

Talking Values

Ben Cameron, Executive Director of Theatre Communications Group, New York

In January 2005, NAYD invited Ben Cameron, Executive Director of Theatre Communications Group to Dublin to address an audience of youth theatre members, practitioners and theatre professionals on the value of youth theatre in a changing world. The following is the complete version of his address.

Youth drama in the United States has traditionally straddled two separate, and often mutually suspicious worlds. Many in the arts field have looked dubiously at productions involving mostly avocational performers, frequently engaged in original work created without the involvement of a professional playwright: this can't be theatre, they say, relegating it instead to the world of education. Education officials on the other hand, unable to measure the impact of arts involvement in rigorous standardized testing modes, say: "This can't be education; it's theatre." Funders shunt applications back and forth across program areas, and it is easy for the youth drama community to feel like the red-headed stepchild in its quest for recognition.

Interestingly enough, your [NAYD] speakers by orientation also acknowledge this divide. Last year, Shirley Brice Heath, the extraordinary demographer, talked to you about the world of education; now here I am today, a representative of the professional theatre world, prepared to talk to you about what we in the arts business see when we see youth theatre.

That said, theatre in the United States is in a moment of unprecedented stress and uncertainty. To be sure, my first five years at TCG were marked by a time of remarkable growth. Once a year, we gather data from our member theatres in a document called *TheatreFacts*, the only national fiscal analysis of the field. In those heady days of 2000-01, 71% of theatres finished the year with a surplus; an unprecedented record of success. Foundation contributions were up, government contributions were up, corporate support was up. And perhaps most importantly, audiences continued to grow, reaching a record level of 32,000,000 attendees at not for profit theatres around the country. In short, more people were going to the theatre, more people were creating theatre, more people were participating in theatre than at any other time in our nation's cultural heritage.

And then came 9/11. And the message that I had been able to carry with confidence, certainty and optimism was quickly replaced by one more accurately characterized by pessimism, uncertainty and despair.

In the wake of 9/11, the number of corporations supporting theatre has fallen 48% in three years. 59% of theatres last year now registered a deficit. Foundation grants have stagnated or fallen. State and local government support have fallen. And most distressingly, for the first time in more than a decade, aggregate audience attendance has fallen.

But let me be clear: 9/11 caused none of this. 9/11 may have brought things more quickly home to roost; it may have accelerated certain trends that, in hindsight, we can see were already gathering. But it caused none of this.

Rather, the current environment is the result of a changing world, a radically different world than the one that gave birth to the creation of the not-for-profit theatre sector.

At our National Conference in 2001, Thomas Friedman, a mere three months before 9/11, warned us that we were living in a new world order. The world that those of us over 40 were raised in was a world symbolized by the Berlin Wall ;a world of clear division. And in the world of a wall, it's easy to tell good from bad, friend from foe, the powerful from the un-powerful, a division symbolized by the Nobel Peace Prize, typically awarded to a president, a prime minister, a diplomat. The world we live in today, however, is a world symbolized by the net. And in the world of a net symbolic of interdependence its not so easy to tell good from bad, friend from foe, the powerful from the unpowerful. Think of the Nobel Peace Prize which went to a housewife who had started an anti-land mine campaign on email: not an individual of power, but a super-empowered individual. And if 9/11 taught us anything it taught us that it takes only 18 super-empowered individuals to temporarily bring a world order to its knees.

In this moment, can we look at our economic stress, not as causative, but as feedback? Are our audiences telling us that we don't matter, that when hard choices have to be made that we are expendable?

If we are to survive as an industry, I think we must take these trends in precisely this way and to be willing to re-imagine ourselves in response to three very different issues that have shifted wildly in our world: **Who we are, how we think, and how we congregate.**

First of all, who we are? In the United States, the face of our nation is literally changing: Latinos are the largest population of color, 70% of entrants into the work force by 2010 will be women and/or people of color, and white people will no longer be in the majority by 2050. Here in Ireland, I understand, your world is changing as well: the second largest religion is now the Muslim religion, not the Protestant, and a large infusion of Cantonese speakers, for example, has transformed a neighborhood very close to where we gather today.

Now I come from the Southern part of the Unites States; an area that typically calls to mind for many agriculture, bigotry and ignorance. As a Southerner, I was always conscious of the way the rest of the country viewed the special place I call home. The rest of the nation saw us as modern-day Southern belles and gents, a latter day version of Gone with the Wind, or as a region typified by Gomer and Andy, by Dolly and Dogpatch, by grits and collards. All Southerners have experienced the condescension that greets our Southern accents and the amazement of non-southerners that accompanies our ability to string two consecutive intelligent sentences together. To this day, if an actor wishes to suggest that his character is stupid, prejudiced and violent, he adopts a Southern accent. And the media, at least from our viewpoint, tended to reinforce rather than help us overcome these limiting images.

On one level, these stories were entertaining enough, and I tuned in faithfully to laugh at Barney Fife every week. Yet what was so often wrong with these stories was that they were stories of the South told by non-Southerners. Others were trying to tell our stories for us, rather than allowing us to tell them for ourselves. The South I knew was never the South I saw on the screen. I did not know a single Gomer Pyle, though I could believe he existed as a tiny piece of that world; I knew instead the world of my grandfather, an Appalachian country doctor known for his generosity and kindness, his tact and culture, a man who delivered his 7,000th baby on his 92nd birthday. The world he introduced me to was a world of deep family connection, of unbelievable generosity, of profound religious connection. It was not until I was in the 12th grade

that I was introduced to the work of William Faulkner, and for the first time I heard not the story told to the south by others: I heard the story of the South told by the South as only the South can tell it. From this vantage point, it is perhaps not so difficult for me to connect to the child of color who goes to play after play and never sees himself up on that stage, to the pain that the disenfranchised must feel simply by walking into lobbies, seeing the opulence and the production values, to the impatience of artists of color who talk about community organizing and the impact of crime and the deaths of young black men on a daily basis, and watched white artists talk about psychological transformation and getting in touch with inner feelings, oblivious to the privilege inherent if that is the most pressing issue those artists face.

In planning our seasons, do we make the decisions for others on their behalf? Or do we relinquish the power and invest in them the authority to program what they want to say, even if it is what we do not want to hear? At some level, we must cling to this experience every time we try to cross a cultural boundary. We must remember, just as we Southerners know the falseness of most of Hollywood and the honesty of Faulkner and McCullers, to look at each story told and see that *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is the story of integration told for the comfort of the white, that *Philadelphia* is the story of AIDS and gay life told for the comfort of the straight, and that *Miss Saigon* is the tale of the Asian told for the comfort of the Caucasian. We cannot congratulate ourselves for breaking the ice and introducing our audiences to stories that are inauthentic or told in inauthentic ways. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* did not open the door for Spike Lee, just as *Miss Saigon* did not open the way for the *Joy Luck Club*. In dealing with a community that is not our own, we must ask: Who is telling me this story? And is it the story that they community wants me to hear or is it the story I feel comfortable being told? And let us all learn the lesson that audiences respond gratefully and recognize the inauthenticity of the acceptable once the true and the honest have been told.

There are times I wonder whether the depth of our struggle isn't simply the reflection of the limits of our own generation. There are times that I feel hopeful that time will heal what we seem unable to heal. Even among the numbers of worrying signs, I can find causes of hope. The *New York Times* recently reported an 800% increase in interracial marriage in the last 30 years; that 1 in 25 married couples are interracial; and that there are more than 3,000,000 interracial children in the US today. But then I wonder what that generation sees when they see us, and whether our de facto segregation, whether it is represented by the lack of diversity they see on our stages or in our box offices or even in our leadership as represented today might be a source of an increasing cultural alienation and indifference to theater, and whether we will be able to bridge that gulf.

This reference to a younger generation brings us to our second question: how we think. The young is equally a generation dominated by the impact of media in a way far more reaching than any of us could have predicted. Certainly, technology is reinventing all of our lives. The incipience of the superhighway we've all been hearing about will affect us in more ways than we can understand at present, but I do sense that the challenge is upon us to be the masters, rather than the casualties, of this fundamental communications change. Already, many of you I suspect are thinking of going on-line with publicity notices or discussions; there is great local excitement, for example, about the Guthrie site which allows you to recreate the sightlines from any specific seat in the house for the ticket buyer. How we maximize this technology on our behalf is a major question for us all, but one many of you are solving.

Yet frankly, it is the less provocative question for me; how we manipulate technology is considered more frequently than how technology manipulates us. I hope you all know the work of Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Her books, including *Dirty Politics* and *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, assess the workings of media and its impact on our patterns of thought, beyond manifest content. Her most recent research has focused on two groups, those over 40 and those under 25, the former having grown up before the introduction of video games, MTC, etc, and the other never having lived a day without them. She focused on the media coverage of the Bush/Clinton election, using both MTV and the conventional three-network coverage of events. Her findings are fascinating: the under 25's retained little information from the convention coverage, while the over 40's found MTV virtually incomprehensible. She concludes that we have a generation gap in learning styles; that the over 40's think in linear and narrative patterns, while the under 25's relate to the world through visual and associative imagery, a finding that, if true, has profound implications for our largely linear, narrative art forms: in essence, we may be the custodians for aesthetics that our audiences will find inaccessible. We've spent many hours in the United States worrying that ticket prices preclude attendance by young audiences: yet there is not a theatre in the United States that you can't attend as a student for roughly \$15 or less. And if the barrier is price, why when I am at Tower Records at midnight am I number 27 in line behind kids who are carrying stacks of CD's at \$15, \$16, \$17 apiece? Why, when I see the artist formerly known as the artist formerly known as Prince (because he's now Prince again), am I surrounded by kids who have paid \$85, \$95, \$105 per seat to be there? I think that the disaffection from young audiences is linked to this perceptual disconnect: what does it mean for our art form to tell stories, the vast majority of which are written in a linear/narrative pattern, to audiences primed to hear stories told in a visual/ associative way? Our "aging of audiences" is perhaps far from accident and may have to do more with the very art forms than merely with marketing and economics, as we have often supposed.

But there's more: most artists of my generation and above praise the arts for the tendency to lead us to reflective thought, to cause us to ponder questions and analyze ethical dilemmas. Hall's studies, however, indicate that the speed of images, whether MTV or video games, precludes reflection: you don't question whether you should shoot the death star when it's firing at you five times per second, and you don't contemplate the significance of single images when they change every second and a half. The downside, however, is that we may be producing a generation incapable of reflective thought. And, in remembering that ethics, not morals, is a choice between two rights, not between a right and a wrong, and that reflective thought is a precursor to ethical action, we may be producing a generation incapable of ethical behavior. Suddenly, all those shootings over new NIKES--- or sadly here in Chicago, for new bicycles--- make far more sense to me. How do we expose them not merely to arts education--- they already have it four hours a day (it's called television)--- but to the countervailing arts education that will promote sustained thought, reflection, humanization, that will prioritize the understanding of experience over the bombardment of image and exploitation of sensation?

And finally, how we congregate. When a book entitled *Bowling Alone* hits the best-seller list, the title of which says it all, we know we don't congregate as we used to. There was a joke in the South that the air conditioner was the death of the Southern neighborhood; a joke that was profoundly true. When I was a child, every adult knew me for an eight block radius because in July you could not stay indoors because of the heat: every kid rode her bicycle up and down the street, every adult sat in chairs

on her porch; a community bound together because you could not stay indoors. Now people go home, slam the front door, crank up the air conditioner and they don't know people four doors away. And if we think this technology has redefined community, it pales besides the impact of the internet. Increasingly, young people are saying, "My community is not Dublin ; my community is the group I chat with on line at three or four in the morning." And if community truly becomes a virtual, rather than a geographic construct, the question will be joined: why should I support the youth drama of Ireland when my community is not the Irish citizenry but the hundreds of friends spread across the globe who will never see the youth drama work in the first place?

Confronted with questions of this magnitude, we have two choices. For those of us of "a certain age", we can keep our heads down, knowing that retirement is just around the corner, and it will be someone else's problem. Frankly, this is not the option I recommend.

Or we can view this moment as, in author Douglas Rushkoff's term, a renaissance; a collective renegotiation of old ideas to reach a new consensual reality.

And in each of these dimensions already discussed, a renaissance is under way. And youth drama - the work of young artists and theatres started by young artists - is leading the way.

Youth drama is inherently multicultural: I can think of no collective of young artists that is one race only. There is a vital cross-fertilization of race in music, in fashion, in hip-hop, in theatre.

Youth drama is expanding our aesthetic vocabulary. Young artists are working in response to the new possibilities of the visual/associative. Young playwrights are writing in short, disjointed scenes, engaging in multiple plots, simultaneous story-telling - not unlike viewing television with remote control in hand, flipping channels, watching five programs at once. Young designers are working in abstract, juxtapositional mode, eschewing the strategies of literal reinforcement favored by earlier generations. I remember in particular a production of *Inspector General* I saw years ago---a play generally featuring a set of three walls, a settee and a samovar. This production had a giant fish suspended over the stage - a choice that the over 40's found deeply disturbing. We spent hours trying to understand the fish, finally settling on it as metaphor for the government. (Fish when it gets old begins to rot from the head, the government when it gets old rots from the head. We were very consoled.) The under-20's simply said, "A fish. Cool." Visual associative.

And they are proving as well that they can be linear/narrative AND visual/associative - a kind of bi-lingualism of perceptual mode. Kids have a deep hunger for the narrative. In the wake of *Sesame Street*, the next major program was < em>Blue's Clues- a linear story about a dog who does detective work and solves mysteries. And if kids aren't engaged by linear/narrative, someone will have to explain *Harry Potter* to me. When eight year old children camp outside of bookstores overnight for 900 page books that they can later recount in acute detail, there is a hunger for the joys that narrative can bring.

And youth drama is finding new ways of convening audiences. Youth drama feels unconstrained by traditional eight o'clock curtain times, starting at 11:00 at night, at 1:00 in the morning, featuring bands and engaging in rave events. Youth drama is happening in site specific pieces, in rock clubs and coffee houses. Young artists are

advertising their work on-line, often avoiding hard print publicity all together, organizing Zagat like web discussion sites, burning CD's to distribute highlights of upcoming musical theatre pieces before the piece itself opens, and more. Brat Productions in Philadelphia spends the bulk of its marketing in matchbooks - matchbooks left in discos and coffeehouses, matchbooks picked up by young people who see those same matchbooks the next morning as they light up with their first cup of coffee and who pack the premises for Brat's productions.

In other words, youth drama is leading the way for the rest of us. We look to you for the new answers that many of us may now be simply too old to see.

Beyond this refashioning, however, we as a community must make our case more effectively in the court of public opinion. We must reorient ourselves to speak not only about the quality of our work, but about its **value**.

Clearly, quality dominates all of our concerns. Rehearsals are about how to get better acting, better directing, better work. Managers want higher budgets because they can hire better talent and the work gets better. Critics call us to task based on the quality of our work. And more.

But while we have focused on quality, our country has moved on to value as the dominant criterion of social worth. As they taught me during my time at Target Stores, you can have the best toilet paper in the world in your store, but if people don't see the value of coming in the store in the first place, they never get to see whether you have the good or the bad. And PS, if you promise them the best, you better have it, or they wont come a second time.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that we abandon our concern with quality . It should always be at the forefront of our thinking; we need to always challenge one another to raise the bar, and we should be provoking our audiences to more demanding levels of expectation. But this discussion can happen only after we have the audience invested in our work. And that investment will come from the perception of shared values far more frequently than it will come from perception of quality alone.

To that end, every arts organization needs to be able to answer three basic questions.

What is the value my theatre offers to my community?

Harder: what is the value my theatre and my theatre alone offers, or offers better than my peers? Duplicative or second rate value in these times will not stand.

Hardest: how would my community be damaged if we closed our doors and went away tomorrow? If we can't answer these three questions, the only supporters we can expect already sit in our seats.

Traditionally in the United States , we have quantified this value in three key areas. We quote economic impact studies to show that typically, every dollar spent on a performing arts ticket generates \$3-5 or \$5-7 for the surrounding local economy - money spent on parking and restaurants, at the fabric store where we buy the fabric for costumes, at the printer who prints our programs and more. To this we add the skills that corporations spend millions in trying to impart in their leadership training - empathy, team building, confidence, commitment, the ability to listen and motivate

others; the very skills we teach every time we produce a play.

We cite the educational impact of our work. As I am sure Shirley Brice Heath told you last year, kids who have the arts typically perform 80 points higher on college entrance exams than their non-arts colleagues. They are four times more likely to run for class office, show radical reduction in disciplinary infractions and are exponentially more likely to graduate from high school than their friends not involved in the arts.

And we cite the role of the arts in building community and teaching social empathy. Those who read the reports from Columbine in the wake of those tragic shootings will remember what the students said. Our campus is deeply divided, the school is dominated by cliques and factions. The only place where we can come together, they said, is the performing arts center. And a recent UCLA study has shown that kids who have made an act of theatre are 42% less likely to tolerate racist behavior than kids who have never been in a play.

In short, youth drama is good for theatre.

It's good for the individual.

It's good for society.

These statistics are important ones: they are vital in quantifying our case and in influencing social policy, funding priorities and more. But our audiences know these things in our heart.

When I worked in retail, I worked for Target Stores, an extraordinary corporation that donates 5% of its pre-tax profits to charitable giving in locations where they have stores. Part of my job involved visiting new communities where we were about to open stores, to say to groups, - We're coming to town. We give away a lot of money ;we give to support education, violence prevention and the arts and here's how you can apply for a piece of that pie.

And in virtually every community, a hand would go up and someone would say, "You're not from here, so you may not appreciate the magnitude of problems we face. We have AIDS infection rates exploding through the ceiling. We have welfare to work issues. We have a homeless shelter without enough beds, a food shelf without enough food. We have a school system that can't put books and paper into kids' hands. Why the hell do you people give so much money to the arts?"

I'd take a moment and ask, "How many of you grew up acting the school play, singing in the school choir, painting pictures, etc." Almost every hand would go up. "What did you learn from that?" I asked. After someone saying, "I learned exit stage left" and another "I learned to read a musical scale" ,someone would say "I learned punctuality. You could ditch class and show up late, but you can't show up at 8:15 when the curtain goes up at 8:00. I learned teamwork. When you sing in the church choir, it's not how well you sing; it's how well you listen and blend with others". "I learned delayed gratification. You practice those piano scales time and again, and one day they just bloom in a way that you never expect." A marine in a small town in North Carolina said to me, "I didn't learn discipline in the Marines; I learned discipline playing the french horn." And when it came to theatre, people said, "I learned to lay aside my own feelings and thoughts and see the world, feel the world, experience the world through the eyes and skin and breath of another." If we don't have that ability, when it comes to AIDS and welfare and homelessness and starvation and more, we

can't even have the conversation.

Let me close with a quick observation. A recent poll showed that, when confronted with a burning house, people rush first to save their family photos. To you, I say that the arts are our family photos - the photos of our nation's spirit and soul - and that as a male struggling to make sense in a modern world, the plays of David Mamet and Lanford Wilson are my family photos. As a Southerner, the plays of Tennessee Williams and the stories of Carson McCullers are my family photos. As a gay man, the dances of Bill T. Jones and the compassion of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* are my family photos. And as a human being in a changing world, the books of Toni Morrison, the poems of Maya Angelou, the plays of David Henry Hwang, the music of Diamanda Galas - all inviting me into a family I have not yet known but which in turn has known me - these are my family photos. The poems of my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, the paintings of my African American siblings, the plays of contemporary feminist aunts, the music of my Asian American cousins - these are my family photos. Long after my granddaddy's name has been forgotten, the art of this nation, if it is allowed to flourish, will survive as a living testament to who we were, what we dreamed, how we felt - just as the plays of Euripides, far more than the mere record of wars won and lost, speak to us as living photos of the world of ancient Greece. To abandon the arts is to abandon hope, to abandon conscience, to abandon a moral quest to make the world better for us all. I value the arts because, in doing so, I honor the past, commemorate the present, and mold the future in a way that does honor to all and violence to none. In my mind, this is God's work we do.

I'd like to thank you for your part in doing God's work here in Ireland. I would like to salute the young people here today - the people who are finding the answers for the new generation, who are forging the new paths, who are making the new theatre. And I would like to thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me today. God speed you in your work.

Ben Cameron (Executive Director) has been with the Theatre Communications Group since 1998. Prior to this appointment, he had been active in corporate philanthropy and also worked for the National Education Association, serving as Director of the Theatre Program from 1990-'92. His work in professional theatre includes time as Associate Artistic Director at Indiana Repertory Theatre; Literary Manager for PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, NC, Baltimore's Centre Stage and Yale Repertory Theatre. He has published many articles on theatre, including a monthly editorial column in American Theatre.

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