

Creative Collaborations Involving Theatre for Young People

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Abstract

This paper asserts the importance of theatre for young people and that collaboration can help to overcome some of the challenges for developing and presenting theatre for youth. Three case studies are presented suggesting different approaches to providing theatre for young people. Potential partners include not-for-profits, businesses, government agencies, schools, and other arts groups and each type of organization presents a different kind of challenge to the performing arts organization. The inputs (financial, time, management), and outputs (outreach, authentic outputs, reputational enhancement, audience development) associated with each case are presented and analyzed uncovering the hurdles and shortcomings in the collaborative process.

Keywords:

Collaboration, Resources, Youth Performance.

I. Introduction

The development and presentation of quality theatre for young people is an essential activity for a number of reasons. Exposing youth to meaningful options for spending their leisure time has merit, as does the imperative for future audience development—early childhood exposure has been demonstrated to be one of the strongest predictors of performing arts attendance for adults (Andreasen & Belk 1980). One of the most compelling arguments, however, is the potential for good theatre to help kids grapple with their most pressing developmental challenges. For example, theatre which deals effectively with tough subject matter such as divorce, bullying, and drugs can be invaluable for helping young people find their way in a complicated world.

Despite these arguments, a number of factors contribute to keep effective youth theatre from happening. In times of budgetary restraint in the schools, for example, the arts are frequently the first discretionary resources to be sacrificed. Similarly-strapped, not-for-profit theatres, often see youth theatre as a positive, yet optional activity which often has to wait for better days. With this tepid commitment, youth theatre often devolves into either trite presentations of classic themes (e.g., Goldilocks and the Three Bears) or preachy and simple-minded presentations warning students about society's ills. With kids smelling a rat, the results are sometimes worse than nothing at all as kids actually get turned off the art form.

One way to address the resource challenges is to consider innovative collaborations in youth theatre. In many cases, a variety of organizations can share an interest in this area and are

willing to contribute in some way. Despite, good intentions, however, partnerships with disparate parties can be challenging and must be managed properly for the desired results to occur.

The purpose of this paper is to learn from those experienced in youth-centred theatre collaborations. By examining three case studies we will consider the necessary inputs, outputs and processes that combine for successful collaborations in youth theatre.

II. The Collaborations

Three very different professional theatre companies provide case studies in collaborations involving youth theatre. The comparison and contrast between these groups will broaden our insight into the wide range of available possibilities.

a.) Theatre & Company (Kitchener, Ontario)

Theatre & Company is a repertory theatre, presenting 5-6 play runs a season (2-3 weeks each) in a medium-sized city in Southern Ontario. Anticipating an upcoming play with themes of racism and hatred, theatre management wondered how they might make the offering more relevant to the community, and in particular, to the area youth. After gaining a pledge of support from a local insurance company, they approached a social services organization to develop a workshop related to the play that could be presented to area schools. The result was an adapted anger management program which was brought into the high schools and facilitated by both actors and social service workers. The centerpiece of the program included seeing the play, and included a facilitated debrief their back at the school. A total of 16 workshops comprising over 500 students participated in the program.

b.) Green Thumb Theatre (Vancouver, British Columbia)

Green Thumb Theatre's mission is to develop and produce original Canadian plays about social issues for young people. Common themes include cultural diversity, abuse, gender issues, illiteracy, poverty, teen-age pregnancy, and AIDS education. Green Thumb regularly reaches out to government branches and not-for-profit agencies that have common interests in the topics of their plays. In some cases the outside organization may be interested in commissioning a new play. Other times, the theatre company merely engages in an exchange of information and good practices. Green Thumb's ultimate aim is to generate the most authentic theatre they can muster, which they then tour through the area schools.

c.) Headlines Theatre (Vancouver, British Columbia)

Headlines Theatre develops and presents theatre which has a strong social/political message. Inspired by the Brazilian tradition of "Theatre of the Oppressed", the theatre group has tackled issues such as water privatization, native land claims, housing shortages, disarmament, and human rights abuses. One of Headline's approaches is to go into a community and develop theatre from scratch utilizing the experience and insights of non-professional actors. This method has been used in the schools with students around themes such as drugs, immigration, and bullying. Student volunteers devote a week to the project co-created with Headlines professionals, resulting in a performance for the rest of the school.

In each of these three cases significant effort is made to bring quality theatre to life for youth. For Theatre & Company, it involves working with an outside organization to help bring an existing play to life. In contrast, Green Thumb works with an outside organization to help generate an authentic play that resonates once the students receive it. Finally, Headlines focuses on a much deeper partnership between the schools and the students themselves to ensure a meaningful outcome.

III. Inputs

Collaborations are about exchanging resources, broadly defined (Barney & Arikan 2002). A common purpose for partnerships is on the basis of their “cost savings”. More frequently, however, arts collaborations are mission driven and seek to accomplish goals for the organization, demanding a complex combination of resources. While the list of inputs required for performing arts collaborations could be a very long one, this paper focuses on three major resources: financial, time, and management.

a.) Financial

In the area of finances, arts collaborations can either contribute to savings on existing performing arts programs or help fund new activities. Collaborations are often described in reference to their financial exchange, when in fact (as we will see in the following sections) monetary matters represent just the starting point of the overall relationship. In many situations the broader costs associated with gaining access to monetary resources are often grossly underestimated. On the other hand, non-monetary benefits to contributing parties can represent value far in excess of the related monetary amount. We now consider the financial exchange associated with each of the three partnership case studies.

For Theatre & Company, the collaboration facilitated the creation of an entirely new outreach project to compliment existing programming. Corporate funding of \$25,000 paid fees to the social service organization and helped subsidize increased performances to meet student demand. Bringing together multiple parties in short order was facilitated by pre-existing personal and professional relationships, including that of an existing corporate sponsor.

Collaborations for Green Thumb, in contrast, involve seed money for a circumscribed function: generating new plays. Organizations can sponsor the writing of new work knowing that the play will deal with their issues. The theatre diversifies their support for new work (not having to rely solely on government grants) providing a new play for touring and generating payment for the support of playwrights. In some cases the transaction is smooth, with the execution of a simple contractual agreement. In other cases, when the commissioning organization becomes invasive, the transaction can become a long, drawn-out process involving significant time and effort to resolve.

Finally, for Headlines the theatre group seeks direct compensation for the onsite development and presentation of the play (one or more professional salaries for a week’s time)—a far more costly venture than staging a canned play in the school gym. In some cases Headlines and/or the school has drawn on foundation support to subsidize their school work.

A common problem for arts organizations is to underestimate the actual financial value of their efforts to external parties involved in collaboration (they under-price their contribution). One problem is the uniqueness of partnership outcomes makes it difficult to compare to other

projects to get an idea about what is appropriate. Too often outputs associated with arts collaborations diminish financial commitments to a simple calculation of costs. Such calculations too often result in a significant underestimation due to the isolation of the effort without considering the overhead of the organization (costs necessary to keep it running)—the collaboration is perceived as being an add on as opposed to part of the core.

Beyond costs, a much more appropriate approach is to consider the considerable value which accrues to the parties, often resulting in a financial contribution far in excess of what the direct costs may suggest. One example of this was with Theatre & Company. Based on interviews on both sides, it is apparent that the insurance company accrued a far greater corporate benefit through their exposure in the community (students, parents, teachers, social service workers, press coverage, corporate promotions, etc) than the original amount they paid for the sponsorship.

b.) Time

While time is often money, it can often be very difficult to measure and assess. Theatre & Company's time amounted to bringing disparate parties together and overseeing their efforts. While this involved a considerable administrative effort, a further time stress occurred with the actors themselves (a two-person show) as they committed to helping facilitate the classroom programs. This particularly became a problem as the program expanded from an initial 6 high school workshops (involving 80 students) to 16 (involving 500 students), and involved adding additional matinee shows to the existing run.

For Green Thumb, the time commitment involves one-on-one negotiations between the artistic director and the administrator interested in sponsoring the play. In some cases this is a relatively simple process involving signing a contract. For others, however, the newness of dealing with arts organizations and overcoming the pre-existing perceptions of the organization can involve a substantial commitment in time. The overall time commitment, therefore, depends on the whether it goes well or not.

Finally, for Headlines, time intensivity is inherent in the goal. Theatre professionals painstakingly engage with the school administrators, the parents, the students, and others to develop theatre that is meaningful. The process takes hours and hours of overcoming logistical hurdles, perceptions, and biases and engaging the efforts of inexperienced and diverse participants.

In some cases, time commitments in performing arts partnerships can be a bottomless pit. Simple logistics such as setting up meetings and keeping up communications are trouble enough. Helping partner organizations from other sectors understand artistic process can be a long, arduous and frustrating engagement. On the plus side, savvy arts organizations appear to learn quickly, anticipate trouble spots and reduce unnecessary time wasting, particularly as experience increases. For example, one agency asked Green Thumb to create a play on traffic safety. Green Thumb realized early on that the agency was interested in a much more instructional play (i.e., why jaywalking is dangerous) as opposed to an artistic work that would pivot on traffic awareness and how it relates to people's lives. Despite the potential for a large fee, Green Thumb walked away from the deal knowing it would be an overall drag on their organizational time and resources.

c.) Management

The final category for inputs reflects the overall requirement necessary to manage the partnership. This is a broader, more strategic category and refers back to the overall objectives and qualities of the relationship. The overall quality of management inputs has implications for elements of negotiations, control, and risk in the partnership.

With Theatre & Company, for example, the overall management challenge was as *coordinator*. Dealing with an existing play, the outcomes of the collaboration were fairly low risk. As long as each party followed through with their agreed activity, success would occur. With the exception of overcoming some minor opposition to some colorful language in the play, the process required relatively little actual negotiating due to the overriding enthusiasm by the participants as well as the relative lack of ambiguity about what needed to be done.

Green Thumb's management challenges for the partnerships are better characterized as *mediator*. In this relationship they essentially play the middle man between the students as the end receivers of the theatre performance, and the organization funding the development of the play. As professional actors in the schools, they have a distinct idea about what is artistically appropriate for youth audiences and how they need to portray themselves as actors. Their challenge is to mediate the organizational goals of the funding organization with their requirements as artists. A primary difficulty for Green Thumb is when advocacy groups want to control the outputs in such a way that they are essentially instructional tools for their particular cause, as opposed to creating genuinely thought-provoking art. The risks associated with commissioning a new play are considerable; in particular being sure all parties are happy with the final outcome. Despite some difficult experiences in this area (in one case a zealously-meddling government-agency resulting in non-payment), Green Thumb has become adept in anticipating these types of problems and being selective about refusing support from groups with didactic aspirations, as well as managing the process in a savvy manner.

Finally, Headlines' collaborative management challenge is best characterized as *facilitator*. The goal of the theatre group is to provide continuous engagement from start to finish. Considerable work is required to be sure all parties are in agreement about the process. As well, the risks for producing an acceptable outcome for all parties are high given the sensitivity of the subject matter. Substantial hands-on negotiations are required for positive outcomes. Once again, Headlines has necessarily become very adept in being able to generate positive outcomes.

Regarding the overall management responsibility, the challenge is to take a step back and consider the quality of the challenge involved (for example: *coordinator*, *mediator*, or *facilitator*) and decide whether or not the associated level of control, risk and negotiations are appropriate for the outcomes. In many cases, performing arts groups get involved in collaborations they are very uncomfortable with, primarily because they are ill suited to the overall management requirement of the partnership.

IV. Outputs

Collaborative outputs we will discuss have to do with outreach and engagement, authenticity in the artistic process, reputational enhancement, as well as audience development. As these are inter-related themes, we now deal with each case study individually.

a.) Theatre & Company—Outputs

The overall collaborative output for Theatre & Company was a targeted outreach program including multiple parties centered around an existing performance offering. Corporate sponsors engaged in a relevant project that met their giving criteria and they could honestly promote themselves as good corporate citizens. In this case the corporate partner had already recently been a sponsor and capital contributor to a new theatre. The collaborative project broadened and deepened their existing relationship with what was perceived to be an ideal community effort.

The social service organization was able to get mileage out of an existing program and reach the teenage population group which is difficult to access in traditional counseling avenues. They also increased awareness of their services to teachers, parents and students. Finally, they became working partners with a major corporate player, indirectly receiving support for their programming. These kinds of networking connections often help open doors to the community in the future.

Perhaps most importantly, the youth were able to access art that otherwise wouldn't have been available to them. Combining it with a workshop prepared them to experience the theatre in a way that made it relevant to their experience and therefore meaningful and enjoyable.

One structural output of the program was the resolve of Theatre & Company to hire a dedicated professional to handle education outreach. Through the process they realized both their commitment to doing more of this kind of outreach and animation, as well as a need to formalize the function.

b.) Green Thumb—Outputs

In addition to receiving funding for the development of new theatre works, Green Thumb has the benefit of association with the agencies and foundations whose mandates are of great importance to children. One benefit of this association provides the exchange of knowledge and best practice. In the case of epilepsy as subject matter for a play, for example, better terminology includes references to “people living with epilepsy” as opposed to “epileptics”. Attention to details such as this helps to break down the barriers to prejudice and ignorance and the theatre is always eager to pass valuable knowledge on to teachers in the form of lesson plans and study guides. In some cases, money is not even exchanged, but rather just information and discussion. The overall process of engaging professionals and interest groups boosts Green Thumb's reputation as a quality theatre group interested in grappling with tough issues in an honest and professional way.

Kids benefit by being exposed to quality theatre with socially-relevant themes. For one thing, their perceptions, attitudes, and actions can be challenged and potentially altered when confronted effectively in a play. Gold (1990) suggests that vicarious experience through literature and theatre can be even more valuable than having actually experienced things for your self.

With its emphasis on socially-relevant themes Green Thumb always runs the risk of producing plays that border on being didactic, or preachy and simplistic tools which promote issues. Green Thumb fights this tendency by encouraging playwrights to address issues in a more open-ended way that enables youth to wrestle with ideas rather than be bludgeoned with propaganda. As already mentioned, it takes a vigilant negotiation with funders to ensure this

philosophy—a management skill that has developed over time for Green Thumb. Finally, it is ultimately their ability to produce engaging and authentic new theatre that keeps young audiences and their schools coming back for more year after year.

c.) Headlines—Outputs

Headlines has a reputation for going deep into communities and enabling a transformational experience through the generation and production of theatre. The schools are no exception. The students directly involved in the process have the most to gain as they struggle to open the doors and expose what is ailing their community through the process of crafting a theatrical presentation. The production quickly becomes a whole community effort, however, as the group takes on the role of mouthpiece.

An honest and open process for change provides a liberating experience for youth. To see a genuine treatment of their issues come to life in the theatre can bring about deep change in the way they regard themselves, their communities, and the art forms that give them expression. While the Headlines approach is the least efficient (money/time per student), the trade-off in engagement and impact can be worth it

The schools are one of many types of institutions and communities that Headlines works with. Successful work in the schools broadens their exposure, support and reputation to a much wider constituency base. This base of support helps as Headlines often seeks direct individual support to achieve its aims which are often controversial and in need of independent funding.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the priority for quality youth theatre in our communities. Youth need well crafted art to help them confront tricky issues such as drug abuse, teen sex, and bullying. In some circumstances, collaboration can help to reach into the communities relevant to youth issues, particularly in a resource-strapped environment. Three case studies demonstrate different types of collaborations and how they work through the challenges to success.

Through case study illustrations, this paper presents a framework for considering the benefits and drawbacks of performing arts partnerships. Consideration of the necessary *inputs*—including financial resources, time and proper management—must be balanced with the desired *outputs*—including the successful production of authentic and meaningful theatre that can help kids, community outreach, a boost in reputation, and audience development.

For schools and youth groups these cases illustrate how to achieve authentic theatre for kids, as opposed to preachy, didactic presentations. For potential funders (government or corporate) these cases suggest multiple approaches to collaboration that may meet differing program mandates. Finally, there is the hope that agencies with youth-related mandates might seek out arts groups as a means of animating or bringing their important work to life.

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