

Salzburg Global Seminar

The Performing Arts in Lean Times: Opportunities for Reinvention

Daily Session Notes, by Brent Reidy, Rapporteur

Salzburg, February 21st-25th, 2010

February 21st, 1st day

The day began with a meeting of session faculty. The co-chairs reiterated the aim of our conference. Russell Willis Taylor noted that the timing of our convening is apt. In the last few years many have begun to rethink the value, goals, mission and definition of the arts; the usual way of doing business is clearly no longer working. The United States' liquidity shortfall and subsequent global economic crisis did not create this feeling but made it more acute.

Adrian Ellis remarked that many of us have likely been at other sessions in which we have diagnosed the various issues causing this distress. Diagnosis, however, is no longer a suitable option. The lean times have coerced many organizations into action. Our goal is to rethink the arts together and explore possible solutions. We seek not an overarching prescription but a better frame for experimentation.

Tony Woodcock said that our mission is also overcoming our denial. We often blame audiences, economics, and so on, rather than taking blame and making change ourselves. We need to create new ideas free of old precepts.

The co-chairs noted that we hope for three outcomes: first, to create a place where we talk about the future through candid conversation that breaks from the scripts with which we often speak; second to learn and refresh our thoughts from the experiences and ideas of our diverse assembly; and third, to reassess our mission and value in the face of this new reality.

These thoughts were reiterated and developed upon in the introductory meeting. Taylor quoted Wordsworth: "We half create the world we see." State-of-mind generates reality. Reinvention is going about us. We can choose to lead this reinvention or we may be victimized by it.

It was noted that our disagreements in this session might be more fruitful than our agreements. A motto was invoked: "Be tough on the issues, but generous to each other." Nonetheless, moments of challenge are often the best times to do something fresh. Here at Salzburg we are removed from the minutia of our everyday work so that we may focus on longer-term, broad solutions.

Michael Lynch finished our day with a speech that focused on the issues we face and questions that arise from those issues in the context of his career. We have seen remarkable

growth in the last few years. The world has changed significantly. We recognize that many traditional structures for running organizations are floundering.

Perhaps the best way to move forward is to put the larger issues on the table so that we can move towards dialogue. We all know that recent technology offers amazing opportunities but we don't yet know how to realize them. We also know that the global financial crisis is a very real and serious threat to our field.

There is also a generation gap between what is being presented and the audience for which it is intended. Generation Y is not interested in the art often offered by many institutions. There is also a gap between our participants, as, for example, the arts world of Australia is very different from that of Beirut. At the same time that American orchestras reduce their offerings, China constructs more than 100 new art centers. The world is a diverse place by generation and geography and it is difficult to address the concerns of all parties.

Taylor ended with a series of questions in five categories.

Creation of new work: how do we tell our stories? How we make our creation real to the world? What happens beyond traditional performance spaces? How do we connect the live with digital?

Business: What replaces traditional business models? How do we build a new audience? Where is an organization's money best invested?

Technology: How do we monetize the digital experience? How do we use technology to innovate our field?

Community: How do we foster creative communities? How do we program toward audiences that want to participate and not have art thrown at them?

Education: What skills are needed by artists and art managers? How do we provide those skills? How do we facilitate access and equity for all?

A spirited discussion followed. We debated the education level of today's audiences. A younger listener today knows less about classical music but listens to more music and knows more about many different forms of music than a listener of a few decades prior. Youth today are more aesthetically connected than any audience that has existed before. Our goal should be to unpack what we value and validate compared to that younger audience.

Our effort may, in some way, be a futile or inappropriately labeled one. We speak of the "arts in crisis." The arts are not in crisis but some institutions and delivery systems are broken. We would like to fix those institutions and delivery systems, but art will survive regardless.

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February 22nd, 2nd day

We had our first plenary this morning, *The Creative Process and Technology* with Andrew Taylor and Chris Mackie. Adrian Ellis, the session's moderator, noted that we live in a golden age of cultural participation and amateur creation, yet audiences are not used to consuming long form works with undivided attention. The digital divide still exists and replicates itself, and price and constant innovation means constant obsolescence. We often look to the private sector for leadership, but it is still grappling with business models for the monetization of digital distributions.

Chris Mackie discussed his understanding of technology as a creative process and organizations as forms of information technology designed to advance certain information flows and hinder others. This can be a curse to heedless organizations or a boon to strategic ones. Both arts and technology organizations are designed for creativity, yet the arts fail to capture the same young audience technology reaches.

Arts organizations may reap the benefit of the creative process by doing things that focus on mission; creating structures that recognize, prioritize, and respond efficiently to change; improving sovereignty, the degree of self-determination that they exercise; and increasing long-term sustainability by enhancing long-term access to essential human and other resources. While there is no way for organizations to compete their way out of "structural holes" already dug and enterprise solutions are inadequate, organizations might form a community of practice to together author technology that can achieve the aforementioned strategic decision criteria. Groups should collaborate to create software to solve the things that hinder development and cannot be solved alone so that they may focus instead on more important vectors of competition, effectively "coopeting."

Andrew Taylor discussed the idea of *useful fictions*, metaphors that beneficially structure our thoughts and actions. The technological revolution has changed these useful fictions so much that we might discard or radically rethink those that no longer work. An example is *Professional vs. Amateur*: Is it useful for arts organizations to co-opt the creative spirit that exists in many forms and claim only professionals have that spirit in order to increase attention and money paid to an organization? Technology has made this fiction less tenable as it enables and empowers the amateur and those amateurs who want to be included in an organization's artistic paradigm.

Other examples include the ideas of *Production and Consumption, the Box Office, Light vs. Dark in Performance, Organizations, and Artistic Disciplines*. We must unlearn these useful fictions, and more importantly, not imprint them on future generations.

The discussion that followed highlighted competition as the lifeblood of the art; Mackie noted he wants organizations to cooperate on matters that are not mission-oriented so more resources may go towards mission. Some also touched on the possible ethic responsibility of the arts to not direct thinking mimetically; Mackie stated we don't have a unique responsibility for this and such engineering is difficult to achieve and currently far from effective.

Many conversational threads related to how recent technological innovation is a disruptive transformation of mass scale. A. Taylor noted we don't get to pick where sit in this change. We will never have control. We can only engage in the existent conversation. It was noted that the world is becoming more isolated and lonely for those outside of this technology. Mackie suggested that those who join late might leapfrog earlier iterations to achieve success. According to comedian Steven Wright, as quoted by Andrew Taylor, "the early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese."

In the day's second plenary, *The Performing Arts and Communities*, with Dick Penny and Basma El Husseiny, moderator Russell Willis Taylor noted that the arts do not create community. While the arts can encourage community, community springs up regardless of whether the arts are there to enable it.

Penny described his organization *Watershed's* growth over the last ten years and how, by digital disruption, the group stumbled into nurturing a creative community. In 1999, *Watershed* was given a then-very-quick Internet connection and began to produce material for the web. Rather than exert undue control over this content, *Watershed* invited as many curious people as possible to play with this technology. This proved quite successful, even though *Watershed* did not quite understand what it was doing. Penny learned to trust the creative space and *Watershed's* audience and users. The organization became a highly flexible, porous piece of cultural and creative infrastructure for its city. Success came as *Watershed* did things *with* people, not *for* people.

Basma El Husseiny described her experience with her organization *Al Mawred Al Thaqafy*. Arts participation in the Middle East was low because of a shrinking middle class and diminishing nationalist feelings. Artistic communities were splintered by differences of economics, religion, race, ethnicity, and language. *Al Mawred Al Thaqafy* hypothesized and subsequently nurtured an existent but fractured community of 18-35 year olds across 22 countries of 350 million people.

The organization saw immediate success in its programs. The community is an expression of a larger collection of young people who do not practice in the arts but see the arts as an essential element of society. The arts allow youth to feel power through expression. While many groups elsewhere in the world experienced shrinking audiences, *Al Mawred Al Thaqafy* grew its audience substantially.

Discussion prodded at various definitions and manifestations of community: the role of performer and non-performer within a community is not strict; community is more than an audience—it talks back, criticizes, and challenges; and some communities are disenfranchised by arts organizations' business-as-usual.

After small group discussions, the evening concluded with a fireside chat on *Regional Challenges and Opportunities for the Performing Arts* with Lyne Sneige Keyrouz, Geeta Chandran and Mulenga Kapwepwe, moderated by Adrian Ellis. The talk's goal was to provide a view of regional issues.

Sneige noted that the generalization of all countries in the Arab world as one is unfortunate as the differences among just cities, let alone countries, is immense. In cities such as Beirut and Damascus the youth generation has hugely changed the cultural landscape. We perceive artists as agents of change; we think now that our work has been nurtured long enough to engage in serious dialogue. What is missing is archiving artistic experiences so they may be distributed to affect change on a larger scale.

Chandran likewise explained that India is a collection of many states, languages, and dance styles. The plurality creates questions as to what should be supported, challenged further by audience taste changing every few years. India is investing in cultural exports, creating 150 cultural centers in many countries and producing a major Festival of India in China this year. The country is also shifting policy to focus on regional groups in small cities rather than large organizations in major cities.

Kapwepwe reflected on many of the issues raised so far in the context of Zambia. Times have always been lean and artists never have had the luxury of devoting themselves entirely to the arts professionally. The major challenge is instead one of identity. Much of the local art is derived from a European model. Organizations are trying to peddle indigenous art forms that are not even familiar to local audiences. Outsiders might contribute best to Zambia's and other's developing art form by following the Scandinavian model: ask for something in exchange and show trust. This instills a sense of pride.

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February 23rd, 3rd day

Our plenary today explored *The Creation of Value*, with Sarah Lutman, Sara Selwood, and Doug McLennan. Moderator Russell Willis Taylor noted that when capital transactions are made to signify value in the arts, the arts tend to suffer. She illustrated with a quote by Mark Slouka, from his *Harper's Magazine* essay “Dehumanized: When Math and Science Rule the School” (September 2009, p. 32 – 40):

In our time, orthodoxy is economic. . . . our artists are ranked by and revered for it. There is no institution wholly apart. Everything submits; everything must, sooner or later, pay fealty to the market. . . . If humanity has suffered under a more impoverishing delusion, I'm not aware of it. . . . Capitalism has a wonderful knack for marginalizing (or co-opting) systems of value that might pose an alternative to its own.

Consumers not producers determine value. Art has no value in a community if the community does not value that art. We cannot expect money, time, or attention for those things a consumer does not value.

Sarah Lutman discussed the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra’s recent experiment in lowering ticket prices. The change came after a crisis a few years prior in which audience declined and the orchestra considered cutting performances. Ticket revenue was an insignificant portion of overall budget so instead of cutting concerts, the orchestra slashed concert prices and focused on introducing as many audience members as possible to the group. The orchestra worked to engage novice patrons along the continuum to “super patrons” through various programs. As a result the subscription base rose about 40% and the gifts patrons provided proved more significant than the ticket revenue not realized. Marketing costs also were considerably reduced as tickets at lower prices were easier to sell.

Sara Selwood described cultural policy in the UK under the Labour party and that policy’s future under the incoming regime. Arts received a huge increase in funding under the Labour party. However, the then newly formed Department of Culture, Media, & Sport linked this funding with direct performance oversight. The department expected that the arts would improve behavior, combat crime, and create safe and cohesive communities; all were circularly linked to economic expectations.

The sector was complicit at first because of the funding infusion but the imposed hierarchical system of cultural value eventually took heavy criticism. Anticipated arts funding may drop in the future by 10-30%. Selwood noted this may not be negative; it may be an opportunity to rethink cultural structures in a way that benefit the arts.

Doug McLennan stated it misguided to discuss “value for the arts” as we are currently experiencing a shift to a niche economy. Finding a generic argument for value in a system that is disassembling does not make sense. Measurements of values that McLennan discussed included the National Endowment for the Art’s 2008 Audience Participation Survey, based mostly on the number of seats filled in a hall. This measurement is problematic as it focuses on an audience member as a consumer of a product rather than as a part of a community.

Facebook is the only the third most popular Internet site by volume of page hits, but its users spend about seven hours a month there, many more hours than are spent on the most popular site Google. This occurs because Facebook cultivates an interactive community. Netflix found success by encouraging a community of coders through an algorithm development contest. Frito-Lay generated some of the year’s most popular advertisements by creating a contest for users to submit Doritos commercials which the company would air during the Super Bowl.

In the discussion that followed Selwood fielded questions on her outlook that the UK’s new regime might be positive for the arts, despite a cut in cultural grants. Russell Willis Taylor observed those with a strong national cultural policy seem to run from it, while those without pine for government support.

Conversation also touched on the difference between declaration and invitation. Arts organizations traditionally speak by declaration, but invitation generates community. However, this does not mean an organization should be run by public vote, but that their process should be made transparent to and questioned by the public.

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February 24th, 4th day

Our morning began with a plenary on *Understanding Our Crisis of Legitimacy*, with John Holden and Ben Cameron. Session moderator Adrian Ellis described institutions as having a consensual relationship with society. The constituents in that society often hold views on institutions that are irreconcilable and in constant debate.

John Holden outlined an overarching challenge to the legitimacy of the arts in the UK evidenced by declining participation. Research found the public feels excluded from art. This might be the result of institutions ineffectively articulating different values to different stakeholders.

There are three sorts of values: intrinsic, the non-objective aesthetic of art; instrumental, the arts' capacity to promote economic regeneration and have other direct beneficial effects; and institutional, the arts' ability to bring people together and increase public good. Likewise, there are three types of stakeholders: the public, the arts professionals, and political bodies. The arts will benefit from a sophisticated discussion in which all three values are better understood and argued to all three stakeholders.

Ben Cameron described three questions an organization ought to ask itself: "What is the value of my organization?"; "What is the value my organization offers or offers better than anyone else?"; and "How would my community be damaged if we closed our doors?" An artist might ask the same three questions of his or her own work and also inquire "How can the organizations I work with be my community's best conduit to art." From these questions is derived the idea that organizations should not just produce high quality art, but should connect audiences to high quality art

Organizations and artists must become values clear as well as value clear to gain legitimacy. Individual and collective values are both needed across all arts. We must examine and dismantle behaviors and beliefs that will no longer serve us, including the belief that longevity and sustainability are criteria for greatness. We also must be clear about what the arts do better than other sectors. Other sectors have co-opted the word "creativity," which threatens the arts' legitimacy.

In discussion, it was noted that the arts often concentrate on intrinsic value alone while it is for many the smallest motivating factor to participate in the arts. A conversation followed that focused on the notion that artists can apply their creativity towards many other sectors, including science and business. It was suggested that the vocabulary of the field ("Culture," "Values," "Value," "Creativity) is deeply flawed and perpetuates issues of legitimacy.

In the next session, panelists Brigitte Fürle, Gitta Honegger, and Tony Woodcock presented on *The Role of the Performing Arts in Civil Society*. Honegger compared the relationship university and dramaturge to art: both shape art and act as conduit between art and public. There are ways we can better interweave the community and arts on campuses. Isolationist policies have harmed the arts; visiting guests often do not interact with the larger university community. Curriculum should be reformed so classes stretch across disciplines; a visiting artist might teach a seminar for business, art, and science students. Arizona University is a choice target as the school is far from centers of artistic excellence. Subsequently, students lack a sense of entitlement that might be regained through the arts.

Fürle described “Le rendez-vous de Berlin,” a theater piece on the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, enacted by two giant marionettes in the streets of Berlin with an audience of hundreds of thousands. The most important aspect of the art was to transform a capital city of Europe into a space of poetry. The artists did not make people come to art; they took art to the people. The art reminded people to believe in the unrealistic by experiencing an enchanted world of dream; if people do not believe in this world, with whom can the artist work?

Woodcock reported on the New England Conservatory’s efforts to empower musicians so they become “Apostles of Community.” NEC just began a United States’ version of *El Sistema*, a Venezuelan music education program with massive success. The program creates an “affluence of spirit” to better all those who participate regardless of whether they become professional musicians. NEC likewise focuses now on “entrepreneurial musicianship.” Musicians are often not taught skills needed to survive; this program teaches how to play to an audience, choose a program, manage conflict, market, raise money, and more.

Many orchestras today are problematic. While performance standards have risen, orchestras lack relevance, have arcane employment practices, operate with a 19th century performance model, do not have flexibility to work in new media, do not assess the character of the performers they hire, and, most importantly, do not harness the creativity of their performers.

Two brief presentations rounded out the plenary. Anna Shulgat described that times in Russia do not feel particularly lean as the times prior were much more difficult. The arts in Russia, however, suffer from heavy-handed centralized funding. Artists today seek authenticity through a balance of traditional and Western influences. Constantin Chiriac noted that the theater festival in Sibiu now has 350 shows in 62 venues. Culture has rebuilt the community; his community does not face an arts crisis as described in many of the other talks.

Co-chairs Russell Willis Taylor and Adrian Ellis gave a brief talk to conclude the seminar's proceedings. Ellis reminded participants that the issues we face fundamentally challenge us. We have a responsibility to engage with these issues. During this process we will make choices. As leaders we must not just understand or anticipate the issues and have answers thrust upon us. No answers will be straightforward and many of us have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. There is no monolithic solution to these problems, but the seminar has hopefully provided insights in the ways in which we all might move forward.

