Closing Plenary Speech

By Ben Cameron

When we first met on Friday night, we began by articulating the difficulties of the current times—noting the drops in corporate contributors, government and foundation funding; indeed, not only the chilling 1.2 percent decline in overall charitable giving, but also the 25.6 percent decline in giving to arts and culture.

That said, even amid these dire numbers, there were at least two statistics that jumped out at me and gave me hope:

- Audiences grew. We can take immense pride that TCG Member Theatres gave 63,330 performances to more than 18 million audience members and employed 42,000 artists, administrators and production staffs—a pivotal piece of the 32 million people who attended theatre in all its various forms (commercial, community, avocational, etc.,) in the last year.
- And in stark contrast to trends in the foundation, corporate and government sectors, individual giving soared. Five years ago, trustee gifts at TCG Member Theatres covered 2.6 percent of expenses; last year, they covered 6 percent, a more than 100 percent increase, led in part by an average $9,999 dollar gift to the annual fund. (Oh, for that one dollar more.) Five years ago, "other" individual (meaning non-trustee) gifts covered 7 percent; last year, they covered 14 percent. In sum, there was a shift in individual donations from 9.6 percent to 20 percent in a five-year span.

In essence, while we may despair behind closed doors about our increasing sense of irrelevance, our audiences are telling us proudly that we do have meaning in their lives—and that they will rise to the challenges of supporting us at unprecedented levels if only they are asked.

While we are deeply, deeply grateful for this financial support—especially from our trustees—board service increasingly requires yet another level of involvement. As many of you have heard me say in forums or board retreats, in this climate of changing winds (a particularly apt metaphor for this weekend in New York), the spirit of board service has changed.

In the earlier era of the field's history, board service meant insuring fiduciary responsibility; hiring, counseling, retaining and/or firing the CEO (however you define that); monitoring ongoing performance; renewing yourselves through board performance reviews and recruiting your successors; adopting long-term strategic directions and objectives; and insuring that the necessary resources—human and financial—are in place to do the work. These board responsibilities are eloquently articulated by William Bowen in his book Inside the Board Room. Typically, these duties implied service on a committee or two, attending a few meetings, writing a check to the organization, and coming to a dinner every year that allowed the staff, in some small way, to genuflect and pay thanks for all the board member has done for the organization.

All that has changed. On the one hand, those duties are still the focus of board work. Yes, we still want you to come to those meetings. And can you serve on three
committees instead of one? And absolutely yes, we want you to write us a check (and please make it an even bigger check than before). And yes, come to dinner and let us say not only thank you, but also thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you.

Yet, it's no longer enough to be a supporter in order to warrant a place on an arts board. Now arts board service means being an activist on behalf of the organization.

An activist board member writes letters to the editor, especially in those times when support for the arts is under attack. As I learned from my years at the NEA, especially in those times, the voice of the artist is perceived as too self-interested to be heard (a rejection typically expressed in the contrast between the arts community and "the American people"). In such times, it is the doctor, the lawyer, the stay-at-home mother, the local business executive—in essence, the board member—whose voice is heeded when ours cannot be.

Activist board members actively participate in lobbying. They know the old maxim: no legislator understands an issue until a voting constituent explains it to him or her. The activist goes to city hall, goes to the state capital and, if possible, goes to Washington, DC, to lobby for arts support.

Activist board members take a kid every time they go to the theatre (unless there is specific content that is not suitable for children). We know that any adult with a lifelong relationship to the arts will cite an important encounter he or she had before the age of 18: if we haven’t engaged someone by then, the chances that we will engage him or her as an adult are negligible. Even better, an activist board member takes a kid and a kid’s friend, know that lifelong arts allegiance is actually the result of two co-factors—parental example and peer reinforcement—and that the latter is actually more important.

The activist board member accompanies the theatre staff on funding calls. As a former funder, I can say that it was painful but not especially difficult to look across the table and tell the arts professional that there simply weren’t enough funds. Yet when I looked across the table and saw, not only the arts professional, but also a local board member (especially one who had a relationship with my CEO), somehow the funds were found.

Activist board members are not afraid to leverage resources through creativity and passion. Many of you have heard me talk about my experience on the Minnesota AIDS Ride, an annual charity event that I used to do when I lived in the Twin Cities. Every spring, I’d make the rounds to friends and acquaintances, asking them for pledges to support my ride to Chicago. Every July, I’d saddle up and peddle the 500-plus miles to raise money for HIV prevention and services.

There were two requirements for the riders: you had to be at least 18, and you had to raise a minimum of $2,500—no cash, no ride. One year, I was peddling along beside an 18-year-old kid in the middle of Wisconsin. When I looked down, I saw this yellow blur on his wheels—he told me that this blur came from post-it notes, each wrapped and fastened around a different spoke. (And not for the purposes of making sound, as some of us used to do as kids with playing cards and clothes pins.)

"Okay," I asked, "what gives with the post-it notes?"

"Well," he said, "I'm 18. I knew I had to raise $2,500, and I've never raised a dime in my
life. So then I got this idea that if you pledged me at least $150, I'd make you a spokesperson. Each post-it note has the name of a different donor on it, and when I get to Chicago, I'll dismantle the wheel and give each of my supporters his or her own individual spoke."

That kid raised $17,000. And if an 18-year-old kid who has never raised a dime in his life can raise $17,000 through creativity and commitment, there is no limit to what an activist board member can achieve.

Admittedly, we are in seismic times. With our hands outstretched, we can appear to be one of those in need. Activist board members will remember that we have been granted not-for-profit status—not because of our commercial appeal or our ability to entertain—but because of the social, the educational and the cultural contributions that we make to our communities.

Activist board members, indeed, remember that the entire not-for-profit sector was created to address the problems and issues that government and the for-profit sector could not or would not address.

Activist board members also know that even as our increasingly fractious world and deeply problematic fiscal policies threaten to create communities in which none of us will want to live; theatre is not part of the need. Theatre is a vital part of the solution.

The activist board member is armed with the vocabulary to speak, not merely about the quality of the work, but also about the value of the work itself—a larger purpose that theatre allows us to pursue.

For instance, many of us will cite the educational achievements of arts students—the improvement in SAT scores, the enhancement of self image, the growth in complexity of thought, tolerance of ambiguity and rigorous self-discipline that the arts promote—all achievements that we can substantiate with studies from Stanford, Harvard and MIT, among others.

Also others will cite the work of Richard Florida, whose articulation of the vibrant civic community of the future is centered in the Creative Class—a group in which the artist is the super creative core. Note the progress Florida has made with visionary government leaders around the country—powerful arguments that complement the traditional economic impact studies many of us already have.

Still others will cite notions of community image, of livability, of civic pride. Especially in an age of increasing homogenization—an age in which those of us who travel increasingly encounter the same Starbucks, the same Barnes and Nobles and the same Hiltons no matter what city we are in, it is the arts that confer distinction on a community. It is South Coast Rep that makes Costa Mesa Costa Mesa; the Guthrie, Theatre de la Jeune Lune, the Children's Theatre Company and a host of other vibrant theatres that make Minneapolis Minneapolis; the astounding Dell' Arte Company of Blue Lake, CA, or the thrilling Roadside Theater of Whitesburg, KY, that define each of these communities.

And I must remind us: of all the events that are slated to transpire between now and our 2004 Fall Forum next November, none has greater significance than the national presidential election. Regardless of your party affiliation, your candidate affiliation or your
point of view, this election provides us, not merely with the opportunity, but also the responsibility to remind legislators, potential legislators and voters that the arts are more than entertainment: we are important civic assets that warrant investment and cultivation. Activist board members will speak with every legislator and every potential legislator to remind him or her of this importance.

But if we are serious about making this case, we must move beyond the traditional pattern of delegating advocacy to the management leader. I would challenge every board to embrace, without reservation, its role in advocacy—to recognize that they have the power to speak and to make the cultivation of relationships with legislators and potential legislators a serious priority, to initiate letter writing campaigns and op-ed pieces, to go *en masse* to the city hall AND the state capital AND Washington, DC, to make their case first hand. I would challenge every theatre leader to think about the possibilities of transforming our buildings from theatres to civic centers, making theatres voting and polling places, reinforcing our civic connections on voting day; to dedicate an hour or more of rehearsal time to laying out the issues for our actors—many of whom have no concept of the significance or role of contributed income or the government’s role in it—but who have wonderful opportunities to make our case as well; to more strategic and courageous thinking in helping our audiences understand our role as not-for-profits and our contributions to our society at large. Moving forward on advocacy issues cannot be delegated to managers alone; think of the advances that we can make if only we mobilize all the assets that we have—managers and artists and audiences and buildings and boards.

Frankly, these are all things I had prepared to say, even before we convened two days ago—and I believe in them deeply. Yet, the weekend has turned out to be provocative one for me as I hope it has been for many of you. As we pull into the home stretch, I want to think out loud a bit more, in hopes of stimulating a different discussion than the one I have heard before.

Now may be a good time for timorous managers to seize their trustees by the hand and sprint for the elevators.

The weekend has reminded me, not only of the challenges inherent in our advocacy during these most perilous of times, but also of the messages that our past failures in this arena represent—a kind of feedback about how others perceive us and the degree of value they attach to our work.

When Mark Moore used four tables to embody the four forces that must collude to establish public value—the organization leaders and boards who define, the audiences who affirm, the staff who execute and the supporters/shareholders who support—his failure to define a role clearly for the other 25 tables may have been more resonant than even he intended—an embodiment of the huge majority of "all those people over there who aren't interested" as he called them.

Even while we spend hours publicly placing ourselves in Anne Howden's growth stage in the life cycle of not-for-profits—a public position essential to galvanizing support from a variety of sectors—most of us might well admit behind closed doors that we fear that we are in a field thoroughly immersed in the stage of decline—a stage that points either to the possibility of turnaround or to the downward slide to termination.
Each of our plenary speakers charged us in this moment to pay attention to those not engaged in our work—Mark's "all those people," Clara's injunction to re-imagine our core business to reach new shareholders, and perhaps most powerfully Anne's characterization of specific cycle elements—the role of inward, almost incestuous listening in the stage of decline versus the careful attention to external markets that defines the stage of growth. Indeed, I wonder what these groups of "others" currently see when they see us as a field, what they hear when they hear our messages, what they experience as they cross our thresholds should they be bold enough to do so.

On the one hand, we tell them that their time with us will be an adventure: unique, vibrant, once-in-a-lifetime—indeed, no two performances are the same—and unforgettable.

But if we can put ourselves in the position of those newcomers for a moment, what might we experience?

We enter a lobby, relatively well lit (in most cases), often decorated in a kind of inoffensive industrial business chic. We see ushers, often clad in muted colors, sometimes in a kind of dress-coded uniform of sorts. We see head shots of the actors we’re about to watch and pictures of scenes we’re about to encounter. There’s precious little other sensory stimulation—no music, no distinctive lighting, and certainly no differences (save for the head shots and production shots) should we choose to return for a second production—an unalterability that already mitigates our claims about the uniqueness and difference of every production.

There’s clearly a dress code at work here: while never explicitly articulated, it’s a different style of clothing than we’d encounter from the exact same people at a sporting event or rock concert.

At a predetermined signal, the doors open, lights blink and bells ring, signaling our need to move into the performance space proper. An usher hands us papers to read, enjoins us from carrying food or drink inside (and woe to those who even think about gum or putting their feet on the furniture). We’re told when we may enter, when we may go the bathrooms (and if we go outside of this pre-ordained schedule, we risk not being re-admitted), and when (and how) to express our appreciation.

We see reverential divisions between those empowered to speak (on the stage) and the rest of us, empowered only to listen—a division between authority and the unenlightened. And if the performance seems even slightly complicated, we may be subjected to authorities who appear after the event to harangue us for being too stupid to truly appreciate the piece we’ve just experienced.

In short, we’re back in school—and probably more like the school of 1955 than the school of 2003.

We know that the single biggest indicator for attendance at a not-for-profit performing event is educational level—the higher up you’ve gone in education, the more likely you are to attend the theatre. Until this weekend, I had always presumed that the connection in some way reflected the intellectual nature of our work—that theatre, as a form, is inherently concerned with ideas and will most likely attract those people who have given most of their time to the pursuit of intellectual excellence.
Now I'm not so sure. Could it be that the link exists because in subtle and profound ways, we are re-creating school—that those individuals who are most likely to attend are precisely those who have flourished in the very environment we've now re-created?

Make no mistake about it—our not-for-profit status is contingent on the educational contributions we make to our communities, but has this emphasis led us into dangerous alleys of self-piety?

What audiences may want—what Mark openly said he wanted, what Susan Booth's audience in Atlanta craved; indeed, what all of you clearly wanted on Saturday morning as judged by your overwhelming response to the style of Anne Howden's presentation—is fun.

Should we admit that we have conflated our seriousness of purpose with an inappropriate seriousness of experience?

Should we admit that we have internalized a larger Puritan conflict over whether fun should be supported at the public trough to our own detriment?

Indeed, can we re-seize the fun that characterized the "idea" and "start-up" phases of the life cycle but that grew increasingly muted as we inched toward "maturity" (much less toward "decline")?

Can we consistently find the fun that Susan Booth noted as pivotal to the success of Crowns—the gospel choirs, the hat makers, the extension of the play into the lobby, the emphasis on an experience that begins to make our promises of distinct and unique theatre adventures true in a complete and genuine way?

Let me be clear: I am NOT talking about dumbing down the material or shying away from difficult or even just serious work. But if Susan is right that we attend the ball game less for the nine innings than for the whole experience (the hot dogs, the cheering, the sunshine, etc.), can we follow this and seize the lesson that sports offer us—that discipline, rigor, pain (emotional and sometimes physical) very often are at the heart of the experience but that allegiance happens if the surrounding context invites and nurtures a true sense of engagement, of delight?

If we're serious about recapturing this fun, it will mean an absolute reexamination of the entire theatrical experience—the way we extend the production into the lobby and make the lobby as variable as the play, the way we use music and sound and light, the curtain times we are willing to call, our traditional prohibition of food and drink, the ways we invite socializing and conversation—indeed, perhaps banishing the word "education" in our thinking and replacing it with "engagement."

Nowhere do I see this lesson more clearly than in the explosion of hip-hop and the emergence of a new aesthetic form. Hip-hop is a fantastic experience: it is as rigorous, as ambitious, as filled with provocative and difficult ideas as any traditional theatre piece, as informed by craft. It cannot be dismissed on aesthetic grounds in any way, nor should it be slighted for its failure to conform to older practices. But for all the wonderful things it is, there is one thing it is clearly not.
School. There is no way that the environment of a hip-hop event recalls school, not even the school of 2003.

And look at how packed those events are, the thousands of kids who come—the very kids that we despair we cannot reach.

Perhaps we need to educate less and engage more.

As I said, this idea is all of 24 hours old, and I’ve been thinking out loud in ways that I might later regret. But whether you agree with this thinking or not, we are here because we care passionately, deeply about the theatre. We are united in our belief that there is something special, something unique in what we do, and ultimately we gather around an event conceived, organized and executed by artists.

In that sense, artists always have the first word, and as always, they should have the last.

Jeanette Winterson, in her essay "The Secret Life of Us" published in the London Guardian in November 2002, made the most compelling case of all. She writes:

Art is a different value system. Like God, it fails us continually. Like God, we have legitimate doubts about its existence, but like God, art leaves us with footprints of beauty. We sense there is more to life than the material world can provide, and art is a clue, an intimation, at its best a transformation. We don't need to believe in it, but we can experience it….

When you take time to read a book or listen to music or look at a picture, the first thing you are doing is turning your attention inward. The outside world, with all of its demands, has to wait….

Art can offer no obvious return. Its rate of exchange is energy, for energy, intensity for intensity. The time you spend on art is the time it spends with you…. Art can't change your life—it is not a diet program or the latest guru—it offers no quick fixes. What art can do is to prompt in us authentic desire. By that I mean it can awaken us to truths about ourselves and our lives; truths that normally lie suffocated under the pressure of the 24-hour emergency zone called real life. Art can bring us back to consciousness, sometimes quietly, sometimes dramatically, but the responsibility to act on what we find, is ours….

There is a different way, and it's not a William Morris utopia or an Omega workshop niche, it's a celebration of the human spirit. Art reminds us of all those possibilities we are persuaded to forget. Peace or war, we need those alternatives. And we have never needed them more than now.

As always, it has been our honor to be with you for these past 42 hours or so; the hand of friendship from TCG is outstretched whenever we can be of service to you in any way and at any time. God speed you in your travels and bless you in your work. We are adjourned.