

Mapping a New Landscape

By Ben Cameron

As we begin this brave new millennium, TCG is happy to offer you *The Field and Its Challenges*, an examination of the issues that face the American theatre today-the product of five focus meetings across the country, a facilitated discussion at the San Francisco National Conference last June, and a national survey of TCG and non-TCG theatres.

A proper measure of our growth can be gained by reading this new report alongside *The Artistic Home*, TCG's attempt to define field issues in 1987. Such a reading reveals some rather profound and surprising differences.

Perhaps the most dramatic shift is in the emergence and impact of technology, which is influencing the way we do business-opening e-commerce and advertising opportunities-but also influencing our allocation of resources as we invest in both the technology itself and the personnel to manage it. We are also increasingly aware of technology's impact on our audiences, as competitive entertainment and as a shaper of perceptual frameworks. What are the implications for our field-long a teller of linear, narrative stories-if our audience increasingly operates from a visual, associative framework of perception?

Given the growth of the not-for-profit theatre field from fewer than three dozen professional groups in 1961 to more than 1,200 today, it is not surprising that we are now witnessing our first collective, large-scale leadership transition, as founders leave the field or retire. Concerns about succession and developing new leaders are strong.

Many of these 20-to-40-year-old theatres are now facing capital issues, as facilities have fallen into disrepair, building codes have changed (remember asbestos?) and as new artistic leaders find that their aesthetic aspirations warrant new/refurbished/additional spaces. More of our theatres are confronting the prospects of major capital campaigns, often asking whether they would be better served to relocate rather than renovate.

Given the confluence of the increasing financial needs and the increasing emphasis on serving our broad communities well, maximally functional board relations are ever more critical. In particular, board recruitment and communications are more at the forefront of concerns.

The discussion of diversity a decade ago was dominated by racial issues, and those challenges remain squarely before us: While theatres reported varying degrees of success in serving more diverse audiences, no one reported a sense of satisfied accomplishment. Indeed, there was general agreement that we still have far, far to go. At the same time, the discussion of diversity has shifted to embrace issues of age and generation as much as race, while issues of gender, sexual orientation and physical ability still tend to remain, unfortunately, on the peripheries of discussion.

Concern for the increasing vulnerability of "midsize" organizations is louder. While there was no consensus on the reasons for this new vulnerability, we heard repeatedly of the

growing gap between the largest organizations and the smaller ones. The field is tending to polarize in budget size, and midsize groups are disappearing with distressing frequency.

There was at least one element striking by its absence from discussion: protracted agonizing about the National Endowment for the Arts, a topic that a decade ago consumed many of us. While we worried in the 1980s that our fates were inextricably linked to the health of the agency, we have for the most part managed to survive, even as federal budgets have fallen and as the NEA has shifted its focus from the "life's blood" of general operating support to its current focus on project support. Whether through creativity, flexibility, imagination, resiliency or just plain stubbornness, theatres have found new ways to achieve annual solvency. And there is a sense that under Bill Ivey's leadership, the Endowment may be poised to regain a measure of stability.

But plus ça change, as the saying goes—in too many ways, we remain saddled with certain chronic problems, challenges that have plagued us throughout our collective history. Foremost among these issues are artist and staff under-compensation, organizational under-capitalization and social resistance to controversial work, all of which have been discussed in *American Theatre* editorials over the last year. It is not surprising, given this combination of chronic and emerging problems, that respondents to our survey identified "creation of new work"—including resources to facilitate new work, promoting understanding of the value of new work and the ability to cultivate new voices—as their most pressing concern.

Attention is always paid to how arts organizations meet new challenges; clearly, leadership will fall to those who creatively confront these emerging issues while fashioning theatres flexible enough to grapple with issues we cannot even foresee. Who among us 20 years ago would have foreseen the impact of the Web on all we now do? But it will also fall to those who resist complacency, who refuse to equate "chronic" with "inevitable" and who refuse to rest until these long-term obstacles are overcome. Balancing the short and the long term, nurturing the artistic spirit and organizational health, learning to embrace service to community and service to the art form as synonymous are the tasks that lie before us. They are tasks that we must all rush to embrace.