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BY DANIEL RENNER

Over the last few years every time I have an extended discussion with other education folks in the field the conversation usually turns to the question of technology, specifically the Internet. "How does your theatre use it? How can it be used in conjunction with a live art form that depends on the interactions of people and artists in the same physical space? Won't it undermine all of our efforts to get people into our theatres? We're understaffed as it is and this will only take more time (and resources) away from the real work that we do." The list goes on. I must admit that for years I was resistant to the Internet and its potential power in educating audiences and the training of artists. The urging by some funding organizations to go "on the Net" (with the promise of six digit grants) didn't help either. It all seemed too fast with no thought as to the outcome or the effects of putting our programming online.

While I haven't had an epiphany or a revelation on the road to Damascus, I have come to better understand the need for addressing the realities of the Internet and learning to embrace its potential. The Denver Center Theatre Company is part of a larger organization, the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, which has been developing its Web site for the last six years. In its preliminary stages it was an information site that served more as a billboard for the listing of shows and programs, with numbers to call for more information. We added far too many graphics (that were eye-catching) but they took forever to download. Our customers taught us very quickly that less is more. Something else that we learned as we moved to become more interactive in 1999 (with online ticketing, e-mail clubs and virtual registration for education classes to name but a few changes) was that 90+% of the people using the Internet to buy tickets at the DCPA were first time patrons to our theatres. That WAS a revelation. The section with the second most "hits" on our Web site was our online study guides. We had suddenly begun to reach an untapped population that we had no idea existed in Colorado. While that 90% hasn't been mirrored in all of our educational programs, the rise in online registrations and number of people attending our classes has risen dramatically since 1999 as well.

That has given us a lot to think about as we begin to go beyond bulletin boards for teachers and students to constructing chat rooms and virtual tours. What else can we do with this ubiquitous technology? How do we best serve a region that is as diverse in its topography as it is in demographics? It would seem that we have a lot of dreaming to do.

Sharon DeMark, Education Manager at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in St. Paul, Minnesota, and David Shookoff, Education Director for the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York, graciously accepted the offer to share their concerns and journey towards the creation of their educational Internet programming. Most theatres now have Web sites but I think these two are among the best in the country. Their theatres have very different missions and situations, yet each has found a successful way to use technology to extend their efforts in the field. I know you will enjoy reading about their adventures in cyberspace and recommend that you call Sharon DeMark's five-year-old son to get in on his Amazo.com Company before it goes public. I think he's on to something.

TAKING OUR MISSION ONLINE
BY SHARON DEMARK

My five-year-old son has an idea. When he turns 19, he is going to start a business called The Amazo (pronounced a-may-zo) Company to sell his many inventions. The company will have a Web site called, of course, amazo.com. From this Web site, eager consumers will clamor to buy such items as the Amazo Time Machine (which, for some reason known only to the young CEO, must include a serving of Amazo stew), the Amazo washing machine that, instead of shrinking the clothes, makes them get bigger as the kids get bigger, and the Amazo gold coin-making machine. So, at age five, my son already has a grasp of E-commerce, one of the most prevalent uses of the World Wide Web.

The power and promise of E-commerce is a potent issue for non-profit arts organizations. When we began developing a Web site for Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in St. Paul, Minnesota (www.ordway.org), we struggled with the question of what we really wanted from this brave new world of technology. It almost goes without saying that a primary focus for a performing arts organization's Web site is connecting patrons with performances; the site should make the process of selecting an event and purchasing tickets easy and engaging. After all, the majority of people who access our Web site are there to see what's on stage and how to buy tickets.

As an arts organization that supports and embraces its education programs on an institution-wide basis, we firmly believed that our Web site needed to connect with our audiences in ways other than increasing customer service and boosting revenue streams. We felt that it was important for Ordway Center's Web site to support our mission: "to increase understanding and enjoyment of life, society and the world through the creation and presentation of the performing arts."

Theatre is an interactive, relational experience. The artists interact with each other in building the work. The work interacts with the live audience. The audience relates to each other during and after the performance. One of the wonderful things about theatre is its ability to bring strangers together for a shared experience and dialogue. What if our Web site could extend — even deepen — that shared experience and dialogue?

The Education pages on our Web site include several links that allow teachers, parents, and young people to talk to each other about the shows they have attended. The online teacher's forum includes topics such as "how to prepare kids for a live performance" and "how to integrate arts experiences into the curriculum." Teachers can access our comprehensive study guides through the Web site. (We have learned that even teachers who don't attend a particular performance use the guides as teaching tools for different units of study.) Classrooms can observe video clips of performances and hear audio samples of our global music shows. Teachers can fill out assessment forms on-line and e-mail them back to us.

Both parents and teachers can learn much about Ordway Center through the Web site before they even step foot in the lobby. This, we have learned, is crucial. A recent study observed that young people's most immediate obstacle for engaging in a show they see is their unfamiliarity with the actual theatre building. Practical preparation — such as how students will get to the destination, where the buses will park, and when children will eat lunch — is actually as important as contextual preparation about the performance itself. In this study, students who received logistical information were able to focus better on the performance. One idea for future incarnations of our Web site is an interactive, video-based virtual tour of the theatre. Families, teachers, students, and audiences could take a virtual walk through Ordway Center — the lobbies, the stage, backstage, even to the place where school buses park — before they ever arrive.

Besides the Web, Ordway Center is exploring other realms of the interface between art and technology. In May 1999, we launched a pilot program called "Access the Planet," which makes use of the emerging technology of interactive video teleconferencing, commonly called ITV. So far, we've been able to telecast two student matinee performances to a total of about a dozen schools in Minnesota — schools too far away to make the trip to Saint Paul for a live show. After each show, the performers spent time talking with these students who live in diverse areas of Minnesota: from a small town with a large Latino population, to Red Lake, an Indian reservation school five hours north of the Twin Cities. We'll do two more ITV telecasts this year: *Lula Washington Dance Theater* and *They Came Singing, A Concert Celebrating the Musical Journey of Native Women.* Our plans for developing this program include partnering with local artists in these remote areas to create in-school residencies that prepare students for the performance while offering them opportunities to participate in the arts. In this way, art and technology merge with the human element to make the experience more connected. Eventually, we envision Web-based interactive chats — so that students can talk to each other immediately after viewing the ITV telecast.

Introducing cameras on stage presents us with many challenges as a performing arts center – some logistical, some more philosophical. To make the ITV project possible, we were able to negotiate with our stagehands union. And since most of our student matinees do not use Equity performers, that wasn't an issue for us. The important question for us as an organization to ask is: "Is this what we should be doing?" After all, we are a performing arts center, not a movie theatre or television studio. We made the decision to invest in this

technology (and have received an NEA grant in 2000 to purchase it for further use) so we can reach young audience members who will most likely never have the chance to see live performances at Ordway Center. In fact, the teachers of these students shared with us that for most of these young people, this would be the closest they might ever get to live theatre. While Ordway Center doesn't pretend that ITV performances equal the excitement and uniqueness of live theatre, we do see it as an opportunity for those students to see a performance up close and to meet artists in a way that students in our 2,000-seat theatre don't have the opportunity to do.

Next summer, Ordway Center will launch a new version of our Web site, created and maintained in-house. In the next few months of planning and re-design, we are actively dreaming about what kinds of things our Web site could do. We are allowing ourselves to think like my five-year-old son. The phrase "in your dreams" usually means, "no way is that going to happen." But when it comes to Web technology, it is clear that dreams are coming true every day. The World Wide Web is pretty darn close to being a time machine — a young person can travel to the other side of the planet in the wink of an eye. So maybe my son's Amazo Company is not so nutty. With that in mind, Ordway Center is thinking about how we can use Web technology to make gold coins. Our development department is particularly interested in that. And maybe, besides selling tickets on our Web site, we can also sell family-sized cans of Amazo stew. Anything is possible.

Sharon DeMark is the Education Manager at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Ordway Center for the Performing Arts' Web site is www.ordway.org.

THE THEATRELINK PROJECT
BY DAVID SHOOKOFF

The Education Department at Manhattan Theatre Club developed TheatreLink in order to bring theatre education programs to students in isolated communities. MTC's Education Program had existed for seven years before TheatreLink, during which time we had created an array of programs, all of them characterized by a mixture of hands-on theatre workshops and attendance at MTC productions, all of them serving New York area schools.

Our Core Program brings high school students to matinees as the culmination of an in-class preparatory process, co-designed and co-taught by our teaching artists and the classroom teachers. We had also developed a playwriting residency initiative, teacher training programs, a family matinee series, and several other programs. We were far from alone in these endeavors; our sister institutions in New York and around the country have also been creating high-quality arts education programs to serve the schools and their communities.

But even as our programs and those of our colleagues grew and proliferated, we were becoming increasingly concerned that through accidents of geography, kids in rural areas were unable to enjoy the exciting and edifying interactions with artists and live art that were becoming increasingly commonplace in metropolitan areas. Barry Grove, MTC's executive producer, would report the frustration and envy his cousin – who taught drama in a Western Pennsylvania high school – would express at family gatherings when Barry described to her the kind of learning and excitement that took place in our classrooms and in our theatres.

We contemplated several responses to this issue, including, for example, the idea of itinerant teaching artists and touring productions – a not uncommon solution in other parts of the country – but for us the most feasible and cost-effective approach was a distance-learning model, employing Internet technology. So, in consultation with IBM, who provided us both advice and funds for a pilot project, we developed the TheatreLink model in 1996 and launched it in the winter of 1997.[1]

We embraced the Internet strategy warily. We were aware that the model we were developing entailed serious compromises, that a Web site could never fully supplant live performance or the compelling presence of an artist in the classroom. (We did not, however, anticipate certain unique benefits that this methodology would provide, discussed below). We were determined to preserve the humanistic, student-centered teaching and learning that characterize our live programs, and similarly we wanted to ensure that MTC's art – the plays we produce – remained central to the TheatreLink process. At the same time, realizing that one strength of the Internet – as the term implies – was multi-site interactivity, we wanted to create a model that would enable students to collaborate with other schools as well with MTC.

We developed a three-phase instructional model, designed to encompass an academic semester, and enrolled schools in threes, one class per school. In the project's first phase each participating class studies an MTC play and undertakes warm-up activities that introduce the students to the technology and to their counterparts at the partner schools. In Phase II, each class writes a scene based

on a key theme or issue in the MTC production. In Phase III, in a round-robin, the classes pass their scenes to a partner class, who produces it. Each class, in other words, is the author of one scene and the producer of another. As a culmination, each class videotapes its scene and uploads it to the site, where it can be viewed and discussed. The whole process is guided by the classroom teacher and by an MTC teaching artist who communicates and collaborates with the three classes and the teachers via the TheatreLink Web site.

The Web site is a password-protected communications and resource center which we have developed and modified each year of the project's existence. It includes bulletin boards, e-mail, and a chat room capacity. These features enable the students, teachers, teaching artists, and MTC staff to communicate easily and flexibly, with varying degrees of privacy. Teaching artists, teachers, or MTC staff can create chats or add bulletin boards practically by just touching a button. The Resource Area of the site includes a detailed syllabus for the semester's work, background materials on the MTC play to be studied (including a 15-minute video clip from the production), as well as articles, essays, and tips to assist students and teachers as they work through the syllabus. The Resource Area also includes a glossary of theatre terms and a variety of theatre games and exercises that can be used to enrich the TheatreLink process. The site also includes a Staff Area, which allows teaching artist, teachers, and staff to post materials they don't want students to see, and a Project Area, to which classes post their final work products: their completed scripts, set and costume designs, stage managers' rehearsal reports from the production phase, and digitized videos of their productions of their partner school's script.

The central elements in the TheatreLink syllabus are the MTC play under study and the scene-writing assignment it generates. In Years One and Two, the project was built around *Nine Armenians*, Leslie Ayvazian's family drama about ethnic legacy and individual responsibility. Students read the script and undertook several pre-writing activities, including the sharing of family stories with students at partner sites. They viewed a video clip of the play's airport departure scene, in which the family's twenty-something daughter leaves to join a relief mission to Armenia over her father's objections. They then wrote their original scene on the theme of "leaving home."

For the past two years, TheatreLink focused on *Captains Courageous, the Musical* by Frederick Freyer and Patrick Cook. Based on the Kipling novella and the film with Spencer Tracy, this work dramatizes the story of a spoiled rich boy who, rescued from the sea by the crew of a fishing boat, grows into manhood under the tutelage of the fisherman Manuel. We videotaped the scene in which young Harvey, in a misguided attempt to help his mentor, creates a crisis by fouling the fishing lines of Manuel's rival. Students discussed the scene with each other, with students at partner schools, and with their teaching artists, using the site's chat function. They then wrote a scene about an outsider taking an action that causes a crisis within a closed society.

This year we will change plays again. We are currently planning a new edition of TheatreLink around David Auburn's play *Proof*, which, fortuitously, MTC is transferring to Broadway this fall after a successful run at our home theatre last spring.

In the final, production phase of Theatrelink, students assume traditional theatre jobs: actors, directors, designers, stage managers, and so on. This is the period when cross-site communication becomes most intense, as the producers of each scene try to understand and realize their authors' intentions. (As one student put it in a newspaper interview, "We have to give their play justice, just as we want our play to be given the same justice.") Each stage manager posts a daily rehearsal report to the site, and while we insist that the students keep their physical productions simple (in part so that schools will not compete with unequal resources), we do encourage them to be inventive and imaginative.

The eagerly awaited culmination is the sharing of the schools' production videos. Here again, we encourage the schools to keep it simple. We don't want multi-camera studio shoots; rather we want a single camera in the back of the theatre with a live audience (which is the way we tape the MTC production). This is, after all, a theatre project, not a film/video workshop.

TheatreLink is very much a pioneering effort for MTC, and indeed for the field. To our knowledge, no other arts organization has created such an elaborate, Internet-based distance learning project. As a result, we are still sailing uncharted waters. Even now as we enter our fifth year, we feel that TheatreLink is very much a pilot project.

We have definitely succeeded in creating a student-centered, theatre-based model. Despite the multi-site interactivity and the critical role of the Web site, the central activities of TheatreLink take place in the classroom. Students study a play, they write, they act, they design, they discuss and analyze. The Web site is a means, not an end. It is these characteristics of the model that in our minds legitimize it.

Formidable challenges remain, some of which we anticipated, some of which we didn't, most of them stemming from the physical distances among the project participants. One of the chief frustrations for our teaching artists is their inability to respond in the moment, to work their magic in the classrooms, and to make on-the-spot revisions in collaboration with the teachers based on direct observations. We always knew TheatreLink would be driven more by the classroom teacher than by our New York-based faculty (a vastly different model from our local projects, in which the collaboration is usually 50-50). But finding precisely the right relationship of the teaching artist to the process remains a challenge. We have tacked widely on this issue: some years we conceived of the teaching

artist only as a resource, a content expert to intervene when called on; other years we have tried to integrate the teaching artist more fully into the process, instituting regular online "faculty meetings" and the like. The issue is still not fully resolved.

To facilitate the teaching artist/teacher collaboration and to better prepare the classroom teachers, in Year Three we instituted a professional development workshop. We flew the participating teachers to New York for four days, during which time they worked through the year's syllabus. In addition to trying out the writing and acting activities, they used all the features of the Web site, scanning and uploading snapshots, posting to the bulletin boards, even conducting online chats with teaching artists sitting in the next office. At first we thought of this decision as a compromise – this was supposed to be distance-learning venture, wasn't it? – now we realize it's a necessity. Our outside consultants confirmed what we were learning empirically: to work optimally, even the most highly sophisticated technology-driven learning initiative requires some direct, face-to-face interaction among the stakeholders. These workshops pay dividends. In addition to establishing personal relationships among the "faculty," the dry-run of the syllabus provided a highly instructive alpha test. Feedback from the participants helped us clarify the syllabus and make adjustments to the site.

Another challenge is fostering appropriate inter-school communication in a text-driven project. The facelessness and relative anonymity of e-mails, bulletin boards, and chats allows for imperfect (occasionally improper) communication. Teaching students how to respond appropriately, for example, to the inevitably flawed scenes they receive from their partner schools would be challenging even if all the parties were in the same room; at a distance, the problems are compounded. The project cries out for a video-conferencing component, but most schools are years away from sufficient capacity in this area.

Distance is frustrating for our outside evaluator too. We sense that the participating schools, their communities, the backgrounds and areas of competence of the teachers, and their respective pedagogical styles are enormously disparate. Yet we are unable to observe these differences – and how they affect the project – firsthand. Budgetary constraints limit site visits, which means that we only get glimpses of the work from the material that appears on the site and from the (relatively frequent, but still insufficient) questionnaires we require.

TheatreLink has also yielded benefits we didn't fully expect. It enables us to "warehouse" our productions: we can teach to a particularly fruitful work long after its MTC run has concluded. And it allows kids to know and work with peers with whom they would never otherwise come in contact. The benefits of this "cross-cultural" interactivity are so palpable that we have liberalized our criteria for recruiting schools. Rather than working exclusively in small rural locales or insisting that students have absolutely no access to cultural institutions, we have shifted our emphasis to finding schools from a variety of communities so as to provide for a rich demographic mix. In past years, we have worked with students from predominantly Latino communities in Southern California, largely African-American students in East Harlem, as well as totally white populations in rural Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

TheatreLink is definitely blazing trails, and as with any pioneering venture, we are making unexpected discoveries and mid-course corrections along the way. But we definitely seem to be heading into fertile territory. Our teachers universally report that the project produces genuine teaching and learning; as a result most of our schools have stayed with the project for several years. As Marsha Brewster, a teacher at the Renaissance Charter School in Irving, Texas, puts it, "To be able to merge the technology with such a hands-on experience is pretty incredible." Pam Slater, a teacher from Kiski Area High School in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania, adds, "Most of my students have never even seen a play. This program is the closest thing these kids can get to in-depth theatre training."

David Shookoff is the Education Director for the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York. The Manhattan Theatre Club's Web site is www.mtc-nyc.org. Please note that many of the areas mentioned in this article are password-protected.