

Survival in Uncertain Times:

Not-for-Profit Theater Companies Staying on Mission and Focusing on Innovation

BY CARL SYLVESTRE

Even in prosperous times, fundraising for and marketing of productions are always a challenge for most theater companies throughout the United States. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that this current financial crisis is pushing many not-for-profit theater companies to stretch their resources to the breaking point. Yet in spite of the gloomy daily headlines, the motto “the show must go on” is alive and well.

This year the New York-based Tony Randall Theatrical Fund expanded its grant making guideline to support the work of some theater companies it believes are addressing this economic downturn with a focused determination to keep their mission alive. “In uncertain times, it is very difficult for many theaters to stay the course, yet many are finding ways to deliver and stay true to their mission with creative initiatives,” states Heather Randall, chair of the fund. Nine New York theater companies with annual operating budgets from \$500,000 to

\$5 million were selected to receive general operating grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000.

Highlights of some of these innovations are discussed in this article. As a golden rule, vigilance to the bottom line is a primary concern of these theaters with a commitment to balance the budget. However, for most of these companies, an economic downturn is not the time to pull back on

the many activities that are critically needed to produce their work. In some cases it means moving forward with productions by adjusting producing methods and in other cases it means expanding on programs aimed at redefining how their audience will interact in the future.

Commitment to Artistic Excellence and Serving the Artists

For many companies, with or without a cash reserve, budget cuts are a necessity and they have to be made strategically, so that they are not at the expense of the artistic output. Repertorio Español, the Spanish-language producing theater company now in its 41st season, is

forging ahead with three long-planned and funded works: Pedro Calderón’s classic play “Life is a Dream;” an original adaptation of Isabel Allende’s

best selling novel The House of the Spirits; and “Letters to a Mother” by up-and-coming Venezuelan-American playwright Marcelo Rodríguez.

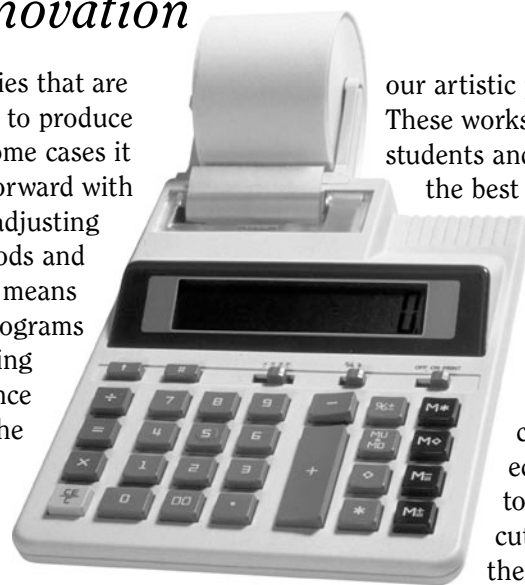


“We could have shied away from bringing these exciting works, but we feel we can better survive with a strong presence and by not jeopardizing

our artistic programming. These works provide students and adults with the best theater and outreach programs that we can offer,” states Robert Weber Federico, the company’s Executive Director. “We are not cutting out on the advertising or canceling our commitment to the artist.”

Now in its 17th season, LAByrinth Theater Company is a multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary collective of 116 artists with boundless creativity and inspiration. The company aims to continue offering new opportunities to artists who are always in need of space to work on new projects. With the increase in hourly costs of city studio/rehearsal space, this season LAByrinth consolidated its resources and moved to a new location comprising office, rehearsal and meeting space. LAByrinth’s artist members can use the space at no charge to develop new work. Although this move has increased the company’s overhead cost, it has also enabled increases in earned income through rentals and educational programming. As so much of the company’s core activities now take place in the new space, members interact more often with one another, thus reinforcing the community spirit that is at the heart of LAByrinth’s mission.

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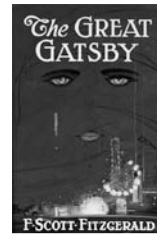
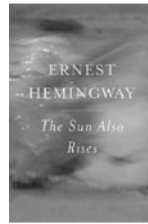
Exploring various production models – Expanding collaborations

As a means of controlling expenses without sacrificing their artistic output, many companies are forming new producing partnerships. For some this practice has always been part of their operations and for others it means jumping on a long-resisted bandwagon.

Elevator Repair Service (ERS), a theater ensemble company creating new works for eighteen years, has seen its professional profile increase in the past three years and aims to continue on that trajectory by continuing to build its partnership base and expanding on their artist experimentation. As the theater-in-residence at New York

Theatre Workshop, where, in Spring 2008, it presented to great acclaim an adaptation of William Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury (April Seventh, 1928), ERS is now developing a new piece based on Ernest Hemmingway's The Sun Also Rises for the Workshop's 2010-11 season.

Additionally, "The Sun Also Rises" has secured commissioning support from the Ringling International Arts Festival. The production has been invited to the Philadelphia Live Art Festival and the Edinburgh International Theater Festival in Fall 2010. The company will perform its show "Gatz," a six hour two-part dramatic reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby at the Brisbane Powerhouse Theater and Sydney Opera House in Australia and it will be part of Boston's American Repertory Theater 2009-10 season.



It is a balancing act for ERS, "starting a new piece now is as challenging as ever due to our densely packed touring schedule and in-

creasingly limited financial support available for new work. Nevertheless, we feel it is critical to balance the presentation of finished work with a commitment to developing a new piece even though works-in-progress and long rehearsal periods are far less lucrative than international touring," states John Collins, the company's Artistic Director, "the ongoing creation of new original work is central to our mission."

Another young ensemble company, The Civilians, is in the process of moving as a project-based ensemble to a more cohesive institution that can support several projects in a given season as well as ancillary programs. The company's produc-



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tion model involves in-depth community-based research; their investigation of the Evangelical Christian Political Movement resulted in "This Beautiful City" presented in Washington D.C., Los Angeles and New York City this past year. To reach the goal of being a cohesive body, the company is strengthening the partnership with universities and larger producing theaters.

"We are finding that different organizations are now more open to work collaboratively in the development process of a piece and in some cases it is more than just with one collaborator," says The Civilians' Managing Director Marion Friedman. These partnerships are providing support on various levels, from short writing

residencies to full productions. A new work in progress, "The Great Immensity," about climate change, will be developed in partnership with Princeton University and the McCarter Theatre with the company working with faculty and students from the Princeton Environmental Institute and Program in Theater and Dance to develop the piece.

Faced with the possibility of decreasing the size and scope of its programming, the Vineyard Theatre, a theater dedicated to producing new works, is actively seeking co-productions for all of its 2009-10 projects. In Spring 2010 it will co-produce with New York's Playwrights Horizons the new musical "The Burnt Part Boys," while continuing its Developmental Lab

Series of small-scale work-in-progress productions. "Throughout our existence we have always sought to create collaborations with other theater companies. In the past we have often supported the work of smaller companies with co-productions; now we are embarking on co-productions with larger companies than ours," says Jennifer Garvey Blackwell, the Vineyard's Executive Director, "the benefits of these co-productions are not only financial. It has often been to the benefit of the creative team who are now working with an expanded group of new collaborators."

Redefining the relationship with the audience

One fear is that with co-productions, many companies risk losing the brand identity that they have built over many seasons. The perception that you do not want to be seen as actively sharing your audience is fading away at the moment. Next

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No two arts organizations are the same.

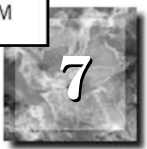
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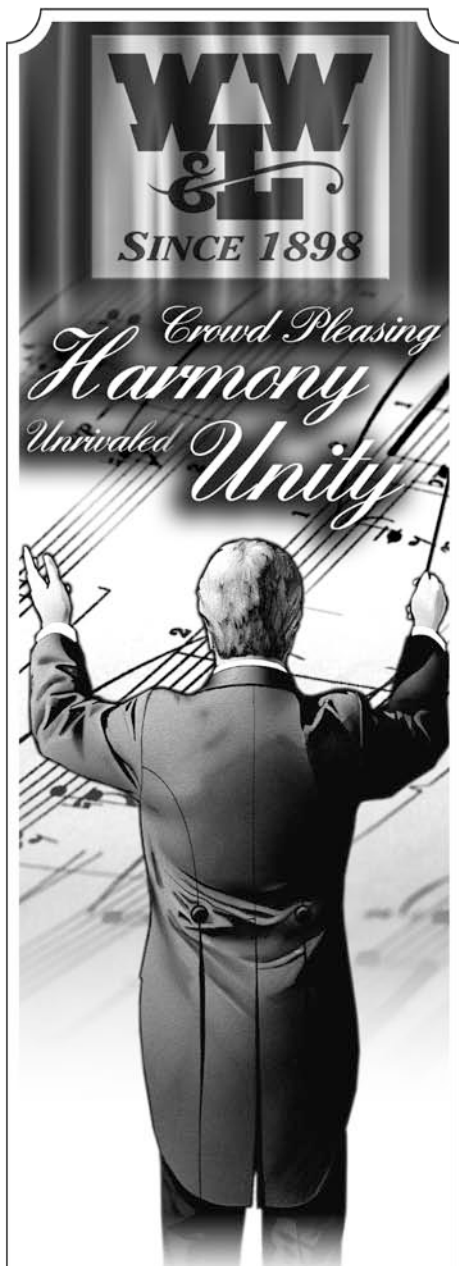
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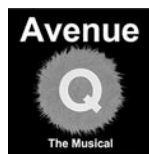
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season Vineyard subscribers will be offered, as part of their package, one production to St. Ann's Warehouse, a presenting cultural organization in Brooklyn, NY.

"We have to believe that audiences want greater exposure to what else is going on in the theatrical community and beyond," states The New Group's Managing Director Oliver Dow, which co-produced with the Vineyard the 2003's Tony-Award winning musical "Avenue Q." The New Group is actively seeking other non-theatrical cultural partnerships to expand the base of its audience. Ancillary events often reserved for cultivating donors are now part of the marketing fabric of any growing theater company to welcome new audiences, as well as strengthening the relationship with long-term supporters.

"Our aim in these difficult times is to make sure that the theater is more than a leisure activity and that it can be part of what makes us a community in this city," continues Dow. As a result of the current economic downturn, The New Group has implemented "Dark Nights at The New Group," which brings theater artists together during the season for a public presentation and cultural discussion. Inspired by its production of Eugene O'Neill's "Mourning Becomes Electra," it produced a panel that featured O'Neill biographers Barbara and Arthur Gelb, playwright Tony Kushner and actress Zoë Caldwell reading from O'Neill's work and discussing his influence on



American Drama. Another evening is a reading by Eric Bogosian on Dracula, since the actor-playwright expressed an interest in exploring that character. Thus, the audience was treated to a reading of a play, discussion and a historical context of the character. "We wanted to have a dialogue with the audience in matters beyond what is happening on the stage," adds Dow.

A commitment to the mission to sustain and expand the audience for classical theater in New York City is the driving force at Classic Stage Company (CSC). It is increasing the reduced group sales program, especially to student and disadvantaged audiences. "These targeted discounts are ensuring that our productions are fully accessible to all members of our community regardless of their economic circumstances, while also ensuring fuller audiences for our hardworking artists on stage," states Jessica Jenen, the theater's Executive Director. CSC's ancillary programs aim to remove the fourth wall by inviting audiences to many activities such as open rehearsals. "Our goal is to continue to grow our community via personal involvement among our patrons, so that they will feel less like customers and more like family. The same approach informs our relationship with the artistic community," adds Jenen.

Beyond the crisis: Looking ahead

Building a loyal supporter base remains a top priority for these companies. The downturn in the economy is an opportunity to strengthen the relationship with long-standing patrons because these supporters are critical for the future growth of these theaters. These companies

are looking beyond the economic crisis and aim to build the audience that will be there to support their long-term



aspirations. The message to convey to audience members and funders is that they are worthy long-term investments.

“Our aim is to take action now to continue building an audience that understands The Flea and will invest in our future and long-term goals,” says Carol Ostrow, Producing Director of Off-Off Broadway’s The Flea Theater. The Flea is launching the “Flea-I-P” campaign designed to capitalize on those donors who are already in the database. The campaign is board-driven and encourages high-end giving by offering unlimited seats, personalized ticket handling, post-show dinners with the cast and intimate discussions about the theater. To keep board members engaged and informed about the work they support, The New Group invites the cast and creative team to someone’s home for a salon where board members get a chance to discuss the work intimate-



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ly with the artists and invite guests who are prospects for support.

The challenge of planning for the next couple of seasons in this economic climate is daunting, as long-term commitments to the artists have to be made, but survival begins by staying true to the mission and trusting that this is the time to open new opportunities on production methods and building stronger relationships with audience members and funders. Audiences are beneficiaries of these initiatives. In these times, the theater can remind them of the need to come to together as a community, and, as an art form, it is uniquely poised to provide that service.

“It is always difficult to produce in the theater. We do what we do

because we love the art form. Theater has always been about innovation and survival and the pleasure that we get that comes from producing the work of these artists and getting the audience engaged. That challenge is not going to go away,” according to Repertorio Español’s Federico. “My hope is that in this downturn in the economy, those with the means to support the theater do not shy away from nurturing these artists. These artists are the stimulus for our soul and I look forward to many great things from these companies. Adds Heather Randall, I’m hopeful that whatever challenges come their way, they will find the means to keep on fulfilling their mission.” ■



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