

Foreword

by **Ben Cameron**

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As someone long engaged in arts advocacy, I've always been a bit uneasy about how we talk about our value to legislators and policymakers. While yes, absolutely, I do believe the arts have enormous economic and educational impact and that these are powerful arguments, do artists really create work to leverage additional dollars for the local economy? Do audiences really go to the theatre to drive local SAT scores higher? And are we setting ourselves up for disaster if we discover other economic drivers or educational enhancements are more powerful in these goals than the arts?

In 2004, Kevin McCarthy and the RAND Corporation published *Gifts of the Muse*, a report that distinguished the arts' "extrinsic" values—the above-mentioned collective benefits of economic impact or enhanced educational performance or even neighborhood safety that accrue to a community through the presence of the arts—from the "intrinsic" values—that landscape of emotional and intellectual, transformative experiences that impact an individual engaging with the arts. Here were values to claim, not *instead* of the extrinsic, but *in addition* to them—values that seemed more authentic and critical to artmaking. But recognizing the value of the quantifiable in advancing any cause, how could such experiences—experiences like captivation or empathy—actually be measured?

Alan Brown has been one of the great leaders in stepping up to this challenge, working with artists, arts organizations and audiences to define

more precisely the intrinsic value of the work they offer. As his studies have grown in number and embraced different disciplines, the excitement from organizations with whom he has worked—organizations who have found his work revelatory, realistic and actionable—has grown.

In 2010, he and Theatre Bay Area approached the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (where we had helped fund research efforts in theatre, jazz, presenting and dance) to seek funding for the creation of an “artistic dashboard,” a low-cost audience research method that would enable individual arts organizations to measure and understand the intrinsic impact of their work on their audiences and would offer additional support to train people in how to use it.

All of our grants are decided by peer panels, rather than by Foundation staff, and this proposal initially set off some alarms. How would artistic directors respond to their work being measured in such a way? Would this information drive the choice of repertoire in a way that would subvert the role of the artistic leader? Would it become a bludgeon of sorts for boards to use in dismissing artistic leaders at theatres where intrinsic impact in some dimensions was low? Would this compound what some saw as an already troubling trend toward audience pandering?

Other panelists argued passionately for this work, noting the steady erosion of audiences as TCG’s annual report, *Theatre Facts*—which shows rising aggregate earned revenue through escalating ticket prices while the actual body count dwindles—attest. In a time when audiences are overwhelmed with choices, how do we compete for their leisure time? Do we even really know why they come—and (conversely) why they stay away? If we listened more carefully to what our audiences *do* value—instead of to what we *think* they value—what would we do with that information? What if we find that what drives them to our theatres is more the social experience than the aesthetic? What if we find that the impact of our work is not as deep as we had thought? Or what if we find that there is more hunger for a kind of experimentation and risk than we had anticipated? That our impact is even deeper? Could this become transferable to other fields? Could what we learn change, not only our marketing, but our approach in advocacy as well? And might it even be possible that understanding our audiences could somehow make our work better?

There was no question from any panelist that the work Alan and Theatre Bay Area were proposing was doable, thoughtful and thorough. There was

no question that it addressed real and urgent needs. There was no question that Theatre Bay Area, under the extraordinary leadership of Brad Erickson, was fully equipped and logically positioned to be the organizational harbor and coordinator of this effort. The final comment that provoked one of those bell-like moments of clarity came from an initially skeptical panelist, who said quietly, "This is smart. Rigorous, but realist, intellectually generous, passionate and compelling."

Needless to say, they got the grant. And the pages that follow are the fruits of that labor—the results of hard work and changes in direction at times and evolving formats, but true to the original spirit.

The collection you hold is a rich and juicy read. The data is impressive in its scope and precision: there are more than a few light bulb moments, some confirming what we may have been groping towards but unable to express, others challenging some of our most sacred assumptions. The interviews that accompany the data—interviews with artists and arts leaders who share their impressions of this information for us—remind us of how complex this work can be. Read Diane Paulus and Michael Rohd and Tony Taccone and Martha Lavey, about how the audience factors into choice of productions and into shaping the work itself, and you'll begin to appreciate how differently this data can resonate. Indeed, their interviews are a prelude to the debate and discussion that we hope will happen with colleagues and staffs and, yes, boards of directors about what these studies mean for us and our audiences, wherever we are and whoever we may be.

I've never forgotten a story told to me by Cornerstone Theater founder (and now Oregon Shakespeare Festival artistic director) Bill Rauch. He recounted an early residency undertaken by the company in a small Kansas community of less than a thousand people (I think), where they were mounting *Tartuffe*, a production in which (as is Cornerstone's practice) the leading roles were undertaken by local citizens while the professional artists played secondary roles. Bill and his colleagues were especially excited by the timeliness of this production, coming at the same time that the Jim and Tammy Faye Baker scandals were rocking the country: what a wonderful opportunity to skewer religious fundamental hypocrisy.

And yet as rehearsals progressed, the play never seemed to "catch fire." The actors all knew their lines, they clearly were doing their best to please Bill, there was a sense of collegiality in the room, yet that elusive spark that makes a play combust rather than merely consume time had yet to appear. And then

Bill began talking less and listening more to the way, not that *he* talked about the play, but that the local *citizens* talked about the play. Their conversation kept returning again and again to Act IV, when Tartuffe, confronted with his own misdeeds, storms out of the house, vowing revenge, threatening to return with officers to drive the family out of house and home, and to Act V when he returns, eviction letter in hand.

And Bill realized that, for these struggling farmers in rural Kansas, *Tartuffe* was not about religious hypocrisy. It was about federal farm foreclosure. And as he surrendered control of the play to the community and to what they valued, the play came alive.

It changed the way that Bill worked—and works. It transformed the audience connection to the play. And it made the work better.

I thought about that story often as I read this report. Just as Bill's community told him what they valued, our audiences will tell us what they value. If only we will listen.

This study reminds us in a measurable and concrete way that what we often suppose our audiences experience and what they themselves experience are often not synonymous. It reminds us that the social dimension of our work is, in some cases and for some groups, as important—or even more important—than the aesthetic dimension. It reminds us that our “audience” is really many audiences, plural, and that an overwhelming number of them are open and eager to tell us generously, passionately, insightfully what they do value and what our work means to them.

Knowledge is power, and knowing what our audiences value does not dictate what we must do. Rather it opens the door for us to confirm, to distill, to imagine, to change, depending on who we are and what we hear.

On behalf of all of us at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, our deepest thanks to Alan Brown, Brad Erickson, Theatre Bay Area and the 18 theatres that have been brave enough to undertake this work. It has been our true honor and privilege to support your efforts.

Keep listening. And happy reading.

