any improvements to their procedures for storing and reusing materials will have a two-fold positive effect in terms of sustainability.

2) A sustainable practice is case-specific. Each theatre group is a wholly unique

organism. While there are certain concerns or issues that will be held in common, it is not intended for the analytical framework to be a laundry list of highly specific procedures, all of which must be implemented in order to reach a sustainable system. Every theatre group functions at a particular scale and within a particular context. Missions and goals are also individual to each group. As such, it is important for each theatre company to engage in an organized process of self-examination and implement a tailored protocol that is appropriate to their circumstances.

3) A sustainable practice should not endanger core missions and values. As stated before, some compromise is always necessary. Any designer who has had to balance their budget against the requests of the director has first-hand knowledge of this. This being said, there is a danger to aesthetic freedom in taking any sustainably -minded practice too far. For example, if one were to be truly extreme in implementing environmental sustainability in the theatre, the only productions done would be in the open air on a sunny day, sans any sets or specialized lighting. Becoming preoccupied with social sustainability may lead one to believe that only productions with distinctly progressive agendas are worth undertaking. And concern for the economic bottom line may lead to mounting productions purely based on mercenary concerns of cost-income ratios (Indeed, for all of theatre companies constantly skirting the line between success and shutting their doors, such concern is common.). It is important to balance the individual aesthetics and goals of an organization alongside any of their efforts to improve their performance in the other three areas of sustainability. Such balance is necessary to preserve the diversity and vitality of the theatre.

4) A sustainable practice requires ongoing effort. Putting a sustainable practice in place is not something a theatre company accomplishes with a one-time effort. Few theatre companies will have the resources and wherewithal to completely overhaul every aspect of their operations with their initial efforts. New innovations in the sustainability movement, technological or otherwise, are constantly occurring, and existing systems will always contain room for improvement, if for no other reason than due to the constant and inevitable changes any long-lasting organization undergoes. Creating sustainable operations requires a commitment to a continual process of appraisal and improvement.

Now that a working definition of sustainability has been determined and a general geography of the analytical framework has been laid out, the following three sections will be devoted to more specific and detailed exploration of the various areas of the framework.

## CHAPTER 3

### ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

In this first of three chapters exploring the major aspects of the analytical framework, the focus will be on Ecological sustainability. The chapter is divided into three sections, one for each level of scale. However, instead of moving from top to bottom or vice versa, the chapter will start in the middle at the meso-level of the Company, since theatrical organizations are the central units that this analysis hinges upon.

#### Ecological Sustainability at the Company level

A key point for theatre companies trying to reduce their ecological impact is *efficient and wise use of resources*. The goal of any eco-conscious theatre company (or any other organization for that matter) is to reduce their ecological impact through reduction of resource consumption and their waste stream. Although theater venues may represent a very small percentage of human infrastructure overall, their typical production practices can be remarkably consumptive per capita. The construction of sets usually demands significant amounts of materials, much of which will not see a use-life beyond the immediate needs of the current production, and many of which are also toxic to the technicians working with them and to the environment. High-powered stage lighting, while intermittent, is particularly energy-intensive. Indeed, as larger and larger segments of the population become increasingly aware of the threat of environmental degradation,

more theatre professionals are becoming concerned about the particular negative impacts of their own work.

Each time we take apart a show I just go, “Oh, god...Just look at the waste. Look at what we’re putting in a dumpster.”

**-B. Cheyne**

Fortunately, there are many possibilities open to a theatre company interested in improving their ecological impact. It’s worthwhile at this juncture to review the now classic Three R’s made popular by the environmental movement: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. Recycling is the one of these that has been most in the limelight, but it is vital to remain aware of the other two. When they are properly implemented, they can be far more effective in preventing waste. In terms of greatest efficiency and results, reduction is at the top of the list. Indeed, the other two can be seen as iterations of reduction. However, while there are numerous ways theatre companies can simply reduce the amount of resources they require for their work, in accordance with the third guideline for a sustainable practice, there may come a point where resource reduction creates highly undesirable effects on the artistic goals of an organization. When this happens, it becomes even more important to effectively employ the other two. In most cases, regular recycling is a simple option and is already common practice for most individuals and organizations. However, with the constant stream of materials required for set and costume construction at most theatre companies, reuse becomes a particularly powerful tool for reducing resource consumption and waste. This will be discussed in greater detail at several points in this work. Each of the Three R’s has an important place in

improving a theatre's ecological performance, as will be seen in the following analysis of typical theatrical operations.

Reducing a theatre's ecological footprint requires a thorough understanding of a theatre's 'metabolism.' A good example of this metaphorical structure can be found in the seminal text on eco-friendly theatre, *Greening Up Our Houses*. (Fried and May, 1994) As with all organisms, a theatre's metabolism is structured into three major parts: Inflow, operations, and outflow. Inflow constitutes all of the 'food' that a theatrical company consumes in the process of creating a production, including materials, labor, and energy. Operations include all of the actual processes engaged in production, such as rehearsal, set and costume construction, day-to-day administration, and most obviously the performances themselves. Outflow includes waste or byproducts generated, including disposal of old set and costume materials, patron-generated rubbish, office waste, and carbon emissions from energy consumed. A theatre's ecological footprint will be successfully reduced by efficient and wise use of resources at every metabolic stage.

Let's break down each of these stages and examine specific practices that can be utilized to reduce environmental impact:

1) Inflow: Here the most important point is to be aware of the source of materials and energy used in production. This can include ordering sustainably harvested lumber, obtaining energy from green sources such as solar or wind, and purchasing recycled concessions cups and other paper products. In some cases, simple changes in a theatre's buying habits can have immediate and positive environmental effects, often with little more investment than increased mindfulness. Larger shifts, such as replacing lighting

with CFLs or LEDs, installing low-flow toilets, creating more efficient heating solutions (a constant issue for many theatres inhabiting old, large, and often drafty facilities), or even installing photovoltaic panels to generate energy on-site, can be a much more significant burden, particularly for small or struggling theatres. But some investigation into public or private grant funding can potentially defray much of these costs in time and finances. For example, the Small-Business Direct Install program is offered through a local Humboldt County government agency, the Redwood Coast Energy Authority.

Here's RCEA Director David Boyd describing the program:

How the program works right now is a small business can request a free energy assessment. One of our auditors will go out and do a walkthrough, look at the existing conditions, come back, and we have some very sophisticated computer software here and we do some modeling and come up with some recommendations on how they can be more efficient. And we also calculate the amount of rebate we can provide, and then we can negotiate with the contractor and pay them directly, so only the balance is billed to the business. We'll also find out what is an acceptable time for the work to be done and make all of the arrangements with the contractor. If issues come up while the projects are being done, we can handle that too. So we've found there are several barriers business owners can have, which we've designed the program to overcome. First, they don't know what to do and we have the expertise to help them. Second, they don't often have the money to pay for the project, and we can help to minimize that as much as possible. Thirdly, they don't always have the time to focus on this, even if they know it's important, and we can help by handling all of the arrangements.

**–D. Boyd**

As public concern over environmental issues continues to build, there should hopefully be an increasing number of programs offering technical and financial support for businesses interested in improving the environmental sustainability of their operations. In some situations it may be possible for theatres to obtain new equipment and supplies for less financial investment than if they chose to not adopt environmentally

sustainable technologies.

While the above paragraph may paint a rosy picture of the availability of new environmentally sustainable technologies for theatres that will reduce their resource consumption, it is also important to remember that many of these technologies, such as photo-voltaic solar panels, remain often prohibitively expensive for an organization that is already operating on a tight budget. In many cases, particularly for small theatres, it may simply not be possible for the organization to implement every change that they would wish to. Essentially, environmentally positive infrastructural and operational changes have to ‘pencil out’, again in the words of David Boyd. Ultimately, environmentally sustainable practices that cripple the economic sustainability of an organization are unworkable. This is absolutely not meant as advocating throwing up one’s hands and abandoning all effort. In these cases, significant progress can still be made by weaving ecological awareness into every-day operations and making appropriate changes wherever possible.

Brainstorming may lead to innovative win-win solutions for a theatre. One excellent example is the Stagecrafters theatre company in Philadelphia. They started with small, straightforward improvements and then continued in an interesting direction. Here’s Joe Herman, a member of the Stagecrafters board of directors, speaking in an interview with Stage Directions magazine: (Slingerland, 2007)

The first thing we did was replace incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs. It's affected our electricity bill on the order of 15 percent, so it's been a pretty quick payoff. The other thing we did was create a green subscription option – a \$2 extra charge, \$1 of which goes to buying clean energy and \$1 of which will go towards additional energy saving efforts.

So far the program has been quite successful. Herman reports that approximately two-thirds of Stagecrafters subscribers choose the green option, which he also notes is about six times the number of people who choose to contribute when asked to make a general donation. This suggests that an environmental focus can be a potentially valuable hook when fundraising.

2) Operations: Once a company has carefully examined their inflows, the next step is to assess their daily operations to find ways to reduce resource use. This can start with things as simple as only heating buildings during the hours audiences are present, often also adopted as a cost-saving device. In the scene and costume shops, proper training of workers and efficient organization of work and storage facilities can reduce waste created during show productions. As was noted before, reusing old materials can be one of the most effective ways to reduce waste, as well as curb costs. Many theatres, including most of those here locally, are very aware of this. Here are two interview excerpts, the first from Michael Thomas, artistic director of North Coast Repertory Theatre, and the second from Michael Fields, artistic director of Dell'Arte International:

Within the house, we recycle materials as much as we can. Two by fours go into set construction; we reuse them until they're worthless. We use the same flats over and over again; we only build new ones when we absolutely need to. It's the same thing with our platforms.

**-M. Thomas**

As for our set material, if we create a show, and it exits the touring repertoire, it's stripped and taken apart and basically everything is recycled from the wood to the hardware. Everything that is salvageable is put back into stock. And again, part of that is just economic, that we don't have the luxury of some of the larger theatres to build everything anew and just throw it away when we're done.

**-M. Fields**

Since reuse can be such a powerful and central tool for theatre, it is vital for theatres to do everything they can to facilitate the regular reuse of materials. This includes having organized, spacious, and well-maintained shop and storage spaces, and ensuring that efficient use of resources is a staff-wide priority and part of the collective work philosophy of the theatre. Another major way that reuse can reduce a theatre's consumption is through the collaboration and sharing of resources between theatres, including lighting instruments, costumes, and even set pieces. While creating these sorts of working relationships can be subject to difficulties, the potential gains are too significant to be ignored. Collaboration between theatres will be specifically discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 6.

3) Outflow: This stage of the metabolic process includes all of the waste generated by a company's operations, such as old sets, office pack, and all trash generated by patrons. The ultimate goal of introducing greater efficiency and eco-consciousness into the first two metabolic stages is to reduce a company's waste to as close to nil as possible. That being said, for all theatres except the most absolutely committed to low-scale eco-friendly production, some waste will be created, which then must be disposed of in a responsible fashion. As much waste as possible should be recycled. Fortunately, the growing abundance of recycling programs across the country

means that it is getting easier all the time for theatres of all sizes and locations to efficiently recycle, although certain interview responses indicated there can still be significant transportation difficulties for small theatres in rural areas, far from recycling centers.

Recycling can also occur in other ways than making use of typical public recycling centers. Old set pieces, costumes, and props can be donated to other theatre programs, particularly small ones that may be desperate for their own resources, such as high school drama departments. Based on the interviews, it is also typical for staff-members and volunteers at many of the local theatres to take unpainted wood waste home with them to use as firewood.

Part of a theatre's management of its outflow is closely linked to its management of its inflow. For example, if a theatre purchases Styrofoam cups to use in their concessions, not only have those cups been unsustainably produced in the first place, but when disposed of they will linger on in landfills indefinitely. An important part of a theatre's responsible management of its waste stream is keeping hazardous waste to a minimum, and ensuring that what hazardous waste is generated is disposed of properly. Theatre technical staff must be conscious of what materials they possess qualify as hazardous, and should also be familiar with what hazardous waste disposal programs are available in their area. And of course, whenever there is a suitable and less toxic alternative available, it should be adopted.

This point is also an excellent segue into the second section of this chapter.

### Ecological Sustainability at the Creator level

There is one central point when it comes to an ecologically sustainable practice for the professionals and volunteers who staff theatres, and that is creating a safe and non-toxic environment. However, theatres can face many challenges to accomplishing this goal. To begin with, many theatres occupy old venues that can be rife with hazards from outdated construction such as asbestos and lead-based paints or plumbing. Obviously such hazards need to be dealt with, although this can be a significant financial burden even for large companies. As theatres search for funds and solutions, they need to be completely aware of their venue's issues in order to protect their staff and public. Even when severe issues have been dealt with, these old buildings can be laden down with dust that can irritate allergies and environmental sensitivities, especially for actors or technicians that must spend long hours in the space. Sometimes the solution can be as simple as making sure enough doors or windows are open at the appropriate time to create sufficient airflow, or investments can be made in air filtration systems. Whatever the issue, theatres must be aware of it and enact proper mitigation. In cases where this is an impractical financial burden, continual effort should be made to find the necessary funds.

The second major challenge involves hazardous materials commonly used in set and costume construction. Such materials as Styrofoam, spray paints, dyes, and epoxies, just to name a few, can not only be unhealthy for the planet in the long run, but extremely dangerous to the health of those working with it, particularly if they are being used improperly with no regard for safety. These problems can be exacerbated in a theatrical

environment, where there is often a need for ‘quick and dirty’ solutions to urgent problems, and also a tendency for off-the-cuff experimentation. Jody Sekas, professor of Scenic Design at Humboldt State University, had this to say when interviewed:

It’s something that if you look back twenty years ago people didn’t care about that at all. Starting in the sixties, they were doing some crazy stuff with plastics. And you have some people who just don’t think quite right anymore, because they’ve damaged their brains. But plastics were brand new and fun and you’re dealing with artists. We’re creative people, we think, “Oh, hey. Look at this new thing. What can I do with it?” You can put a torch to Styrofoam and it makes this really cool effect, but it’s totally releasing all these bad gases. But ever since about twenty years ago, people started to realize they needed to clean up their act. So theatre, in my opinion, all across the country started to change. The issue of hazardous materials is brought up at every USITT (United States Institute for Theatre Technology) conference now. The topic of many sessions is how to clean up your shop. So there’s been this big push to eliminate anything toxic. There’ve been a lot of government regulations, and also a growing concern over health. And companies have also been developing substitutes, so many of these toxic materials aren’t used any more.

**-J. Sekas**

So the good news is plenty of progress has been made. With more and more ‘green’ alternatives to toxic materials coming on to the market, theatres can make great progress in cleaning up their shops by devoting an on-going effort towards finding and utilizing these alternatives. And while, as has been mentioned before, reduction is the most effective solution, those hazardous materials that still have to be employed must be used with proper care. Cash, space, and time-strapped theatres may potentially find it difficult to enact practices such as having a metal cabinet to store flammables, or providing proper breathing masks, but they are still necessary. In many cases, it’s simply a matter of non-negotiable legal obligation.

### Ecological Sustainability at the Community level

The previous sections of this chapter have examined example issues and solutions for theatres attempting to improve their environmental impact, both upon their staff and the rest of the world at large. However, some pessimists may say that given theatre's relatively small niche in the entirety of human infrastructure, the net effect of reducing their resource consumption would be little overall. And while there may be some truth to this from a purely quantitative standpoint, it also ignores the larger social context that a theatre occupies.

In *Greening Up Our Houses*, Fried and May advocate that as soon as a theatre makes significant ecological improvements, they advertise this to the rest of their community. As was seen from the earlier example of the Stagecrafters Company in Philadelphia with their 'green subscription plan', such specific advertising of environmentally positive practices can be very beneficial to a theatre's reputation as well as their economic situation. But there's another aspect to this advertising, and that is its worth as *social marketing*.

I think if you look historically at social change, a lot of times there is this pivotal group, what Max Weber call "Carriers", a group that decides to do things a different way and then it catches on.

**-E. Watson**

Theatres are by their very nature, intensely public institutions. The concept behind social marketing of 'green' practices is that a theatre can use its public prominence to be an advocate for these practices, not necessarily through words or performance, but by simply serving as an example through their actions. As Fried and

May say in their book:

What we do as businesses as well as artists shines as a potent role model for our audiences and our communities.

By placing displays in their lobbies, adding notes into playbills, or enacting programs like the one used by the Stagecrafters Company, theatres can proudly show their own efforts. And potentially this will have a positive effect on all who come in contact with them, making such efforts seem more normal, practical, and desirable.

Perhaps David Boyd from the RCEA put it best when he said in his interview:

I think it is very important for public institutions to be the beacons for the possible.

**-D. Boyd**

## CHAPTER 4

### ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

This chapter will specifically examine economic issues related to theatre at each of the three levels of the framework. It will begin, as before, in the middle at the Company level. For all theatre companies, their own financial stability is by necessity of the greatest importance. If a theatre company cannot afford to keep their doors open, the financial wellbeing of their members or their economic impact on their community is a moot point.

#### Economic Sustainability at the Company Level

Proper responses to an issue first require proper understanding. It is reasonable that many theatrical professionals, preoccupied with the constant stream of their day-to-day responsibilities, would not have time to purview all of the available research on the economic structures of their work. However, the benefits to be gained by a greater knowledge of key points are important enough to be worth the pursuit. The next few paragraphs will elucidate some of the more basic elements of the economic structure of the performing arts, and the financial strain these elements are capable of creating.

In 1966, Baumol and Bowen published *Performing Arts – The Economic Dilemma*, and the basic theory that resulted, not only significantly guided public policy on arts funding, it has gone relatively unchallenged even now, four decades later. This theory is known as ‘Baumol’s Cost Disease,’ and while it can be applied to a diversity of labor-intensive economic sectors, here it will be applied, as it first was, to the performing

arts (Baumol, Bowen, 1966). It's based on several related premises: First, that various technological and capital advances will result in an increase in productivity, as can best be seen in the Industrial Revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, that due to competition for employees, wages will rise to meet increases in productivity. (As an aside, the history of labor rights across the world indicates that this correlation can be highly problematic, but nonetheless it is difficult to dispute that as a whole, wages have risen with productivity increases.) Thirdly, (and most importantly) due to technological limitations, it is *impossible* for the performing arts to realize significant productivity gains.

Essentially, it requires the approximately same amount of labor to mount a production of *Hamlet* today as it did in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with unappreciable gains in audience members. Mass media have managed to escape this particular pitfall by tapping into a highly elastic and expanding audience base. But the live performing arts are ultimately economically constrained by the fact that they are, indeed, *live*. Theatres will of course attempt to increase their income by seating as many patrons as possible, but the differences in attendance are usually measured in no more than the hundreds, while with the mass media, it is typical for consumption to be measured in the hundreds of thousands or the millions. The result is that artist's wages must increase to remain competitive in an economy with rising productivity, but the general income of the performing arts will lag behind, creating what Baumol and Bowen labeled the 'income gap'.

Baumol and Bowen's prediction was that there was no structural solution to the income gap, and that if the live performing arts were to not wither to a vestigial form enjoyed by only the elite few willing to bankroll them, the income gap must be filled by

other means. What this has meant for most American theatres in the nonprofit sector is relying upon nearly 50 percent of their income coming from government sources or private philanthropy, with the majority of that portion coming from the latter (Voss, et al., 2006). This has created an inherently unstable economic environment for the performing arts, and examples of this can be seen throughout Humboldt County. When times are good, funding can be found:

There were CETA grants, which might be way too old history, but it was seminal in California in the genesis of what I'll call a lot of 'original theater'. A lot of that came out of CETA grants, which was the California Employment Training Act. And it had to do with retraining people, although what it did for us, is all of us came here and were paid for 2 years, under that employment act, which enabled us to create a lot of work and build kind of an infrastructure for (Dell'Arte) at that time.

**-M. Fields**

And Ferndale has supported this theater in times of crisis. When the big earthquake happened here, they were there to help. When we were deciding whether the theater was going to have to go to Eureka and close here, the town of Ferndale said, "No way, it's staying here."

**-M. McCormick**

And when times are bad and funding cycles shift, the ramifications for arts nonprofits are severe. Between 2000 and 2003, the funding for the California Arts Council was slashed from 32 million dollars down to 2 million (Dewey, 2008). Since then, it has crawled slowly back up to the 3 million dollar range only to have its funds again held hostage in the latest budget crisis. California's per-capita spending on the arts amounts to barely more than a nickel, and its position relative to the other states in the nation plummeted from 24<sup>th</sup> in 2000 to dead last by 2003, where it has remained since. According to the interview data, there is not an arts organization in Humboldt County

that did not feel the aftershocks of this funding cut. Here is just one example, from the Ink People Center for the Arts:

We were impacted by those funding losses, basically our total budget is about half of what it was about five years ago. We had nine people working with us. Some of them were part-timers or whatnot but...at one point, everybody went except me, and I stayed and kept things running. And slowly we rebuilt and we were able to hire an office manager and get a bunch of volunteers. So we continually experience what everyone else does. Even in the Humboldt Arts Council, Sally Arnott had to take over as executive director because they couldn't afford to pay one.

**-L. Maynard**

So due to the income gap, nonprofit theatres (along with the rest of the nonprofit arts sector) are often held at the mercies of regularly shifting public and private funding streams. But there is another inherent quality of the performing arts that increases the instability of their economic condition. This quality is in fact shared with all media, and it has to do with the inherent unpredictability of media products. To explain simply, first take a model of automobile manufactured by the auto industry. The intent of the manufacturer is that every single unit in the model is identical to the next, with any variations of price affecting the entire model line. If there is any individual variation, this is due to manufacturing defects. This kind of predictability enables the creation of more stable financial projections. Now take any of the arts. Each 'product' of the arts is an inherently unique entity with an almost completely indeterminate level of success until it's finished and out on the market. For example, it has been statistically estimated that in the American movie industry, approximately 5% of the movies produced are responsible for nearly 80% of the industry's revenues (Vogel, 2007). While operating in economies and media environments of vastly different scales, live theatre shares this same product

unpredictability principle and each theatre company must deal with it.

While economics in any sector can be incredibly complex and open to all sorts of academic argumentation, in this paper the emphasis will be on two general questions theatre companies must address to create economic sustainability, as indicated by the issues discussed in the last paragraph: First, how may theatres increase funding streams in order to sufficiently cover costs and offer the best possible services to their communities? And secondly, how may they induce greater stability in these funding streams for their own long-term protection?

The most obvious answer to the first question is to increase public funding for the arts, to bring America's public funding for the arts more in line with the sort of per-capita funding seen in Europe.

Countless studies and advocacy groups have been enlisted in this effort, and there are also many to be found in the opposing camps. Throughout the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public funding for the arts has been a political football in the midst of a heated and furious contest, a contest full of skirmishes as notable as the Federal Theatre Project during the Roosevelt administration and the Reagan Cultural Wars of the 1980's on (Jensen, 1995), (Flanagan, 1985).

Some interview participants pointed to certain social histories of the USA as potential agitators of these conflicts.

In Europe, the government has funded the arts ever since there were kings. So it was built into their culture. In this country, because of the rugged individualism, the Puritanism, all those things worked against the funding of the arts.

**-L. Maynard**

This tumultuous history is problematic. On the one hand, it is certainly beneficial to theatre nonprofits to advocate for increased public funding, not just for the desperately needed funds but also to build public awareness and appreciation for the performing arts. On the other, given the fickle winds of political fortune, it is a potentially dangerous answer to the second question. In other words, if the performing arts are in political favor, increased public funding will provide them with a welcome safety net. But, as can be seen from the history of the California Arts Council, this favor can abruptly shift, leaving arts organizations in a state of sudden financial shock with little control over the situation.

Seeking private funding can be equally fraught with issues. Ultimately, nearly every performing arts company dreams of finding their 'angel', the multi-millionaire philanthropist that will swoop in and shower them with all the money they could need. A select few companies will manage to find their angel, most will not. And for this not-so-lucky majority, the response is to cultivate a solid base of regular donors. Here, the interview responses paint an encouraging picture of small, individual private support of the performing arts in Humboldt County.

My way of getting donations and money through the years has been going around and knocking on doors and asking businesses. Through the years I have been really surprised at how generous local businesses are to support things like Shakespeare in the Park, or even my production of *The Traveler*.

**-J. Floss**

And this county is extraordinarily generous in terms of individual contributions, and small businesses. There's a huge, really vital support in this county.

**-M. Fields**

The generosity of Humboldt County towards the arts is a major component of how it can house the anomalous quantity of performing arts companies that it does, and is yet another reason why it has interest as a case study of the performing arts in rural areas. But even the deepest wells can run dry if drawn from too many times. And, as with public funding, in economic downturns donations or participation in the arts are the first to suffer.

As to the second question, most production companies, whether film, television, or theatre, have experimented with methods for mitigating the risk associated with the inherent unpredictability of their products, and the typical response is to maintain a mixed portfolio. Smaller, low-budget projects are seeded alongside larger blockbusters, and riskier independent productions are buffered with more formulaic, 'safe' standbys (Vogel, 2007). The interview data indicates that this sort of behavior exists regardless of economic scale, and can be as typical of a rural community theatre as it is of a major Hollywood studio. While the enhanced stability such a method provides is absolutely welcome, it can also present a danger to creative freedom, experimentation, and development, as more and more potentially riskier productions are passed over in favor of

tried-and-true ‘crowd pleasers’.

Aside from a few bright points, the above discussion would seem to describe rather bleak economic scenarios for theatre companies. It is not the intent to be resolutely pessimistic; rather, the point is that if theatre companies are to take what agency they can over their own financial well-being, they need to have a clear understanding of the economic situations they occupy. And these situations operate at a variety of scales. First, as can be seen from the above discussions, theatre companies must have a firm grasp on the basic economic principles that guide the arts sectors. Then it is necessary that they have an awareness of their particular contexts. This starts with issues such as the status of public and private funding at the national level, down through the state level (particularly in light of conditions such as those which have evolved in California), down through the funding and audience bases at the local level. This last bit can be one of the most important points for smaller, rural-based theatre companies, which because of a low-profile; will have difficulty obtaining non-local funding while simultaneously confronting hardships created by a smaller, less affluent audience base.

This is a rural area with a relatively low population. There are less people, there’s less money, and the ‘entertainment dollar’ is less. People have a certain amount of money to spend on entertainment, its lower here percentage-wise than in more well-to-do places or places with millions of people.

**-M. Thomas**

Finally, each theatre must understand the economic context particular to them. As was laid out in Chapter 2, proposed sustainability solutions must be case-specific. The interview results have shown that each theatre company in the Humboldt area possesses

unique challenges that call for tailored responses. The Ferndale Repertory Theatre suffers from issues of distance, removed by nearly twenty miles from the major population centers in the county:

What makes it difficult in this area are the vast distances. And when I say 'vast', they're really not that vast... Some people come from Eureka. But now gas prices are so high, and it's not one of your higher-paid counties.

**-M. McCormick**

The North Coast Repertory Theatre has to deal with a small auditorium and cramped storage and shop space, housed as it is in a converted Salvation Army building. Several other local theatre companies have either folded entirely or had to severely curtail their activities because of the loss of their performance spaces. And Dell'Arte International has to balance all of the considerations involved in operating a world-known school of physical theatre along with balancing their local performances and company tours. Each theatre company is a distinctive organism unto itself, with particular economic weaknesses and strengths. That being said, there are certain ways to address economic sustainability which will have common application to most theatres. Three general categories of these will be addressed in the next section.

As can be seen from the above, theatre income can be separated into two areas: Earned income and un-earned income. Un-earned income can be further split into the categories of public funding and private philanthropy. Simply enough, the first way that a theatre company may enhance their economic prosperity is to increase their un-earned income. However, funding from public and private institutions is in rare supply, with numerous companies in fierce competition over it. Smaller companies will likely have

greater success by courting small local donors, although this can be over-stretched depending on the number of companies in a given area. The competition over funding is a key issue here. Contests over limited funds ensure that there will be a few winners and numerous losers, with plenty of damaged inter-organizational relationships as a byproduct. What may ultimately be a more sustainable approach is for theatre companies to search for opportunities for collaborative partnerships, both with other companies and other organizations within the community, thereby creating a stronger case for the funding of all involved.

I think NCRT, Ferndale, etc, should write a huge capital improvements grant together. Individually, none of them is big enough, but all three of them together could possibly get say, a million dollar grant. And Ferndale could get the remodel it needs, and NCRT could get back-end of the building rebuilt to give more space. Maybe we could all have what we want if we all get together and collectively work for it.

**-X. Zublin-Meyer**

Other research suggests that collaboration is a funding tactic that is rapidly gaining popularity in the non-profit arts world. Here is a related quote pulled from the NEA document *American Canvas*, attributed to Deena Epstein, program office for the George Gund Foundation:

You have to begin to think smarter, more collaboratively, to kind of move out of the box, beyond what was your traditional way of doing business, to thinking maybe there is a different way that we can do business and look for partners.

Collaboration is a key behavior for a sustainable practice, and one that will be revisited several times, particularly in Chapter 6.

As for earned income, even a non-profit theatre will count, on average,

approximately half of its revenue as earned income. Any theatre will see the benefit of an increased earned income, and the most obvious way to accomplish this is to increase the participation levels of the potential audience base. In *Building Participation in the Arts*, McCarthy, Jinnat present an excellent framework for analyzing the different ways a theatre may achieve this. The framework breaks down into three distinct emphases a theatre can put on its audience development process:

1) Deepening. Deepening participation means focusing development on existing regular audience members by enhancing the positive qualities of their experience. For example, if an audience member attends a theatre at least once a year, and then is convinced to attend three or four times a year, their participation has deepened. Deepening can also include activities such as recruiting regular audience members as volunteers for the organization, or soliciting donations.

2) Broadening. In this instance, the focus of audience development is to identify and target demographics that would be potentially inclined to attend, but experience some barrier to regular attendance. For examples, someone could be without easy transportation to the theatre, or there could be new parents who have difficulties finding childcare, or there could be a college student who is unable to pay full ticket prices. This is an incredibly complex issue and a detailed analysis of it is beyond the scope of this work, but to sum up, the goal for this kind of development is to identify barriers to attendance and attempt to mitigate them in order to cultivate the audience base.

3) Diversifying. Here, a theatre attempts to create converts out of members of the public who would not normally consider attending a production. This can be one of the

most potentially difficult and risky of the approaches, as it may require significant changes or additions to normal practices in order to affect or elevate existing perceptions. But it also may hold great gains, potentially unlocking entirely new markets.

McCarthy and Jinnel go on to make the point that each of these approaches must be employed carefully, since they may work at cross-purposes in certain circumstances. For example, attempting to deepen an existing audience's commitment by catering to them through production choices may make it difficult to achieve any diversification of the audience base. Conversely, introducing too much diversity into a production lineup runs the risk of alienating core demographics. This is not to say that these approaches are mutually exclusive, and a truly sustainable audience development program will most likely incorporate each of these three in some measure.

What's important is for theatres to have detailed information on their audience demographics, not only what regular and potential audience members do, but why they do it. For example, if a theatre is attempting to broaden their audience base, they must first be able to identify the barriers that are hindering certain demographics. The interviews suggest the majority of theatres in the Humboldt area do not have access to this sort of nuanced sociological data, instead typically relying on anecdotal evidence at best. While it's unreasonable to expect a rural theatre company to employ the services of a trained sociologist, it is still highly desirable for a company to do what it can to gather data on its audience demographics. This is another situation where a collaborative approach could be beneficial, with theatre companies pooling resources and gathered data to create a clearer picture of the community and audiences they serve. Information is

key, so that theatres are not making vital artistic and financial decisions in a vacuum.

When attempting to boost earned income, theatres may see great returns by brainstorming ways to increase participation in theatre-related activities beyond their standard production line up. The philosophy at the Ferndale Repertory Theatre, their response to their isolated location, is an excellent example of this:

We have lots of fundraisers. Or we're busy constantly. I mean, that's what I've been doing, and that's part of what's wearing me out, is that every weekend something has to be going in this theater to keep the doors open. And whether it's renting off to the dance company or presenting a weekend showcase or doing a Fourth of July show or doing our regular shows, there's hardly a weekend that goes by that something isn't happening here. We've done movies, we've done music events, we've done readings, and we've done political shows, all besides our regular lineup. So that's one way in which we've to deal with this, is to try to keep the theater out there, open, in view, and with something happening all the time.

**-M. McCormick**

Across the country, theatres are discovering unique ways for their facilities to offer increasingly broader services to their public, from renting their spaces for community Tai Chi classes to opening adjoining restaurants or bars. Not only does this increase and stabilize earned income, but as pointed out in the above quote, it situates theatre spaces as community centers for a diverse range of activities, rather than as sites solely meant for the viewing of a few regular productions.

There is a third way a theatre company may improve its economic sustainability, and that is through simple fiscal conservation, particularly when it comes to their technical expenditures.

Anybody can spend obscene amounts of money and not care about storage space, or not try to save things for later and just throw everything

away. Anybody can do that, that's easy. Doing the opposite is hard. So you start out thinking how you can get everything in the world with very little money, which is folly of course. And then you have to start thinking creatively. Buying a bunch of things doesn't involve creative thinking.

**-J. Sekas**

This kind of creative thinking can be very powerful, and allows theatre companies to adopt a 'less is more' approach. Here, the financial limitations of Humboldt County have encouraged this kind of creativity to flourish. Here are just two examples from the interviews:

But it always amazes me, what we're able to do with a limited amount of resources. It's fun! And you'd be amazed at what you can create out of cardboard, and it looks like what you were trying to create, just by having a good artist that knows how to paint. So I love that, rather than having a huge budget to create something out of nothing, you have to go out and find another way. That's part of the excitement, I think.

**-C. Wolfe**

Look around at what you've got to work with, and then let a vision grow out of that, because you can do really amazing things with minimal resources. Some of the best theater I've ever seen involved a ladder and pieces of cloth, or a couple of big walls and some chairs. It doesn't take a lot of money to do fantastic theater.

**-T. Sloan**

As was also discussed in Chapter 3, there can be many opportunities for collaboration when it comes to conservation. All theatres share certain needs: lighting instruments, flats, platforms, costumes, etc. Just as sharing these resources can reduce theatre's ecological impact, collaborative partnerships can be extremely desirable cost-savers.

### Economic Sustainability at the Community Level

There has been significant research done on the impact of arts and culture sectors

on larger economies, and much of this work has later been used as advocacy for increased funding for the arts. One of the difficulties presented in reviewing and drawing useful conclusions from this research consists of the variety of economic survey and analysis methodologies possible, and the significant differences that consequently result from study to study. One study that has stood out for its exhaustive detail is *Arts & Economic Prosperity III* (Cohen, Schaffer, Davidson, 2003). Like all economic studies, it must be carefully read to be responsibly employed, and the authors are quite upfront that it is intended to be used by arts and culture advocacy groups. Those two points notwithstanding, it is highly notable for the breadth of its data collection.

According to Cohen, et al, the total economic impact of the non-profit arts and culture sector in the USA for 2003 amounted to \$166.2 billion. This includes all direct organizational expenditures (\$63 billion), and all direct and indirect public spending related to the arts and culture sector (\$103 billion). Even taking this optimistic estimation, the non-profit arts and culture sector economic activity accounted for less than 1.6% of the USA GDP for 2003. And to give an example of the sort of variation that can be found in this body of research, economists Heilburn and Gray estimated the size of the non-profit arts and culture economy in 1990 to be only \$7.3 billion (Larson, 1997). Even given this range, none of these may seem like particularly impressive numbers, especially considering that non-profit theatre constitutes only a small portion of this activity. To give some sense of the proportion, the Theatre Communications Group estimates that in 2006, the direct organizational expenditures for non-profit theatres totaled just \$1.7 billion. But as will be discussed in the following sections, it is not

always easy to see the whole picture of theatre's economic contributions by focusing on generalized, nationwide statistics.

There exists a traditional tendency in theatre to focus on those organizations that 'make it big'. There are the major regional houses, the Shakespeare festivals, and most famously of all, Broadway. And when it comes to the economic impact of theatre, this fascination is understandable. When a theatrical organization's fortunes rise, it's usually economically significant for their surrounding community. An example of this that is relatively close to Humboldt County is Ashland's Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Since humble beginnings in 1935, the OSF has continually grown in size, drawing patrons from across the nation. In 2003, the executive director of the OSF estimated the festival had a contribution of over \$129 million to Ashland's economy (Nicholson, 2003). In a town of approximately 20,000 people this level of economic impact is simply astronomical. The entire economy of the area is built upon the OSF. The success of the OSF is not something that has gone un-noticed by Humboldt County's theatre community:

Then we should have somebody who's out there doing group sales from all of California. That's how Ashland got started. They tried to maintain themselves in their own little community, couldn't do it, and the first time they reached outside of their community and started to bring people in, that's when it started to go. So we'd rather think of this place too as this sort of natural stopping place on the way up the coast. You start in LA, then you go to Carmel or something like that, then to San Francisco, Santa Rosa, then you could go to here and on to Ashland, and you could continue all the way through Eugene, Portland, on to Seattle. And all these theatre groups are on the way. I think that's the way we should be going.

**-M. McCormick**

I do think our area, if things turn around and get a bit healthier in the arts, I don't know why we couldn't be a destination like Ashland. I think there are enough people coming through on the 101 that if we had a really nice playhouse with maybe a main stage and a couple smaller stages, maybe even used cooperatively between the different theatre groups that keep their own names... You could provide in a weekend three different shows at the same facility. And I think that would be an economically viable situation.

**-J. Floss**

There is promise for Humboldt County's theatre scene and tourism shown in events like Dell Arte International's popular Mad River Festival, but the county is still some distance from becoming a regional or national theatre destination. One fact is likely: Humboldt County, or any other area, will be most successful in becoming a cultural tourism destination by not just emulating successful behaviors of organizations like OSF, but by also carefully analyzing their specific context and effectively employing local resources. This requires insight and commitment on the part of the theatrical community and from the rest of the community as a whole, particularly from local government.

Examples like Ashland's OSF represent understandably tantalizing opportunities

to places such as Humboldt County. But this should not distract from the good that small theatre companies can do for their communities without being a tourist destination. The direct economic impact of organizations such as the North Coast Repertory Theatre or the Ferndale Repertory Theatre may be minimal, but their overall contribution as a component of the county's entire arts and culture scene is significant. Many of the towns in Humboldt County do rely heavily on income from the tourism industry, and while local theatres may not be destinations in and of themselves, they can serve as cornerstones. Take, for example, the town of Ferndale:

Well, I do know that this town was nominated as "The Prettiest Painted Town in the Northwest", or something along those lines. Some magazine gave them this reward. And the reason why they gave them this reward instead of to any of the many contenders apparently was because it had a live theater and a museum. And that's what edged this town out over any of the other towns.

**-M. McCormick**

Tourism is not the only major economic contribution theatre and the rest of the arts and culture sector can make to their communities. Many rural areas in the United States, Humboldt included, are experiencing the pains of transferring from their resource-extraction or manufacturing based economies into something different. Many of these areas are now attempting to attract skills-based, 'white-collar' industries to stabilize and truly stimulate their economies. For these firms and their educated and creative workers, a vibrant and diverse arts scene can be a motivating factor in relocating (Florida, 2002). In this way, the theatrical organizations in a community can make important contributions to the overall health of the economy without directly generating a single cent. This is a trend every theatrical professional and local government agent should be

aware of.

### Economic Sustainability at the Creator Level

For professionals in the performing arts, personal economics are typically seen as a matter of triumph or disaster. Typical conceptions of Hollywood (which also shape many of the notions most Americans have about the performing arts in general) are dominated by the stereotypes of mega-celebrities or part-time waiters. Unfortunately, much about these stereotypes are rooted in uncomfortable realities. The unemployment rates of actors and directors are more than double than that of the national rate, the 1990 census showed the median income for dancers to be \$8,500, and approximately three quarters of all artists in general hold a second part-time job (McCarthy, et al, 2001). This stands in stark contrast with the tens of millions of dollars demanded by the superstars in the uppermost echelons of the performing arts. In the case of the live performing arts, even super-celebrity is typically out of reach. And if work can be found, it is almost always on one-time or seasonal contracts and concentrated in a few key metropolitan areas, creating further stress and instability for performing artists and enforcing transient lifestyles.

In the light of these challenges, it is not unsurprising that many theatrical professionals decide to enter either the technical theatre or academic fields, which provide greater stability, or abandon practicing their art professionally and instead take it up as an avocation. These trends are only exacerbated by an over-supply of artists that has climbed upwards since the 1960's and 1970's with the influx of government spending

on the arts. (McCarthy, et al, 2001).

I think you have to be compelled. Because it's really, really hard to make it, even if you choose to be a performer but within an academic setting, it's still hard. It's very hard to get a job. And for every job there are so many applicants, so many qualified people.

**-B. Cheyne**

Aside from the obvious troubles experienced by individuals in the performing arts, the attrition of professional artists due to economic hardship has at least three negative effects in the larger scheme of things. First, it diminishes the quality of the performing arts in non-metropolitan areas that do not have the economies of scale necessary to recruit professionally trained artists in any great numbers. Second, many researchers, including Baumol and Bowen, have identified the non-profit arts sector as a training ground and talent pool available to the for-profit arts and media sectors. If this pool shrinks, it may eventually have larger negative economic impacts. Thirdly, it quite simply weakens the diversity of the arts and culture sector as a whole.

Advocacy for the importance of the arts to economic and social prosperity is a key element of obtaining living wages and financial stability for theatrical professionals. But while any increase in public and private funding for the arts will have a positive effect for individual professionals, it's also important that theatrical organizations and local communities implement those practices that will economically protect their artists. To begin with, the modern Hollywood-style economic model common throughout most of the performing arts, with its structure based around single project or seasonal contracts is not only punishing and uncertain for professionals involved, but some researchers have indicated that it creates inefficiencies by encouraging regular upheaval in personnel and

discouraging the beneficial routines and relationships and that can develop in a stable working group (Florida, 2002). By adopting stable employment practices (more in the style of ensemble theatre), theatre companies may not only economically protect their company members, but also potentially realize gains in both productivity and quality.

Additionally, many theatre companies (particularly smaller ones) can implement what Fried and May have labeled ‘cross-functional hiring’ (Fried, May, 1991). The basic concept of cross-functional hiring is that instead of having singular job descriptions for each company member, members may fill a variety of roles in the operation of the company. In fact, according to the interview responses, for many small theatres such as those residing in Humboldt County, cross-functional hiring is not only desirable but necessary. However, even though it may be born from limitations, some interview responses indicate that this sort of diversification of tasks and responsibilities can enrich the entire experience of the artist.

And for me personally, I get to work in a multiplicity of ways. I get to teach, I get to direct, I get to act, I get to administrate. The multi-faceted nature of what happens is what I like. I’m not a ‘one-track.’ And each seems to inform the other. You get a little more of a renaissance style approach to things in terms of what I do in a day. So I might have a week of doing budgets, but I have the next week teaching something, and that makes a big difference. And if I teach something and then I have to go perform, what I teach informs the choices I might make as an actor.

**-M. Fields**

Cross-functional hiring can have its downsides. It can be easy to pile additional tasks onto fewer people until burn out occurs. Organization and accountability can be complicated by the multiple responsibilities of company members, requiring clear systems and consistent check-ins to avoid confusion. And finally, cross-functional hiring

will often be too inefficient to fully apply to larger-scale theatre companies. Even with these concerns noted, cross-functional hiring is an important tool that every theatre company should be aware of.

## CHAPTER 5

### SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

In this final chapter on the particular aspects of the analytical model, the focus will be on social sustainability at each of the three levels in the framework. To remain consistent with the first two chapters, we will start with the Company level.

#### Social Sustainability at the Company Level

An important key concept for analyzing the social structures of theatre companies is the idea of *communities of practice*, developed by Etienne Wenger in a book of the same title (Wenger, 1998). Interview participant Scott Menzies offered a concise explanation of the concept:

There's a book by Wenger, called *Communities of Practice*, and this book talks about how when people come together, say if they work at an office or they come together for some reason, by being together and working together for a period of time they begin to develop a shared set of norms, obligations, expectations, and behaviors that are particular to that group. And that makes a community of practice. Theater troupes could be considered a community of practice.

**-S. Menzies**

As was discussed in the previous chapter, many of the communities of practice created in the performing arts are temporary affairs, centered on a single project.

I think people really love the sense of community they get within the theater walls. It's a very intense relationship that develops, everyone's really tight for this short while. Sometimes people get into conflicts, but overall people tend to relax around one another.

**-X. Zublin-Meyer**

As alluded to above, these temporary communities can generate some amazingly

powerful connections in a very small amount of time. Actors already have to bare themselves emotionally on stage in the first place, and directors, designers, and support staff can become equally emotional in their connection to the artistic vision.

Additionally, all members of a production are united in a common goal with a typically fast-impending deadline. This experience can be both sublime and incredibly stressful. Bearing this in mind, it is understandable how this sort of environment could be responsible for a wide span of emotional responses, ranging from deep bonding, to the occasional passionate and argumentative flare-up, to behind-the-back whispering and gossip.

There are also plenty of circumstances where theatre companies form more permanent communities of practice. Any successful theatre company will require some number of permanent staff members, some companies may adopt more of a permanent ensemble structure, and professionals or enthusiasts who continue to work in the same geographical area will most likely end up collaborating on future projects, or at least form some kind of relationship, beneficial or not. The qualities discussed in the previous paragraph are often just as much a part of these longer-lasting communities, and depending on the particular circumstances, can be diminished or accentuated through the passage of time. Interview participant Bernadette Cheyne captured the plurality of possible social environments in the theatre with several of her responses:

When I went to Northwestern, I came with a certain attitude about the theatre experience and the sense of collaboration and almost of family that I had experienced in the theatre work that I had done prior to going to this school... And what I didn't expect and what really threw me when I got there was the extraordinarily competitive nature of the 'beast' that I encountered, the cliquishness, the degree to which many professors had their followers and students kind of lapping at their heels, and that wasn't what I wanted to be a part of. I stayed with it for a while, and I felt they certainly offered good training. It was never an issue of the training, it was an issue of the environment. In the Fairbanks Drama Association I found again that sense of camaraderie, that sense of working together towards a common goal. And it wasn't about any one being a star, it wasn't about whose shoes you had to lick in order to be noticed, it was very much a collaborative effort and again I kind of lean toward the word 'family'... There's the ego-driven theater and the sort of theater where people say, "We all love what we're doing and how can we work together to make it happen?"

**-B. Cheyne**

It's possible to see how theatre companies can be friendly, committed, familial communities, or nests full of back stabbing, hurt feelings, aggression (passive or otherwise), and other sorts of social dysfunction. Most theatre companies will, by way of human nature, contain some measure of both aspects. However, it should not be difficult to determine which aspect is more desirable. With the former, company members are more comfortable, happy, and fulfilled. More work is accomplished and the quality of the work rises. So then the question remains of how theatre companies can cultivate positive social attributes. In his 2003 book, *Bringing Society Back In*, Edward Weber included three pertinent issues: accountability, transparency, and virtue. Although Weber introduces these topics as part of an analysis of grassroots ecosystem management, the topics themselves remain highly relevant to the social environment of theatre companies.

First, there's the issue of *accountability*. In its simplest form, accountability

encompasses any systems for ensuring that agreements are kept and responsibilities appropriately handled. To various extents, accountability is an issue in any organization whose members rely upon each other to follow through. But in a theatre community of practice, the reliance of each member upon the others is so intense, the schedules so hectic, and the cost of falling short so punishing to the entire community that accountability is an incredibly key part of whether company dynamics are successful or not. Some potential ways to encourage accountability include creating clear and consistent systems for organization and ensuring regular, objective check-ins and oversight (Weber, 2003). The ‘clear and consistent’ element deserves emphasis, and also leads to the next topic.

Second is *transparency*. Traditional corporate business models usually rely on a military-derived ‘need-to-know’ system for dispersing information. While this behavior has understandable origins in concerns over security and remaining competitive, it can potentially lead to a great deal of dysfunction in an organization. In the absence of clear and available information, members make decisions or form opinions based at least in part on hunches or gossip. Without transparency, true accountability becomes a much more difficult goal to reach, as who is exactly responsible for what becomes a more difficult question to answer. And conflicts and ill feelings can be covered up and left unaddressed to fester and worsen. This is not to say that ‘perfect’ transparency can or should be attained, but it is highly likely that an entire theatre company will benefit if all of its members (particularly those in administrative roles) operate on the principle that, barring special circumstances, transparency is a more positive choice than secrecy. It is

also important to note that even if information is not deliberately withheld, transparency can still suffer if that information is misplaced or otherwise difficult to obtain. This is another circumstance where clear and consistent organization becomes important.

If accountability and transparency are the letters of the law, *virtue* is the spirit. Virtue is a difficult concept to analyze objectively and for most it's loaded with personal significance. As such, it can be a difficult topic to analyze. That said, as Weber found in several of his own interviews, for people involved 'on the ground' in the midst of their own organizations and having to work with other organizations, virtue often amounts to simple common sense and decency (Weber, 2003). Essentially, it is vital for all members of a company to treat each other with respect and understanding. If these are not the motivators for systems to create accountability and transparency, the systems may be nothing more than empty exercises in bureaucracy. This isn't to oversimplify and to imply that if people are just nice enough to each other, all personal conflicts will be eliminated. The goal should not be to do away with personal conflicts entirely, but to resolve them with clarity and maturity when they occur.

So far this discussion has centered on working relationships within a single theatre company, without much mention of how theatre companies relate to each other or to other organizations in their communities. This is an important issue to address. Relationships between organizations can be complicated by many of the same pitfalls that affect a single organization: Gossip, personality conflicts, failed agreements, competition, and cliquishness. Additionally, the relative lack of group bonding will often magnify these problems. Fortunately, almost all of the behaviors mentioned in the above

paragraph can be applied to inter-organizational relationships with little additional qualification. Whenever a theatre company engages in collaboration with others, accountability and transparency are absolutely necessary. And the chances of collaborative partnerships being truly successful and sustainable will be greatly enhanced by performing artists showing the same respect to performing artists from separate companies that they would to members of their own.

### Social Sustainability at the Community Level

Ask any performing artist what the social value of their work is, and the answer is likely to be articulate and passionate:

...it can comment on the way that we live our lives now. It can show us our folly, and can show us our greatness, and can show us our nuance, and do things for us that you can't do in a television series. Like the subtle deep breath that happens that you can feel across a room.

**-H. Houghton**

I love the fact that theater's been around forever, and it's been a way of teaching, it's been a way of informing, it's been a way of entertaining, it's been a way of giving outlets, it's been of reflecting what's going on around us, it's just an interesting and wonderful way of viewing our world.

**-M. McCormick**

However, these kinds of responses are rare to find in much of the sociological research on theatre, even in those pieces specifically intended as advocacy. In fact, it's been posited that arts advocacy itself may be responsible for this emphasis in the research (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, Brooks, 2004). The theory goes something like this: With public and private funding fiercely fought over, arts advocacy groups are driven to constantly produce new research that will persuade foundation administrators and public

officials. Most of these officials have little personal experience in the field, and there is a trend towards greater valuation of quantitative over qualitative data. As a result, researchers will favor studies that rely upon 'objective' easy-to-explain measurements, such as the improvement of student test scores through arts education, or the economic impact of the arts. McCarthy, et al argues that while there are understandable motivations for it, this approach can potentially hold significant drawbacks. First, many of these studies, in a rush to obtain a desired result, employ dubious methodologies. Secondly, while most studies will focus on causal relationships between the arts and positive social or economic effects, it is rare to find literature which actually tries to analyze the exact attributes of the arts which produce these effects. Thirdly, many studies fail to incorporate opportunity costs. In other words, they do not ask an important question related to the previous issue: Are there other development opportunities other than the arts that would provide the same or even better benefits? For example, simply increasing funding for basic subjects in schools may raise test scores as much as equal funding for arts education and building a NASCAR stadium may make just as much or more economic impact locally as the formation of a new regional theatre. McCarthy, et al assert that these weaknesses open up the entire body of research to substantial criticism, legitimate and otherwise, and diminishes the credibility of arguments for the value of the arts, which, ironically, was the motivation for adopting the approach in the first place.

So what should be done? A good place to start, as McCarthy suggests, is to balance out the past crop of arts-related research with new studies employing rigorous

methodologies and carefully examining the *intrinsic* benefits of the arts that no other social or economic institution can reproduce. Additionally, theatre companies and other organizations of artists must continue to make the case for their social value, and not just to the public officials, but to the rank-and-file of their fellow community members.

Many of the underlying causes of the recent culture wars in the United States are rooted in the notion that the arts are inaccessible, elitist, biased, or just plain ‘weird’. Every artist and arts organization must understand that they are ambassadors, and must do all they can do to better connect with their communities and audiences in order to best address these stereotypes.

Doing a truly in-depth analysis of the intrinsic social benefits of the theatre is beyond the scope of this work. And many subjects, such as arts and education, have been dealt with in great detail by other studies. There is one topic, cursorily examined in (McCarthy, et al, 2004), that is worth examining here in greater detail, and that is the role of theatres in the generation of social capital.

Social capital is an idea pioneered by social researchers such as Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, and others interested in issues of community development (Putnam, 2000), (Halpern, 2005). Basically, social capital encapsulates all of the benefits and added capacity that results from social networking. This is based on concepts of reciprocity. For example, if I’m taking a vacation and need someone to feed my cat while I’m away, I’ll ask one of my good friends, and since we have a close pre-existing relationship, they’ll agree. Later, after I return from vacation, my friend’s car breaks down and they need a ride to their work, which I’m only too happy to help with. This

reciprocal system of favors is facilitated by our mutual trust and affection, all of which is contained in the concept of social capital. Social capital can develop in countless contexts: School, workplaces, bars or coffee shops, churches, etc. Anywhere where people congregate in a social atmosphere can be a site of social capital generation. This includes theatres.

Social researchers have also made an important distinction amongst the behaviors that form social capital: *bonding* and *bridging* (Putnam, 2000). Bonding behaviors typically reinforce social capital within a distinct group that is built around a common identity. Bridging behaviors tend to create social capital between diverse groups or individuals.

So what are the specifics of how theatres might generate social capital? First, the most likely form to be generated in the theatre is bonding social capital. This is due in part to the close personal relationships that form among members of a theatre company or production, and their collective identity as performance artists. This can also carry forth to the regular audience members, who share an identity as appreciators and patrons of the performing arts, and particularly as patrons of that specific theatre company. This sort of bonding behavior among audience members is very helpful to theatres attempting to deepen the commitment of their audience base, as was discussed in Chapter 4. It is traditionally more difficult for theatre companies to generate bridging social capital, which can in some cases be partially explained by the emphasis on bonding behaviors. Potentially, theatre company members and their regular patrons can become so invested in their mutual identity as ‘theatre-people’, that the theatre becomes an exclusive club,

viewed by outsiders as elitist, unwelcoming, or at worst, irrelevant. This can extremely hamper any attempts the theatre makes at broadening or diversifying their audience base (also mentioned in Chapter 4), and can be damaging to their reputation in their community.

For a lot of people, going to theater is like going to church. It's like going to somebody else's church. If you don't know, if you've never been in a theater before, how do you know what the protocol is? And how things work? You don't. When you talk about barriers that prevent people from going to theater, there's a lot.

—**M. Fields**

If theatres are sincere in trying to be of service to their communities, particularly in their role as non-profit organizations, they must carefully evaluate how open and inclusive their behavior truly is, and continually make improvements when possible.

There is another idea relevant to the discussion of how theatre venues may serve as inclusive community centers for the building of social capital, and that is the *third place*, introduced by Ray Oldenburg in his book, *The Great Good Place* (Oldenburg, 1999). Oldenburg contends that modern society has increasingly divided an individual's time and activity between the twin locations of the home and the work place. The third place, according to Oldenburg, is anywhere that is associated with neither of the other two, and is where a place where people gather on neutral ground to engage in the act of socialization. The numerous examples Oldenburg offers of third places include German beer-gardens, French cafes, English pubs, American taverns, coffee shops, bookstores, hair salons, etc. It is important to note that in all these examples, there is an 'official' capacity of the third place, i.e., the purchase of food, beer, coffee, books, etc., but this

capacity is in addition to the function of the third place as a place for people to congregate and 'hang out' together.

It is telling that in all of the instances of third places Oldenburg discusses, theatre is conspicuously absent. Looking at the typical theatre experience, it is not completely surprising why. In many cases, a patron of the theatre will drive to the theatre, possibly with family or friends, purchase their tickets, sit down and wait for the show to begin, watch quietly in the dark for a few hours, applaud, stand, and leave when the show is over, and perhaps have a conversation on what was just seen with companions while on the drive home. If they're a regular of the theatre, they may stay and chat with other patrons for a few minutes. Overall, this is not an experience containing the kind of social engagement and interaction typical of Oldenburg's third places, and it is not an environment particularly conducive to the production of social capital, especially when it comes to bridging. The experience and environment are more in common with those of the cinema, where audiences are shuffled in and out quickly so that the next show may begin and productivity is increased. People familiar with the history of theatre know that this was not always the case.

It didn't used to be like that. It used to be very interactive and very alive... People that don't want to be proper, and sit in the dark and be quiet for two hours don't go to theater, because they think it's all too hoity-toity and above them, or too stuffy or whatever. So they don't go. I think there's something missing from the experience of theater for both the audience and the performer when it's done that way, when it's done like a movie. I think everybody loses a big part of the experience.

**–T. Sloan**

Indeed, theatre has traditionally been more raucous, inter-active, and socially driven than it has more recently become. Looking at the history of American theatre audiences, early American audiences drank, chatted, and played card games not only before and after a show, but during. The actual performance was a subject of selective attention, and theatre patrons attended as much to interact with each other as to see the performance itself (Butsch, 2000). It wasn't until the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that various social and economic factors conspired to 'tame' audiences to be polite and passive.

This is not meant to make the argument that all theatres should return to the days when particularly drunk audience members might climb the stage to molest female cast members (Butsch, 2000), but it is meant to raise the point that offering audiences nothing to do while at the theatre other than to sit quietly and passively consume their entertainment is to potentially miss opportunities for a theatre to be a more successful center of community building. And additionally, that there exists a wide continuum of options between these two extremes, any of which may be appropriate for what a given theatre company believes is appropriate for them. The key is to be aware that these options exist.

Even more important, these options are absolutely not limited simply to influencing audience normative behaviors while they're watching a production. There are all sorts of ancillary activities a theatre company that is fortunate enough to have their own facilities can offer. Examples that have been mentioned in other chapters include the Ferndale Repertory Theatre and their commitment to including a regular calendar of events including local elementary and high school plays, movie nights, holiday shows, and live music, all in addition to their regular season of productions. Dell'Arte International regularly hosts live bands in their outdoor amphitheatre during the summer, and also offers the Blue Lake Pageant to their community:

We do the Pageant in the summer, we have the Mobile Mask Unit go out and for three months people in all kinds of communities make masks, and about 300-400 masks are made. And then at the Pageant here in Blue Lake they're all given away and used, and there's probably about 2000 people in the street for that Pageant. That's been built over a period of years. So there's a way for the community to participate in what happens here, not just to come and watch a show. That becomes, I think, an important part of the role of an arts organization, whether it's theater or something else.

**–M. Fields**

The Center Stage in Portland uses their facility to host Tai Chi classes (Wren, 2007), and there are countless other possibilities. Theatres that have some additional space and some capital to invest can create a small café or bar space to serve their patrons. Some options are as simple as redecorating a lobby space to be more inviting and comfortable, or offering talk back sessions at the end of certain performances. All of these options have the potential to increase a theatre's capacity to be a regular gathering place for their community, moving them closer towards Oldenberg's ideal of the third

place. And for the theatre's benefit, many of these additional activities will contribute to the theatre's income, as well as help establish the theatre as a familiar and active place to the rest of the community, encouraging people who might not otherwise consider it, to attend the theatre's regular productions. Not every option is desirable for every theatre's circumstances, but it is very likely a theatre company will realize benefits from carefully analyzing their own situation, and developing appropriate ways to diversify and strengthen their services offered to their community.

### Social Sustainability at the Creator Level

In previous chapter sections examining the Creator level of sustainability, the issues presented included protecting the physical health of performance artists, and also protecting their fiscal health. In this section, the emphasis is on protecting the *psychological* health of performance artists. In order to do this, it is necessary to first identify key threats.

One threat, which while not unique to theatre is definitely very common, is *burn out*. Most individuals involved in the performing arts will have an intimate relationship with this phenomenon. It is endemic to all levels of theatre, but can concentrate particularly at smaller scales, in theatres operated by a small core staff and many volunteers. Simply, too much responsibility accrues on too few shoulders.

I really burned out, and I think other people do too, from this 'crisis management' when really what you want to do is make your piece of art wonderful, you want it to speak to people, and you want it to be art! But then there's just the day-to-day crisis management. That is really wearing.

**-J. Floss**

Or you're busy constantly. I mean, that's what I've been doing, and that's part of what's wearing me out, is that every weekend something has to be going in this theater to keep the doors open.

–**M. McCormick**

And burn out is very insidious. A toxic work environment may threaten someone's physical wellbeing, and poor compensation may attack their financial wellbeing, but burn out and over work attacks the very core of an artist - their enthusiasm for their work. Due to common economic constraints, there is a significant temptation for theatre companies to squeeze as much productivity as possible from their employees or volunteers. Even if there isn't explicit pressure, company members may personally feel that there is so much to do that anything less than constant work will result in falling behind. To some extent, this is an inescapable quality of theatre. Theatre productions necessitate intense bursts of activity, and have inherently unforgiving deadlines. While this can't be avoided, it does make intermittent periods of downtime very important to company members' continued psychological health.

So what steps can be taken alleviate these issues? One place to start is for administrators of theatre companies to stay apprised of day-to-day operations and solicit input from other company members to ensure that no one is being overtaxed. If an impending production deadline necessitates extra work, administrators can take steps to make sure that company members still get enough breaks and rest to stay healthy, and make sure a sufficient period of downtime follows the completion of a production to allow everyone a chance to recuperate. And the onus does not rest entirely on administrators and directors. It is important for every company member to be aware of

the health and happiness of themselves and their compatriots, and be willing to speak up when either they or others are wearing too thin. In this way, a work culture of mutual concern for each other's wellbeing can be developed.

Another important point is the treatment of volunteers by a theatre company. Companies of nearly any size rely on volunteer labor to properly function. In small community theatres, volunteers will also make up most if not all of the directors and actors of the company. Overworking volunteers is an even more delicate matter, as their only compensation is the satisfaction they get from their work.

And of course, it's an art form where 80-90% of the people involved are volunteers. They're giving up their evenings; you're giving up your evenings. That means you're not with your loved ones, and I think that takes a toll.

**-J. Floss**

Protecting volunteers and ensuring their experiences are positive can be a powerful investment for a theatre company. A happy volunteer is obviously more likely to continue volunteering, and as they work, they build experience, becoming more valuable to the company. If a theatre company is a welcoming and rewarding place to volunteer, it is also easier to attract new volunteers. This is particularly of note since many theatre companies will lack the resources to simply hire new employees, and recruiting more volunteers is the best option for increasing their available labor pool.

Also noteworthy is the mention of loved ones and family in the above quote. Not only is losing precious time with family a concern for volunteers, but it is also an issue for actual employed company members with families. It can even be more of a concern for employees, since they have more commitment to the company and much less

flexibility. If a company is to care for its members, this has to be taken into account. For example, at rehearsals for the Dell'Arte International Company, it is not uncommon to see young children playing or sleeping in the auditorium, brought along by parents who also happen to be members of the company. In this sort of permissive environment, an effort is made to integrate children into day-to-day business, and company members are not forced to sublimate their roles as parents.

The most important resource of a theatre company is its people. Sadly, it is also the resource easiest to stretch to the breaking point, due to the relative elasticity of company members and volunteer labor compared to more fixed resources, like financial income. But to do so without concern or forethought erodes the quality of the theatre's work environment, and is detrimental to the long-term success of the company. If a theatre company is to prevent this, the wellbeing and satisfaction of every member and volunteer must be a conscious priority woven into the entire culture of the company.

## CHAPTER 6

### COMMON CONCEPTS AND FINAL CONCLUSIONS

In Chapter 2, the framework for analyzing the sustainability of a theatre company's practice was introduced. In Chapters 3-5, some of the more notable specifics of the framework were explored. The intent was not to be exhaustive, but to offer examples of the sorts of issues that theatre companies face, and how they fit into the framework. But even in this relatively abbreviated format, the sheer array of topics can seem overwhelming, particularly for theatre company members who are actually attempting change centered on these topics. This is why the framework is so important and is the core of this thesis. If theatre companies are to effectively implement changes, they must first start with a clear and organized analysis of the general issues as well as their own specific conditions. The framework is the means by which the interviews and other research done for this work have been synthesized, but it is also the *result* of this research. The framework is meant to be a tool for theatre companies, a matrix into which a variety of concepts and issues can be plugged into and examined both in their separate specificity, and in their relation to each other as part of a larger network of ideas.

This inter-relatedness of issues is a very key point. As ideas are isolated, organized, and then connected with each other, synergies amongst the various areas of a sustainable theatre practice begin to emerge. There are four major synergistic behaviors that have been identified by this research. Each of them bridge the different areas and

levels of the analytical framework, and have applicability in a variety of situations. The first of these is:

1) Consciousness. The foundation for deliberate and positive change is lucid and nuanced understanding of conditions both as they are, and as they might possibly become. This may seem like an almost simplistic statement, but it is very easy to make unwise decisions based on faulty or incomplete information. And it is even easier to decide to do or change nothing due to uncertainty or a simple lack of awareness of options. No theatre company and its member will ever be able to accomplish a ‘total information awareness’, but any decision-making process, regardless of the specific issue at hand, will be improved through greater understanding. And as such, any theatre company or theatrical professional will benefit by engaging in their own research, analysis, and self-education.

2) Contribution. A vital element of a theatre company’s sustainability is the willingness and ability to regularly and honestly appraise the totality of contributions the company makes to their community, and to make improvements where possible. The most obvious contribution a theatre company offers to their community is the art they produce, and here a company must ask a variety of important questions: What are the demographics of our existing audience base? What demographics in our community are under-represented in our audience base? What are some of the barriers causing these under-representations, and can there be changes made to alleviate them? What could be the unintended effects of these changes on our existing audience base and our regular operations? There will be few simple answers to any of these questions, but they must be

addressed if a theatre company wants to improve their service to their community. And it is very important to note there are all sorts of ancillary benefits a theatre company can provide to their community, depending on how they operate. If a company makes positive changes in their ecological impact and then acts as a public example, that's a service to the community. If they involve themselves in the schools, educating young people in the arts, that's also a service. And if they use their facilities as a center for social activities, whether it's hosting community events or opening a small coffee shop, this broadens their offerings. Not only does expanded contribution benefit a theatre's community, in most cases the company itself will economically profit by improving or expanding the services they provide. Both theatre companies and their communities will see significant benefits by companies being flexible, creative, and constantly striving to improve the contributions they make.

3) Conservation. Conservation is a concept most typically applied to ecological issues, but as was seen in the above chapters, conservation affects many different aspects of the practice of theatre. Many theatre companies attempt to conserve materials or energy not simply because it's ecologically sound, but because it's absolutely imperative that the company does everything in its power to save money. So whenever a theatre company can become more efficient in its use of resources, it's a benefit to the theatre, in addition to any possible benefit to the rest of the planet. And this holds true of *human* resources as much as it does of material or financial resources. As was discussed in the last chapter, it's necessary for theatre companies to care for and protect its members and volunteers (which requires all members caring for and protecting each other) in order to

create a stable and productive working community.

4) Collaboration. In the past chapters, there have been many examples of opportunities theatre companies have to work with each other and other community organizations, in order to achieve more together than they possibly could separately. If companies can overcome any distrust or competitive feelings they have towards each other, they can then start creating systems for sharing equipment, costumes, materials, advertising, etc. This can conserve materials, save money, and deepen relationships within a theatrical community, increasing their ability to come together to organize and advocate for their shared interests.

The above discussion is just the surface of the possibilities these bridging behaviors raise for the practice of theatre. The central point is that by isolating, analyzing, and then re-connecting relevant ideas, theatre companies can develop personalized, practical, and innovative ways to enhance their sustainability.

The interviews gathered in the course of this research, along with all of the reviewed literature, are filled with examples of all of the many issues and challenges that face theatre and the live performing arts in general. These issues are so myriad, significant, and endemic that they can paint a very bleak picture of the current state and likely future of live theatre, particularly at smaller scales. But the interviews are also filled with instances of cautious hope, born out of the knowledge of the long history of theatre and its tenacity in the face of adversity, and its importance to society.

And so, it's a really interesting question, is theatre dying...is it passing? I think it could be the exact opposite. It depends on whether or not we as cultures – and we're talking about multiple cultures here, not just the Western cultures either – are going to lose our need for contact, for that reality of one human being in connection with another human being. Will people be satisfied with that distance, that certain coldness, that inability to have any real influence over what it is they are experiencing, whatever that medium happens to be? And I don't know the answer to that. But rather than being a dying art, it seems to me that we in theatre may be a relief from the other forms that are so distancing.

**-B. Cheyne**

I guess theatre is like a phoenix. It keeps rising from its ashes. And I think there are these blossomings of all this creative energy, all these new things going on. But things also tend to fade. It's a phoenix. I think we are definitely going through a kind of a trough right now. But you never know when you're going to have the next big thing and...then it blossoms.

**-J. Floss**

Several of the interview participants, particularly younger ones, pointed to what they felt is a crossroads theatre has arrived at, and that innovative opportunities for a reinvigoration of the arts have opened up and are already starting to be explored.

There's a revolution that is needed in theatre, that much is clear to me. It's clear when you go to Broadway, it's clear when you see *Guys and Dolls* at a community theatre in Anywhere, Kansas. I think starting small, and starting grassroots – I still like that word, despite it probably being used too much – is good. Because in order to shake the sameness away, you have to come at people, you have to come at yourself, in ways that aren't commonly used.

**-J. Morgan**

In the introduction to this work, a parallel was drawn between the challenges facing theatre, and society as a larger whole. Now, at the end, it's possible to see parallels between the solutions and innovations becoming available to both. The larger sustainability movement, as it continues to grapple with issues of ecological, economical, and social justice, can contribute so much knowledge and inspiration to theatre as it

struggles with its own adaptation to a changing environment. And models of sustainable theatre are obviously of value to theatre itself, but they are also of value to the sustainability movement as high-profile and public examples. Through the act of saving themselves, theatre companies have the opportunity to cast light on ways that human society as a whole can save itself, becoming, in the words of David Boyd, “beacons of the possible.”

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