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Building Audiences

STORIES FROM AMERICA'S THEATERS

How Theaters Deal With Change In Building, Diversifying Audiences

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In 1991, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund launched a $25 million initiative to help 42 nonprofit theaters around the country expand and diversify their audiences. *Building Audiences: Stories from America's Theaters* is designed to share lessons from the theaters taking part.

How Theaters Deal With Change In Building And Diversifying Audiences

Introduction

This marks the third and final issue in the series "Building Audiences: Stories from America's Theaters." Earlier issues explored different strategies—using new work and implementing innovative marketing programs—theaters are implementing to attract audiences. This time we focus on the process of change at theaters seeking to broaden and diversify their attendance.

The purpose of these publications has been to share the experience of the theaters participating in the Fund's initiative and to give the people involved a chance to discuss what they have learned along the way. The Fund and participating theaters have learned a great deal since the initiative was launched in 1991. Back then we thought that if theaters had sufficient resources in the form of funds and talented artists, audiences could be expanded in a relatively straightforward, almost predictable, way. Today, we know change is a slow process; it's full of twists and turns; and there are often surprises and unexpected results.

That's certainly been the experience of the theaters profiled in this issue. As a result of their efforts to expand and diversify audiences:

- some theaters' missions changed in important ways;
- some leaders' job descriptions changed substantially;
- some theaters had successes that created new demands and pressures they hadn't anticipated;
- some theaters discovered that the process of building audiences can lead to new artistic challenges and an equal number of rewards.

What these and other theaters have discovered about effective audience building echoes one of the most important lessons learned across all sectors of the Fund's grantmaking: *there is no magic bullet*. No one approach will work in all circumstances or for all organizations. The key is understanding how chosen strategies will engage audiences and then working those strategies effectively with target audience groups over a sustained period.

The stories in this issue, as in our two previous monographs, are offered in the spirit of inquiry and continuous learning. We hope they encourage you as much they have encouraged the Fund. And we hope they inspire you to spread the word about the benefits—as well as the challenges—of making the arts and culture an active part of people's everyday lives.

The Most Important Lesson Of All

Building Audiences Is No Overnight Thing

Although their projects were different, the experiences of Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Second Stage Theatre and Pan Asian Repertory Theatre serve as valuable reminders that patience, an open mind and the ability to apply what you learn as you go along are essential ingredients to successfully building and diversifying audiences.

Berkeley Rep provides a new stage for Asian American theater

Berkeley Repertory Theatre has made great strides in expanding its Asian American audience, which now totals 15 percent for the runs of plays about Asians. Although the theater had originally hoped it could double its Asian American attendance for the entire season to 12 percent in four years, former artistic director Sharon Ott today knows that target was too ambitious.

"It takes a long time to make the theater seem friendly and for people to feel welcome," she said. "I think it requires 10 to 15 years of this work to really be taken seriously by the community and earn their trust."

Berkeley Rep's relationship with the Asian American Theater Company grew from initial skepticism and mistrust to healthy collaborations, such as productions and joint subscription packages.

Berkeley Rep's success at audience diversification has resulted from the development of a body of work that appeals to Asian Americans and making the theater a home for Asian American artists. Among resident theaters, Berkeley Rep has done the most to develop an Asian American canon of plays.

In the first season of its audience initiative, 1993-94, the theater created and staged an adaptation of Maxine Hong Kingston's popular and acclaimed novel, *The Woman Warrior*. Later productions included Alice Tuan's first play, *Last of the Suns*, in 1994-95, and Philip Kan Gotanda's *Ballad of Yachiyo*, which was staged during the 1995-96 season. Ott calls *Ballad of Yachiyo*, Berkeley Rep's seventh collaboration with Gotanda, who is Japanese American, the theater's "best artistic success with Asian American work." Co-commissioned by South Coast Repertory Theatre, where it also had a run, the play received critical and audience acclaim.

During the 1996-97 season, the theater mounted Mary Zimmerman's *Journey to the West*, an adaptation of the most popular classic of Asian literature and Buddhist religion. In addition, Berkeley Rep has co-produced several works with San Francisco's Asian American Theater Company, including Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own*, and two other works by Gotanda.

Collaborations vital to winning trust

Offstage, Berkeley Rep has learned other important lessons about building relationships with audiences, artists and the community. The theater's first attempt to collaborate with the Asian American Theater Company met with skepticism, mistrust and the perception that Berkeley Rep was an interloper in the Asian American community. Yet, by sticking with it, the two found common ground for a mutually beneficial relationship. Today, Berkeley Rep realizes that its collaborations with the Asian American Theater Company—from co-productions to joint subscription packages—were crucial in building a bridge to the Asian American community.

Said Karen Amano, former artistic director of Asian American Theater Company, "We learned how to build up our production capacity through co-productions such as Philip Kan Gotanda's *Day*

Standing on its Head. Also, joint marketing and subscription efforts reached many more people than we could have on our own and enabled us to experiment with new marketing strategies."

Berkeley Rep's long-time alliance with Gotanda, which dates from Ott's arrival at the theater in the mid-1980s, also has boosted its standing in the Asian American community and helped win the trust of other Asian American artists. According to Ott, Gotanda has become a central voice at Berkeley Rep, informally consulting on the development of new plays and issues of diversity. The theater has developed an ensemble of Asian American actors that appear in non-ethnic specific productions, such as *MacBeth* and *Volpone*. Asian Americans also hold permanent production and administrative positions.

The initiative helped lay the groundwork for good practices in marketing and outreach that are expected to continue to serve the theater well.

Ott feels that the Fund's initiative helped lay the groundwork for good practices in marketing and outreach that will continue to serve the theater well, including opportunities it was slow to recognize, like the potential of group sales. She also wishes the theater had budgeted more money for tracking audiences. "Traditional surveys don't work with our audiences. People have told us they resent being asked about their racial and ethnic backgrounds. We really should have done more focus groups and explored other methods for analyzing and profiling our audiences."

Ott believes these lessons will help the theater as it reaches out to other audience groups in efforts to make the theater a place where people from a mix of cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds feel at home. She notes, for example, that the theater's production of *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* by Anna Deveare Smith, which was targeted to African Americans, also drew large numbers of Asian Americans. "That's a testament to the success of the Asian American initiative," Ott said. "We had the most racially mixed audience of any of the cities we toured with this show."

Berkeley plans to continue this cross-pollinating effort with the 1997-98 season premiere of Gotanda's *Yohen*.

Ott has already seen that the lessons she learned during the years of Berkeley Rep's audience development initiative can work elsewhere. Recently named artistic director of the Seattle Repertory Theater, Ott arrived there both with plans to support the development of Asian American works and the knowledge about ways to effectively reach members of the city's large and growing Asian American community. Ott said that as a result of applying many of the strategies she tried and refined in San Francisco, "when we performed Gotanda's *Ballad of Yachiyo* in Seattle last January, we brought in 3,000 new Asian American ticket buyers."

Second Stage begins work by asking key questions

The 1992 grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund provided both the means and opportunity for New York's Second Stage Theatre to embark on a full-scale effort to attract theatergoers ranging in age from 11 to 18. But before plunging full-speed ahead, Second Stage decided it first needed to learn more about what youngsters thought about theater and its relevance to their fast-changing lives.

Carole Rothman, artistic director, said one practice that proved especially useful was to invite teens to take part in focus groups. These sessions provided Second Stage with valuable insight into young people's ticket-buying habits and how the process of growing up can affect their relationship with the theater. Information learned through focus groups and other discussions with members of the target audience helped—and continues to help—Second Stage shape decisions about all aspects of its operations—including what plays to commission, how to present them and ways to market them more effectively.

For example, Second Stage learned that teens don't attend theater alone, but often come with their parents. That discovery made Second Stage aware that it couldn't focus its outreach efforts exclusively on teens, but instead also needed to build relationships with parents, teachers, principals and other adult mentors—both because of their influence and because they're easier to reach directly season to season.

As a result, one successful program the theater started invites parents to buy tickets for themselves and bring their children for free to Family Matinees that are offered on two Saturdays during the run of each show. The theater makes a point of calling each family before the performance to discuss the content of the play and its suitability for different ages. Rothman said that 50 to 60 families regularly take advantage of the offer. Second Stage also offers six to eight free school matinees each season, and it sells group tickets for regular performances to schools, community centers and youth organizations.

To reach teens directly, one of Second Stage's most successful marketing tools was a quarterly newsletter. Called *Scene*, it was written by teens and carried feature articles, behind-the-scene profiles and student reviews about productions at Second Stage and other New York theaters. *Scene* also featured a guide to attending theater—including tips on how to purchase tickets, when to arrive and what to wear—and listings of current plays around the city. Demand for *Scene*, which was mailed to the homes of teens and delivered to schools and youth centers, increased throughout the initiative. While Second Stage couldn't continue funding *Scene* after its grant ended, Rothman reports that the Theater Development Fund, a New York City nonprofit service organization that administers a range of discount ticket programs, has introduced a similar publication for teens called *Play by Play*, which is modeled on *Scene*.

Over three years, young people's total attendance at Second Stage nearly doubled, and now they are considered a permanent part of the life of the theater.

Other ancillary activities that have been beneficial included the formation of a student advisory council and the creation of paid internships. In addition to helping forge and strengthen relationships with teens directly involved, these efforts provided a valuable link to schools, families and youth groups in New York City.

Over the three years it participated in the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Theater Initiative, Second Stage reported that total attendance by young people had nearly doubled to 1,942. Rothman said Second Stage now considers young people a permanent part of the life of the theater. "We look at every play we consider for the season through a teen's eyes," she said. "We've learned that there are a variety of issues kids may be attracted to that we might not have been as aware of before."

For example, through discussions that followed the 1997 production of Lanford Wilson's critically acclaimed *Sympathetic Magic*, the theater learned that school audiences were drawn into the morality of the play and the questions it poses about our place in the universe, what may exist beyond human knowledge and how individuals make decisions about what to do with their lives.

Second Stage feels its effort to build a multigenerational audience is an investment in its future. Optimism about its growing audience led it to begin building a new 299-seat theater, triple its current capacity—that it expects to move into in time for the 1998-99 season.

Pan Asian Rep renews its grassroots connection to community

Pan Asian Repertory Theatre Artistic Director Tisa Chang had already begun to see glimmers of change in her company when it submitted its proposal to the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund theater initiative. The artistically driven theater that Chang founded in 1977 had been successful in attracting large audiences for many productions, including the broadly popular film noir satire *Yellow Fever* by Rick Shomi, through positive reviews in the *New York Times*. But Chang had come to realize that the theater couldn't get by forever depending on favorable *Times'* reviews. It needed to have more of a say about its future.

Thus, the invitation to participate in the Fund's theater initiative came at a propitious moment, Chang said. "I knew we needed time to strategize, learn and plan for the future. I saw the grant offering us that opportunity."

At the outset of the grant no one on the theater's board or staff was familiar with the intricacies of audience building. So the company decided to start with the basics. "We had to ask 'Who is our audience? How do we relate?,'" Chang said.

As a first step, the company had to overcome the differences in outlook between its artistic and administrative staffs and make audience development a central goal for everyone of the theater. "We could no longer separate audience building from the art," she added. "It had to become everyone's concern and responsibility." Today, the theater's artists, staff and board share a mandate to strengthen Pan Asian Rep's relationship with its audience. Everyone, especially staff members who have direct contact with the public, is held to the same standards of excellence and effectiveness as the artistic staff.

Today, everyone at Pan Asian Rep, especially those who have direct contact with the public, is held to the same standards of excellence as the artistic staff.

Pan Asian Rep's focus on audience led the theater to take visible steps to demonstrate its concern for and commitment to New York City's Asian American community. As the theater's primary representative, Chang attends many events in the community, including luncheons hosted by the Chinese American Lions Club and events to mark the Japanese Day of Remembrance.

Chang feels that this outward display of interest in the affairs of the Asian community—not only by her, but the theater's directors, playwrights and actors—is essential to developing, forging and sustaining relationships. That need to make direct and personal contact with current and potential supporters was reinforced watching Clinton and Dole campaigning for votes in the 1996 presidential election. "There they were out on the stump day after day shaking hands with the voters. I realized we needed to do the same to stay in contact with our constituency."

These days, Chang will seize any potential "vote-getting" opportunity that will serve the theater's interest. For example, in September 1996, she traveled to the annual retreat of the China Institute in Lake George, in northern New York State, to present an excerpt from *Shanghai Lil's*, a new musical by Lilah Kan the theater planned to premiere in the Spring. Chang was joined by Louis Stewart, the show's composer, and three actors. They performed to a captive audience of 250 people—mostly second-, third- and fourth-generation Chinese Americans, all prime targets for this production about a Chinatown restaurant in San Francisco that's transformed into a nightclub during World War II. The following January, Chang appeared at a meeting of the Pan Pacific Southeast Asian Women's Association, attended by women interested in Asian relations. Chang said these kinds of personal appearances are important, because "you never know how this kind of networking will pay off."

But pay off, they do. Three weeks before *Shanghai Lil's* opened, 70 percent of the tickets were sold. Many were purchased by groups. Before that, the theater had little experience—or success—with group sales, something it is much more astute about today. "We learned that many groups book their activities as many as six months in advance," said Chang. "So now, we're out planting our seeds in a more timely fashion." In fact, Chang added, she and company members now make personal appearances, networking, and other outreach activities part of their jobs.

Some things are worth repeating

Another—and perhaps one of the most valuable—audience-building lessons that Pan Asian Rep has learned is how to both capitalize on opportunity and lead with its strengths. For example, because *Shanghai Lil's* proved so successful during its previous run, and generated such positive word-of-mouth attention, the theater decided to stage a reprisal of it to open its 1997-98 season. That strategy, which the theater has used successfully in the past, also serves another goal, which is to find productions that support themselves while they're running. This helps free the theater to raise funds needed instead for development and rehearsal that hopefully will produce future successes like *Shanghai Lil's*.

Learning how to capitalize on opportunity and to lead with its strengths has proven to be one of Pan Asian Rep's most valuable lessons.

Chang, like her counterparts, may have frustrations about the time it takes to build and sustain diverse audiences. But to a person, they know the future for theater looks much brighter as a result of their efforts.

Getting Past The Roadblocks

Collaboration Is A Process Of Give And Take

Berkeley Repertory Theatre has enjoyed a fruitful relationship with playwright Philip Kan Gotanda, producing six of his works, including three premieres, and hosting two playwriting residencies. But the collaboration—which has helped forge new links between the theater and the Asian American community—has had its share of challenges.

On paper, Berkeley Rep's resume of work with Philip Gotanda reads like a match made in heaven. Yet, the relationship between Berkeley Rep and the Japanese American playwright has been built over time and myriad experiences—some good, some bumpy. Gotanda has had more work produced by Berkeley Rep than by any other single theater. And the theater's former artistic director, Sharon Ott, has been more involved in Gotanda's work than any other artist's. Although both have demonstrated a solid commitment to the theater's goal of expanding Asian American audiences—and the collaboration between the two has been instrumental in making progress toward that goal—issues of race and culture and how they play out at Berkeley Rep's programming are still ongoing topics of conversation.

The fact that Gotanda has become such a fixture at Berkeley Rep was born out of Ott's interest in him. Having read some of his work before arriving at the theater for the 1984-85 season, Ott contacted Gotanda before any other playwright. At the time, Gotanda was still working primarily with Asian American theater companies. Gotanda says he responded to Ott's overtures cautiously, although, in retrospect, he praises her for beginning a dialogue before it became "chic" or "financially opportunistic" for mainstream theaters to work with ethnic playwrights.

Despite interest on both sides, it was three years before Gotanda and Ott agreed on their first collaboration. Gotanda said he would allow Ott to direct *Yankee Dawg You Die,* a two-character play about stereotypes of Asian Americans that draws on the playwright's experiences in the theater. However, that agreement came with a condition: to overcome his unease about a non-Asian directing his work, Gotanda made Ott promise that she would take the time to understand his world and the cultural vantage point of his work. When the play premiered during the 1987-88 season it won critical and audience acclaim there and in subsequent produc-

tions in New York City and Los Angeles. Looking back, Gotanda said, "She really did her homework."

Beside rave notices for their work together, Gotanda said that his first collaboration with Ott resulted in other benefits. Traveling with the production gave the director and playwright each a chance to get to know the other better and spend time in the other's environment. "Our worlds started to overlap," he said. That awareness of similarities, not just differences between them, left Gotanda open to the possibility of working again with Ott.

Thus, when the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City and Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles decided to co-produce a revival of his play *The Wash,* in 1990, Gotanda requested that Ott direct it. During that production he said he became even more comfortable with her. "She spent a lot of time with me and the actors," he said, "and I sensed a shift in her world view." That same season, on Berkeley Rep's stage, Ott slotted the premiere of Gotanda's *Fish Head Soup*, which Oscar Eustis directed.

In 1993 the relationship between the playwright and theater came under fire. Berkeley Rep received a $1.5 million grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to help it attract Asian Americans. To some—especially smaller Asian American theaters—the theater's plans were viewed as an attempt to compete for their audiences. Suddenly, Gotanda, who was considered by many as the unofficial spokesperson for Asian American artists, found himself in the middle of a brewing feud.

However, because Gotanda also had a close relationship with San Francisco's Asian American Theatre Company, Berkeley Rep used that to try to smooth over harsh feelings. In early 1994 the two theaters co-produced the West Coast opening of Gotanda's *Day Standing on its Head,* which had premiered several months earlier at the Manhattan Theatre Club. The play received enthusiastic critical and audience response, and Berkeley Rep felt the co-production was vital to fortifying its relationship with Gotanda and the Asian American community.

Things didn't stay quiet for long, however. When Berkeley Rep announced plans to produce a stage adaptation of Maxine Hong Kingston's popular epic novel *The Women Warrior,* the Asian American community accused the theater of cultural appropriation and questioned what Asian American input there would be in the production. When the work was presented in mid-1994, it drew large numbers of Asian Americans and criticism from some factions in the community. Among the dissenting voices was Gotanda's, who felt Berkeley Rep had shaded its production with "Orientalism," or playing up certain exotic elements of the culture.

Despite his issues with the staging of *The Women Warrior,* Gotanda tried to balance his support for Berkeley Rep's audience expansion goals with his concern over the growing resentment among Asian Americans. At the Theatre Communications Group (TCG) National Conference in Princeton, N.J., in 1994, Gotanda found he could no longer hold his middle ground. TCG had invited Berkeley Rep to present a case study at the conference about its production of *The Women Warrior.* A panel including Ott, Maxine Hong Kingston and scenic designer, Ming Cho Lee spoke about the production.

Gotanda publicly challenged one panelist's assertion that Berkeley Rep was the only theater that had the production resources to successfully present the work and that Asian American theaters weren't artistically up to the chore. "I had to say something to dispel any misconceptions about the work of Asian American theaters in this country," Gotanda said. While Berkeley Rep regarded Gotanda's statement as a betrayal, the playwright said he felt the theater had no right to think it could prevent him from freely expressing personal opinions.

It took some time for tensions between the theater and Gotanda to cool. Ott and Gotanda admitted they didn't even have a common vocabulary for talking about these issues of race and culture. In the end, though, it was their friendship and trust that brought Ott and Gotanda together again. "We liked each other as friends, felt we understood each other as individuals and worked well together," he said. "We tried to look at things through each other's eyes and agreed we don't agree on a lot of things. Tension can be a part of the working formula."

Ott said the period of dissent and estrangement was "extremely difficult, but ultimately beneficial to Berkeley Rep. We had very different points of view on race and culture, but we were able to work them through."

Ott acknowledges that "because Philip is such a noted presence in the Asian American community, any discussion with him is highly public. When people saw that we were serious in our commitment to Philip and intended to work out our issues, we achieved a higher level of respect in the community. When Philip's trust in us was renewed, it rippled out to other Asian American artists and the community at large."

Gotanda also agrees the partnership is worth the struggle and effort. "It has to do with living in this world at this moment in time. We're all struggling with how this thing called America works. The theater happens to be a civilized and contained area for working out some of these issues of race and culture."

Sustaining A Boost In Audience

After You Get Them, How Do You Hold On To Them?

Manhattan Theatre Club, Dell'Arte theater ensemble and Pregones Theater differ considerably in size, program and audience. Yet each of these three theaters has faced a turn of events—some planned, some unanticipated—that have led to a growth in audiences. In the process, they've not only surpassed their original audience-building goals, they're handily sustaining them. Here's a look at their strategies.

Manhattan Theatre Club stretches capacity to make room for new audiences

Manhattan Theatre Club rounded out its 20th season in 1990 and found itself at a crossroads. The theater wanted to diversify its primarily white, affluent audience of over 50-year-olds by growing the number of younger and more ethnically mixed ticket buyers for the company's productions.

Because of its limited capacity, Manhattan Theatre Club used to find itself having to close a production when single-ticket demand was at the highest.

But its ability to do that successfully was constrained by two factors. One was that it could only expand audiences so much before reaching the upper limits of its space in New York's City Center, located in midtown just a stone's throw from Broadway. And while a move to a larger home had been contemplated, it was at least several years away. The other constraint was that subscribers already accounted for some 70 percent of each season's sales, leaving only a small inventory of single tickets to accommodate new buyers.

"With our fixed subscription season and large subscriber base, we found ourselves having to close a production just when single-ticket demand was at its highest," explained Barry Grove, the theater's executive producer.

To address its limited capacity, Manhattan Theatre Club devised a new strategy. It approached the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund for a grant to establish a cash reserve fund of $500,000. It proposed using the money for extending, or moving to larger venues, plays that appeal to new and diverse audiences. What made the idea especially attractive was its built-in sustainability. The theater agreed that any money drawn from the fund would be replenished within 18 months—from box office proceeds or from the general operating budget, depending on the success of the venture.

Since Manhattan Theatre Club created the cash reserve fund in the 1991-92 season, it has borrowed from it to extend such hits as Anne Meara's show *After-Play* and A.R. Gurney's *Sylvia*, starring Sarah Jessica Parker. It also was able to extend Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (which received the Tony Award for Best Play of the 1994-95 season) and move it to Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre for an open-ended run. John Patrick Shanley's *Four Dogs and a Bone* was transferred to the Lucille Lortel Theater in Greenwich Village, where it attracted a large number of young adults. *Pretty Fire* and *Neat*, both by Charlayne Woodard, and Cheryl West's *Holiday Heart*, plays by and about African Americans, were assured longer runs. So, too, were *Playland* and *Valley Song* by South African playwright Athol Fugard. Most recently, the theater was able to produce the New York premiere of August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* in an open-ended run on Broadway.

"The success of this initiative has fundamentally changed the way Manhattan Theatre Club sees itself," said Grove. "We have become the producer of first resort for open-ended runs." That, he admits, helps attract and maintain the interest of many of the high calibre playwrights with whom the theater works.

The ability to seize such opportunities has helped Manhattan Theatre Club increase its single-ticket buyers by more than 80 percent since the 1991-92 season. Its total annual audience nearly tripled from 90,000 to more than a quarter of a million. And while subscribers increased by 50 percent to more than 20,000 in fiscal year 1996, they only represented 35 percent of the audience. The theater's extended reach also had an unexpected impact on fundraising. From 1990 to 1995, individual giving doubled to $1 million. Grove attributes the expanded donor base to its larger number of single-ticket buyers.

The influx of single-ticket buyers has also changed the demographic profile of the audience, as the theater had hoped. The audience is younger and is starting to diversify racially. African Americans now account for 15 to 20 percent of the non-subscription attendees at plays that are by or about Africans and African Americans, although that number continues to include a considerable number of complimentary ticket holders. While the theater has yet to see much crossover of African Americans to other mainstage productions, it is encouraged by their growing attendance at the theater's literary series, Writers in Performance. African Americans accounted for 90 percent of the audience for Alfre Woodard's reading of *The Street* by Ann Petry, and 10 percent of the audience for Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, read by Jeremy Irons.

Armed with a database of 150,000 single-ticket buyers and access to outside lists, Manhattan Theatre Club can finely target its marketing efforts.

"This change in demographics has altered audience response," said Grove, who notes that single-ticket buyers are more responsive to reviews and word of mouth, unlike subscribers who are usually reached through direct-mail solicitations. "By having a greater number of single-ticket buyers in the audience, we're getting our subscribers to behave more like single-ticket buyers. They're even more emotionally available and intellectually alert now."

Since the 1993-94 season, Manhattan Theatre Club has scheduled at least one show each season at an off-site venue. In the 1996-97 season, for instance, the theater opened Charles Busch's zany new musical, *The Green Heart*, at Variety Arts Theatre, where it would naturally attract the playwright's large downtown following. This tactic of producing off-site, combined with an overall growth in audience and box office revenues, has allowed the theater to increase the average length of mainstage runs from eight to 10 weeks and second stage runs from five to seven weeks.

Over the past several seasons, Manhattan Theatre Club has strengthened and expanded its marketing infrastructure to sustain the growth in audience. The theater now produces a marketing plan for each production. With its database of 150,000 single-ticket buyers, and access to numerous outside lists, the theater can finely target its efforts. It offers some single-ticket discounts through flyers and print ads, and it has been working to increase group sales.

"Our biggest hurdle with group sales continues to be a lack of inventory," said Grove. "Many nights, the most we can make available is 25 seats." However, the theater was able to sell 800 tickets to groups for the 1997 season's New York premiere of *Nine Armenians* by Leslie Ayvazian. "We applied to the Armenian community many of the same strategies we learned working with other communities," explained Grove. "We started six months early talking to churches, other organizations and the press in the community."

The theater judiciously uses focus groups prior to launching subscription renewal campaigns to understand how the audience perceives Manhattan Theatre Club and to ensure clarity in positioning shows. Whenever the theater plans to transfer a play, it also employs focus groups to give direction to an expanded marketing effort.

Emboldened by its many successes of the past several seasons, Manhattan Theatre Club is making plans to reach an even larger audience, according to Grove, without compromising the theater's work. Those plans include a new home in the near future. The theater has already found new office and rehearsal space in the Broadway theater district and now is actively searching for a performance space

that will at least double the capacity of both its mainstage and second stage, which currently seat 300 and 150.

Poised to unveil a capital campaign to raise funds for the new theater, Manhattan Theatre Club will also be seeking funds to double its cash reserve fund to $1 million. “We want to move more work to Broadway,” said Grove. “While the cash reserve fund has been a hugely successful idea, it’s not big enough right now for us to do all we’d like to.”

Dell’Arte leaves the road behind to discover an audience at home

Like many artists in rural northern California, actors Michael Fields, Donald Forrest and Joan Schirle were drawn to the area by its natural beauty and lifestyle. In 1976, soon after the opening of the Dell’Arte School of Physical Theater, they founded the Dell’Arte theater ensemble in Blue Lake (pop. 1,100). But, like other artist neighbors, the Dell’Arte ensemble had to look beyond this sparsely populated region for audiences for its work. Most of Dell’Arte’s performing was done on the road, with extensive touring in the United States and abroad.

According to Dell’Arte’s co-artistic director Michael Fields, that began to change in the late 1980s as the founders wanted to spend more time at home with their families and become involved in their community. This decision was reinforced by a shift in the touring market. With less funding available to them, presenters were scaling down their seasons and taking fewer risks by selecting work familiar to them and their audiences. That increasingly ruled out Dell’Arte, known for its original theater works in the physical theater tradition.

After opportunities to tour around the country began to dwindle, Dell’Arte shifted focus and concentrated its efforts on developing local audiences, which continue to grow.

The ensemble decided to redirect its focus and create a regional theater center. It already had its school, the only one of its kind in the country, which attracted theater artists from around the world. But Dell’Arte needed to build a local audience for its work. Its first efforts were to create tours and residencies in the immediate five-county area of northern California, whose population barely reaches 500,000. Through community touring, Dell’Arte began to develop a body of work that reflected the history, culture and concerns of the region and involved local residents in the creative process.

In 1991, the ensemble created the Mad River Festival to culminate its season of rural tours and residencies. This festival of physical theater is now an annual event, which includes performances by Dell’Arte and other artists from around the country. Attendance has grown from fewer than 1,000 in 1992 to more than 4,000 in 1996. The festival takes place over four weeks in Dell’Arte’s studio theater (130 seats), outdoor amphitheater (300 seats) and other locations in Blue Lake.

The Mad River Festival is now a primary activity of Dell’Arte, artistically and economically. It has successfully captured the imagination and interest of the local population, even reaching into pockets of the region that have never had ready access to live theater before. The audience Dell’Arte attracts to the festival is a diverse cross-section of the region’s population. Included are loggers and fishermen, whose industries once sustained the region, but are now beleaguered; a sizable population of Native Americans; and those Fields calls “aging hippies,” who, though well-educated, are underemployed because of limited job opportunities in the region. According to surveys of the Mad River Festival’s audience conducted by AMS Planning and Research, half of the theater’s audience earns $15,000 or less while holding BA or higher degrees.

Since Dell’Arte’s work has always been topical, many in the community perceived it as a political theater company. According to Fields, that initially kept many local residents away from festival performances. But the public couldn’t resist any longer when in 1994 Dell’Arte mounted *Korbel*, a soap opera about their own community. Named for an actual town (pop. 50) just up the logging road from Blue Lake, *Korbel* was about the frustrated lives of a lumber family crushed by the region’s economic woes. Admiringly characterized as “crazed and convoluted” by a local reviewer, the piece is centered on the funeral of the family’s matriarch, who,

despondent about her sons' disintegrating lives, takes her own life by putting her head in a microwave oven. *Korbel* and its two sequels, produced in successive festivals, are full of such situations, ranging from outrageous to just plain wacky, but always referencing actual issues and developments in local life. "The Korbel pieces have drawn enormous numbers of people to the festival," said Fields. "Even though those pieces could touch plenty of raw nerves, people aren't offended because the physical style of the work makes them accessible." Besides, everyone is equally lampooned in these plays.

Other work featured in the festival ranges from experimental to family fare, including clowns, jugglers, mimes, puppeteers, and music and dance groups. To attract local Native Americans, there are stories and songs from the Karuk people. Adult-oriented work is reserved for evening performances in the indoor studio space. Prices are kept low, never topping $12 for a ticket. While most events are priced at $10, admission for family nights is $5, and every festival features at least one free event. There are also several evenings billed "Blue Lake night," when townspeople can attend for half price.

Dell'Arte attributes its marketing successes to learning to avoid duplication of efforts and how to do less more effectively.

In marketing the Mad River Festival, Fields says Dell'Arte has learned to streamline its efforts and not duplicate them. "We're doing less more effectively and with greater results," he said. Dell'Arte produces a festival poster and brochure, which are graphically bold, but clear and uncluttered. Large quantities of the brochure are mailed to surrounding communities and followed up by additional mailings of individual flyers for selected events. The theater works with a few key community organizations, such as a local food co-op, to reach their constituencies. Company members also make promotional appearances at local events leading up to the festival, and Dell'Arte consistently secures extensive coverage in the local press.

Through audience surveys, Dell'Arte learned that its advertising dollars are better spent in television than radio. Luckily, the local television market, based in Eureka, is one of the lowest priced in the country. Dell'Arte can purchase ten 60-second spots for $2,000. The company produces the commercials in a madcap style, which makes them particularly effective. It also runs ads on the milk cartons of a local dairy. And the festival has its own beer, Dell'Arte Dark, which is bottled by the Mad River Brewery.

The audience base that Dell'Arte established through regional touring and residencies has been solidified and expanded by the Mad River Festival and, in turn, the festival audience is sustained throughout the year by the company's touring and presenting activities in the region. Like Dell'Arte's work for the festival, its tours and residencies focus on what Fields calls "theater of place." For the 1997 season, Dell'Arte toured *Out of the Frying Pan*, a piece that covers 500 years of regional history through cooking, and *Journey of the Ten Moons*, which is based on local Indian legends and beliefs. During the year, the company also completed the first season of Dell'Arte Presents, a series that takes place in a renovated studio theater and features the work of guest instructors and students from the school. Every event sold out, according to Fields.

In addition to these activities, Dell'Arte has helped sustain its audience growth by the depth of its involvement in the community. When the company is developing a new piece, it turns to the community for feedback. "The audience is a critical teacher in the development process," said Fields. Students at Dell'Arte's school are required to volunteer in the community, and company members regularly attend meetings of Blue Lake's citizens' group, which discusses the future of the town, including the role of the Mad River Festival. In the past, Fields has served on the group's economic development committee. Town meetings, he admits, fuel ideas for Dell'Arte's creative work. "That's where you learn what makes people *mad*," he said.

In a larger sense, Dell'Arte's vision for the future also bears the hopes of Blue Lake's citizens' group and other planners and dreamers in the area. The theater hopes to greatly expand its audience for the Mad River Festival by attracting tourists from

throughout the Northwest and even nationally. "No other festival in the country celebrates the art of physical theater," Fields said. One of Dell'Arte's goals is to raise the national profile of the festival to make it a travel destination. Many in the region believe that efforts such as these, to promote tourism in the area, are what's needed to help revitalize the fallen economy.

Above all, Pregones Theater prizes intimacy with its audience

Like Dell'Arte, Pregones Theater began as a touring company. After six successful years on the road, the Puerto Rican ensemble, which was formed in 1979, decided it needed a community base and came home to New York City's South Bronx. Pregones was invited to open a theater in a church in Mott Haven, a section of the South Bronx that is impoverished, heavily hit by AIDS and rife with drug crime. The theater enjoyed nine more successful years in the 120-seat space at St. Ann's, producing original theater works for a loyal following of school and general audiences.

In 1994, as Pregones was gainfully completing its first season of audience expansion through the support of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund theater initiative, the company changed venues. Because of an unexpected and controversial change in leadership at St. Ann's, the theater decided to terminate its lease with the church. While Pregones began to search for a new home in the area, it made provisional plans to carry out its 1994-95 season in several nearby venues, including the new Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, the Bronx Museum and Lincoln Hospital.

The season exceeded Pregones' wildest expectations. Instead of losing the gains of the previous season because of its lack of a permanent home, the theater saw a 40 percent jump in audience attendance over the gains of the previous season, more than tripling the goal it had set for its three-year plan to expand audiences. It became immediately apparent that the change in venue was not a handicap, but an asset to Pregones' audience-development efforts. Audience members—even those from the old neighborhood—voiced their preference for the safer locations of the new venues. All are located on or just off the Grand Concourse, the South Bronx's main artery of commerce and government (shared by Yankee Stadium), which is well served by public transportation and has undergone revitalization in recent years. Media coverage of Pregones increased, too, according to artistic director Rosalba Rolon. "Critics used to shy away from our old neighborhood," she recalled.

Pregones' first production of the fall, *Fabulas del Caribe (Fables of the Caribbean)*, sold out three weeks in advance of its opening at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, which seats 367. Audiences for the show, which numbered 2,000, were almost double the attendance for the entire 1992-93 season. "Change in location was certainly a big factor in our growth," said Rolon. "But so too was our theater initiative grant, which helped us develop and carry out strategies to heighten the visibility of Pregones. And we maintained our standards of artistic quality while keeping our ticket prices low."

For the 1995-96 season, the theater focused its efforts on sustaining the rapid growth of the first two seasons of its audience expansion initiative. While Pregones narrowed its search for a home theater to the Grand Concourse, it again produced part of its season at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture. Additionally, it presented at Repertorio Espanol and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, two veteran Latino theaters in Manhattan, which gave Pregones exposure to other new audiences.

Despite its continuing growth, Pregones became ill at ease with its new arrangements. Something was missing. Without its own space, the theater couldn't produce as many plays as it had in the past because of the expense of renting Hostos Center. It also felt it was losing its connection to its audience by working in rented spaces and at host theaters. "In our own space, the audience would not leave after a show until they saw the artists and had a chance to talk to them," Rolon explained. "We would let people stay as long as they wanted. It was so informal, we would often turn on music and there would be dancing," she added. "We couldn't do that at other theaters."

The ensemble felt more strongly than ever the imperative to re-establish its own theater. "We need that intimate connection with our audience," said Rolon. "They nourish our work by informing our artistic judgment."

During the summer of 1996, after failing to find a suitable theater, it came up with another plan. Pregones created a small studio theater in one end of the ample office space it had been renting since 1994 in a furniture warehouse on the Grand Concourse. The following October, Pregones opened its new 50-seat theater to school groups and in the winter unveiled its first mainstage production there, *El bolero fue mi ruina (The Bolero Was My Downfall)*, an adaptation of a short story by Manuel Ramos Otero. Rolon said the space was perfect for this piece, a one-man show running open-endedly.

Pregones plans to employ a variety of strategies to sustain and expand its growth of the past several seasons. It will use its new space for selected mainstage productions, for rehearsals, readings and workshops, and for school performances, which Pregones prefers to do in an intimate setting to give the young people the most opportunity to interact with the ensemble. The theater will continue to mount its larger productions at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture to accommodate larger audiences, and it will present there as well. In the 1995-96 season, Pregones presented a Chilean production of *Pinocchio* that played five sold-out performances. In the 1997-98 season, in partnership with Local 1199 of the National Health and Human Services Employees Union, Pregones will sponsor a six-week residency of Orquesta de Cámara Concerto, Puerto Rico's premier chamber music group, which will include performances at Hostos and other locations in the Bronx.

In addition, Rolon says Pregones hopes to further strengthen its alliances with Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and Repertorio Espanol. During the 1996 summer season, it toured *El Apagón, (Blackout)* with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. The following summer, Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre presented Pregones' production of *Baile Cangrejero (Dance of the Cangrejero)* an original show of African-Caribbean poetry, drama and music in 25 outdoor performances throughout New York City's five boroughs. Pregones has also discussed with Repertorio Espanol the possibility of doing another two-week residency there in the 1997-98 season.

Rolon says Pregones' collaborations with these theaters has had a positive impact on all the theaters and their audiences. The theaters support each other's audience-development efforts by regularly exchanging mailing lists and displaying materials for each other. "Audiences are aware of this cohesiveness, this shared sense of purpose," Rolon remarked. "People are starting to perceive a Latino theater movement growing."

This perception has been reinforced by Pregones' leadership in creating TeatroFestival, which fills the void left by the demise of the Public Theater's Festival Latino of the 1980s. Pregones produced TeatroFestival in 1990 and 1993 in association with Repertorio Espanol, Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and INTAR. It will renew this partnership in the 1998-99 season to produce a two-week festival featuring theater companies from the United States, Central and South America, Europe and Africa.

As Pregones reaches outward with its plans for TeatroFestival and its own national touring, its appreciation of its audience base at home deepens. The tiny theater with an annual home audience of 1,250 in 1992-93 reached 10,000 New Yorkers in 1995-96, as well as 7,000 others in touring activities outside the city.

"The greatest lesson we've learned over the past several seasons is that the audience is the center of everything," said Rolon. "There must be a direct connection between the artist and the community. We instinctively knew that before, but now we've made it part of all our practices, artistic and administrative."

That's a lesson the theater expects will keep paying off year after year.

It's More Than Just What's On Stage That Matters

Who's In The House Tonight?

Many artistic directors see their jobs as more than finding a balance between where their dreams take them and what their theater's budget will permit. They have to make programming choices that will appeal to the audiences their theaters want to reach. Four artistic heads participating in the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund's Theater Initiative discuss the importance of putting audiences at the center of their work—and what they've learned as a result.

Inviting audiences not just to observe, but to participate in creating theater

Dudley Cocke, Roadside Theater

When Roadside Theater sets down its stakes in the small towns and urban neighborhoods where it conducts extended residencies, one of its first activities is to create a story circle. A story circle is an open event where the people of the community are invited to share stories about their lives, their ancestors and the history of the place where they live. The shape, tone and content of each story circle is unique to a particular locale, and forms the basis for all Roadside's subsequent activities while there. It establishes a neutral ground where disparate members of a community can come together to tell their stories, rather than voice their opinions. It draws individuals unwittingly into "performing" one of the earliest forms of theater. And it lays out the themes, conflicts and characters the community can draw on if it decides to take up Roadside's invitation to develop its own plays.

Roadside's successful extended residency program grew out of a desire to return to its goal of creating a working class theater.

Roadside, an ensemble of actors and musicians from central Appalachia, brings theater to rural areas and to poor or working class communities in the city, places often underserved—or not served at all—by cultural organizations. But when Roadside works in a town, it doesn't want to play to an audience of observers. Its goal is to encourage the audience to participate in the ephemeral art of creating theater. "Our productions have no 'fourth wall,'" said Dudley Cocke, Roadside's artistic director. "For us, the audience is part of the show."

Founded in 1975 in Whitesburg, Kentucky, Roadside enjoyed an active schedule of national touring by the early 1980s. "We had a successful economy of one- and two-day performance-and-workshop bookings," Cocke explained. "We could have spun off another touring company."

But, by the late 1980s, the company became dissatisfied with touring because the audiences it was reaching were predominantly traditional theater audiences—white, college-educated and affluent—and not the poor and working class people Roadside had set out to serve. The company's genesis had been in the coal fields of Appalachia, where unemployment runs as high as 60 percent and only about half the population holds high school diplomas. Even though Roadside was resourceful in working with tour presenters to attract some non-traditional audiences, the theater found it was drifting away from its goal of creating a working class theater.

Roadside began investigating ways to make a more lasting impact on local communities and experimented with an extended residency program of several months. Roadside found the Appalachian model it developed could be used in its national touring activities to reach communities of poor and working class people. In 1992, Roadside was awarded a five-year grant of $600,000 from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to help support local and national residencies that would engage audiences in activities beyond attendance. In the five years of grant-supported activities, Roadside conducted nearly 100 extended residencies at home and around the country, some lasting weeks, months or even years.

The shift, said Cocke, was essential to Roadside's artistic vitality. "If we hadn't found a way to connect more strongly with rural and urban working class audiences, we would have been cut off from our artistic source," he explained.

Roadside's work with communities often has an enduring effect. Many communities continue to conduct story circles and some have even created their own community theaters. In Honaker, Virginia (pop. 1,000), Roadside was invited by the high school to work with two ninth-grade English classes and the drama club to incorporate Appalachian storytelling and theater into curriculum. The students worked with local senior citizens to write a play about Honaker that they performed for the senior center, their school, a local college and a community-wide event they produced. *The Honaker Story Swap* was enthusiastically received and audience members stayed on to tell stories, sing songs and show family heirlooms, such as quilts and photos. The two teachers Roadside worked with continue to incorporate Appalachian storytelling and theater in their classes and the community has come to expect an annual production of *The Honaker Story Swap* and is committed to supporting it.

Roadside's work in small towns and urban neighborhoods often has an enduring effect—with some even creating their own community theaters.

In Choteau, Montana (pop. 1,700), Roadside worked with the town's Performing Arts League and the American Festival Project, a national coalition of performing artists to conduct a three-year oral history project. The project was designed in concert with an economic development plan to encourage young people to remain in the area. Roadside brought together people of all ages and occupations to collect and exchange hundreds of stories and songs. The project culminated in a play written by participants, *The Coming Home: The Anniversary*, which was performed by a multigenerational cast and toured to communities around the state.

"When we began the Choteau project," Cocke said, "I asked a group of young people how many of them thought they would still be living in Choteau when they're 25 or 30. Few raised their hands. But a year into the project," he continued, "that changed. They had begun to see that their locale has advantages and possibilities, and they developed a pride and a desire to make it work. It was a very emotional discovery."

Choteau has since established its own theater company and is at work on its second production, a play about the area's dryland farmers and ranchers. Like many of Roadside's residencies, the Choteau project came to fruition through the efforts of several organizations and agencies. In addition to the town's Performing Arts League and the American Festival Project, funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Forest Service. "The U.S. Forest Service got involved," Cocke explained, "because they believe a strong culture holds the community together and that helps enrich land use by local residents and preserve natural resources."

With a decline in public funding for the arts and social programs and the increased cost of its longer residency model, Roadside is hard-pressed to find adequate funding. Once representing 60 percent of the company's expenses, now only 30 percent of the company's costs are covered by residency fees and ticket sales. "We need to identify forward-looking funders who understand how the arts can affect a community," Cocke reflected.

New non-arts funding partners like the U.S. Forestry Service point the way and offer hope. So too does the support of the Zuni Tribal Government in New Mexico, where Roadside has completed the 11th year of a 20-year residency and cultural exchange to nurture a Zuni-language theater. In a collaborative playwriting project, Roadside and Zuni artists created *Corn Mountain/Pine Mountain*. Told from two cultural perspectives and in two languages, the play speaks of a time when everyday life for Zuni and Appalachian people followed the cycles of nature more closely. It suggests to the audience that a contemporary assessment of some of

those traditions might provide some solutions to current social and economic problems.

The play was enthusiastically received by audiences at the Zuni Indian Reservation and in Whitesburg, where it has had lasting effect. The Zuni artists have formalized a theater group that, like Roadside, draws their original productions from their oral, music and dance traditions. The study of Zuni language is also being introduced in reservation schools. In Roadside's own community, the benefits of this cross-cultural exchange have been felt too. Interest has been renewed in the area's Native American history. The local Kiwanis Club organized a meeting of regional Indian tribes and set up a museum in a downtown storefront to exhibit Indian artifacts found in Central Appalachia.

Seeing communities create their own art and develop their cultural resources is more than just a reward—it's also a testament to putting audiences first.

Seeing communities create their own art and develop their cultural resources is Roadside's greatest reward and just one more testament to putting audiences at the center of their work.

Reaching new audiences reaffirms the timelessness of Shakespeare

Michael Kahn, The Shakespeare Theatre

The fall 1994 meeting of The Shakespeare Theatre's board of directors proved decisive to the future of the Washington, D.C.-based theater. It could have passed quickly and quietly, the board easily determining that with the end of a three-year grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and no new funding on the horizon, the theater's free summer performances of Shakespeare should be discontinued. However, Michael Kahn said, that meeting proved to be one of the board's most vital conversations in his eight years there as artistic director. "The board decided Shakespeare Free For All was as important to the meaning of the theater as anything else we did," said Kahn, "even if it costs $500,000 to produce and doesn't bring in any revenue."

Producing free Shakespeare in Washington had been Kahn's secret wish since he accepted the position at The Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger Library in 1986. But he kept it close to the vest until he had boosted attendance at the 200-seat theater and achieved other artistic goals, such as heightening production values and reintroducing non-traditional casting.

In 1990, with the theater running at capacity, Kahn announced plans to move the mainstage season to a larger space (443 seats) in downtown Washington and to produce free outdoor Shakespeare the following season at the abandoned Carter Barron Amphitheater in the city's Rock Creek Park. "Much of the audience I wanted to reach couldn't get into the theater at the Folger," Kahn said. The intent of the free outdoor performances was to serve a broader audience more representative of the city's demographics (75 percent of the population is African American) and reach many people who wouldn't otherwise be able or inclined to attend the theater or ever see a Shakespeare play.

In June 1991, The Shakespeare Theatre's Free For All debuted with a production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, starring African American actor Paul Winfield. Two weeks of performances drew 30,000 people and the interest of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The Fund pledged to support Free For All for the following three seasons, over which time audiences swelled to 45,000 for two-week runs of *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Comedy of Errors*.

"The audiences we draw for Free For All are completely multiracial, multigenerational and from a variety of economic backgrounds," said Kahn. "A lot of these people don't normally attend theater." The Shakespeare Theatre estimates that 40 percent of the Free For All audience comprises target audience segments that include African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, the disabled, seniors and young people. The theater's outreach is accomplished mostly through subway and bus advertising and radio public service advertisements. "We're trying to reach an audience that probably doesn't read the *Washington Post*," Kahn explained.

Although Kahn insists the summer production was not designed to build audiences for the theater's

mainstage season at the Lansburgh, there has been a 5 to 7 percent crossover of the Free For All audience members that the theater has managed to solicit by mail. In a special introductory offer, the theater extends them a 25 percent discount on tickets to the first production of the mainstage season, as well as discounts on subscriptions, which some take.

"I have always believed that Shakespeare's plays were written for everyone and engage audiences in ways other plays don't," Kahn said. "That belief was affirmed for me when I saw the response of the Free For All audiences," he continued. "No one can tell me Shakespeare is unworthy of today's audiences because he's a dead white European male.

"Making Shakespeare accessible doesn't mean making it dumb and easy," he commented. In fact, he explained, performing to a large audience in an environment that closely parallels the one for which Shakespeare wrote poses greater challenges to the director and actors. "The actors must speak better and their thought must be richer to create deeper characters and more complex action."

Although the free summer performances of Shakespeare are not designed to build audiences for its mainstage season, the theater has experienced a 5 to 7 percent crossover.

High school students and their families are also targeted for Free For All. Throughout the year, The Shakespeare Theatre serves metropolitan area students with a range of programs, including special matinees, touring performances, seminars and workshops. Text Alive! is a curriculum-partnership program developed by the theater that encourages the in-depth study of Shakespeare's plays throughout the school year. Through Text Alive!, nearly 2,500 high school students annually are offered a variety of opportunities to attend performances and rehearsals and talk with company members. The school year culminates with an invitation to The Shakespeare Theatre's Free For All, including tickets for students and their families delivered to the schools and buses provided for transportation. Shakespeare's plays have at their heart numerous themes that touch the lives of adolescents regardless of race or culture, Kahn said. "They find excitement connecting to work from the past," he added. "Properly presented, Shakespeare opens doors for kids to talk about events they don't normally have the chance to discuss."

Since 1994, there has been what Kahn calls "a permanent commitment" to the summer program. To sustain the program over the past two seasons, the theater's board of directors has pledged to raise $100,000 annually from its ranks. The theater's development staff has cultivated partnerships with corporations and has also started a Friends of Free For All group to attract individual contributions, which guarantee donors reserved seats at the first-come, first-served performances. In a recent development, the board has begun testing the water for a $12 million capital campaign. Part of that effort would be to establish an endowment and use the annual income from it to support Free For All and other artistic initiatives.

"Free For All represents just one-sixth of our season and consumes one-third of our audience development and fundraising staff time, but it has become central to the mission of The Shakespeare Theatre" said Kahn. "We are here to present Shakespeare's work in ways that make it accessible." In 1995, in recognition of The Shakespeare Theatre's dedication to serving a broad public, it was honored with the D.C. Humanities Award.

Overcoming bias to create a new, diverse audience

Kenny Leon, The Alliance Theatre Company

As artistic director of Atlanta's Alliance Theatre Company, Kenny Leon does double time as its ambassador. At luncheons, dinners and meetings around town and in his regularly scheduled Lunchtime with Kenny programs, he is the epitome of optimism, tolerance and perseverance, winning patrons and supporters wherever he goes with his charisma and enthusiasm. His staff follows suit, with never a negative word about the challenges of rebuilding the theater's audience base or a complaint about any constituent, past or present.

Yet Leon would have ample reason to feel battle weary from time to time. As the first African American to lead The Alliance and one of a handful of blacks to ever head a resident theater in this country, he has met with plenty of negative reac-

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tions to his position. When Leon was promoted to artistic director of The Alliance in 1989, he announced a platform of inclusiveness and began programming two works each season by or about blacks to better serve the city's 60 percent African American population. His first few seasons included several of August Wilson's works, as well as other such nationally known plays as *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Miss Evers Boys* and the popular Broadway musical *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Audience response to Leon's presence and his play selections was stunningly negative. Within three seasons, the number of subscribers plummeted from 22,000 to 14,000. (See related articles, "Building Audiences: Stories from America's Theaters," August 1996 and January 1997.)

Leon says he wants everyone in the community to feel so closely connected to The Alliance that they'll say, "This is my theater."

"I found the racism to be deeper and different than what I thought it would be," he said. "There were biases on both sides. Whites thought the programming would be pro-black, political and make them feel guilty. And blacks dismissed me as just a token."

According to Leon, the board's commitment to diversify The Alliance's audience was sustained by national recognition of their efforts, including the announcement in late 1991 of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund's three-year grant to the theater for $1 million. The grant supported the theater's outreach to new audiences, and it bought Leon time to prove the artistic and box office merits of his vision and rebuild public trust in the theater.

Through strong programming and strategic marketing, The Alliance had attracted 2,000 African American subscribers by the end of its audience-development grant in the 1994-95 season, accounting for 12 percent of the theater's total subscribers. (In the 1990-91 season, the subscriber base was 3 percent African American.) In successive seasons, the theater has continued to attract African Americans, who currently represent 12 to 15 percent of subscribers and single-ticket buyers. It has also won back some lapsed older subscribers and many new and younger white subscribers. In the 1996-97 season, the subscriber base resurged to 18,500 at a time when subscriptions are declining at theaters around the country.

Leon has captured public attention at home and nationally with premieres of Atlanta playwright Pearl Cleage's acclaimed and popular works *Flyin' West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Bourbon at the Border*. For the Olympic Arts Festival in Summer 1996, The Alliance commissioned Alfred Uhry to write *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*, which is currently running on Broadway and won a 1997 Tony Award for Best Play.

But one of the greatest triumphs for Leon is the audience crossover that's been achieved at The Alliance. African Americans can be found at every performance throughout the season. "The audience for Ibsen's *Ghosts* this season was 20 percent African American," he reported, "and the cast was all white."

When asked how far the theater has come since he assumed the helm in 1989, Leon said, "On a scale of one to 10, we're at six. We have four more long strokes to pull." His goals for the next few seasons include further diversifying the work presented on stage to reach the city's large pockets of Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans. "I want to give a sense of ownership of The Alliance to every community," he said, "so everyone can say, 'This is my theater.'" Leon hopes to create an even greater crossover of African American audience members by featuring more works about the human condition that speak to all cultures, such as the theater's highly acclaimed 1994-95 production of *Angels in America: The Millennium Approaches*. He intends to identify more playwrights of color who are writing about universal themes.

Leon says he will have achieved his goals when audiences embrace the theater's mission of including many different voices and points of view and when they show pride in what's been accomplished. How will that be demonstrated? It is already beginning, he said, in the willingness of audience members to sit next to someone different from them-

selves. “Our audience is starting to feel the theater is a safe place to explore issues,” he reflected. “There’s a dialogue going on among our patrons that would never have taken place if we hadn’t stuck with the effort to diversify all these years.”

High standards, strong infrastructure and bold aspirations

Walter Dallas, Freedom Theatre

Since he arrived at Philadelphia’s Freedom Theatre in 1993, Walter Dallas has helped set in motion a series of changes that have transformed the African American theater from a grassroots operation to a sharply managed Equity theater with its sight now set on joining the League of Resident Theaters (LORT).

Dallas entered at a time of great promise for Freedom, which was founded in the mid-1960s, making it one of the nation’s oldest African American theaters. A new 298-seat theater was beginning construction, and Freedom had just been awarded a five-year $500,000 grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund to diversify its audience. Dallas had been a guest director at theaters around the country and had just completed a 10-year stint as head of Philadelphia’s University of the Arts’ theater department. He brought with him a vision for creating new artistic standards of quality for Freedom.

Knowing what the audience likes--instead of making programming decisions based on intuition--helps Dallas be creative in new ways.

Ironically, Freedom’s growth surged forward when the theater decided to rededicate itself to expanding its core African American audience, rather than trying to reach a more diverse audience. In the second season of the audience-development grant, Dallas and his board hired a director of marketing, Jocelyn Russell, who holds an MBA from Wharton. After reviewing a marketing study of audiences for Philadelphia cultural institutions conducted as part of the evaluation of the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund’s Theater Initiative, Russell sent a tidal wave through the organization when she announced to the staff that the theater’s play selections did not complement its audience’s interests, nor did its goal to diversify audience make sense at that time. (See related article in “Building Audiences: Stories From America’s Theaters,” August 1996.)

Dallas took her analysis and recommendations to heart and programmed a season for 1995-96 that helped further tap what he came to understand was Freedom’s core audience: African American women over age 35, college educated, relatively affluent and conservative. Dallas was apparently on target with his selections because the audience for the 1995-96 season grew 29 percent to 13,400. Ticket sales increased 56 percent, with paid capacity growing from 62 to 75 percent. Income from group sales more than doubled, constituting 60 percent of all ticket sales.

When asked about the artistic limitations of programming to suit a particular market segment, Dallas responded: “It really satisfies my producer’s hat. Before I was trying to put together a season for an audience I didn’t know. I was doing theater I liked and guessing what the audience might like. Now I know the parameters and it’s forcing me to be creative in new ways.”

The new emphasis on serving audience, said Dallas, has helped Freedom’s infrastructure grow “in leaps and bounds.” The theater has defined areas of management, marketing and sales, and development. As those areas have become specialized, the professionalism of the staff has grown. So too have systems of operation. “We are now a research-based institution,” Dallas said, “and when we consider taking on projects, we have models for measuring their benefit to Freedom.”

As Freedom’s new theater nears completion — it’s slated to open in winter 1998 — Dallas hopes to similarly expand and specialize the production staff. Increased revenues are already allowing him to consider hiring for the positions of associate artistic director, staff producer and dramaturg.

With an effective infrastructure in place and greater clarity about artistic programming, Dallas has been able to pick and choose what he wishes to direct in Freedom's season and accept invitations to direct at other theaters. In the 1996-97 season, he directed seven outside shows, including the premieres of August Wilson's *Jitney* at Crossroads Theatre and, at McCarter Theatre, *The Old Settlor*, a play by John Henry Redwood he discovered at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Dallas also set the Mark Taper Forum's production of *Having Our Say, The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* and, at the Goodman Theatre, *Seeking the Genesis* by Kia Corthron.

Pleased with the response of "Generation X" to* Cooley High, *Dallas says his next challenge is to find ways to draw them into future Freedom productions.

"These are the theaters we want to keep company with," said Dallas, alluding to his aspiration to make Freedom part of LORT. He admits that opportunities to direct at resident theaters have allowed him to do homework for Freedom. "I want to see how these theaters operate so I can learn how to easily and gracefully move my theater into that league," he said. "I came home with the confidence that the plays I directed outside this season could have been done at Freedom." He said the theater is already in line with many of LORT's salary and contractual requirements.

At home, Dallas closed Freedom's season with his production of *Cooley High*, the first stage adaptation of the 1970s cult movie about the coming of age of five young black men in Chicago. A month prior to the play's opening, it was sold to 80 percent capacity. Dallas was excited about the breadth of audience that had already responded. He felt assured that the play, which is set in 1964, would appeal to people who had graduated from high school in the 1960s, which includes much of Freedom's core audience. But it would also have a strong pull on men, further expanding the core.

Dallas was surprised to also see a strong response from those he calls "Generation X folks," who have more recently discovered and embraced the film, and from people living in the surrounding neighborhood who have never attended Freedom before. "As I make my way around the community, people who normally don't come to Freedom tell me they're buying tickets to see *Cooley High*," Dallas said. "I want to know more about these people and how we can draw them into something else at Freedom." That would mark another breakthrough for the theater.

Resources: Contact information for theaters participating in the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund initiative

Alabama Shakespeare Festival
State Theatre
One Festival Drive
Montgomery AL 36117-4605
(334) 271-5300
Kent Thompson
Artistic Director

Alliance Theatre Company
1280 Peachtree Street, NE
Atlanta GA 30309
(404) 733-4650
Kenny Leon
Artistic Director

American Music Theater Festival, Inc.
123 South Broad Street, Suite 1820
Philadelphia PA 19109
(215) 893-1570
Marjorie Samoff
Producing Director

Arena Stage
Sixth & Maine Avenue, SW
Washington DC 20024
(202) 554-9066
Stephen Richard
Executive Director

Berkeley Repertory Theatre
2025 Addison Street
Berkeley CA 94704
(510) 204-8901
Tony Taccone
Artistic Director

Bilingual Foundation of the Arts
421 North Avenue 19
Los Angeles CA 90031
(213) 225-4044
Margarita Galban
Artistic Director

Center Stage
700 North Calvert Street
Baltimore MD 21202
(410) 685-3200
Irene Lewis
Artistic Director

Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum
135 North Grand Avenue
Los Angeles CA 90012
(213) 628-2772
Luis Alfaro & Diane Rodriguez
Directors, Latino Theater Initiative

The Cleveland Play House
8500 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland OH 44106
(216) 795-7010
Dean Gladden
Managing Director

Crossroads Theatre Co.
Seven Livingston Avenue
New Brunswick NJ 08901
(908) 249-5581
Ricardo Khan
Artistic Director

Dell'Arte, Inc.
P.O. Box 816
Blue Lake CA 95525
(707) 668-5663
Michael Fields
Managing & Co-Artistic Director

El Teatro Campesino
P.O. Box 1240
San Juan Bautista CA 95045
(408) 623-2444
Luis Valdez
Artistic Director

Freedom Theatre
1346 North Broad Street
Philadelphia PA 19121
(215) 765-2793
Walter Dallas
Artistic Director

Goodman Theatre
200 South Columbus Drive
Chicago IL 60603
(312) 443-3811
Roche Schulfer
Producing Director

Guthrie Theater Foundation
725 Vineland Place
Minneapolis MN 55403
(612) 347-1100
David Hawkanson
Managing Director

Hartford Stage Company
50 Church Street
Hartford CT 06103
(203) 525-5601
Stephen J. Albert
Managing Director

Indiana Repertory Theatre
140 W. Washington Street
Indianapolis IN 46204
(317) 635-5277
Janet Allen
Artistic Director

INTAR Hispanic American Arts Center
420 West 42nd Street
New York NY 10036
(212) 695-6134
Max Ferra
Artistic Director

Irish Arts Center
553 West 51st Street
New York NY 10019
(212) 757-3318
Marianne Delaney
Executive Director

Jomandi Productions, Inc.
1444 Mayson Street, NE
Atlanta GA 30324
(404) 876-6346
Marsha Jackson-Randolph
Co-Artistic/Managing Director

Manhattan Theatre Club, Inc.
453 West 16th Street
New York NY 10011
(212) 645-5590
Barry Grove
Executive Producer

The Mixed Blood Theatre Company
1501 South Fourth Street
Minneapolis MN 55454
(612) 338-0937
Jack Reuler
Artistic Director

The National Theatre of the Deaf-CT
Five West Main Street
Chester CT 06412
(860) 526-4971
TTY: 526-4974
David Hays
Founder and Artistic Director

Oakland Ensemble Theatre
1428 Alice
Oakland CA 94612
(510) 763-7774
Zerita Dotson
Managing Director

Pan Asian Repertory Theatre
47 Great Jones Street
New York NY 10012
(212) 505-5655
Tisa Chang
Artistic/Producing Director

Penumbra Theatre Company
Martin Luther King Center
270 North Kent Street
St. Paul MN 55102
(612) 290-8683
Louis Bellamy
Artistic Director

The People's Light & Theatre Company
39 Conestoga Road
Malvern PA 19355-1798
(610) 647-1900
Abagail Adams
Artistic Director

Perseverance Theatre
914 Third Street
Douglas AK 99824
(907) 364-2421 Ext. 8
Lynette Turner
Producing Director

Pregones Theater
700 Grand Concourse, 2nd floor
Bronx NY 10451
(718) 585-1202
Rosalba Rolon
Director

Repertorio Español
138 East 27th Street
New York NY 10016
(212) 889-2850
Gilberto Zaldivar
Executive Producer

Roadside Theater
306 Madison Street
Whitesburg KY 41858
(606) 633-0108
Dudley Cocke
Director

San Diego Repertory Theatre, Inc.
79 Horton Plaza
San Diego CA 92101
(619) 231-3586
Sam Woodhouse
Producing Director

San Francisco Mime Troupe
855 Treat Avenue
San Francisco CA 94110
(415) 285-1717
Patrick Osbon
General Manager

Seattle Group Theatre
305 Harrison Street
Seattle WA 98109
(206) 441-9480
Jose Carrasquillo
Artistic Director

Second Stage Theatre, Inc.
P.O. Box 1807
Ansonia Station
New York NY 10023
(212) 787-8302
Carole Rothman
Artistic Director

Seven Stages, Inc.
1105 Euclid Avenue NE
Atlanta GA 30307
(404) 522-0911
Del Hamilton
Artistic Director

The Shakespeare Theatre
301 East Capitol Street, SE
Washington DC 20003
(202) 547-3230
Michael Kahn
Artistic Director

St. Louis Black Repertory Company
634 North Grand Avenue, Suite 10F
St. Louis MO 63103
(314) 534-3807
Ronald Himes
Producing Director

Theater at Lime Kiln
P.O. Box 663
Lexington VA 24450
(540) 463-7088
Barry Mines
Artistic Director

Victory Gardens Theater
2257 North Lincoln
Chicago IL 60614
(312) 549-5788
Denis Zacek
Artistic Director

The mission of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund is to invest in programs that enhance the cultural life of communities and encourage people to make the arts and culture an active part of their everyday lives.

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