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CENTERPIECE FOCUS ON: GOVERNANCE

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ENDURING PARTNERSHIPS

BY JAAN WHITEHEAD

As our theatres move into second, third and even fourth generation leadership, old partnerships are ending and new ones beginning. It is a good time to explore what makes a creative and enduring partnership among an artistic director, managing director, and board leader. How do they interact? How do they treat each other? How do they address problems and work through differences together? How do they lead the institution together? These are some of the questions we wanted to explore.

To do this TCG's Jennifer Sokolov and I visited the leadership of McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey and asked them a series of questions about how and why they thought their partnership has been successful. Emily Mann, the artistic director, Jeffrey Woodward, the managing director, and Liz Fillo, former board president and now chair of special gifts for McCarter's new capital campaign, all came to leadership positions at the theatre within a year of each other. Emily was hired in 1990 and Jeffrey 1991. Liz became president of the board in 1991 after serving on the board for three years and also performing at the theatre as an actor in the 1970's and early 1980's. The three of them inherited a theatre in debt that was plagued with low morale and a host of staff and board problems. Working together they turned the theatre around, building a strong board, an effective staff, and an exciting artistry. Although Liz has moved on to the capital campaign, the deep bonds of respect, affection and shared achievement among the three leaders was a living presence in the room when Jennifer and I were there.

The McCarter Theatre for the Performing Arts was founded in 1930 by Princeton University as a home for its Triangle Club, the student theatre group that still produces an original all student-written musical each year and has featured students such as Joshua Logan, Jimmy Stewart, and Brooke Shields. After a number of incarnations of the building, in the mid-1970's the University decided that the best way to operate the theatre was to turn it over to an independent organization. This was the beginning of McCarter as we know it. It is now a major theatre center with a budget of around eight million, a five-play season, and an additional season of music, dance and special events that the theatre books as a presenter.

Governance *Centerpiece* curator: Jaan Whitehead, Trustee, Living Stage.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH EMILY MANN, JEFFREY WOODWARD AND LIZ FILLO

AS CONDUCTED BY JENNIFER SOKOLOV

Jennifer: Obviously your collaboration has been incredibly successful. What elements of the partnership between the three of you have made your relationship work over so many years?

LIZ: First of all, we're friends. I'd never served on a board before I began at McCarter so I had a lot to learn. But Jeff started when I did, and he'd dealt with boards. I knew instinctively that he was going to lead me, that these two were going to do exactly what had to be done, and my job was to keep everyone out of their way. They liked that a lot.

Jennifer: If you had to pinpoint some of those things that he taught you?

LIZ: Well, first of all, I came from the theatre side of things. I had an artistic sensibility when I took the job, which was lucky. I had a sense of what Emily was doing, and what the process was. What I didn't know was how to administer a theatre and how to run a board. Jeff really held my hand. He taught me about the function of committees and committee structure. I respected what he was doing and just let him do his job.

Whenever people ask me to speak to boards, I always start by saying hire the best people you can to run the theatre and put the best work on the stage, and then get out of the way. You cannot micro-manage, and you cannot make artistic decisions. Jeff helped me to know that, too, in a deeper way.

So for me, it has been, more than anything, fun.

JEFF: Liz has fond memories of what was a difficult time in 1991.

EMILY: Out of what was actually a very, very rough first year, management consultant Bill Wingate helped make the change that introduced us all to Jeffrey, who came in on his white horse and helped to save the day. We were able to get Liz to agree to come on as board president, and then the work really began.

But it was really our production of *Three Sisters* that I think turned around a lot of things in this theatre. It played to a hundred percent capacity: it brought us a new cachet and a higher level of performer to the stage. The production was well received and it began to steer the board, the audience and the staff in a direction that said, okay, this is the way we're going now.

We had a rocky first year. But I do think that each one of us was able to do our jobs well. We got out of each other's way, and we also supported each other. That's where I think the friendship comes in. It was an effortless support. I mean, I will ask Jeff as much about what play I should do as I will about audience development. We all talk about what each other does, and there's a bond. There's no defensiveness. There's just support. And the same thing goes for the staff. There is no backbiting or talking badly about each other. We don't do that here. None of us likes that or tolerates it on any level of the organization.

JEFF: I think the three of us...we're pretty straight arrows. The board does not get involved in artistic matters here at all. No one has ever called me and questioned what we're doing artistically. And we do plays and present events that sometimes are extremely challenging.

LIZ: It takes enormous trust and respect on everyone's part.

Jennifer: Can you speak more about that crucial time when the three of you came on board? How did you facilitate such a massive institutional change?

JEFF: It just sort of happened overnight. And in some ways, what happened at McCarter has been repeated all over the country. Institutions know they're in for a change, but they don't quite know what that means. And in McCarter's case, it was a very significant change. Immediately, what was expected of the staff and the board was more work. It was difficult: money had to be raised. The kind of board that McCarter had when Emily arrived was not the kind of board that could support what she wanted to do with this institution, which was to raise it to be in the top ranks of American theatre. And what Liz did was take a very neighborhood-based board — I mean, we literally had seven or eight trustees who lived on the same block — and transformed it into an active board in terms of fundraising and advocacy for the institution.

A highlight of Liz's early tenure was a letter she wrote to all the trustees saying here's what I need from you as a member of this board. I need you to attend meetings, I need you to serve on committees, I need you to give money to the institution, I need you to raise money for the institution. If you cannot do this, please resign.

It was a very bold statement and it shocked people. Some people left, either immediately, or within the time their term expired. And we started to build a very different board; one that has really served this institution well, that more accurately represents the audience of McCarter. We didn't have a board that was geographically diverse, and that's one of the things that we started to go after. We did not have a particularly diverse board racially. We did not have a board that represented the corporations that are based and headquartered in New Jersey. It took years to do. Liz built a completely new foundation for this theatre.

EMILY: And the work on the stage reflected that. It was an absolutely different repertoire. I just came in and said, at the first interview with the search committee, if you want this to be a theatre of the first rank, then it's going to take a lot of time, a lot of effort, and everything has to change. And they all said, oh yes, we want this. And I remember thinking, do they know what they're in for? But they all said yes. And I must say those who backed what the program was going to be, and it really was setting the bar very, very high on all levels, those trustees stayed. That audience stayed, and I was very happy to see the audience that left leave.

JEFF: It wasn't about throwing the keys to Jeff and Emily and letting them run. It was making the decision to transform the institution, and then standing up in front of our community and saying we're changing.

Jennifer: So now, these many years later, what are the significant creative achievements that have resulted from your work together?

JEFF: One thing that's unusual about McCarter, and Liz again had a lot to do with this, is that there is a great relationship between the staff of this theatre and the board. What occurred in that first year when \$500,000 of state money was lost, was that the building was being renovated, and the opening was delayed by construction costs so the theatre was bleeding financially, and the board didn't know it. The majority of the trustees had no idea the theatre was really having difficult times until Emily told them. All of this was in the middle of her first year. So, when I was interviewing for the job, everybody looked at me and said you are going to tell us what's going on, right? And I said, yes. And that was the beginning of a different kind of relationship. I have conversations with Liz, and now with our new board president every day about what's happening. Sometimes he and I even talk about the minutiae, just so he's aware of what's really going on.

Liz also made it a point to have the board and the staff be more comfortable with each other. It's not rocket science. She hosted parties in her home and encouraged the staff to go. She said hello to everybody and developed a first name

relationship with all of the department heads. Everybody knows Liz here. And a lot of the senior staff have ongoing, sometimes daily communications with trustees. Emily and I, we are not the only people who speak with this board: we probably have a dozen staff members that are constantly talking with them. So it's not just one person doing all the communication. I think that's been a key to our success: there really is a partnership here. The staff respects the board and has no problem picking up the phone and calling for advice or a favor, or help with a fundraising visit, or whatever the need is. That's what the board should be doing.

LIZ: I tried very hard to make the board understand that the staff is not here to serve them. We're here to serve each other. I really wanted the board to feel this is their home.

Jennifer: When you're bringing new board members on, how do you bring them into the fold?

LIZ: First of all, we make sure that they have a passion for the theatre. That's been established now as a guideline for any new trustee. If they don't love the theatre, they don't belong here. We talk to them before we ever offer them the nomination and define what they're interested in. We always sit down with every prospective board member and tell them more than they ever want to know about McCarter, and what we expect of them as board members. At the first meeting, there's an orientation at the theatre. We go to all the offices, and they're introduced to all the staff members. This is not like sitting on a corporate board. This is where you come to laugh and be entertained, to be excited and inspired. This is the fun part of life.

EMILY: But they work hard.

LIZ: Oh yes, they do. You work hard for something you really care about. I also make sure they understand that they are the link with the outside world. If I ever heard a trustee talk negatively about a production, it would just send me through the roof. I know they're not going to like every production. I don't like every production. Sorry Emily. But there's something important about every production, and that's what we bring out to the community.

JEFF: We've actually started having a dinner for the first trustee meeting every year and that way new trustees quickly get introduced to the group. Sometimes it's frustrating for newcomers, because we do have forty people so they have to show some initiative on their own. We also have a nominating committee which discusses how trustees are working out, who's active, who's not, and why. We really try to make it a joy to be a trustee here, the best part being what you get when you go into the theatre and see the work on our stage.

I think the staff has felt supported by the board, not only in terms of people getting to know them, but also in terms of

improved benefits. In the last five, six years, the board has pushed for higher salaries and a pension program.

EMILY: It's made a huge difference in the morale of this staff.

Jennifer: Is there a formal trustee review process?

LIZ: Oh, yes, there is. And we use it. I think a lot of boards are afraid to do that.

Jennifer: How does it work?

LIZ: We have three-year terms. The key is to really look at the end of three years at how effective that board member is. I have written a letter on at least one occasion that did not invite someone back. It was sort of a shocking thing to do, but if you don't effect this kind of evaluation, you then risk accumulating an awful lot of deadwood on boards.

JEFF: In the case of one individual, that decision cost us a lot of money, too.

LIZ: We were pressured to put that trustee on for financial reasons. And I said to Jeff, I feel like a prostitute: I don't think this is going to work. The money was there, but it was three years of hell. So I think boards have to be very diligent about that. And it's not always easy, particularly when you have the kind of board where you're bringing on your friends and your social acquaintances. You have to observe them, and you have to be tough with them about the kind of work they're doing.

JEFF: There's a great deal of respect that the board has now for the staff. They know how hard everyone works, how underpaid they are. So rather than have their assistant call to set up tickets, they say, wait a minute, these people are working their heads off to do amazing work up there. I'm here to support them.

Now, they might also request good tickets for Sunday. But at the same time, it's all done with great respect, and knowing how busy everyone is.

LIZ: I think also some of the education of the board has extended to our audiences.

The audience now understands that they're not going to like all five plays in a season. Sometimes they might. But they know the quality of work that's on the stage is something they've never had before.

EMILY: That's what doesn't waiver. The actual production may not be your cup of tea, that's all. And that's fine. That doesn't mean you don't subscribe. It means you do subscribe, because you want to support the quality of the work. So, I think we've gotten that across. And a lot of it has to do with the board understanding it and then being ambassadors.

Jennifer: So then how do you communicate with the board about the art?

JEFF: Emily speaks.

LIZ: Every board meeting, she's there.

EMILY: I talk about what I'm doing.

JEFF: Why you're doing it. Why we're doing this very challenging work. Athol Fugard's a good example. Early in your tenure, we did *Hello and Goodbye*, which is one of his most difficult plays. And it was a really hard play for the audience. But we brought Athol into a board meeting, and that was it. I think he knew what we were doing in terms of the risks that we were taking as an institution to do this play. The support that he got led to a permanent relationship with Athol; we are now his American home. He also teaches at the University, which came out of the generosity he felt from this institution towards his work.

And I think that's how we prepare the board. We let them know what we're doing, and why we're doing it.

EMILY: Also we let them know that we back artists, not hits. Not particular plays that happen to be great box office successes or successes in the press. In fact, the production of *Hello and Goodbye* was not warmly received. But that didn't matter. We're backing Athol Fugard, the artist. So he went and wrote about what he thought the new South Africa was, which was *Valley Song*, one of the most successful plays he has ever written. That came here first. And whatever comes out of his typewriter, everyone in this theatre knows, if he wants it produced, we will produce it.

LIZ: There's also a feeling of pride that this board has which is very important. Pride in what Emily has accomplished. Pride in what the theatre has accomplished. Pride that we attract the kind of artistic talent that we do. Pride that we have the reputation that we have.

JEFF: And it's given us more freedom artistically.

EMILY: Absolutely.

JEFF: Because with this pride and this respect, people realize that we may do something that will not please them or may not be successful, but that's okay, because they fundamentally support the art.

Jennifer Sokolov is the new web site editor and assistant editor (book program) at TCG. She previously acted as the artistic programs associate.