

TCG Fall Forum 2008

Radical Shifts: Governing Ahead of the Curve

Closing Remarks: *Observations* by Kate Warner
(artistic director, Dad's Garage Theatre Company and TCG board member)

Sunday, November 9, 2008

Kate Warner:

Good morning. I'm Kate Warner, artistic director of Dad's Garage and member of the TCG board, and I have been given the dubious honor of attempting to sum up what we've experienced here together by providing you some of my observations from this weekend.

I run Dad's Garage along with Lena Carstens, our brilliant managing director, and we like to say that at Dad's we've been consistently exceeding your low expectations for years. So please let me now try to lower your expectations of these observations, except to say these will be brief and you will all make it to your flights or matinees on time.

I came to the Fall Forum because I am looking for perspective on our current times, to provide a lens to my organization, like our theatre can provide a lens to our audience. So in looking for a framework for these observations, I referred back to our title. And while I do agree that "shift happens" would have been a perfectly appropriate title, *Radical Shifts: Governing Ahead of the Curve* did communicate to me that we would be hearing from big thinkers and experienced colleagues on how we would move from crisis to opportunity.

Radical Shifts also made me think of biologist Stephen J. Gould. Any Stephen J. Gould fans in the house? In his book, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, which is a real bodice ripper, he posits "punctuated equilibrium," which I will horribly distill here as the idea that evolution or change does not happen gradually or smoothly, but rather in rare and radical bursts away from stasis. Wikipedia it; it's good stuff. *Governing Ahead of the Curve*, of course, brings the responsibility back to us to be proactive, to be responsive but not just reactive.

We began our gathering on Friday evening with Mark Halperin, who spoke to us with what I call "Yes We Did. Now What?" That while what happened on Tuesday is obviously extraordinary and historic, now the real work must begin to rebuild leadership and trust through a cooperative transition and bipartisan solutions. And by the setting of priorities that must be acted upon quickly. Several of us then continued serious conversations at the bar of the Algonquin Hotel.

Teresa welcomed us Saturday morning and reminded us of the three priorities voted on and highlighted in the Town Hall forum at NPAC in Denver this June of advocacy, arts education and diversity. She also posed this question as we started the day, “How do we articulate a value proposition in a difficult economy?”

Janet Babin from *Marketplace* joined us with incredibly complex and depressing detail of how we got here. Janet proposed action steps for not-for-profits during the sub-prime crises that include becoming profitable (*Laughter.*), strengthening relationships with current allies, communicating our value and staying focused on our mission. The question that was asked with no clear answer is, “What does rock bottom look like? Are we there? When will it get better? 2010?”

A panel of our colleagues spoke to us of staying on mission and not diluting our distinctiveness. David Hawkanson suggested we build a team to own the challenges and to think in two month or quarterly strategies. Ryan Rilette spoke of planning for the worst case scenarios at all times. He would know. Molly Smith reminded us that in chaos it’s possible to get at what really matters. Megan Wanlass-Szalla shared the important notion of involving the ensemble of artists into the solution with the example of asking their designer to be a philosopher for their next project.

If we lean into conflict and not away from it, we can shift crises to opportunities and this ability to shift reminded me of a very unique part of our culture at Dad’s Garage that comes from our background as an Improv theatre and that is the foundational concept of “Yes, and.” “Yes, and” is the primary building block for collaboration onstage. You offer an idea and I say “Yes” to it. No matter what, saying “No” is not an option. I take your offer, say “Yes,” and return the offer to you after building upon it. And so on, and back and forth we collaborate to tell a story. And while failure in Improv is an option, if the fundamental collaboration of “Yes, and” is enacted, failure is near to impossible. So I was thinking of that.

Rory MacPherson came to remind us of the resources we have in the Wallace/Rand reports to better understand our audiences. He asked us to elevate the importance of marketing our organizations by treating it at the level we treat our art. Susan Booth distilled it for me further by saying demographics seem less important than psychographics as we try to create an experience of how the audience wants to see themselves.

After lunch someone at my table said, “I smell workshop,” and we did so—painlessly. I won’t distill those conversations here since we will be receiving transcriptions of the many notes. Other than to say the over-riding theme I heard several times was that we must enter our communities and be

learners so that we can find catalytic ideas that will allow us to communicate our value across several audiences/communities/stakeholders at once.

Then, and I'm going to get in trouble for this, but bless their hearts, a panel of older white men came to tell us why newspapers are becoming irrelevant. (*Laughter.*) I think the important point is that forms of social media are developing so rapidly, like Dan Shelley said, that we are functioning in dog years if we try to be prescriptive about one form of social media utility vs. another. More importantly, we must approach how our audiences get their information with a true openness and willingness to be interactive in engaging our customers. We also learned that Zell Miller has no right thumb? I also, as several others suggested, recommend hiring someone in their early twenties to help navigate what's current in terms of social media utilities. They can also provide you with helpful phrases like, "Wow, the year you graduated high school was the year I was born." (*Laughter.*)

This morning some brave early-risers met with Jim Steinberg to continue yesterday's discussion. Our panel discussion on diversity presented info on changing populations in NYC and U.S. Ninety is the new 60 and the change in our national identity is an un-ignorable fact, not only for our identity but for our theatres. The panel spoke of building critical mass for diversity initiatives, which means consistent hard work and requires the support of infrastructure. Tim Bond told us of changes at Syracuse Stage and tensions between, not only ethnicities, but also ages, and preparing new audiences for what they experience at the theatre. Casey highlighted why it's so very important for us to reflect what our communities really look like. It seems self evident that, as Mia and Tim said, we will have no future if we do not reflect who we are.

Jim updated those who slept in about the 30,000 foot view discussion of, "Are we looking at a retrenchment of the old economic model" vs. "Are we looking at how to frame our resources in a new economic model to fulfill our missions?" Are we looking at more or less theatres existing in the next five years? We don't yet know or agree.

Marc Masterson led our distinguished panel on philanthropy to help us understand their strategic concerns and to hear their advice about deepening your current relationships with funders, strengths they are looking for and to seek out new opportunities for greater professional development and innovations. And it's going to be tough.

In conclusion, I want to share a Louis MacNeice quote that I use to describe the collaborative action between an actor on stage and the audience—to keep the energy going is a complex relationship of openness of holding on and letting go. "Remember when we were children, the game of holding on

to someone while spinning around, the balance cannot live in the one or the other. It must exist in the space between the two.”

This next year is going to be tough. I have to believe we will get through it. Look around you right now, every person in this room is a resource to you. The incredible staff of TCG is a resource to your organization. So be proactive, build your teams, collaborate and be open to letting some things go and breaking some old rules. Hold on and focus your mission so we can stay vital and sustain the relevance of our organizations, our industry and our art form. Thank you very much.