



All-Ireland Arts Conference 2012 – Ben Cameron, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

Thank you for that lovely introduction—and for the opportunity to make my maiden voyage to Belfast, where already I have experienced your unbelievable hospitality and generosity. Northern Ireland artists who have reached across the proverbial pond—Seamus Heany and Brian Friel, Liam Neeson and Kenneth Branagh, CS Lewis and Joyce Carey, Van Morrison and his brown eyed girl, all have been extraordinarily meaningful to me. I thank you, not only for them, but for the countless phenomenal artists whose work I have yet to meet and the amazing artists you will produce in years to come. It is an honor to be with you all.

Over the past decade, I have had the privilege of attending numerous local and national arts community meetings in various countries—New York City, Portland, Seattle, Boston, Minneapolis, Sydney, Edmonton, London, Edinburgh, Zwolle, Calgary, to name just a few. Whatever the unique issues and problems may have been, participants at their best have all pursued the pathway of creativity as described by Angeles Arrien: “showing up—really showing up---listening deeply, speaking the truth, and letting go of predetermined results”—a path I hope we will pursue today.

In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis aka the GFC, artists and arts organizations in the United States are caught in a difficult economic chapter—one which has shaken philanthropy at every level, led to significant erosion of government subsidy for the arts in local, state and federal circles; redefined resources and forced many organizations to engage in a range of responses, including downscaling or eliminating productions and exhibitions, reducing performance weeks and resorting more frequently to small cast or reduced scale work; implementing hiring freezes, staff furloughs and lay-offs; eliminating retirement or health benefits and engaging in emergency fundraising appeals, all to avoid the worst case scenario, the declaration of bankruptcy and the permanent shuttering of doors.

And yet I would humbly suggest we disserve ourselves if we define our lives primarily in terms of the financial crisis. Indeed, to be even bolder, while our collective financial fortunes—as meager as they are—are under assault, the crisis that NGO arts organizations and artists face is not financial.

In meetings involving more than 700 artists, managers and administrators convened by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in 2006, three issues were identified as formidable challenges to the NGO arts sector that could dismantle the traditional business model and organizational focus on performance that has dominated our industry.

First, we heard concern about an impending generational transfer of leadership as the current generation of leaders retires or moves on. While many of us have wondered for years where we will find the next generation of leaders hungry for the long hours, bad pay, the lives of social and financial masochism with which we have contented ourselves, the conversation was revealing in a new way. “There are plenty of us eager to give ourselves to the arts,” the young people said. “But we don’t want to be the mere custodians of those institutions you have already made. 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 means the real issue is that of organizational capacity for flexibility and change, not simply the identity of the heir apparent.

Second, even in 2006—two years before the GFC—we heard about we heard about changes in audience behavior. We heard about the erosion of audiences in every field—declining subscription renewals, difficulties in attracting single ticket buyers, increased “churn”—a term reflecting the high percentage—typically 70-75%—of audience members who attend a single event in a season and do not return—the collapse in the window of social planning, when seemingly overnight audiences shifted from committing, not two to four weeks in advance, but more typically purchasing on the day of or, if you’re lucky, 24-48 hours in advance—a disorienting shift that continues to plague box office and marketing departments who struggle to understand the implications on a Tuesday for a sparsely sold Saturday performance. Even before the economic collapse, we faced a populace characterized by over-scheduling and exhaustion—a time in which 42% of men and 55% of women say they are too tired to do the things they truly want to do, and where the #1 answer to the question of most eagerly anticipated use of a free evening is no longer dinner with friends or a movie or a performing arts event, but is instead “a good night’s sleep.” After decades of growth, our audiences are shrinking and our own financial needs, driven in many cases by escalating fixed costs in facilities, insurance, health care and more, in tandem with negative shifts in funding mean escalating ticket prices that threaten to place attendance beyond so many in our communities we wish to reach and serve.

Finally, we heard the struggle to understand more fully the impact of technology on the live performing arts. While many of us greeted the internet as a potential new force in marketing, its realized potential is, if anything, too effective: in trying to attract the attention of potential ticket buyers, we now compete with (depending on who you read) between 3-5,000 different marketing messages a typical American, at least, sees every single day. In fact, technology has emerged as our biggest competitor for leisure time: the average American spends 25.7 hours of leisure watching television or online each week—the majority of that online, and internet leisure time consumption has grown from 8.9 hours per week to 14.2 hours in the last three years alone. By the time a young woman graduates from University, she will have spent more than 20,000 hours on the Internet and an additional 10,000 hours playing video games, a trend producing a radical redefinition of a cultural market in which computer games now outsell movie and music recordings combined. This shift is producing shortened attention spans, as well as radical changes in our perceptual frameworks, replacing from the linear/narrative orientation of my generation to the visual/associative orientation of the young. What will this mean for the theatre,

90% of whose stories are told in linear/narrative patterns, if increasingly we are being asked to tell them to an audience primed to hear them in a visual associative way?

And make no mistake: technology is altering the very assumptions of consumption. Thanks to the internet, we believe we can get anything we want, whenever we want it, customized to our own personal specifications. We can shop at three in the morning or ten o'clock at night, expectations of convenience and personalization that live performing arts organizations—organizations who depend on set curtain times, set venues, attendant inconveniences of parking, travel and the like—simply cannot meet. And what will it mean when we ask a young person for 50 pounds for a theatre ticket, when that young person is used to downloading culture on demand, 24 hours a day, for .99 pence a song or for free?

Since these issues were first identified in 2006—two years before the GFC—we have experienced a dramatic decline in arts education, an aging of audiences, a blurring of the live/digital experience, an emerging recalibration of the amount of stimulation necessary for audiences to have a satisfying cultural experience and more.

Surely we see ourselves in the words of poet Adrienne Rich in *The Dream of a Common Language XIII*: “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...”

And aren’t you glad you invited me here to brighten your day?

Now perhaps these conditions don’t resonate for you. Perhaps you are looking at rising audiences, increased philanthropic support, more media attention, and more—and God forbid you slide in the direction of the perfect storm in which your American counterparts are now engaged. But if you recognize yourself in even one of the predicaments I have described, perhaps you will find inspiration in the words of two different thinkers: our 19th Century American President Abraham Lincoln, who in his second inaugural address said, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so must we think anew and act anew.”

And Wayne Gretzky, the Canadian ice hockey player, who when asked to account for his greatness said simply, “I skate to where the puck will be.”

How do we in the arts skate to where the puck will be?

Every individual organization must begin by asking: why must we exist today? Because we have a building is no longer good enough. Because we have a staff and board is no longer good enough. Because we have a history of critical reviews and awards is no longer good enough. What is it in the world that mandates that we continue forward and flourish today?

Every organization must begin by asking itself three questions:

- 1) What is the value of my theatre or my work for my community?
- 2) What is the value my theatre alone offers or offers better than anything else? In this competitive world, duplicative or second rate value is unlikely to survive for long.
- 3) How would my community be damaged if my theatre closed its doors tomorrow?

If we cannot answer these questions, the only supporters we are likely to find already sit in our seats.

But with the passage of time, I have begun to think that these questions are perhaps too limiting, that they invite us to view our communities through the lens of our organizations as we have known them today. Perhaps the more critical questions are those that lift us outside that organizational context and challenge us to define the very value of our field, asking:

1. What is the value of drama or theatre the art form (not just of my theatre company) for my community?
2. What is the value theatre alone has or that theatre fulfills better than anything else?
3. How would my community be damaged if it were abandoned by theatre tomorrow?
4. And how might my organization be optimally structured, poised and focused to be my community's best conduit to theatre?—a question that invites us not to jettison all we do, but to keep what is most central and viable, to expand to embrace the new possibilities we may not have seen, and to discard past behaviors that do not and will not serve us in the future—a future we must recognize as an Arts reformation.

As an occasional student of history, I believe that often, the past can illuminate the future. I was deeply inspired at the ISCAA conference several years ago, when an audience member asked, “What if the moment we in the arts are facing is the equivalent of the Religious Reformation? What if we are in the early stages of the Arts Reformation?”

This image has been a rich one for me to ponder.

The religious reformation was spurred in large part by technology--the invention of the printing press made possible the wide spread direct public access not only to scripture but to religious tract—and we too now are caught in a technological revolution and a massive redistribution of knowledge.

The religious reformations obliterated old business structures –as National Arts Strategies CEO Russell Willis Taylor has wryly noted, “The reformation was a great time to be a land buyer and a bad time to be a monastery”—and at some level we might ask whether the traditional orchestral model is the monastery of today.

But perhaps most profoundly, the reformation at its very heart challenged the notion of the necessity of intermediation in a spiritual relationship—why do I need a priest to have a relationship with God?—a question paralleled by today's fundamental challenge of the necessity of a professional artist to have a creative artistic experience.

Just as the religious Reformation reconceived and broadened the universe of how religion would operate, when and where it would operate, who would be empowered to act, giving rise to new denominations, new religious rituals, new opportunities both for clergy to practice in radically new ways and for the common lay person to assume responsibility for her own spiritual experience, we are witnessing an explosion of new practices and challenges to old assumptions.

We are seeing the blurring of the formerly rigid professional/amateur divide—the emergence of the “Pro Ams”—avocational artists doing work at a professional level, flooding YouTube and dance competitions and film festivals and more at one end—and the rise in “hybrid artists” at the other like Liz Lerman—a choreographer whose company ranges in age from 18 to 82 and who works with avocational citizens to create dances based on their movement vocabulary-- and Cornerstone Theatre who work with disenfranchised communities to reinterpret classic plays with the non professionals playing the leading roles--and Mark Bamuthi Joseph who works with kids in environmental centers and on street corners to develop their own unique artistic language—professional, vocational artists who work with nonprofessionals outside of the traditionally hermetic arts environment, not from economic necessity but because they believe the work they are called to do cannot be accomplished in the concert hall, the dance studio or the theatre-- at the other. The primacy of the arts professional is being shattered by an expanded vision of what the audience encounter can be—a five fold spectrum of the traditional performance at one extreme followed closely by the enhanced performance—e.g. the traditional performance complemented by program notes, blogs and audience talkbacks; crowd sourced curation one in which audiences next participate in the selection of work, helping determine the very the choice of repertoire or the artists to be engaged; co-creation of work in which the audience emerges as artistic agent, making active choices about the substance of the work and its creation; and audience as sole agents, flash mobs for example who are called into being without the participation of the classic professional at all—a spectrum in which increasingly the professional artist moves more and more to the periphery and loses more and more control. It is a time of a new generation of pioneer artists and managers who are creating yet new paths and new ways of behavior, where none have existed before. These new practices are expanding our sense of aesthetic possibilities—even as they assault our traditional notions of cultural authority and undermine the assumed ability of traditional arts organizations to set the cultural agenda. Most revealingly, arts attendance in the United States is down, while arts participation—avocational citizens writing their own poetry, singing in choirs, acting in community plays-- is exploding at an exponential rate.

Now if you think I am saying that the era of the traditional professional artist and institution is over, let me be clear: the Reformation did not spell the end of the Catholic Church—a church which continues to be deeply meaningful to millions worldwide. Similarly, the best of our current institutions will continue to be worthy of our investment as they too continue to offer deeply rewarding spiritual experiences to audiences who hunger for them. Whatever we do, we need to continue to nurture and support the best of these artists and these institutions as we move forward, offering as they do the best chance for lives of economic dignity for our artists and homes where artists working on a certain scale can practice.

But these artists and organizations are less likely to dominate the arts landscape—and its philanthropic support systems—as they have done in the past. So we all must ask: How do we think about interacting with the growing tsunami of creative energy that typically exists beyond the purview of our classrooms, our buildings and our performing arts centers? What if our mission is no longer to produce performances but social orchestration—orchestration in which the performance is a piece but only a piece of what we are called to do? What if the role of the arts is no longer only to present products to be consumed, but to provide experiences that will serve as springboards to our communities’ own creativity? Can we think of our organizations, not as self-contained institutions, but as platforms designed to aggregate creative energies? Can

we in short increasingly embrace a vision of the arts that are firmly rooted in the world, rather than insulated from that world; that speaks with the world in dialogue, rather than to the world; that mirrors in business practice the same principles of nimbleness and openness, of innovation and curiosity that the aesthetics may seek to impart?

Recognizing this fundamental moment of reorganization for the arts industries, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has been explicitly supporting organizational innovation for the last four years—a notion defined for us by Emc Arts CEO Richard Evans as “new pathways to mission fulfillment,”—a reminder that innovation must reflect core purpose—“discontinuous from previous practice,” or in driving terms, a hard right, rather than a gradual left—and “resulting from shifts in underlying organizational assumptions.” A marketing department or an artist hoping to expand on-line presence with the goal of emailing brochures and production announcements, for example, is really less of an innovator than an adaptor, simply taking core assumptions into new technological terrain. A marketing department or artist that moves into web territory, aware that while the focus of traditional marketing has been to disseminate information, the internet is predicated on exchange—an exchange in which what the organization receives in information is at least if not more important than what they send out—shifts the underlying assumptions of marketing from broadcast to conversation, opening the door for true innovation.

In our work, we have already learned an enormous amount about three key building blocks of innovation—leadership, executional capacity including change management, and capital. We have seen the importance of commitment from the top; the value of assembling diverse groups of people working to solve a common problem; the value of incremental changes and testing ideas at a smaller scale; and the usefulness of “change capital”—periodic investments designed to create new organizational platforms, beyond ongoing revenues.

Two very different schools of thought around innovation are useful.

Jerry and Monique Sternin and Richard Pascale in *Positive Deviance* (and that’s with a “ce,” not a “ts”)- *Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World’s Toughest Problems* arrested child malnutrition trends in South Vietnam, not by poring over nutritional theories, but by studying very very poor, non-malnourished children. They discovered that their mothers did three things that other mothers did not: they fed them smaller portions but more frequently during the day; in stirring the soup, they made sure to dig deep into the pot to get vegetables and other nutrients that had settled to the bottom, and they supplemented the soup with handfuls of the plentiful tiny shrimp and crabs they would grab from the rice paddies where they worked. By adopting these simple practices, villages were able to eliminate child malnutrition.

Four lessons here that the Sternins articulate are worth considering:

- 1) Innovators are “observable exceptions.” It’s not that they think differently or feel differently: they act differently and are observable by others who see them behaving and having success outside of the norm.
- 2) Innovators can be unaware that their behavior is exceptional at all. They may not be withholding information; they may simply be unaware that they have useful knowledge to share.

- 3) Innovators often work with the same resources and face the same conditions as non-innovators. Their success is not the result of more resources, or more money; more history or more time. They are outliers who succeed against the same odds their colleagues face.

In essence, innovators demonstrate that solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist, within an affected community itself. They simply have yet to be understood and adopted by others. Much of innovation involves shepherding existing intelligence and energy and replicating that behavior—a quest that makes networks and meetings like these increasingly valuable. You should all simply ask everyone you meet, “What are three things you are doing today that are working and that you weren’t doing three years ago?”

Innovation for existing groups and for start-ups can pose different challenges.

The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra or SPCO, as it is called, is attempting as radical a reinvention of itself and of the orchestral model as I have ever seen. They began this journey by redefining the mission, abandoning the more traditional emphasis of “world class orchestra playing the great repertoire” in favor of a new mission of “patron development”—a mission that has economic consequences to be sure, but that more critically defines a mission of reaching individuals who have had minimal or no relationship with symphonic music and turning them into fanatics for the symphonic repertoire—a redefinition that leaves no choice but to change in the face of declining audiences. They have discarded the maestro model, instead engaging prominent artists—Dawn Upshaw, for example—in staggered multi-year contracts to work with administrators and the musicians themselves to chart the artistic destiny of the orchestra. They have decided that the concert hall is not the venue—it is A venue, but not THE venue, and they have radically altered their programming profile to play in schools, ballparks, churches and more. They have redirected the attention of their board to become change agents, rather than guardians of past rituals. And they have rescaled their ticket structure, with tickets now \$10 or \$20, with a small percentage at a \$40 top—an enormous risk in a field where tickets more typically cost in the \$80, \$90 or \$100 range—a strategy made possible by equally rigorous decisions of what to stop doing, including not only the maestro position but abandoning print advertising entirely.

Already, they have seen their paid percentage of house skyrocket, and questions are now on the table: at these lower prices, will people come more often? Will they be more adventurous in what they come to see? Will they be less resentful of pieces they don’t like? Will they recognize this low ticket as a “gift” and contribute in greater numbers? Time will tell, but preliminary indications are indeed positive.

Unburdened by an old organizational model and the need to change, the new the Trey McIntyre Project has started from innovative premises, rejecting traditional assumptions of business practice, structure and location, choosing deliberately to set up shop not in easily accessible, million citizen dance centers like New York, San Francisco or Houston, but in Boise ID—a town of under 200,000 more than 550 miles from a truly major urban center. They initially attracted local attention by launching “spurbans”—spontaneous urban events—seizing the logic of the flash mob to create short dance interactions on public streets for startled pedestrians—a rejection of old assumptions around curtain times, venues and concert formats. They won instant

allegiance in Boise Idaho, their home base, by opening their first concert with a documentary film—not about dance or Trey or the dancers but with every dancer giving a personal testimony about what she or he loved about Boise—a core connection to community that has expanded by positioning themselves in harmony with a civic strategy for Boise emphasizing innovation—one that embraces the soft ware industry, the government, the dot com start ups, and that has includes a monthly working group bringing together the head of the state university, the sheriff, the chamber of commerce and John Michael Shert, Trey’s managing director. They have created work specifically with the Basque community—a previously overlooked population—and launched a new sense of cooperation with the surrounding arts community, hosting an arts auction where local visual artists are invited to create work that reflects local or dance themes, and where the company and the artist split the gate—a huge event binding the arts community together. In perhaps my favorite strategy, they have made a link to the local high-end bar where the mixologist, not bartender, has created a different signature drink for each member of the company, bearing her or his name—a strategy that gives people a personal connection to the often all-too-anonymous ranks of dancers, that becomes an event to drink your way through the company, and which supports the company through an arrangement giving them half the proceeds of every named drink sold. They are irreverent and entrepreneurial and fearless and generous—one presenter at a panel at Arts Presenters said, “When Trey’s company arrived for their engagement with us, the first thing John Michael did was walk into my office and say, ‘We have five major contributors here in your town we want to introduce to you so that they will support you’”—and deeply at the center of their community.

A different school of innovation involves what Steve Johnson in *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* calls “the adjacent possible”—innovation achieved not within a field but through the lifting of an idea from successful neighboring industries to launch breakthrough behavior. Gutenberg, he reminds us, came to the notion of the printing press, not by hanging out with calligraphers but by experimenting with the wine press, and arguably the single greatest innovation in the nonprofit performing arts has been the subscription model, lifting it from the world of journalism but applying it to live performance.

While rare, there are some thrilling new models to watch that exemplify this “adjacent possible.” ACT Theatre in Seattle has abandoned the traditional subscription in favor of a membership model, based largely on health clubs and gyms—a monthly fee that entitles the member to come as often as she or he likes in a month, seating permitted. On the Boards performing arts center in Seattle has created a video documentation unit called On The Boards TV, borrowing its monetizing model largely from Netflix—rentals for differing periods with options to buy. Perhaps most interesting to me is work undertaken by Springboard for the Arts in St. Paul, MN, replicating the community shares agricultural model of buying a share in a local organic farm and then picking up a box of produce every month. In their CSA for artists, arts patrons buying share in an artist communities and retrieving a box of art every month—a system that sells out, has huge visibility, has led to performances around the box pickups and that has led shareholders to commission and grow their individual collections of specific artists they discover and admire.

Attuning ourselves to the external world—being vigilant in the search for the adjacent possible—while gleaning and adapting the bright spot behavior of our innovative colleagues already among us may lead our fields forward may lead us to improved practice and true breakthrough ideas.

So what does this all mean for us?

We must become adept at managing organizational change. In a meeting we convened of roughly a dozen arts groups undertaking significant change, all but one agreed that their biggest champions were their audiences—and their biggest obstacles their own staffs and boards. In a time when the call is for flat, unhierarchical organizations, how do we create more porous organizations that engage a broader constituency in decision making but retain the advantages—the depth of specialization, the passion and the insight—of former silos? Managing change is not a hard science—there were lessons I learned in the six years I spent in a major American for profit corporation that I would be happy to share in the Q and A, if anyone is interested—but we must become more deliberate and aggressive in accepting the necessity of change.

We must take the long view. Frankly opponents of arts funding have succeeded precisely because they have been willing to sacrifice a current moment in favor of long term gain. Now is the time to ask ourselves, what will the world look like in 10 years if we succeed in fulfilling our collective vision of the arts—and what must we do now to begin to call that 10 year world into being? We must have the foresight to articulate the important questions now, the openness to embrace to face disconfirming data and information as it comes our way and the courage to change in its wake. Indeed, if innovation is, as MIT says, “Useful knowledge for solving problems,” what is the useful knowledge we in the arts possess, and what is the problem we are trying to solve?

And at the most basic level, we must find new ways of working together. In a time when scarcity of resources heightens the competitive urge and can make it so easy to turn on one another, we must elevate the discourse to an arts ecology, realizing that praising theatre while disparaging dance or opera, arguing for the avant-garde while denigrating the mainstream, pleading the case of the smaller at the expense of the larger ultimately advantages no one and harms us all. We must discover the power of bypassing competition in favor of co-opetition, as Yale author Barry Nailbuff urges—arguing that we can continue to compete for a piece of a fixed or shrinking pie, or coopestate to grow the pie for us all, even as we continue to inevitably compete for a piece of it.

Regardless of our nationality, we are here today, joined by common cause. We work together to promote a healthier, more vibrant world, to ameliorate human suffering and nurture a more thoughtful, empathic and substantive and yes economically equitable international order.

Especially now, in a moment when we all must confront the fallacy of a market orientation uninformed by social conscience, we must proclaim the role of the arts in the formation of our collective and individual characters, particularly the character of the young, who are increasingly subjected to “bombardment” of sensation through violent film and video. And in an age of demonization and fear of difference, of intolerant social policies and politicians who encourages us to view our fellow human beings with fear and hostility and suspicion—we must seize the social power of the arts—our power to gather audiences to look at our fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. God knows, if we have ever needed that capacity in human history, we need it now.

I salute you all as activists and thank you all for what you do in your individual communities and for your nation.

I promise you the hand of friendship from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation is extended to you now and for years to come.

And I thank you for your kindness and generosity in listening to me this morning. Thank you and God speed.