Dissolving the Barriers

Theatre professionals discuss strategies for bringing artists, institutions and communities closer together

By Celia Wren

In a pointillist painting, dots of color coalesce to form an image. A similar process is at work in this country's cultural sphere, where myriad organizations and creative individuals make up the entity we call the American theatre.

Since its founding in 1961, Theatre Communications Group has striven to take regular stock of that entity's welfare, through initiatives such as field surveys and projects such as the gatherings of theatre professionals that led to Todd London's 1988 book *The Artistic Home* and Ben Pesner's wide-ranging 2006 report "Where Are We Now?"

Over the past year, with support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, TCG has done another round of checking-in, this time paying particular attention to the relationship between theatre organizations and individual artists. In an exploratory phase, in spring 2010, actors, designers, directors, dramaturgs and playwrights exchanged views in five teleconferences—colloquies that subsequently helped shape and inform a Field Conversations project, consisting of roundtable discussions, a survey, and a set of "Town Hall" meetings.

Kicked off in fall 2010, the roundtables in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York drew together a total of 154 professionals, including individual artists, leaders of TCG member and nonmember theatres, trustees and educators. Attendees shared accounts of productive and satisfying artist/organization synergy, and they mulled over—among other issues—the challenges that can affect such collaborations.

Then, in early 2011, TCG created a "State of the Artists" survey that went out to individual artists working, or seeking to work, in the not-for-profit theatre. The survey included questions about work life, compensation issues and the artists' relationships with organizations. More than 1,500 surveys were completed by actors, playwrights, directors, designers, choreographers and other creative folk, and Washington, D.C.– based research expert Mark Shugoll analyzed the results

Also in early 2011, TCG encouraged theatres to invite members of their local artistic communities to meetings focused on topics that surfaced during the previous fall's roundtables; hosts of these Town Halls forwarded summaries of the conversations to TCG.

These connected initiatives—amounting to an epic listening session—gathered a huge amount of material: hopes, observations, worries and ideas related to issues affecting the theatre field. In some cases, the dialogue touched on circumstances specific to a geographic region: For instance, the discussions in Los Angeles sometimes hovered around the issue of Hollywood's rapport with, and impact on, local theatre artists. In Chicago, there was much talk about the relationship between storefront theatres and larger theatre organizations.

But a number of themes sounded repeatedly regardless of geography. Not surprisingly, participants often referred to the impact of the economic crisis of the last few years. Many spoke of financial constraints: "In this economy, you want to stop worrying about day-to-day. You want to be able to dream again," as one attendee put it. Others were more optimistic, positing that the Great Recession has prompted artists and companies to become more creative, to get back in touch with fundamental values, and in some cases to become bolder.

"It might take us longer to produce each piece and get the support for it. But this moment is really a moment to go big or go home," one managing director said. "If we're not doing something that without question is deserving of support because it's so big, so ambitious, so needed, then why would anybody give us money?"

Barry Grove, executive producer of [Manhattan Theatre Club](#), suggested that the recession may have helped strengthen relationships between theatre organizations and individual artists.

"The thing that's been most exciting and reaffirming to see is how the artist and institution have continued to work well together in creating new work, despite reduced financial circumstances," he said. "We've actually found a common ground in trying to figure out how to do more with less. We can't take either side for granted at the moment, because everything is fragile—and yet, the fragility gives us a kind of ability to come together in a strong way."

Attendees at the roundtables certainly heard testaments to that strength, from descriptions of productive new-work labs and festivals; to a tale of a playwright who, during a residency at a theatre, launched a successful young-playwrights program at a nearby high school; to an account of a theatre's associate artists pitching in—of their own volition—to help fundraise for a critical challenge grant.

Many participants particularly stressed that long-term relationships between companies and artists are key to harmonious art-making. In a representative comment, a freelance sound designer noted that, as a result of the "really close relationships" she has developed with certain theatre companies over the years, "they understand how I work—and that has strengthened our process."

An artistic director spoke of how a commitment to working with artists over a span of years has allowed her company to make the play-development process less frustrating. "We started saying, 'We're not cultivating and developing work we're not going to do'—which allows the artists to believe in us. Even if we're not able to do it the next week, they know the show is going to get done," she said.

In a leitmotif that would not have been heard 10 years ago, a number of roundtable participants described how recent new-media phenomena—including hyper-popular social media outlets—are helping artists and organizations work together to realize creative visions, promote productions and bond with audiences.

An artistic director recounted how, by employing Internet-based strategies, artists have boosted audience engagement at her large, high-profile company.

"The artists have been very, very helpful...contributing to our blog and our website" with material like videos and interviews, she said. As a result, she added, the artists have become "much more a part of the face of the theatre."

Sean Daniels, associate artistic director of [Actors Theatre of Louisville](#), described an online strategy his company uses. "One of the things we try to do is connect our audience to our artists, and the main way that we do that is by getting out of the way," he said. "We encourage people to post questions for our actors directly to [our Facebook page](#), and then each week we record the actors' responses to those and put them up on Facebook." Members of the community then can respond in turn, creating a powerful artist-audience connection.

Kristin Marting, co-founder and artistic director of New York City's [HERE Arts Center](#), says her organization has adopted a comparable tactic, "connecting audiences directly with artists without the institution being the middleman. So on our site, resident artists each have their own page, and they're in control of putting up their own information, whether it's photos from a recent rehearsal, or video," or blog entries. Audience members can post comments.

"You can connect the artists to your community in a way that is fulfilling for them, so they don't feel they're just guns for hire, and in a way that lets the community feel the artists on stage are really people they identify with," Daniels says, explaining the approach. "That kind of sustained engagement between artists and community is just as valuable to the institution as trying to connect with the artists or with the community on its own."

Of course, the Field Conversations project also allowed people to air concerns about certain aspects of the artist/organization relationship. Some roundtable attendees suggested that artists have too little say in theatre companies' values, programming, operations and planning. Others were uneasy about the financial welfare of freelance creatives, who may have trouble simply making ends meet, and who may be tempted to leave the field in order to acquire enough financial security to pay off loans, support aging parents and/or start a family.

"I think the whole under-payment of artists is still a taboo subject," a lighting designer commented.

Adding to the delicacy of this issue is the perception among some people that theatre organizations choose to invest in administrative salaries, say, or buildings, instead of dedicating more resources to artists. (According to the most recent edition of TCG's [Theatre Facts](#), the percentage of theatres' expenses taken up with artistic payroll dropped .9 percent below inflation over the five years that saw the worst of the recent recession; the percentage of administrative payroll, by contrast, held almost steady during that time. During this period, some theatres responded to economic stresses by trimming staff. On average, the total number of paid artists at theatres hovered between 101 and 105; the number of permanent administrators fluctuated between 32 and 35.)

Some people involved in the Field Conversations connected this scale-of-payment phenomenon to flaws in theatre organizations' values and governance structures.

"There's a fundamental imbalance in power, authority and voice between individual artists and the theatre organization," opined one long-time theatre trustee. "That not only affects the artist's life, but over time, it affects the allocation of resources. And we're under-investing in the art, because the artists don't have enough voice in the theatre organization."

But others noted that the administrative payment issue is related to more basic matters, such as the shortage of qualified candidates for critical administrative jobs—a shortage that, in turn, drives salary levels.

Moreover, others pointed out, theatre organizations require a certain level of resources in order to be able to commit to art and artists. "In the attempt to pay the actors something close to living wage, you have to have marketing and development personnel that are on full-time staff—who end up making twice as much as the actors will make if they're employed 52 weeks out of the year," a theatre leader observed. "But if you take them away, we can't pay the actors."

The artist/organization rapport isn't entirely about pocketbook issues, of course: For instance, a dramatist at one roundtable spoke about the pressure writers may feel to put their own artistic vision on hold while penning scripts suited to a commissioning theatre.

A subjective and emotional dynamic comes into play, too—a critical one, given that art flows from the interior life, and the self-confidence, of its creators. Individual artists don't like to feel that they are replaceable cogs conscripted for a production; they want to feel a certain degree of ownership in the art that's being conjured into existence—and some artists at the roundtables wondered whether theatre organizations could do more to make ownership possible.

But the survey data suggests that artists are, overall, generally less concerned about the ownership question than they are about a different issue: the role of networking in professional life. In order to get a job, they feel, they need to know the right people.

Of survey respondents, only 25 percent feel that, when working at a theatre not their own, they are considered "jobbed-in talent," rather than partners. A larger number—36 percent—think that theatres do want freelancers to feel ownership in the art.

Only 13 percent of freelancers think being treated as "jobbed-in talent" keeps them from doing their best creative work. By contrast, 68 percent of all respondents feel that their creative potential is hampered by the difficulty of getting jobs without knowing "the right people."

Could the tensions that complicate the artist-organization continuum be related to shifts in the national zeitgeist? Susan Medak, managing director of [Berkeley Repertory Theatre](), thinks so.

"For the last 15 years or so, we've been in the middle of what I think is really a demographic debate," she comments. "We had a generation that created organizations capable of offering living, if limited, wages for many theatre practitioners; one of the reasons we did that was that, for many years, the people starting theatres had a strong faith in the value of organizations. That demographic was followed by a generation that,

as a group, has been known for its distrust of institutions. That demographic divide has really colored this conversation about institutions and artists."

Insofar as there are strains between artists and organizations, participants in the Field Conversations project had suggestions for easing them. In an oft-sounded motif, many people suggested that greater transparency on the part of theatres would help artists feel more comfortable with organizational processes.

For instance, when the issue of cash-strapped artists came up, a director of new-play development remarked that theatre staffers often have modest incomes, too.

"Nobody doing theatre makes money," he said, going on to hypothesize that some feelings of frustration would ease "if we were to have more transparency with artists and say, 'Here's what the budget is....You can see how much health insurance costs. You can see how much we're paying just to have a van we can use to bring the props from one space to another.'"

"The theatre organization has much more information than the artist does," a composer and performer agreed, pointing out that "many artists have never seen a production budget. So there's all this information about money and how the production gets done that artists are never privy to." Sharing such info "would lead to a much better relationship between the artists and the organization," she said. (In a figure that may support these calls for financial transparency, 61 percent of artists responding to the survey said that, when working on a show, they would like to know the full production budget.)

Looking at the other side of the coin, an actor-playwright thought that individual artists, too, could help foster openness. "When both artist and organization are really transparent about expectations, numbers and possible directions a project could go," the relationship can work "brilliantly," he said.

In one specific strategy for fostering openness, an artistic director spoke of underpinning each artistic collaboration with a positioning statement—an "evolving document" that discusses "all the different types of people that you think should see this work...what you think the work is, and why you believe in the work."

To keep artists and organizational staff on the same page, some people suggested building systems for ongoing evaluation into theatres' operating procedures. A designer talked of working at a theatre where, after each production, there is a formal debriefing session to discuss what worked and what didn't. An artistic director said that each program at his play-development center was assessed every year by artists, with the result that artists experienced a "sustained support of their idiosyncratic visions."

The calls for transparency are, essentially, calls for dissolving some of the boundaries that may traditionally have separated the field's administrative and artistic sides. That notion of barrier-shattering turned up again and again during the roundtable conversations.

Some people suggested bringing artists into strategic and season planning, administrative day-to-day routines and board meetings. For instance, one managing

director said that including actors in company planning "really changes the way everyone views everything and makes the company much stronger."

"Artists can contribute a lot more in an institutional way than sometimes they're allowed to," one theatre's artistic associate noted.

"Wouldn't it be great, as an artist, if I was in your marketing discussion when it first happened?" another participant wondered aloud.

"We need to ask guest [artists] to be in our board meetings, even if it's just 5, 10 or whatever minutes you can allow," said one producing artistic director, calling such attendance a key way "to get trustees to be involved with the artists."

Howard Shalwitz, artistic director of D.C.'s [Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company](#), is a big proponent of boundary-dissolving. He speaks of the "inherent artistry" of institutions and of the importance of "drawing artists into the institutional challenges and imperatives of keeping the work alive." With this philosophy, Shalwitz says, Woolly has created a new staff department, called "Connectivity," which bridges art and management. The department's job, in part, is "to look at each play and say, 'Who's the audience we want for this play?'—not in terms of how much money they can pay or 'How can we fill seats?' but to make the conversation the playwright wants to have. Who would have special interest in it? Who needs to hear it?" The department also thinks about "the total audience experience—what is the information the audience gets in its pre-show e-mail? How does that send them to the blog? What chances do they have to engage in conversation after the show?"

Shalwitz says the new approach "has been a big game changer," helping artists and staff realize they're "engaged in the same enterprise."

But if inclusive conversations and game-changing new departments can strengthen the artist/organization bond, so can more informal activities. Looking back on his days as a freelancer, one artistic director recalled how valuable it had been to him to hobnob with staff at the theatres he visited. "I would walk the administrative offices and production offices and just chat with people and get to know them," he recalled. The practice "gave me the confidence of the leaders of the institutions" and in turn "built great confidence in me," bolstering his creativity.

These proposals for dissolving the barriers between artists and theatre organizational staff point toward a broader theme that cropped up repeatedly in the conversations: the benefits of cross-fertilization. People spoke with enthusiasm about reaching beyond the theatre world's traditional borders, citing invigorating experiences teaming with people and groups in other cultural and civic sectors—museums, musicians, educational institutions, teams of medical students, a mariachi festival, a piano bar.

Looking back on the roundtable she attended, Raelle Myrick-Hodges, artistic director of San Francisco's [Brava Theater](#), said in an interview that she was struck by how many attendees seemed to feel as she does with regard to outside-the-box collaborations. (Brava, for instance, works with performers to help prepare them for shows at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), she said.) "It's really important for theatre companies

to be working outside [the theatre field], as well as inside," she said. "Once you start working with an education program, or a job-training program, you are also enlightening them as to what we're contributing as an organization—which they might never have known about." She adds, "By doing that, we have opened up who our audiences are."

David P. Saar, founder and artistic director of Childsplay in Tempe, Ariz., says that, partly in order to facilitate partnerships, his company is "fundamentally changing our business model, from looking at seasons to looking at projects." A project might be a production, a new marketing initiative, or a new fundraising event, but in each case a team consisting of artists and staff will "track that project through its life," he says. "And each team is charged with trying to locate community partners that might make the project ultimately less completely dependent on box office." (In an example of productive partnering, when staging *A Little Bit of Water*, an original show about ecological issues, Childsplay teamed up with Audubon Arizona.)

A commitment to community seems to underlie many of these cross-pollinating initiatives, and indeed the Field Conversations project turned up evidence that, in the words of one artistic director, "individual artists and theatres are engaged in a pretty vital conversation about where theatres live in their communities."

Discussion at several of the Town Halls, in particular, focused on issues close at hand, in some cases prompting calls for more neighborhood give-and-take and tighter bonds between local artists and companies—big and small. A Town Hall held at one theatre produced an informal proposal for a local "guild" that could nurture partnerships and promote a sense of community, through a website, a system for providing discounted tickets to artists, and other means. At another Town Hall, dialogue about cross-sector collaboration and community partnerships led to the intriguing observation that "unusual spaces for performances attract unusual audiences."

(Many of those who participated in the Town Halls seemed to find them valuable catalysts for important community dialogue. TCG is encouraging groups to hold another round of Town Halls to discuss, among other topics, the contents of this article.)

Some kinds of community transcend geography, of course: In another recurrent theme, roundtable participants talked about how the broader community that is the American theatre can benefit from the practice of mentoring. Some people suggested expanding the "mentorship" concept to include established companies nurturing younger ones.

A managing director of a large company spoke of the "wonderful experience" of hosting a production by a much smaller troupe. The arrangement "was a huge success for both sides, mostly in the way it raised our sights about audience," she said. "Audiences came to see them that wouldn't have otherwise."

Even the loan of space—to individual artists, or to young or struggling companies—can be a kind of mentorship, some people pointed out. (Though, admittedly, the lending theatre organization may risk losing control of its image and branding as artists with different aesthetics move in.) Some companies are already putting that concept into practice: "We just bought a new facility that's significantly better than what we had before," the development and marketing director of one company said. "And to kind of kick that off, we decided that we would do space grants to young artists. So, we're

actually putting out an RFP...and we'll give space for a certain amount of time, maybe a couple of months, and a $1,000 grant to artists to develop new work."

Needless to say, many other topics came up during the Field Conversations project. Some people wondered whether the field has been too willing to accept mediocre art—a practice that, they speculated, could undermine the art form's broader image. "We are all responsible for the quality control" of the field, an artistic director and actress noted.

Of course, implementing quality control could be a tricky business. "Who is deciding what's good?" a playwright asked, pointing out that theatres can have radically different aesthetics.

Some of the discourse about excellence and aesthetics focused on the idea of artistic risk, and on the role of daring creative visions in a society that values growth and financial stability. "In the artistic field, when we think about success, we think about innovation—we think about the ability to take risks," a producing director said. "And so there's this kind of inevitable tension between wanting to be maverick and wanting to be mainstream."

"Risk is a word that's thrown around too much, I think," an associate artistic director of an established New York company suggested, offering another perspective. "Especially when you're at a larger institution, it's more a question of responsibility. I'm very aware that when we put something on the stage, if it does really well, everyone is going to want to do it. And if it doesn't do well, no one is really going to want to do it. And I think that responsibility is even as weighty as the risk."

The conversations often recognized the slipperiness of language. The word "success" may mean different things to audiences, artists and organizational staff, for instance. A summary of one of the Town Halls pointed out that "language matters," and went on to hypothesize that "terms like want, nonprofit, unearned income and budget can hurt the work in the rehearsal room, administrative offices and the board room," whereas the alternative terms desire, social institutions, contributed income and blueprint of values might be more helpful.

The subject of devised theatre—theatre created through a group's collaborative process, as opposed to work that's based on a single playwright's text—came up at a couple of the roundtables, with a number of participants asserting that the genre has gained new prominence and earned new respect in recent years.

Participants also spoke passionately about other concerns: diversity issues; the pros and cons of local casting; the steady erosion of arts journalism; the particular needs of emerging artists; and the importance of articulating the value of theatre to the wider public.

As TCG executive director Teresa Eyring noted in her introductory remarks to several of the roundtable discussions, the Field Conversations initiative has been, in some sense, a launching pad. Over its 50-year history, TCG has put together a relatively wide-lensed picture of how theatre organizations have evolved, financially and structurally, but it doesn't have a consistent body of research on the nation's largely freelance community

of theatre artists. The Field Conversations project represents a step towards rectifying this imbalance.

The roundtables and Town Hall findings suggest that, while there is some frustration in the field about the artist-theatre organization dynamic, there is considerable respect and good will on both sides. If everyone puts a premium on honesty and transparency, solutions may be within reach.

"Nothing is simple or obvious or fixed," a longtime theatre trustee wrote in an e-mail that elaborated on one of the roundtable discussions. "We are a complex group of artists, administrators and community members working together to try to create the best theatre we can. All we can really do is try to point out imbalances that creep into how we work together, or the changes in attitudes and values that affect how we work."