



Case Studies



Developed by **Theatre Communications Group**, with funding provided by the **Doris Duke Charitable Foundation**, the **Audience (R)Evolution Program** is designed to study, promote and support successful audience-engagement models. Through specific case studies, the project's goal is to tell organizations' stories based on institutional insight, qualitative and quantitative data, and personal perspective.

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Arkansas Repertory Theatre LITTLE ROCK, AR

INTRODUCTION

For nearly 35 years, **Arkansas Repertory Theatre** was the only professional theatre in Little Rock, a legacy that has led The Rep to create a space for community dialogue and learning, becoming an essential part of the civic conversation. Believing that human connections are the key to unlocking content and challenging material, The Rep focuses on partnerships and education to build and deepen relationships with audiences. Over the past several years, The Rep has begun to focus on becoming a destination for people interested in live theatre, learning and entertainment. This case study describes three strategies designed to help the theatre achieve these goals.

TCG engaged AMS Planning & Research, a national arts management consulting firm, to provide research expertise for this project. AMS gathered data by way of institutional and audience surveys, and conducted interviews with staff, board members and artistic leadership. Interviews were conducted in April and March 2013.

CASE STUDY

Arkansas Repertory Theatre (The Rep) is the state's largest nonprofit professional theatre company. Since its founding in 1976, The Rep has produced more than 300 productions, including 40 world premieres, on its 385-seat MainStage and 99-seat black box SecondStage, located in its historic building in downtown Little Rock.

Much of The Rep's engagement work emphasizes extending the experience of its shows—providing on-site events that keep people in the theatre longer and make the theatre a “destination” for the public. Because its audience has not always represented Little Rock's economic and ethnic diversity, The Rep is committed to keeping ticket prices as low as possible and pursuing artistic projects that resonate for diverse communities.

This case study focuses on three strategies as articulated by The Rep:

- 1. Provide audiences with direct access to actors, creative team members and directors in order to involve them more closely in the creative process.**
- 2. Create affinity events in conjunction with performances.**
- 3. Sell the entire house to a nonprofit partner on the first Tuesday of previews for use in its own cultivation and fundraising.**

Of the five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters developed as part of this overall research effort (see Research Approach, page 10), those in alignment with The Rep's efforts were the Income (#3, above) and Relationship (#1 and #2, above) strategies. The Rep completed an institutional survey as part of this research project, which included sharing the goals and strategies associated with three of its audience-engagement programs. Tables detailing this information appear in the appendix to this case study.

The case study covers a number of programs and practices at The Rep which support these strategies. These include:

- **Inviting the audience to collaborate in the creation of specific new work;**
- **Welcoming community leaders into conversations about the work before it is staged;**
- **Partnering with the Clinton Library and School for Social Service through its Distinguished Speaker Series;**

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- Reaching out to local businesses to collaborate on affinity events;
- Collaborating with local nonprofits by hosting them at “First Tuesdays” preview performances;
- Joining with a local newspaper on “Pay What You Can” evenings.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The case study included interviews with the following individuals:

- Robert Hupp**, Producing Artistic Director
- Michael McCurdy**, Managing Director
- Angel Galloway**, Director of Communications and Marketing
- Fran Carter**, Director of Development
- Myron Jackson**, board member (CEO, the Design Group)
- Xia Feng**, partner, New Haven Free Public Library
- Sonya Murphy**, board member (Business Development Officer, Arvest Bank)

STRATEGIES

STRATEGY 1

Provide audiences with direct access to actors, creative team members and directors in order to involve them more closely in the creative process.

The Rep has embarked on several efforts to directly involve audience members in the creation and production of works for its stages. One example from 2007 involves *It Happened in Little Rock*, a play about the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School during the Civil Rights Movement, written and directed by Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj using text from oral histories gathered from the Little Rock community.

“It took an outsider to begin talking to us about things we weren’t talking about,” said Producing Artistic Director Robert Hupp. “We are a fairly conservative theatre with a modest budget, but Rajendra opened up our thinking about the artistic process.” Maharaj wanted to engage the audience in the creation of work—something that had never been done at The Rep. Local residents were interviewed for the show, which generated source material for the script. Approximately 50 interviewees were written into the script as characters. By engaging members of the community in the collection of their stories, the interviewees shared investment in the project. That paid off as they became excited to spread word about the work. Hupp mentioned that The Rep saw an increased audience turnout, most likely because the play demonstrated interest in the community’s history and people.

A turning point occurred when The Rep produced John Rambo’s *God’s Man in Texas*, a play that condemns mega-churches and therefore had the potential to create wedges in the community. Hupp stated, “*God’s Man in Texas* is a comment on organized religion, but it’s very funny.” To curb potential misunderstandings, Hupp engaged local ministers early on in the process to have an open conversation about church communities and the play. Hupp anticipated mixed criticism due to

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the show's theme on faith and capitalism. The internal meetings were very positive and, as a result of these meetings, the ministers became interested in participating in the play's postshow talkbacks. By bringing ministers into the conversation at the beginning, Hupp said they avoided problems and had an important dialogue with audiences.

God's Man in Texas helped The Rep find an unexpected audience in Arkansas's faith community. The play became a popular subject in sermons at local churches. The experience was illuminating for Hupp, as it established a powerful point of contact between The Rep and Arkansas churches and their congregations. For many churchgoers who attended *God's Man in Texas*, the experience was their first exposure to The Rep. Hupp stated, "It made us check our own biases about who might be engaged with our work."

The Rep also has an ongoing partnership with the Clinton Library and School for Social Service through its Distinguished Speaker Series. For each production during the season, Hupp leads a panel discussion at the Clinton School that is free and open to the public. The discussion includes insights from guest directors, actors and other members of the creative team. The discussions are intended for audiences of The Rep, members of the Clinton Library and school community. The program is driven by the recognition that members of The Rep's audience like and want to engage with a production beyond just experiencing its entertainment value.

STRATEGY 2

Create affinity events in conjunction with performances.

The Rep has reached out to local businesses to collaborate on preshow affinity events. Examples of successful events include a "Girls Night Out" shopping experience with local vendors; family days with local organizations, such as *Little Rock Family* magazine; a hair event in conjunction with a production of *Hairspray*; and a partnership with the Humane Society that brought its mobile adoption unit on-site during a production of *Winn-Dixie*.

This program, run by the communications and marketing department, helps The Rep achieve its goals of encouraging people to think of The Rep as a destination—a place to have an enjoyable social experience, be with friends and learn; to develop ownership of the theatre among constituencies; and to increase positive responses and word-of-mouth.

Affinity events are intended as enjoyable experiences for people who might not otherwise have a habit of going to the theatre. They minimize any sense of unfamiliarity or intimidation for new audiences. "We want people to have an enhanced experience that goes beyond the transactional," said Angel Galloway, Director of Communications and Marketing. "Some people don't want to go behind the scenes. They just want to have an enjoyable time—a social experience."

While the program began as a ticket-selling initiative (and has been successful in that respect), The Rep's goal now has expanded to include building community. According to Galloway, affinity events help The Rep create and expand connections with local businesses. The Rep takes a seasonal approach to planning business-related events, rather than trying to develop them on a one-off basis. At the beginning of each season, communications and marketing staff look across the productions to identify possible event connections and potential "matches" with local businesses.

Doing this work has had significant institutional impact—what Galloway describes as a deeper internal focus on patron experiences and customer service. "The experience has to be the best it can be," she said, and that mindset has now shifted to the box office and house management staff. Audience members now call the box office to say what a good time they had, Galloway reported. She assumed that if they are calling The Rep, they are also telling their friends.

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STRATEGY 3

Sell the entire house to a nonprofit partner on the first Tuesday of previews for use in its own cultivation and fundraising.

This third strategy is loosely linked to the affinity events strategy. The Rep developed the “First Tuesdays” program as a series of collaborations designed to address the lack of single-ticket sales during previews. The Rep devotes the first Tuesday preview of every show to a nonprofit partner, selling the entire house at a significantly reduced rate (\$4,000-\$8,000) and allowing the partner to use the theatre for its own purposes in conjunction with the show. Sometimes that means organizations get sponsors and host their own patrons and/or donors; sometimes they use the evening as a fundraiser for the organization.

Acknowledging that Little Rock is a “word-of-mouth town,” staff initially sought to fill as many preview seats as possible, in order to create a buzz around each production. “First Tuesdays” now also aims to increase revenue over the run of a show through increased ticket sales; create buzz around individual shows; and build partnerships and good will in the community.

Led by the development department, The Rep arranges six to seven “First Tuesdays” each season. Organizational partners have included North Little Rock Rotary, the Chamber of Commerce, Wolf Street Foundation, Delta Sigma Theta (a service sorority) and the University Medical Society Parents Club. The Rep has longstanding partnerships with some of these organizations, and those always receive first choice of Tuesdays. The Rep reserves additional preview Tuesdays for corporate sponsors and other nonprofits. According to Fran Carter, Director of Development, groups usually prefer to choose a particular time of year, but she also tries to match organizations with individual shows.

The Rep also regularly partners with a local newspaper, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* to offer “Pay What You Can” evenings. Although the *Gazette* is not a nonprofit, the publication is the state’s major metropolitan daily newspaper and holds a huge readership. The *Gazette*’s sponsorship of “Pay What You Can” evenings made it possible for The Rep to admit audience members who might not be able to pay the cost of a regular-price ticket. Hupp stated, “There are economically challenged parts of Arkansas, and the partnership brings in many young families, who otherwise might not be able to afford to come to The Rep.” Participating audience members typically pay four to six dollars at the door.

According to Carter, “First Tuesdays” and “Pay What You Can” evenings are a win-win for everyone. The Rep sells seats that would otherwise go unused, and the partner organizations make money as well. In addition, the artistic production team gets a boost from seeing full houses and the cast feeds off the energy created by audiences during previews. Carter says the program also builds loyalty among patrons of other nonprofits and contributes to staff motivation.

SUCCESSSES

Hupp mentioned that numbers are one indicator of The Rep’s success. Attendance at individual Rep events on the Clinton School’s Distinguished Speaker Series ranges between 100 and 150, making these discussions the most popular on the series. Affinity events and “First Tuesdays” regularly produce sold-out houses, and close collaborations with other local nonprofits, businesses, churches and the Medical Center are so successful that partnerships are renewed on a regular basis. “Pay What You Can” evenings are hugely successful too, with people typically lining up around the block starting at 9 a.m. to purchase tickets.

While Galloway admitted that it is difficult to make causal connections between affinity events and increased attendance,

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she added that they certainly have helped diversify the audience. During a production of *The Wiz*, for example, the audience was 90 percent people of color on the “Girls Night Out” evening, and Galloway said The Rep saw an increase in attendance of people of color throughout the season. “We don’t know yet if that is holding,” she said, “but we can report anecdotally that new people are feeling comfortable and coming back.”

CHALLENGES

Hupp acknowledged that limited staff resources can be daunting. Affinity events, for example, are deeply time-consuming. Engagement is just one of Galloway’s responsibilities, and yet her department has a staff of only two. In addition, the marketing budget is small, forcing staff to focus on projects that are inexpensive and heavily dependent on partners’ grassroots outreach. Carter agreed that “First Tuesdays” and “Pay What You Can” evenings are challenging for her development staff of five. “There are never enough people or resources to do what we want,” she said.

One unique challenge of “First Tuesdays” arises from working with patrons of other nonprofit organizations. Because they are not typical theatre audiences, their reactions may be unexpected, something Carter suggested can sometimes be difficult for actors. Also, what is sometimes seen as essentially “renting a play” creates logistical challenges. Since partners are looking to raise money for their organizations, they require a good deal of attention. While this can be tiring for staff, Carter says it’s not really a stumbling block because the immediate response that comes from the audience during the performance is extremely useful for the actors and artistic collaborators as they work to understand what might need tweaking in the show. “First Tuesdays” occur early on in a show’s cycle, so other nonprofits’ constituents are the first to respond to the show.

A continuing challenge, said staff, is being boxed into traditional outcome-based measures that are inherently transactional. Knowing how to evaluate, determine and communicate success is a struggle. Sometimes events don’t meet ticket goals, but succeed based on other metrics. While that doesn’t mean The Rep wouldn’t do an event again, it means that there has to be constant vigilance around impact—often without having obvious measures to determine success.

MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Hupp also spoke about outcome-based measures of success. His take was that staff has not been specific about identifying intended outcomes. While they wanted to fill empty seats, they realized that this was not a marketing problem and that relying too much on a set of problems drove them to ask questions that may not have been the right ones. Initially, there was not a direct link between knowing they wanted to deepen relationships with audiences and focusing on opening up the artistic process. “Our thinking just wasn’t that linear,” said Hupp. “We had impulses, theories and we just needed to try some things.” He reported that the TCG New Generations grant was especially helpful in this process; the grant supported *It Happened in Little Rock* and allowed The Rep to focus meaningfully on the audience-engagement aspects of the show.

Hupp admitted that measuring success is difficult because “the first tendency is to jump directly to marketing outcomes.” Today, The Rep is working to identify new measures of success that are more qualitative, but also therefore more difficult to track. In this context, staff are asking a number of questions: Is The Rep at the center of important community conversations? How much are people talking about us? Are people comfortable picking up the phone and calling us?

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Are they comfortable enough to make a suggestion? Do they give us useful feedback? How do we measure success beyond transactional values?

Designing ways to capture this information is an ongoing challenge. The theatre conducts email surveys about a variety of factors after each show, but at least for now does not list affinity events on the surveys. Patrons' survey responses do, however, provide good benchmarks, and the theatre shares responses and results across the staff. Hupp described surveys administered via email as helpful in some ways in that the virtual medium allowed "people to offer up their opinions candidly, giving them a forum to express themselves in a raw, honest way."

REPLICATION OPPORTUNITIES

The Rep's successful experiences with community-based artistic work through *It Happened in Little Rock* and other projects have led to an emphasis on building non-artistic partnerships—something easily transferable to other theatres. *It Happened in Little Rock* signaled a major organizational shift in The Rep's thinking on audience engagement. Hupp described this shift as a turn toward "a more democratic approach that encouraged people from the community to have ownership over the themes and ideas addressed in The Rep's plays." Though *It Happened in Little Rock* focused around the engagement of local community, The Rep targeted specific communities for subsequent activities. The Rep used the experience "as a springboard into the deep end," said Hupp; it led the organization to deeper and truer collaborations with the audience.

In a subsequent season The Rep produced *Wit*, but Hupp said they were initially stymied as to how to engage the audience around the play. As an experiment, they built a partnership with the University of Arkansas Medical Center to use the play as an instruction tool for doctors dealing with terminally ill patients. The project not only benefited The Rep, it also helped the Center by demonstrating new approaches to instruction. The project was so successful that the theatre replicated the process with the Psychiatric Research Institute around its production of *Next to Normal*, a musical that addresses mental illness. The process has been organic, said Hupp. He added, "We have demonstrated that we can be at the table—that what we offer isn't tangential, but essential."

Likewise, The Rep's success with affinity events, "First Tuesdays" and "Pay What You Can" evenings has led to a continuation of those programs internally. Staff believe these strategies are replicable in other theatres as well.

LESSONS LEARNED: BENEFITS TO THE FIELD

According to Hupp, The Rep could not function without engagement being at the core of its mission. He asserted that a successful organization must be as rigorous about audience engagement as it is about artistic work. He added that while The Rep is not a community activist organization, it operates on a two-way street that "can be very crowded if we get out of the building and listen." He said he takes great care to be in the community and to hear the "stories everyone has to tell." He also said that the theatre has learned that The Rep can have a real role to play in the community, but success depends on making connections with community activators. Finally, he said, the work itself and the audience's experience in the theatre have to be exceptional; otherwise it's "a horse and no cart."

Success in collaborating with partner organizations, said Galloway, comes most often when the theatre takes care to

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engage partners over time, focusing on the benefit to the partner, the patron and finally the theatre. “You have to be careful to select partners who can promote the event at an equal level,” she said, noting that reciprocity between The Rep and the partner is critical to the success of any event. Hupp further attributed success to open and collaborative internal relationships. While he drives engagement strategies at The Rep, he was quick to say that ideas can come from anywhere in the organization, including the board. Ideas also come from outside and Hupp noted that one project was initiated at the recommendation of a congressman.

Galloway said she isn’t concerned that some people might see affinity events as “frivolous.” She noted the variety of productions, people and experiences, and said she cares most that people have a good time and feel like coming back as a result. “If you can make these connections and provide a good show,” she said, “you can demonstrate how theatre is a content resource for the community.” She added that it is critically important to both get out into the community to develop strong partnerships, and to enhance the experience patrons have once they come to the theatre.

Carter said she is careful to avoid surprises. “You have to be very open with the staff about what’s happening with partners,” she added. “If I’m worried about something, I let everyone know.” The other important lesson, she offered, is that in dealing with non-arts partners, it is extremely important to value their patrons’ experiences. That often means providing easy, accessible educational material, being open about content and what they should expect from a given show. She wants partners to come with their “eyes wide open,” and she works hard to design for the audience that will be coming so that they know what they will be getting and can have a good time through their experience. Above all, she said, it is critical to be flexible.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

The Rep’s engagement work is driven by staff under Hupp’s leadership. Although the organizational structure is typically hierarchical, with all staff reporting to Hupp and Hupp reporting to the board, the organization is anything but rigid. Hupp said he dislikes departmental silos, and staff report that they regularly work across departmental lines to implement projects, with marketing often taking the lead, working closely with the development staff.

Staff credit Hupp with an “infectious energy” that sets the tone for collaboration. They look to Hupp for vision and leadership, but they also said they have a great deal of autonomy to make decisions themselves. For his part, Hupp said it is important to ensure good communication and transparency within the organization. He said he never hides anything from staff, and there is lots of conversation around “the whys of doing a project.” He works hard to keep ideas generative as long as possible to allow for maximum experimentation and flexibility. As a result, channels of communication are good, and everyone has a clear idea of institutional values.

Also, staff carefully develops and monitors the programs to ensure that they reflect The Rep’s mission.

The board, too, is actively involved, playing a major role in supporting engagement initiatives through discussions at board meetings. Board members are willing to make connections wherever possible. An institutional marketing task force has shifted attention away from show-by-show marketing to long-range institutional marketing and engagement plans. Described by staff as an inspiration and source of energy, this committee looks at the overall landscape and environment.

“Our greatest success,” Hupp said, “is our current evolution toward an institutional mindset where engagement is concerned. We don’t think of engagement at the last minute—it’s part of our conversation from the beginning of any project.”

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BACKGROUND

This case study is part of TCG's **Audience (R)Evolution Program**, which is designed to study, promote and support successful audience-engagement models. The program will take place over three years and include four phases: Assessment, Learning Convening, Grants and Dissemination.

As part of the research phase, AMS prepared eight case studies on theatre companies that have incorporated audience engagement as a fundamental component of their service delivery and institutional mission. The focus was to understand "success" for these theatres' audience-engagement efforts and to comprehend the journey and outcome of their efforts. The eight companies are:

- **Arkansas Repertory Theatre**, Little Rock, AR
- **HERE Arts Center**, New York, NY
- **Long Wharf Theatre**, New Haven, CT
- **Oregon Shakespeare Festival**, Ashland, OR
- **Steppenwolf Theatre Company**, Chicago, IL
- **The Theater Offensive**, Boston, MA
- **Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company**, Washington, DC
- **Youth Speaks**, San Francisco, CA

More information about the study is available by emailing AudienceRev@tcg.org.

ABOUT ARKANSAS REPERTORY THEATRE

MISSION: Arkansas Repertory Theatre exists to create a diverse body of theatrical work of the highest artistic standards. With a focus on dramatic storytelling that illuminates the human journey, The Rep entertains, engages and enriches local and regional audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

Founded in 1976, Arkansas Repertory Theatre has an annual budget of \$3.4 million. Robert Hupp, Producing Artistic Director, leads a resident staff of designers, technicians and administrators in the creation of eight to ten productions for an annual audience in excess of 70,000 for MainStage productions, educational programming and touring. The Rep employs guest artists from across the country to produce works that are created, rehearsed and built in downtown Little Rock, ranging from contemporary comedies and dramas to world premieres to the classics of dramatic literature.

The Rep has always been interested in engagement and typically focuses its engagement strategies on education as a means of creating comfortable relationships with audiences, making outsiders and inexperienced theatregoers feel welcome and building a sense of community.

www.therep.org

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ABOUT AMS

AMS Planning & Research, a national arts management consulting firm, has been engaged by TCG to provide research expertise for this project. For more than 25 years, AMS has been supporting the success of the arts and cultural sector through applied research and strategy development. AMS prepared eight case studies on theatre companies that have incorporated audience engagement as a fundamental component of their service delivery and institutional mission and have adequate results to support their assertions of success. The companies were selected based on a review of research data and recommendations by TCG leadership. AMS compiled research data on each theatre, studied grant reporting and conducted site visits to interview a broad array of staff, lay leadership and audience-engagement program participants. www.ams-online.com

ABOUT TCG

Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national organization for the American theatre, was founded in 1961 with a grant from the Ford Foundation to foster communication among professional, community and university theatres. Today, TCG's constituency has grown from a handful of groundbreaking theatres to nearly 700 Member Theatres and Affiliate organizations and more than 12,000 individuals nationwide. TCG's mission is to strengthen, nurture and promote the professional not-for-profit American theatre. www.tcg.org

APPENDIX

I. RESEARCH APPROACH

Earlier in the research process, based on an extensive literature review, AMS defined five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters, designed to organize a theatre's tactics, support more productive collaboration and suggest underexplored approaches. While a theatre's strategies may be represented by more than one group (two is most common), the majority of strategies deployed are dominant in a single one. The five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters are:

1. SEGMENT Strategies

Defining and refining the intended **people** to be served by the institution's work.

2. VENUE/PATH Strategies

Rethinking the **place** where people engage with the organization's work and the **road** they follow to find it.

3. RELATIONSHIP Strategies

Building or enhancing the **personal relationships** the organization has with its community.

4. INCOME Strategies

Redesigning the **financial** exchange: who pays, how much, for what, for whom.

5. CONTENT Strategies

Doing **different work**, rather than doing current work differently.

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II. INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAM SURVEY TABLE

These tables, which were provided by the theatre, indicate which specific strategies from among the five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters apply to each of the programs covered in this case study.

PROJECT 1

A partnership with the Clinton School for Public Service aimed to increase audience's depth of knowledge about productions through engagement with performing artists.

GOALS

1. Engage Arkansas communities around Rep productions.
2. Educate audiences about the production process.
3. Increase ticket sales to productions.
4. Form a lasting, mutually beneficial partnership with the Clinton School.
5. Utilize an existing and popular Clinton School program to raise the profile of Rep productions.

STRATEGIES

1. Provide direct access to actors, creative team members and directors and allow for questions from audience members.
2. Structure panels per production based on educational focus (fight choreography, acting process, directing process, historical framework, etc.).
3. Promote panels along with the Clinton School to increase attendance from both Rep and Clinton School audiences.
4. Provide quality artistic content to the Clinton School and assist in promoting attendance and engaging audiences.
5. Remain responsive to providing high quality artistic programming for the Clinton program.

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PROJECT 2

The Rep has made the theatre a downtown destination for before-the-show activities (dining, surround events, etc.) and postshow engagement in our on-site bar with cast members.

GOALS

1. Make the theatre a downtown destination.
2. Make attending the theatre more of a social event with affinity experiences.
3. Provide dining experiences themed with event experiences.
4. Engage patrons postshow with actors on-site in a newly renovated bar area.

STRATEGIES

1. Encourage local businesses, boutiques and restaurants to reach Rep audiences through affinity events.
2. Engage special interest groups (moms, young women of color, shoppers, foodies) to plan events at The Rep.
3. Develop creative event concepts to engage vendors and audiences in existing Rep spaces.
4. Encourage patrons to interact postshow during preshow speeches.
5. Offer actors a free drink in the on-site bar to encourage attendance.

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PROJECT 3

The Rep also developed a partnership with *Oxford American* magazine and TheatreSquared company in Fayetteville to produce new-play readings focused on regional voices at *Oxford American's* new downtown restaurant/performance space.

GOALS

1. Introduce local audiences to new plays.

STRATEGIES

1. Partner with a downtown restaurant/performance space.
2. Entice audiences to see new works in progress.
3. Work with a LORT theatre partner to promote event.

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

RESEARCH

AMS Planning & Research Corp

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Ben Pesner

COPY EDITOR

Sarah Hart

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Kevin E. Moore, Managing Director, TCG; Emilya Cachapero, Director of Artistic & International Programs, TCG; Kevin Bitterman, Associate Director of Artistic & International Programs, TCG; and Soriya Chum, Project Assistant

DESIGN

Monet Cogbill, Associate Art Director, TCG

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