



February 4, 2011

Rocco Landesman
Chairman
The National Endowment for the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Rocco,

I have admired your leadership of the NEA, particularly when you told a TCG gathering that your success would be measured by how much more money you were able to obtain for the arts! But I must respond to your recent comments regarding the notion of “over-supply” of not-for-profit arts organizations, particularly in relationship to the American theatre.

Given TCG’s role in the field and our longstanding partnership with the NEA, we urgently request the opportunity to sit down with you personally to discuss the issues you’ve raised. Between our research and our overall knowledge of the field, I believe that we could be an excellent resource to you. In addition, having been on the front lines in advocacy efforts on behalf of the arts for many years, we could also help strategize with you about approaches to some of the advocacy issues that we expect to face during the challenging times we’re in. I understand from your remarks that you want to create a comprehensive dialogue on this issue, so I hope this will add to the discussion.

Over the last 50 years, the not-for-profit professional theatre field has grown from a handful of resident companies across the nation to an estimated 1,800+. They are large, small and medium-sized. They have budgets ranging from a few thousand dollars a year to \$50 million. They employ 130,000 people and contribute \$2 billion directly to the U.S. economy. In the process of bringing stories to the stage, they employ actors, directors, costume makers, designers, stage hands, facilities engineers, carpenters, playwrights, fundraisers, teaching artists, musicians, composers, box office staff—and sometimes even lawyers. Community members volunteer as trustees, and audiences engage with the great stories of our time, both classic and new. The field has its roots in democratic practice and reflects the American spirit through its inventiveness and entrepreneurialism. Through our extensive and growing international work, TCG has witnessed that theatre is thriving across the globe, sometimes even playing a role in peace-building.

While I appreciate your desire to evaluate the overall arts ecosystem and determine the best ways to create a strong and healthy future, your focus on an over-supply of theatre *oversimplifies* the issues and has focused the conversation in a way that could be counter-productive.

In analyzing supply and demand, we have to take a comprehensive look at all aspects in the relationship to determine if there is an “over-supply.” In addition to attendance, other measures should include public support, the nature of the audience, the quality of the work, community partnerships and contributions to the field. If there is an assumption that there are too many arts organizations, then one has to consider: are there too many small organizations or large organizations? Small organizations tend to have the lowest volume of attendance and public support, yet they are generally the incubators for new artists in the theatre. A new small theatre company may only produce one noted work in three seasons, but the author of that work may go on to have a long career in the American theatre by virtue of that one production. So do we discourage new artists by reducing the supply of what appears to be marginal companies? As for large institutions, if the thinking is that there are too many large institutions soaking up dollars and audiences that could be better used elsewhere, one must consider the fact that losing large organizations would eliminate sources of meaningful paid employment for theatre artists. Furthermore, generations of theatre artists have had lives in the theatre due to the large resident companies in this country. As you well know, August Wilson’s career grew and flourished thanks to larger not-for-profit theatres.

At a time when our President is calling for innovation as a way to spark economic progress and competitiveness in the nation, the arts community offers both an opportunity and a solution. Theatre is a “Triple Threat” because it sparks jobs, creativity and citizenship—as demonstrated by the large overlap between participation in arts events and other social activities. Art works.

Among the topics our field could be exploring with our national funding agency are:

- How can we increase the number of job opportunities in theatres in order to produce more plays, employ more actors and other theatre artists, while helping the economy?
- What strategies are working to cultivate new audiences and how can they be replicated?
- How can we bring theatre and arts education more firmly into the lives of young people, knowing that there is a strong correlation between a drop in attendance

and a drop in arts education in schools? (We also can cite research regarding the relationship between arts and student achievement.)

- What sorts of strategic partnerships and practices can help theatres and artists evolve effectively in a time of enormous change and economic upheaval?
- How can theatres access resources in order to take better advantage of advances in technology and social media?
- Many theatres are actively engaged in their communities. What is the role of the arts in building strong communities and civic life? How can we establish a new set of metrics and criteria that captures the true relationship between arts organizations and their communities –and the value that they are creating on multiple fronts?

The NEA's recent *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* showed a decline in the percentage of the adult U.S. population that participated in the arts overall, from 41 percent of the population in 1992 to 35 percent in 2008—the height of the recession. In 2008, 59 million adults attended a play or musical, which was the largest number for any single art form, except for literature, and represented about 26% of the U.S. adult population. I understand this data comes from a supplemental survey to the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, which is currently not tracking all new art forms and ways of participating. It also leaves out major groups of participants. For instance, the study is based on adult attendance at arts events. It doesn't reflect the considerable participation of students and young people under 18.

A look at TCG's attendance research shows a strong correlation between higher densities of theatres and higher capacity utilization. Audience members and funders typically support more than one theatre, and it seems unlikely that fewer theatres would translate into more audiences and larger grants for those remaining. As stated above, fewer theatres could also mean fewer opportunities for artists, including for those working at different career levels and in different forms and aesthetics.

I would also comment that both the NEA and TCG aggregate data nationally, which is a helpful snapshot of overall trends and helps with national benchmarking. However, theatre organizations exist in local and regional ecologies, and theatres exist to serve artists as well as audiences. They are often started by artists who need places to do their work. New theatres form for a reason. Our communities have become so diverse that the needs of our communities can't always be met by just one or two organizations and require multiple perspectives. We do not currently have a reliable set of region-specific data to determine whether decreases in arts participation in one region or

locality may offset larger increases in other regions—or may be tied to specific factors, such as the loss of one large organization and its audience or a major funder. Our field has accomplished a lot in the fifty-plus years of the not-for-profit theatre movement. If you read *American Theatre* magazine—just the February issue alone—you will find how immensely diverse and wise this community is:

- There is a story of a young Muslim American writer, Wajahat Ali, who was encouraged by his teacher, Ishmael Reed, to write the next great American play about a Pakistani-American family. It was presented at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Nuyorican Poets Café and in DC at Atlas Performing Arts Center. It was also the first time a play was included in the literary journal *McSweeney's*.
- The magazine published the full script of the play *Detroit*, written by New Orleans playwright Lisa D'Amour, which premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre Company and will have a Broadway run in the spring.
- The Public Theater's involvement not only in presenting but in supporting the cause of the Free Theatre of Belarus, a group of artists who have been persecuted in their own country, a post-Soviet dictatorship, is highlighted. (Because they couldn't return home after their performances in New York, the Goodman Theatre led an effort to bring the company to Chicago for a month.)
- And yes, there is the story of Angelina Fiordellisi's decision to close Cherry Lane Theatre because she no longer believed she could fulfill her mission. Theatres do sometimes choose to close when the elements of audience, funding and art are out of alignment.

I would add the following important facts:

- A recent economic impact study, *Arts & Economic Prosperity*, published by Americans for the Arts, stated that the not-for-profit arts and culture industry supports 5.7 million jobs, a number which you've cited. However, 3.1 million of those are non-arts jobs that are supported by the not-for-profit arts sector—restaurant employees, parking garage attendants, hotel and retail store employees—and the report included research on event-related spending, which beautifully illustrates just a fraction of the valuable economic impact of arts organizations in every community.

- Not-for-profit theatres are among the most efficiently run organizations imaginable. The notion that there is an excess supply of theatre administrative personnel, as you claim, is not true. In the Survey Universe of TCG's *Theatre Facts 2009*, 112,400 out of 128,200 theatre workers (88 percent) are identified as artistic and production personnel. Part of the complexity of the field is that many of our artists are also administrators within their own organizations.
- The not-for-profit theatre leverages dollars into jobs and economic impact with tremendous efficiency. And almost all not-for-profit theatres are small businesses. If the NEA budget could be tripled (an extremely small sum in the federal budget) through challenge grants directed towards job creation and support for artists, the impact on the quality and demand would be enormous.
- Over the last 50 years, through the leadership of the NEA and others, the arts have become the fabric of American society. The facts are there, but we have not organized the data into a compelling narrative about the reach, economic impact and benefits of our work. I am confident that it will eventually happen so that we can celebrate the extraordinary supply of diverse artists and organizations that exist in this diverse and magnificent country.

I hope that we will not squander the chance to locate our national conversation about the arts, in the context of accomplishment, investment and opportunity. Again, I respectfully request that you find time in your schedule soon to sit down with TCG and a small group of leaders from the theatre field to strategize about ways that we can most productively address and leverage these opportunities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Teresa Eyring". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent than the last.

Teresa Eyring
Executive Director