



Case Study Follow-Up Report



Theatre Communications Group (TCG)'s **Audience (R)Evolution** program, a multi-year project funded by the **Doris Duke Charitable Foundation**, studies, promotes, and supports successful audience engagement and community development strategies in the U.S. not-for-profit theatre. The program has grown to include reports, case studies, convenings, grants, blogs, and videos, all available on the TCG website.

Building on the 2013 case studies, which were based on audience engagement and community development findings of **AMS Planning & Research**, [this follow-up report](#) re-visits seven of the eight original not-for-profit theatres studied and includes a mini-report on two additional organizations selected by TCG.

Audience **(R)**Evolution



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Hattiloo Theatre
MEMPHIS, TN



ENCORE! ENCORE! SPOTLIGHTING TWO ADDITIONAL THEATRES

The original eight **Audience (R)Evolution** case studies described work at theatres selected from various geographic regions and comprised companies of various budget sizes and aesthetics. But our field is a vast and diverse one, with audience engagement and community development taking many different forms at companies across the country. So in the summer of 2018 the TCG leadership selected two additional theatres to add to the pool: **Hattiloo Theatre** in Memphis, Tennessee; and Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island.

I connected by phone with Ekundayo Bandele, founder and CEO of Hattiloo Theatre. The Memphis company is a leading Black theatre with a \$1.7 million annual budget that has become a model in how to build cross-sector partnerships to both engage their community and ensure sustainability for the organization.

What follows is a look at some of the strategies this company has brought to bear in approaching community development and audience engagement in a broad sense.

CASE STUDY

In the dozen years since its founding in 2006, Hattiloo Theatre has grown from a three-person operation at a 75-seat venue in a small storefront in the Edge District of Memphis into a major player in the city's cultural scene. And as the only freestanding Black repertory theatre in five surrounding states, Hattiloo has developed a strong regional audience as well. The company's founder and CEO, Ekundayo Bandele, oversaw Hattiloo's 2014 move to a newly-constructed, debt-free facility in the city's Overton Square Performing Arts District. The move followed a \$4.3 million capital campaign that also established a \$500,000 endowment. A second campaign in 2016 funded the construction of a new Development Center.

In addition to its mainstage work, Hattiloo offers high-quality, free programming and performances staged at its venue and throughout the city. Hattiloo also operates the Hattiloo Technical Theatre Center, which offers low-income local youth free workshops in the technical theatre arts; and HattiHouse, a residential space for guest artists and interns. In May 2018, following its production of *Jitney*, Hattiloo received the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* August Wilson American Century Cycle Award, which honors theatre companies that have staged all 10 plays of Wilson's epic cycle. The company hosted the Black Theatre Network's annual conference in the summer of 2018.

Based largely on my conversation with Bandele, I have identified four strategies that inform key elements of the company's audience engagement work.

Strategy 1 - Create more opportunities to give community members direct access to artists

Strategy 2 - Serve Black audiences in Memphis and beyond by producing work and civic conversation that speaks to and elevates voices from the Black community.

Strategy 3 - Invite audiences to experience Hattiloo as a place for public discourse.

Strategy 4 - Create a technical theatre program for local youth.

Of the five **Audience Engagement Strategy Clusters** developed by **AMS Planning & Research** as part of the original **Audience (R)Evolution** overall research effort (see "Research Approach" in the [2013 case studies](#)), those in alignment with Hattiloo's efforts were Segment (#2, above), Venue/Path (#1 and #4, above), Relationship (#1, #2, and #3, above), Income (#3 and #4, above), and Content (#1, above).

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Strategy 1

Create more opportunities to give community members direct access to artists.

The center of Hattiloo's audience engagement work is giving community members direct access to artists and building relationships by engaging members of the community around those artists. "We put them in the same room as artists who can inspire and teach them," Bandlele says. "Otherwise they can only grow as large as their own imaginations." Giving people direct access to artists is an investment in creating and sustaining theatergoing in Memphis, as well as a community of what Bandlele refers to as "engaged citizens."

That investment has taken numerous forms, and it involves not just artists whose work appears on the Hattiloo stage as part of its regular season of plays and musicals, but many others as well. A recent example is the Memphis Black Artists Summit, which took place under Hattiloo's auspices in the spring of 2018. This day-and-a-half long summit put local artists and community members in the same room with notables in various fields including music producer David Porter, film director Alton Glass, stage and screen actor Harry Lennix, writer Jeffery Renard Allen, and painter Floyd Newsom. The event also included panel discussions with artists, philanthropists and arts funders, as well as a breakout session to identify next action steps for the local Black artists community. The modestly-priced event included attendance to Hattiloo's production of *Jitney* (scholarships were available as well). "We didn't do [the Summit] to make money," says Bandlele. "We were investing in the culture brain trust of our city."

Similarly, Hattiloo offers a free film series, with titles that tie into the theatre's mainstage productions. And the company's Speakerbox series is a monthly event to showcase Black Memphis musicians. "Theatre can embrace other forms, complementary disciplines, that speak to a large audience," says Bandlele, pointing to the success of the program in drawing an audience whose primary entertainment and cultural interests may not otherwise include Hattiloo's programming.

Hattiloo's home city hosts a thriving arts scene, but it is not spread evenly throughout the metro area. "There are cultural deserts in Memphis," says Bandlele. "We're working to build relationships with citizens in those areas." So, for example, the Hattiloo at the Library (HAL) program takes shows out of the Hattiloo building and presents work in other Memphis neighborhoods. This traveling performance series is tailored to youth in the greater Memphis community, to bring artists to "where the people are." In partnership with the Memphis Public Library, HAL provides access to theatre and performance to underserved youth at various library branches throughout the city. The performance includes a short, interactive and kid-friendly production, a talkback with the actors and program facilitator, and interactive activities.

Strategy 2

Serve Black audiences in Memphis and beyond by producing work and civic conversation that speaks to and elevates voices from the Black community.

"Because we are a Black repertory theatre, we want to make certain we serve that segment of the community," he says, pointing out that although Memphis boasts a great many thriving cultural organizations, few of them are identified as Black. Hattiloo's website speaks of its work as revealing the "inner soul" of the Black community. "Our plays are for some people a means of self-examination; and for others they are eye-openers."

Bandlele has written, "Hattiloo gives Blacks a stake in this city and tangible proof of their current, ongoing contribution to the art scene here. Vicariously, through Hattiloo, the Black community can give. That's huge...What can the black population put their hands on and say, 'This is our contribution today; we can share this with you. Come to my house, and let me feed you'? Hattiloo—outside of just the arts—is something the black community can touch and say, 'This is our contribution to Memphis.'"

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The above-mentioned Black Arts Summit and Speakerbox series are part of this strategy, and are also part of a longstanding commitment to building relationships with leading national Black theatre artists. Those relationships keep Hattiloo at the center of a national conversation about Black theatre, and also give the Memphis community access to leading national voices in this area. Memphis-born playwright Katori Hall served as artistic director of the company in 2017. Every year Hattiloo commissions two local painters to paint a notable Black thespian. The portraits hang in the theatre lobby, with recent examples including August Wilson and Suzan-Lori Parks. "So we're speaking to audiences through [visual] art, too," says Bandele.

Though Memphis is a majority-Black city, the theatre's new building is in a predominantly white neighborhood. It's a vibrant cultural district with three other theatres nearby, but "historically, Black people didn't feel comfortable there," Bandele says. "So we had to go the extra mile to get Black folks into our theatre." How? As do many other companies, Hattiloo leverages partnerships with local organizations as a key element in community development. The theatre works closely with local churches, fraternities and sororities, and social organizations such as the Red Hat Society. The form of the partnership varies from organization to organization. Alumni nights, especially with Lemoyne-Owen College, a historically Black college in Memphis, have proved particularly rewarding to both parties. "Lemoyne needs scholarship dollars," he says, "so we help them fundraise" by donating five percent of certain productions' net box income to the college. "That turns alumni into advocates for Hattiloo," he says. Other local organizations have been the beneficiaries of donations, with similar results. "If we're going to spend money, I'd rather spend it on relationships than on advertising," Bandele says.

STRATEGY 3

Invite audiences to experience Hattiloo as a place for public discourse.

Likewise, Bandele is clear about the role of Hattiloo in the Memphis cultural landscape. "Our theatre is a place for public discourse," he says. Though often anchored by the work on stage, this strategy extends beyond the play or musical in question to encompass numerous events, mostly free, that invite members of the community to actively participate in conversations on issues of local and national importance.

Like many theatres, Hattiloo offers post-show discussions (Bandele explains, "We call them 'call-and-response talkbacks,' which resonates with our Black community"). But Bandele also brings up a free public discussion Hattiloo hosted in May 2018 around two recent hit music videos, Childish Gambino's "This Is America" and Jay Z's "The Story of O.J." Moderated by a hip hop activist, the lively discussion drew an audience that was mixed in terms of race and age, Bandele reports. He makes it clear that these events are not about listening to what experts have to say, but about creating a forum for two-way conversation. "Theatre is at the crossroads of art and expression. Don't just focus on the art," he says. "Give people a safe environment to express themselves. That's what we're doing at Hattiloo."

The theatre also programs panel discussions associated with every production. The events are free, as part of what Bandele calls an effort to "meet people where they are" economically. The panel discussion programmed to complement Hattiloo's staging of Tom Stolz's gospel musical celebration *Mahalia* in August 2018 was entitled "Memphis Women of Gospel Music" and featured gospel music legend Deborah Manning Thomas. The theatre offered attendees the option to purchase discounted \$10 tickets to the show (another free event included a screening of the film documentary *Mahalia Jackson: The Power and the Glory*). Similarly, in conjunction with Dominique Morisseau's *Sunset Baby*, locals could attend an open conversation with three children of civil rights icons, Rosalind Withers, Cardell Orrin and Kamillah Turner, about how growing up in a civilly-active home affected them as children, and today as adults. Another open public discussion tackled the subject of gentrification, timed in conjunction with the theatre's staging of the musical *Raisin*.

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STRATEGY 4

Create a technical theatre program for local youth.

In 2016, Hattiloo entered into a \$1/year lease with the City of Memphis to convert an 8,000-square-foot former Head Start school into the Hattiloo Technical Theatre Center. The "Techiloo" program engages local youth from the Hollywood community of North Memphis. "The average household income for the area is just over \$6,000 a year," Bandele says. "It's crime-ridden and economically depressed."

The center is for "individuals who can walk to it," Bandele says, emphasizing its connection to the neighborhood. Techiloo students take part in free workshops in the technical theatre arts ranging from sewing costumes to building props and painting scenery. Participants develop artistic, practical, and team-building skills, as well as a sense of pride in themselves and their community.

The students receive practical training from professionals who work at the theatre; they experience first-hand the results of their labor when they attend Hattiloo shows via free tickets. "They see what they built on our stage," Bandele says.

"It's all part of our mission. To develop Black theatre, you have to develop the community," Bandele says. Not only does the program open future academic and employment opportunities, but it also fosters a sense of pride in self and community, and plants the seeds for meaningful, long-lasting engagement in the arts.

PARTNERSHIPS

Many of Hattiloo's audience engagement and community development activities involve partnerships with other Memphis organizations, both within and outside of the performing arts community. In addition to the aforementioned work with Lemoyne-Owen College, Bandele tells me about a partnership with Memphis' Mid-South Food Bank. The theatre offered a portion of the box office for *Mahalia* to benefit a church-based program called Manna Outreach, which supports the food bank. And he mentions a now three-year-old partnership with a local resource called Out 901 that has forged new and stronger relationships with the LGBT community centered around "A Night Out at Hattiloo" events.

In the works are producing partnerships with local organizations such as the Metal Museum, a local attraction devoted to exhibitions of metalwork and public programs featuring metalsmiths. "We're talking about doing [the musical] *John Henry* on their property," says Bandele. "And we're talking with Opera Memphis about a co-production as well." These partnerships are valuable not just because they expand the company's audience pool, Bandele says. "When we do these partnerships, both organizations get to stretch their art from to better fulfill their mission. A collaboration that's easy really ain't worth the work." Bandele points out that partnerships have to be well-conceived to be successful. "Being equally yoked is critical," he says. When it comes to all aspects of producing, onstage and off, "clear definition of roles is critical" and best worked out well in advance.

OBSTACLES

Despite the amount of free and low-cost programming Hattiloo offers, cost is still an issue in a city beset by poverty. "Our tickets aren't that expensive at \$35, but to low-income neighborhoods that's a lot," Bandele says. "We're always looking for opportunities to make theatre more accessible." As with many companies, Hattiloo offers pay-what-you-can performances—but at Hattiloo, they're called "pay what you want." Says Bandele, "This may be semantics, but it empowers the patron who wants to experience the excellence in performance and customer service" they will find at Hattiloo.

Bandele points out that funding is a perennial issue for his and the few other freestanding Black theatres currently operating in the U.S. "We say we need \$10 and we get \$7.50. Black theatres get just enough to fail." He points out that

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culturally-specific companies are largely under-resourced, and are thus often hard-pressed to compete for limited resources with larger peer organizations that are perceived as having broader audiences. When we speak he mentions the recent loss of a six-figure annual door—but he adamantly refuses to dwell on the negative. “We know our capacity, what we’re good at, and what we need to be better at,” he insists. “I’m not going to be organizationally jealous. Of course we still have our aspirational events and programs, which we will do one day. But now I’m focused on the bread-and-butter of what we do well.”

LESSONS LEARNED

I asked Bandele to share some of the most important lessons he has learned in his dozen years as the driving force behind Hattiloo. Specifically, how has he successfully created deeper relationship with members of the community? “By keeping your word, you earn public trust,” he says, citing the theatre’s recent \$4.3 million capital campaign for its new building, which opened on time and with no debt. “So we raised an additional \$1 million in a month—because we had kept our word.”

“Keeping your word” informs all the consumer-facing operations of the company. The theatre has a clearly articulated snow policy—“If public schools are open, we’re open.” And management insists that the staff adhere to a same-day email reply policy. At Hattiloo, all performances start on time, and latecomers are not admitted. “Keep your word,” Bandele repeats. “If you say your show starts at 7:30 but you start at 7:45, you’re breaking your word.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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For more information on TCG's **Audience (R)Evolution** program please contact AudienceRev@tcg.org or visit www.tcg.org.

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For over 50 years, **Theatre Communications Group (TCG)**, the national organization for theatre, has existed to strengthen, nurture and promote the professional not-for-profit theatre. In all of its endeavors, TCG seeks to increase the organizational efficiency of its member theatres, cultivate and celebrate the artistic talent and achievements of the field and promote a larger public understanding of, and appreciation for, the theatre. TCG is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. www.tcg.org

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