

In 2008, the Wallace Foundation selected the Washington State Arts Commission to serve as its local partner for a 4-year national program of learning activities. With funding from the Wallace Foundation, ArtsWA provided a series of public forums and workshops exploring arts participation, the arts and changing demographics and using technology to increase audiences. Seattle writer Keri Healey provides her personal reflections on a forum and workshop she attended on March 19, 2013, at the Seattle Center.

Yes, I am a Percussionist!: A Stream of Consciousness on the Act of Participation

By Keri Healey

Sometimes it's the voice from the stage that commands our attention and sometimes it's the sound of the rain outside the theater that does so.

What makes me listen? What moves my focus from one thing to another? What makes me engage? What compels me to commit? What inspires me to *participate*?

I couldn't help but do a little self-analysis as I listened to the speakers at a March 19 forum at the Seattle Center on the topic of arts participation. The event was hosted by ArtsWA and co-sponsored by The Wallace Foundation as part of the Arts Participation Leadership Initiative. Thirteen Puget Sound arts organizations shared the results of their recent experiments in designing and testing new audience development strategies. These organizations had received *Innovation Grants* through an ArtsWA/Wallace Foundation partnership. (Seattle was one of six cities in the nation selected for The Wallace Foundation's investment in arts participation.)

The *Innovation Grant* parameters were as follows—use grants of up to \$30,000 over six months to wrestle with these issues:

- Engaging teens and young adults
- Diversifying audiences by engaging specific ethnic communities
- Integrating digital communications and marketing
- Creating new social engagement or social connections

Then throw these ideas into the mix:

- “Innovation” can be defined in a number of ways.
- Failure is an acceptable outcome.

And see what happens. The grantees included A Contemporary Theatre (Seattle), Bellevue Arts Museum (Bellevue), Book-It Repertory Theatre (Seattle), Campus MLK (Tacoma), Frye Art Museum (Seattle), Museum of Glass (Tacoma), Northwest Folklife (Seattle), Seattle Symphony Orchestra (Seattle), Seattle Theatre Group (Seattle), TeenTix (Seattle), Theatre Puget Sound (Seattle), Town Hall Seattle (Seattle), and Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience (Seattle). This cohort represented a broad range of organizations in terms of artistic disciplines, missions, and infrastructures—from museums to theaters to service organizations to a huge community festival. One by one, the grantees told us their stories, not with dry charts and graphs and soul-sucking business jargon, but with surprisingly lively rapid-fire presentations that came to life with the help of visually active and often witty videos and Power Points. They told their stories *with stories*.

I am an artist. A writer. A playwright. I care about the traditions and the practice of the arts. I care about how they are made accessible to people and how people respond to them. I care about crafting experiences for audiences. I care that they feel or learn something. And I worry about change. I worry that changes in life's pace and in the human attention span might mean that my chosen art form is becoming a dinosaur. I worry that the social isolation brought about by readily accessible technology in the home might mean that no one sees the need to gather together in a neutral space anymore to experience live exchanges between human actors. Why should they? After all, if it's any good, it'll show up on YouTube, right?

Brazilian musician Eduardo Mendonça kicked off the forum with a sampling of his drumming skills. A couple hundred or so of us were in attendance, dressed in our business casuals, waiting for the presentations to start. We came here to learn something to take back to the office, back to the place where the commerce part of art happens. We could have smiled and bounced our heads in sync with the drummer, biding time until the “real stuff” started, but Eduardo would have none of that. Instead, he got us up on our feet and asked us to think of ourselves in a new way.

You ARE a percussionist, he told each of us. And he made us clap. He commanded some in the crowd to slap their thighs while others were asked to stomp their feet. He cued us when it was our turn to go, and together we morphed into a rag-tag band. He sang his words and when he pointed, we

responded in rhythm to his beats, drumming without drums, and chanting back to him:

Yes, I am a percussionist!

It's that easy to let art start the day, to let art change the tone. And yet how often do we allow (or encourage!) that to happen? Let me guess...not often. Because we're busy. Because we have work to do. Because we have kids who need to get somewhere and pets that are sick and cars that are in the shop and the day is only so long and I'll get to that later. I'll get to the art later. I promise. On the weekend, maybe. We'll see.

I am a middle aged white woman who is what you could call "culture-inclined." In other words, I am everyone's easiest target market. So it strikes me that the challenges that the forum attendees are up against are mammoth when even I—as the demographic they rely on to always show up—am starting to have problems participating in the arts.

Building audiences is about building demand, we were told by Alan Brown (of WolfBrown), a leading researcher and management consultant in the nonprofit arts industry and one of three expert panelists present at the forum to provide commentary on the grantees' presentations. How is demand built? Well, it's not like the old days—and in this case the old days I'm referring to happened anytime pre-1980 when arts education was pretty much a given in our public schools. Back in those old days, exposure to artistic content at an early age meant that children had the tools and vocabulary of the arts to integrate into their playtime. I grew up taking field trips to Radio City Music Hall and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. My mother kept paint sets and old sheets and cardboard boxes and coffee cans in our basement so that her five children could be sent down there in the evenings to "go make things!" Participating in the arts was something that was modeled for me in my home and in my school, so it was something I understood and craved.

But what if, like today's young people, I had grown up without those early exposures? Today, would I need to rely on mass media and social contacts to shape my tastes and build my personal demand for arts experiences? And how does the average arts organization, eager to sell me a ticket, infiltrate those networks of influencers?

Several of the *Innovation* grantees shared truths they learned about cultivating and working with youth audiences:

Younger audiences want to be engaged, not just as ticket buyers but as participants, claimed Wier Harman of Town Hall Seattle. *They want to feel authentic and humanized.*

Young people don't want to be marketed to, said Myra Platt of Book-It.

It's not that teenagers don't care about art; teenagers just don't know about art, said TeenTix's Holly Arsenault.

Young people are broke and they have a lot of choices, revealed Clayton Kelly of Seattle Symphony Orchestra.

Authenticity was a theme important not only to the youth demographic, but also to the ethnically-specific communities engaged in several grantees' projects. A Contemporary Theatre's *Innovation Grant* project was built around their production of *Ramayana*, one of South and South East Asia's greatest epics. ACT reached out to the Indian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Thai communities to recruit "ambassadors" who advised the theater on cultural parameters and validated ACT's intentions in producing this much loved work. Though ACT's audience growth goals for the show were attained, Director of Marketing & Communications Becky Lathrop reported that the real success of this project was that the community ambassadors wanted to stay on and continue working with the theater, even after *Ramayana* was over. They wanted to convert from *Ramayana* ambassadors to *general ACT* ambassadors, helping the theater maintain its newfound ties to cultural communities that were previously not included in its operations in a significant way.

It's this change, this moving of particular groups of people from the margins to the center of one's work that I felt was such a meaningful result of many of the *Innovation* projects. This, and the acknowledgment that *programming* is the true Holy Grail of arts participation. Alan Brown noted that rare is the artistic director who consults with the broader community about content choices; this is one of the leading reasons for audience indifference. Arts organizations, unlike social service organizations, rarely conduct true community "needs assessments" to determine what people really want to see and do during their cultural/recreational hours. He likened the typical season selection process at most arts organizations to electing a pope: there's a secret meeting, then a puff of white smoke, then—*voilà!*—we're ready to announce the new season! He advised that arts leaders ought to ask their audiences not what plays they want to see or what music they want to listen to, but what

issues are impacting their daily lives. The lack of bi-directional exchange between arts providers and their audiences is what will leave traditional arts organizations in the dust.

Vivian Philips, Director of Marketing and Communications for Seattle Theatre Group, said something in her presentation that really struck a chord with me. Organizational leaders often talk about serving the “underserved.” Vivian said it was the goal of STG’s project, *Bear Witness: Voices of Strength*, to serve the *uninvited*. She was referring specifically to young female African immigrants, and her words reinforced to me the importance of actively inviting people to the table. I remembered my own experiences as a young artist moving to Seattle, attached to nothing and no one here, and trying to find my way through the lively Seattle arts scene of the early 1990s. I spent a good deal of time—after years of being an active, participatory member of another artistic community, far away—as an audience member. And I can clearly remember what it felt like to have no relationship to the art being presented or to the artists onstage. I was anonymous. I was not yet a member of this community and no one cared what I thought. At least no one asked. I certainly didn’t have the obstacles that young female African immigrants face in my way and yet there I was...uninvited. It took a very special artistic environment, in my case, Seattle’s storied Annex Theatre, to make the first invitation that opened the door to the arts for me here.

In creating new work, I often think about this act of inviting people inside and how crucial that is. At the forum, Brown and his co-panelists Claudia Bach (AdvisArts) and Shannon Stewart (arts consultant and co-founder of the Vera Project) described six innovation practices that were folded into many of the 13 funded projects, and one that I found particularly exciting was “experimenting with setting.” What makes someone interested in seeing art in one setting (such as a park) but resistant to seeing it in another (opera house)? I’ve seen the impact that messing around with audience expectations around setting can have in my own work producing site-specific theater—most notably when I created a serialized live soap opera that took place in the display rooms at IKEA and, more recently, when I staged a history-based live Western on the grounds of Auburn’s Mary Olson Farm. In the IKEA play, shoppers stumbled onto our show whether they’d planned to or not, and some of these folks were turned into enthusiastic repeat viewers. (Of course, others just rolled their shopping carts right through the scenes being performed, oblivious to the dramas going on—this is one of the risks and the glories of non-traditional settings, I have learned.)

On the farm show, I got the distinct feeling that most of our audience members were not experienced theater-goers. One of my favorite experiences was watching them interact with the performers, even in the middle of the show. Those of us who grew up seeing theater learned early on where to draw the line between performer and audience member and how to mind our p's and q's in a "legit" performance hall, but the visitors to our show paid no attention to such antiquated conventions. Because there were few places for the actors to get dressed and prepare before the performance, the cast gathered behind an old farmhouse, out of sight lines, and dressed themselves in the great outdoors. Without a "lobby" to corral them and having been given verbal permission in the pre-show speech to drop out of the performance whenever they felt like it, our audience members wandered around the farm before, during, and after the show, often stopping to chat with half-dressed actors about the farm, its history, and the story they were watching. It was a magnificent, accidental two-way conversation between artist and audience that made me realize the importance of flexibility and letting go of rules in art. I believe that the informal settings for both these productions—and our active invitations to people to step into the action—gave unlikely audiences a window into something they might not have attended in a traditional theater space and maybe even encouraged them to sample other experiences later.

So...what makes people listen? What compels them to commit? What inspires them to *participate*? There is obviously no simple or singular answer to these questions. But this forum shook up my assumptions about what *innovation* means. I cannot be an artist (or a citizen, for that matter) and ignore or fear the cultural changes happening around me in order to "preserve" my art form, my way of doing things. Innovation is being creative, it is offering something different, it is listening, it is taking risks, it is course correcting, it is collaborating, it is inviting. Some days, it is drumming when you are not usually a drummer. Ultimately, it is embracing change and moving forward. And *that's* something that definitely inspires me to participate.