

## AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE THEATRE PRODUCTION

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.

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)

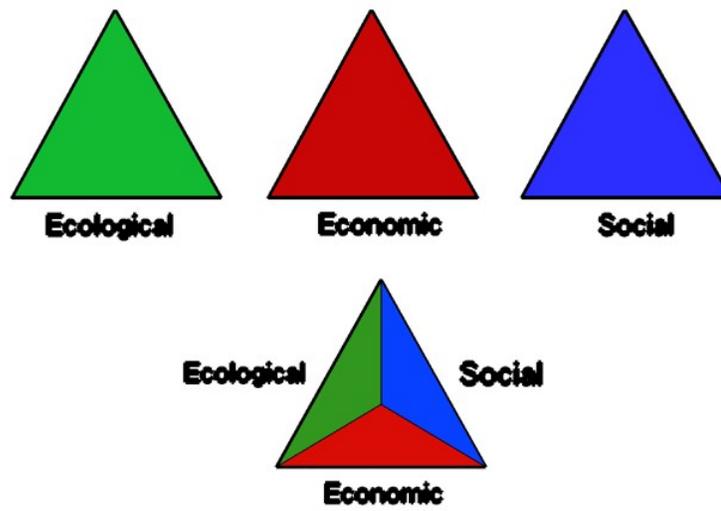


Figure 1

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)

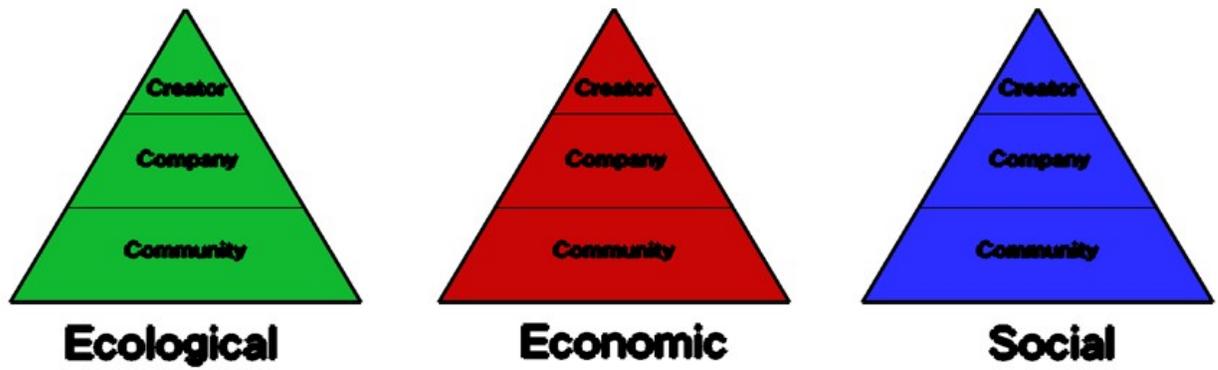


Figure 2

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:

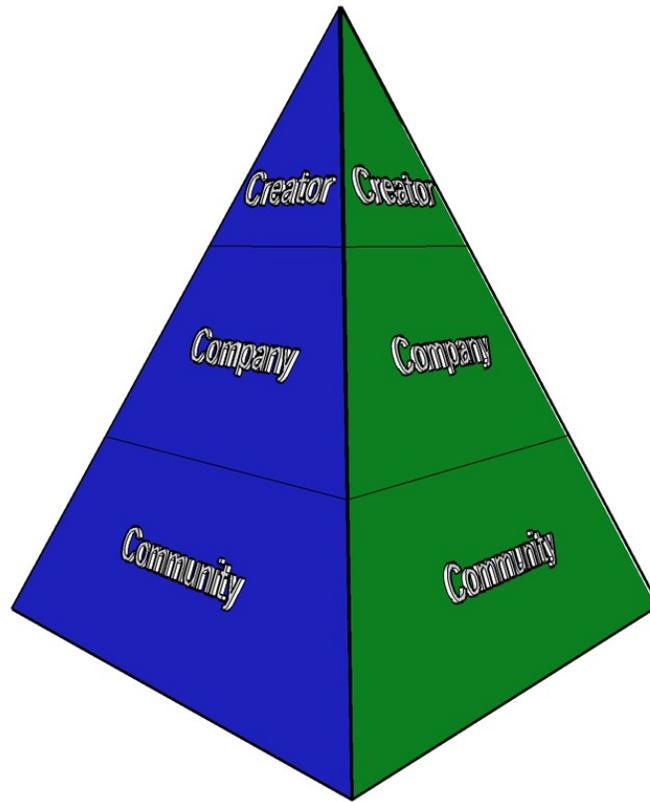


Figure 3

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.

## 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.”