

**Performing Arts Exchange 2007
Keynote Address
Ben Cameron, Program Director for the Arts
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation
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Thank you for that lovely introduction and that kind reception. While I realize that Louisville—or Luhavul—does not necessarily consider itself a Southern City, I find myself here among many of my fellow Southern bretheren—to whom I say, “What a pleasure to be back among people where I don’t have to explain that Southern men who call their fathers daddy do so out of emotional strength rather than mental deficiency; where true haute cuisine is a plate of barbecue, a side of hush puppies, a jar of sweet tea and a Krispy Kreme donut; and where the three most important words in the English language, especially during NCAA March madness, are ‘Anybody but Duke.’” It’s good to be back home.

And indeed, we are all home, not because of geography, but because we are now among a family where all of us care deeply and passionately about the arts—a different home that is in a turmoil unlike any I have seen in my 30 years in the field.

This turmoil was apparent in a series of national conversations in dance, presenting and theatre, designed to capture the current state of the performing arts, that the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation convened last year.

These conversations, involving more than 700 participants in 22 meetings held in 14 cities during 2006, were fascinating, and raised three types of issues:

- **chronic issues, like artist compensation and organizational under-capitalization, urgent issues to be sure and ones we need to address, but ones we heard thirty years ago or more;**
- **idiosyncratic issues, pressing for one field but not for others—issues around career transition for dancers, which had no counterpart in jazz, for example, or issues around text translation in theatre, which had no counterpart in dance;**
- **and four major issues that cut across disciplines, that resonated in every field and that seem especially pressing to this moment we are facing today—issues that were not on the proverbial front burner a decade ago, if indeed they existed at all, but that warrant our most fervent attention if we wish to survive.**

Such issues included concerns about the increasing dysfunctionality of the 501(c)3 model—the breakdown of old fundraising strategies, the difficulties of managing boards, and the hunger for new models, as arts leaders, increasingly overwhelmed by the time and effort necessary for fundraising, board cultivation, advocacy and the like, asked “Isn’t there another way for us to finance and support the work we are called to do?”

We heard concern about an impending generational transfer of leadership, as a generation of founders retire or depart. And while much of the concern was around where we might find their successors—especially given different expectations from young people around higher compensation, shorter hours, in essence less patience for the sacrificed lives of dignity and the financial masochism that were the givens for so many in my own generation—this conversation brought to my ears, at least, a new strand of the conversation: the unwillingness of emerging leaders to be mere custodians of organizations they inherit. “There are plenty of us eager to give ourselves to the arts.” they said, “But unless we are given the same authority to reinvent and reshape organizations as you yourselves were given, we are not interested.”—a point of view that raises far more questions about an organization’s capacity for change than about the identity of an heir apparent.

We heard about an erosion of audiences—declining rates in subscriptions renewals, the difficulties in attracting single ticket buyers, the collapse in the window of social planning—the unspoken aftermath of 9/11 when seemingly overnight ticket buyers seemed to commit, not two weeks in advance, but more typically 24-hours or (if lucky) 48 hours before performance—a disorienting shift that continues to plague marketing departments and box office staffs who still struggle to understand the new social rhythm and interpret accurately on a Tuesday the prospects for the sparsely sold upcoming Saturday performance. Moreover, the ever-accelerating schedule of our lives is producing a populace characterized by unprecedented exhaustion and over-scheduling, a time in which (according to a Yankelovich poll) half of consumers across all income levels say that lack of time is a bigger problem than lack of money, when 42% of men and 55% of women say they are too tired to do the things they want to do and when the #1 answer about most eagerly anticipated use of a free evening is no longer socializing, dating or attending a special event but “a good night’s sleep.” Not surprisingly, in every field, we heard concerns that, after decades of growth, our audiences are shrinking, and that our own financial needs, in tandem with negative shifts in funding, mean escalating ticket prices that threaten to place attendance beyond the reach of many in our communities that we wish to serve.

And, perhaps most significantly, we heard the struggle to understand more fully the impact of technology on the performing arts—the area that especially for an over-50, cranky Luddite like me can be the most perplexing, the most astounding of all. The potential of technology as a marketing device is, if anything, too effective: in trying to attract the attention of potential ticket buyers, we now compete with the at least 3,000 different marketing messages a typical American sees every day, according to Peter Whybrow in his book *AMERICAN MANIA: WHEN MORE IS NOT ENOUGH*. In fact, technology has emerged as our biggest competitor for leisure time: Gen X-ers spend 20.7 hours every week on television and online combined. Gen Y-ers spend even more—22.8 hours—with the majority on line and growing, and last year, computer gaming outsold the combined sales of movie and music recordings. According to Google CEO Eric Schmidt, a new blog is being created every second of every day. Moreover, technology is altering the basic

assumptions of consumption: thanks to the web, we believe we can get whatever we want, whenever we want it, customized to fit our personal needs. We can shop at 8 at night, 3 in the morning, expectations of customization and personalization that performing arts organizations, at least, cannot meet. Young people especially can get their culture on demand through You Tube and iTunes any time they want it and at little or no apparent cost--and what will it mean in the future when we ask someone to pay \$100 for a theatre ticket when that customer has become accustomed to downloading on the internet for free or at most for a mere 99 cents a song?

In response, we've launched websites, expanded our box offices to embrace on-line ticketing, moved from hard tickets to print your own, changed newsletters to email blasts, replaced hard mail subscription brochures with on-line graphics. With late dawning awareness, we have come to recognize the internet—not as a broadcast and marketing space, but as a social space—it's true purpose—and we have moved from communicating only through our own website but to My Space to Craig's List to Second Life—yet nothing we do seems to be quite enough, quite fast enough and or quite adequately resourced.

We are, in short, in a time of seismic change, and the future looks uncertain and mystifying in ways that it has never quite looked before. As Adrienne Rich wrote in her poem, "The Dream of a Common Language XIII," "The rules break like a thermometer, quicksilver spills across charted systems. We're out in a country that has no language, no laws....Whatever we do together is pure invention. The maps they gave us were out of date by years..."

Aren't you glad you invited me here to brighten your day?

So what are we to do?

I take to heart the words of Wayne Gretzky who, when asked why he was such a great hockey player, said, "I skate to where the puck will be."

Regardless of the stress of the present, regardless of the uncertainties, how can we—individually and as a community—shift from the reactive to the proactive? How can we skate, as it were, to where the puck will be?

We must recognize that the market for culture has shifted—a seismic, tectonic shift—and is shifting—a shift I heard provocatively described by futurist Andrew Zolli, using the lens of the coffee industry. In the early days of coffee, power lay in the hands of the farmer: if you grew the coffee bean, you owned the market and controlled the flow of the bean in a what we would now term a commodity market. But with time, the economy changed and we went from being a commodity market to being a product market: the power shifted away from the farmer to Maxwell House and their colleagues, those who processed and ground the coffee that you could buy and bring home, etc., etc. This too was of finite duration: soon, the big

player in coffee was no longer Maxwell House but was Dunkin' Donuts where you could buy a cup of coffee already made for you for 25 cents or 50 cents—a transition from product to service. And then the economy shifted yet again, and we went to an “experience” economy, one where we suddenly became willing to part with \$1.75 for a miniscule cup that somehow we’ve been convinced is a “tall”—how did they do that?—as part of a larger Starbucks experience: indeed Starbucks, as you may know, has a position called the CEO, which stands for the chief entertainment officer.

Many of us in the arts community are only beginning to appreciate that we have seen ourselves in service industry terms in a time of experience economies. Smart performing arts groups are expanding social lobby spaces, adding coffee bars, challenging themselves to extend the production into the lobby, engaging in re-branding and more—all a recognition that we traffic not merely in artistic production but in a total experience that begins with seeing the first ad, continues through the first call to the box office and doesn't end until long after the audience member is home in bed.

But just when we think we are beginning to catch up, the economy has shifted again. Those who wish to survive must think, not merely of experience, but of participation—an economy where value will no longer be consumed but where value will be co-created. Let me say that again: in the future, value will no longer be consumed. Value will be co-created.

We already see the power of consumer participation in other industries. The monolithic power of the restaurant critic has been shattered by Zagat where the collective consumer passes judgment and defines a restaurant value. “Dancing with the Start,” “So You Think You Can Dance,” “American Idol”—all are predicated on the active involvement of the consumer.

Nothing exemplifies this better than the ubiquitous Mp3 player. Anyone know how many of these different MP3 players are on the market roughly? Roughly? A couple of hundred? According to Andrew in January, 2007, there were 11,292 different models on the market—a figure that makes most people gasp. For most of us, if I say MP3, you have one thought: I-Pod. I-Pod. Not because it's the cheapest. It's not. Not because it has the biggest memory space. It doesn't. Not because it's the easiest to download. It's not. Not because it has the longest battery power. It doesn't. Not because it has the best sound reproduction. It doesn't. I-Pod seized the market because they alone emphasized I-Pod as part of an exchange - of creating an experience. You didn't buy an I-Pod merely to download, you built an I-Pod to create playlists of your favorites, to download Podcasts, to enter a world where you the consumer are the creator as well, potentially. And through that emphasis, I-Pod cornered the market.

We are clearly witnessing a veritable tsunami of creative energy unleashed through technology. We are seeing the emergence of a class of amateurs doing work at a

professional level—a group dubbed elsewhere as Pro Ams—a group whose work populated YouTube, independent film festivals, dance competitions and more. And knowing that we graduate 400,000 MFA's in this country every year, this highly skilled, professionally capable yet a vocationally artistic pool is destined to increase—a time predicted perhaps by our Secretary of State, a trained concert pianist who continues to play chamber music with professional musicians, even as her career has called her elsewhere. (This will be the only even vaguely kind thing you'll ever hear me say about her.)

This sense of co-creation is an invitation—an invitation to dismantle irrelevant distinctions between professional and amateur, a status once exalted as more precious than professionalism, capturing as it does in its etymological roots the love of practice. This is an invitation to dismantle arts education programs and replace them with community engagement programs. This is an invitation to seeing our mission, not in creating products to be consumed, but in offering experiences that will serve as springboards to our audience's own creativity—to nurture what Henry Jenkins calls a Convergence Culture, utilizing multi-platform narrative and marketing, inviting everyday people to reassert their right to actively contribute to their culture, channeling creative energies to come together. This is a call to a field to see ourselves, not as presenters, perhaps, but as activators, engagers, animators of creative energy.

This is scary to contemplate: it invites us to rethink our missions, our relationship with our community, our very reason for being. We must enter into these discussions openly, asking why we must continue to exist today. Because we have a building is not enough. Because we have a history and awards and a reputation is not enough. What is it in the world—in an external world—that mandates the flourishing of the arts in our communities today?

On the one hand, this invites groups to be value specific about what we do. Indeed, every arts organization needs to be able to answer three questions:

- 1) What is the value my organization brings to my community?
- 2) Harder; What is the value my organization alone brings or brings better than anyone else? Second rate or duplicated value will not stand for long in this economy.
- 3) Hardest: How would my community be damaged if we closed our doors and went away tomorrow?

Even these questions can be a trap, filtering our communities through our organizations. Too often we try to serve orchestras and forget that we are really called to serve symphonic music; we try to fix theatre companies without the larger lens of examining the connection between dramatic art and our communities.

Perhaps the better sequence of questions—and the scarier set—would be:

- 1) What is the value of dance for my community?
- 2) What is the value dance alone has or that dance fulfills better than anything else?

- 3) How would my community be damaged if it were abandoned by dance tomorrow?
- 4) And how might my organization be optimally structured, poised and focused to be my community's best conduit to dance?

This is perhaps the scariest set of questions of all but demands that we risk. This must be, I think, a time of risk—a word I use sparingly, knowing that many will equate it with irresponsibility. But what I mean here is risk—reaching toward the unknown, pushing past our comfort zones, not haphazardly but armed with our best instincts, our history of knowledge, the input of others expert in ways that we ourselves may not be. Risk—that capacity that lies at the heart of growth and learning, recognizing that without risk, a business does not grow; without risk, your marriage or partnership will grow; without risk, the artist—that central agent whose work we all exist to facilitate and present-- will be doomed to a life of technical expression that, regardless of competence, will never reach the essence of the true artistic moment. Indeed, the three greatest regrets of retirees should serve as a bold admonition to us all, as individuals as well as for our organizations. When asked what they most regretted about their lives, they answered: We didn't spend more time in reflective thinking. We weren't clearer about the purpose of our lives. We didn't risk more.

We must not and cannot lead lives or create organizations we will regret.

I for one am hopeful about this future, even though I may not have sounded so until this moment. We live in an increasingly arts-rich world. Daniel Pink, (interestingly enough a man in his 30's) in his new *A WHOLE NEW MIND*, writes of the emerging emphasis on right brain thinking to complement the left brain orientation that has dominated our world during the last century, “one that prizes aptitude the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new—as well as the ability to empathize with other, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one's self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning”,” to quote him. Bill Breen and marketing experts tell us that consumer desire is increasingly linked to authenticity, defined by four criteria: a sense of place, a strong point of view, the service of a larger purpose and integrity. God knows if we cannot position ourselves in this environment, we do not deserve to exist.

As I come into the home stretch, let me note that what I have really been talking about is bigger than the arts: what we have been talking about is a shift in American society in which culture is merely a player.

Ellen Ullmann, a wonderful thinker whose “Museum of Me” article led us to invite her to a theatre conference several years ago, reminded us that, convenience of on-line ticketing aside, there is great social value in standing in a ticket line beside someone not like you for 5 or 10 minutes—indeed that societies are strengthened

through such causal “social abrasions,” casual encounters that make us rub up against others and that lie at the heart of a coherent social fabric. With the increasing convenience of the web comes the increased loss of these abrasions, - and the rising sense that our larger social fabric may be unraveling.

The internet compounds this social fraying and easily “silos” us: no matter how paranoid your fantasy, there is a website out there to confirm your point of view. Graham Leicester of the International Futures Forum has called this “a conceptual emergency”—a time in which knowledge, which we once believed would set us free, now leaves us more confused: “where for every solid hypothesis substantiated by data, there is an equal and opposite scenario just as well supported; where plausibility is as powerful as truth and we are all left struggling to make coherent sense of the whole.”

Theatre practitioners now report growing audience resistance to encountering any idea not instantly recognizable as one’s own, an increasing polarization in our country, for instance, that led members of the audiences at this year’s Tony winning Alliance Theatre to exit en masse, mid-act, climbing over others, when a character said, “If I had time with George Bush, I’d tell him to share his toys and play nice with others.” For so many, the encounter with the other, with difference, with the new lies at the heart of our missions and purpose: what will it mean for us if we lose this appetite as a society and wish only to encounter the familiar, the known, the already embraced?

In response, we must recognize and celebrate the role of the arts in the search for common meaning.

At the time of the great explosion of arts philanthropy in the early 1960’s, McNeil Lowery, who was the head of the arts division at the Ford Foundation, which began the great philanthropic arts movement in the United States, was challenged to explain why funding the arts was important, he said, “I will give you ten reasons.” And here are his ten reasons:

- They are important, he said, because of their importance to the image of American society abroad.
- They are important because they are a means of communication and consequently of understanding between this country and others.
- They are important because they are an expression of national purpose.
- They are important because they are an important influence in the liberal education of the individual.
- They are important because they are the key to an American’s understanding of himself, his times and his destiny.
- They are important because they are a purposeful occupation for youth.
- In their institutional form, they are vital to the social, moral and educational resources of an American community.
- They are good for business, especially in new centers of population.

- They are components for strengthening the moral and spiritual bastions in a people whose national security is threatened.
- They are the offset to the materialism of a new and generally affluent society.

The “good for business” argument aside, Lowry argued at every turn for the role of the arts in exploring and defining meaning. These reasons—even more resonant today perhaps than in 1963, are in our very DNA and call us to rally ever more to their fulfillment, and even while we have in the last century evolved and adapted enormously as fields, our purposes have been constant. Through the arts, we engage in a struggle or our national character, for the emerging sensibility of the young, especially the young, who prioritize the “bombardment” of sensation through violent film and video over the contemplation and deep understanding of experience, especially in a popular cultural context that often seems to value humiliation over humanity. We reassert what it means to be humane rather than merely human, and we insistently—in an age of demonization and fear of difference, gather audiences to look at their fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. If we have ever needed such capacity in our nation’s history, we need it now.

In closing, let me offer an image that seems especially apt given the stirring musical invocation we received moments ago from the Spiritual Choir. A Harris poll conducted in the United States more than a decade ago asked respondents, “If your house is on fire, what’s the first thing you’ll grab when you run out the door?” The overwhelming answer: “family photographs”.

And I say to you, the arts ARE our family photographs.

As a man whose ancestors came from England, Ireland, Scotland and Germany, the plays of Beckett, the plays of Shakespeare, the plays of Goethe, these are my family photographs. As a man born and raised in the southern part of the United States, the plays of Tennessee Williams, the stories of Carson McCullough, the novels of William Faulkner are my family photographs. As a man in contemporary New York, the plays of David Mamet, the plays of David Rabe, are my family photographs. As a gay man, the dances of Bill T. Jones, the plays of Tony Kushner are my family photographs. But as an American, an American, the novels of Toni Morrison, the poetry of Maya Angelou, the songs of my native American brothers and sisters, the poetry of my Asian aunts and uncles, these are our family photographs. And if we do our job right, they will live and breathe as testaments to who we were, what we thought, what we felt, - just as we turn to the plays of Aeschylus, Socrates and Euripides as the living photos of ancient Greece - not to some record of wars worn or lost.

Many of us did not choose this work; it chose us. But when we choose to answer that call, what we really do is, we honour the past, we commemorate the present, we shape and we change the future in a way that does honour to all and violence to none. I don’t care how much opponents may try to shame us from that path. For those of us who are spiritually inclined, it is God’s work we do.

In that light, I would like to thank you for your part in doing God's work here in Kentucky and the South, regardless of where you come from and the communities you serve. I would like to assure you that our hands at Doris Duke remain outstretched to the national arts community, treasuring you for all you offer. And I'd like to thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this afternoon. God speed you in your work.