



## **Keynote Address Delivered by Ben Cameron, June 20, 2007**

*NOTE: These are Ben's prepared remarks for AACTFest '07 Charlotte and do not reflect numerous departures from the text, such as his Southern reflections about sweet ice tea, barbeque, or his beloved University of North Carolina Tar Heels.*

**In 2006, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation worked with Arts Presenters, Dance USA and Theatre Communications Group to convene national conversations in their respective fields—a reflection of our belief that optimal service comes with first understanding what a field needs from that field's point of view and an outgrowth of our desire to understand more fully the challenges facing the live performing arts today.**

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

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

**Such issues included concerns about the increasing dysfunctionality of the 501(c)3 model—the breakdown of old fundraising strategies, the increasing difficulties around managing boards, and the hunger for new models—the desire to find another way to finance and sustain work.**

**We heard concern about an impending generational transfer of leadership, as a generation of founders retire or depart. And while much of the concern was around where we might find their successors—especially given different expectations from young people around higher compensation, shorter hours, in essence less patience for the sacrificed lives of dignity and the financial masochism that were the givens for so many in my own generation—this conversation brought to my ears, at least, a new strand of the conversation—the unwillingness of emerging leaders to be mere custodians of organizations they inherit.**

Potential young leaders want the same latitude to reinvent and reshape organizations to meet their own artistic ambitions as their predecessors were given, raising issues more about an organization's capacity for change than about the identity of an heir apparent.

We heard about an erosion of audiences—declining rates in subscriptions renewals, the difficulties in attracting single ticket buyers, the collapse in the window of social planning—the unspoken aftermath of 9/11 when seemingly overnight ticket buyers seemed to commit, not two weeks in advance, but more typically 24-hours or (if lucky) 48 hours before performance—a disorienting shift that continues to plague marketing departments and box office staffs who still struggle to understand the new social rhythm and interpret accurately on a Tuesday the prospects for the sparsely sold upcoming Saturday performance. In trying to attract the attention of potential ticket buyers, we now compete with the more than 3,000 different marketing messages a typical American sees every day, according to Peter Whybrow in his book *AMERICAN MANIA: WHEN MORE IS NOT ENOUGH*. We compete with unprecedented exhaustion and over scheduling, a time in which (according to a Yankelovich poll) half of consumers across all income levels say that lack of time is a bigger problem than lack of money, when 42% of men and 55% of women say they are too tired to do the things they want to do and when the #1 answer to the most eagerly anticipated event was “a good night's sleep.” Not surprisingly, in every field, we heard concerns that, after decades of growth, our audiences are shrinking, and that our own financial needs, in tandem with negative shifts in funding, mean escalating ticket prices that threaten to place attendance beyond the reach of many in our communities that we wish to serve.

And, perhaps most significantly, we heard the struggle to understand more fully the impact of technology on the performing arts—the area that especially for an over-50, cranky Luddite like me can be the most perplexing, the most astounding of all. Technology has emerged as our biggest competitor for leisure time: Ad Week reported in “The 24 Hour Limit” that Gen Xers watch 11.2 hours of television and spend 9.5 hours on the internet, a total of 20.7 hours every week—Gen Y-ers spend even more—22.8 hours, although apportioned differently—12.2 hours on line and 10.6 hours watching TV, and last year, computer gaming outsold the combined sales of movie and music recordings.

According to Google CEO Eric Schmidt, we now live in a time when a new blog is being created every second of every day. Moreover, technology is altering the basic assumptions of consumption: thanks to the web, we believe we can get whatever we want, whenever we want it, customized to fit our personal needs. We can shop at 8 at night, 3 in the morning, expectations of customization and personalization that performing arts organizations, at least, cannot meet. Young people especially can get their culture on demand through YouTube and iTunes any time they want it and at little or no apparent cost—and what will it mean in the future when we ask someone to pay \$100 for a theatre ticket when that customer has become accustomed to downloading on the internet for free or at most for a mere 99 cents a song?

I would be less concerned about these changes if they reverberated only in the realm of economics, but the true impact of these shifts is far larger. Ellen Ullmann, a wonderful thinker whose “Museum of Me” article led us to invite her to a theatre conference several years ago, reminded us that, convenience of on-line ticketing aside, there is great social

value in standing in a ticket line beside someone not like you for 5 or 10 minutes—indeed that societies are strengthened through such causal “social abrasions,” casual encounters that make us rub up against others and that lie at the heart of a coherent social fabric. With the increasing convenience of the web comes the increased loss of these abrasions, - and the rising sense that our larger social fabric may be unraveling.

The internet compounds this social fraying and easily “silos” us: no matter how paranoid your fantasy, there is a website out there to confirm your point of view. Theatre practitioners now report growing audience resistance to encountering any idea not instantly recognizable as one’s own, an increasing polarization in our country, for instance, that led members of the audiences at this year’s Tony winning Alliance Theatre to exit en masse, mid-act, climbing over others, when a character said, “If I had time with George Bush, I’d tell him to share his toys and play nice with others.” For so many, the encounter with the other, with difference, with the new, lies at the heart of our missions and purpose: what will it mean for us if we lose this appetite as a society and wish only to encounter the familiar, the known, the already embraced?

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

So what are we to do?

I take to heart the words of two great but very different leaders—Abraham Lincoln, who said, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present. As our case is new, so must we think anew and act anew.”

And of Wayne Gretzky—and when was the last time you heard Abe Lincoln and Wayne Gretzky quoted back to back—who, when asked why he was such a great hockey player, said, “I skate to where the puck will be.”

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

As a first step, I think we have to enter long, difficult, deep discussions about why we exist. Because we have a building is not enough. Because we have staff is not enough. Because we have a history and awards and a reputation is not enough. We must reorient ourselves, expanding our realm of concern beyond the qualitative to understanding what mandates us to continue to exist—indeed, what is the value we offer our community?

Every arts organization must be able to answer three basic questions:

- 1) What is the value of having my organization in my community?
- 2) Harder: What is the value my group alone offers, or that my group offers better than anyone else? Duplicative or second-rate value will not stand in this economy.
- 3) Hardest: How will my community be damaged if we close our doors and move away tomorrow?

And in answering these questions, can we do so without referencing the arts at all? Can we find an ennobling, animating purpose that impels us, one that the arts uniquely allow us to pursue?

A number of theatres, for example, try to articulate their value by saying, “We produce high quality theatre...” a beginning that immediately disaffects those who perceive theatre in general to be a less than pressing priority. Why is doing theatre at all of value, they would ask? In contrast, consider how the Red Cross describes itself. While it would be comparably easy to say, “Our mission is to gather bandages and administer food to disaster victims,” they instead say, “Our mission is to serve the most vulnerable”—a statement of value that can be adorned by “We do that through distribution of bandages and food.” The Salvation Army says, “We make citizens of the rejected”—a value statement that can be comparably with explanations of distributing clothing and education programs. And in Mark Moore’s celebrated must-read *Creating Public Value*, he notes the shift—and the consequent resurgence in public confidence in the police force of Houston TX—when they began talking about their value, not through the filter of what they do by arresting people or enforcing the law, but through the value of “Promoting public safety.”

I am especially inspired by the children’s theatre that sees its role no longer as producing high quality theatre for children, but as “bringing joy to children’s lives.” In that same line, what is the higher purpose each of us is called to do—the positive, animating, galvanizing, ennobling value that the arts uniquely allow us to accomplish and pursue? Are we in the business of education? Or of entertainment? Or of community organizing? Or of economic development? Or even of the arts—true arts for arts sake? The diversity of our possible responses is, to my mind, a strength of the arts ecosystem: the failure, however, for us individually to be precise in our aspirations, to be strategic in the pursuit, is an invitation to failure.

I for one am hopeful about this future, even though I may not have sounded so until this moment. We live in an increasingly arts-rich world.

More Americans work in art, entertainment and design than in law, accounting, and auditing—and as a nation, we are now graduating 400,000 MFA’s annually in training programs ranging from music and dance and theatre to visual and literary arts.

And now, not surprisingly, major universities are taking aggressive new stands on the arts.

Lee Bollinger at Columbia University has aggressive plans to create an expanded arts campus above the current one and has staked his university’s future in part on the arts;

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has recently wooed Emil Kang, the former executive director of the Detroit Symphony to fill a newly created position affectionately

known as “arts czar”—a high level, campus wide appointment charged with coordinating and expanding arts programming.

Nancy Cantor, a psychologist by training and the new president of Syracuse University, has issued a clarion call for the arts in her first year, emphasizing the unique role of the arts in teaching playfulness and responsibility.

Daniel Pink, (interestingly enough a man in his 30’s) in his new *A WHOLE NEW MIND*, writes of the emerging emphasis on right brain thinking to complement the left brain orientation that has dominated our world during the last century.

We are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computer-like capabilities of the information age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities of what’s rising in its place, the Conceptual Age. It is an age animated by a different form of thinking and a new approach to life—one that prizes aptitude, the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new—as well as the ability to empathize with others, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one’s self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning.

Indeed, it is the quest for common meaning that is possibly our most important mission.

How we connect to this quest and to the veritable tsunami of creative energy unleashed by the internet is a question that promises to realign the creative arts industry. I recently heard futurist Andrew Zolli talk about the transformations of the commercial market, expanding a trajectory first described in a book called *The Experience Economy*, using the lens of the coffee industry. In the early days of coffee, power lay in the hands of the farmer: if you grew the coffee bean, you owned the market and controlled the flow of the bean in what we would now term a commodity market. But with time, the economy changed and we went from being a commodity market to being a product market: the power shifted away from the farmer to Maxwell House and their colleagues, those who processed and ground the coffee that you could buy and bring home, etc., etc. This too was of finite duration: soon, the big player in coffee was no longer Maxwell House but was Dunkin’ Donuts where you could buy a cup of coffee already made for you for 25 cents or 50 cents—a transition from product to service. And then the economy shifted yet again, and we went to an “experience” economy, one where we suddenly became willing to part with \$1.75 for a miniscule cup that somehow we’ve been convinced is a “tall”—how did they do that?—as part of a larger Starbucks experience: indeed Starbucks, as you may know, has a position called the CEO, which stands for the chief entertainment officer. Many of us in the arts community are only beginning to appreciate that we have seen ourselves in service industry terms in a time of experience economies.

But Andrew warned us that the economy has shifted yet again, and that those who wish to survive must think, not merely of experience, but of participation and community—an economy where value will no longer be consumed but where value will be co-created.

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

The BBC several years ago released its archives on line, encouraging its viewers to download footage, recut and reassemble work, and repost it as new—a very different vision of relationship to audience. Television today is witnessing a major defection of audience to You Tube, a website where the consumer provides the experience. The power of the restaurant critic has been decimated by Zagat where the collective consumer passes judgment and defines a restaurant value. “Dancing with the Stars,” “American Idol,” “So You Think You Can Dance” all are predicated on the active involvement of the consumer, inviting the audience to co-create value.

This sense of co-creation is an invitation—an invitation to dismantle irrelevant distinctions between professional and amateur, a status once exalted as more precious than professionalism, capturing as it does in its etymological roots the love of practice. This is an invitation to dismantle arts education programs and replace them with community engagement programs. This is an invitation to seeing our mission, not in creating products to be consumed, but in offering experiences that will serve as springboards to our audience's own creativity—an invitation that brings us full circle to that Bethlehem performance of Steelbound and those unemployed steel workers chanting the words of Aeschylus in an abandoned foundry. This is a call to a field to see ourselves, not as presenters, perhaps, but as activators, engagers, animators of creative energy—and in this conversation, community theatres—you who have long involved your communities in active participation—will and must play a leading role.

This is hard, scary, risky work—and indeed, we need to be fearless, risking more as we move forward. This must be, I think, a time of risk—a word I use sparingly, knowing that many will equate it with irresponsibility. But what I mean here is risk—reaching toward the unknown, pushing past our comfort zones, not haphazardly but armed with our best instincts, our history of knowledge, the input of others expert in ways that we ourselves may not be. Risk—that capacity that lies at the heart of growth and learning, recognizing that without risk, a business does not grow; without risk, your marriage or partnership will not grow; without risk, the artist—that central agent whose work we all exist to facilitate and present-- will be doomed to a life of technical expression that, regardless of competence, will never reach the essence of the true artistic moment.

Indeed, the three greatest regrets of retirees should serve as a bold admonition to us all, as individuals as well as for our organizations. When asked what they most regretted about

**their lives, they answered: We didn't spend more time in reflective thinking. We weren't clearer about the purpose of our lives. We didn't risk more.**

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

**Recognizing the difficulty of the work ahead let me leave you with two different sources of inspiration. At the time of the great explosion of arts philanthropy in the early 1960's, McNeil Lowery, who was the head of the arts division at the Ford Foundation, which began the great philanthropic arts movement in the United States, was challenged to explain why funding the live performing arts was important, he said, "I will give you ten reasons." And here are his ten reasons:**

- **They are important, he said, because of their contribution to the image of American society abroad.**
- **They are important because they are a means of communication and consequently of understanding between this country and others.**
- **They are important because they are an expression of national purpose.**
- **They are important because they are an important influence in the liberal education of the individual.**
- **They are important because they are the key to an American's understanding of himself, his times and his destiny.**
- **They are important because they are a purposeful occupation for youth.**
- **In their institutional form, they are vital to the social, moral and educational resources of an American community.**
- **They are good for business, especially in new centers of population.**
- **They are components for strengthening the moral and spiritual bastions in a people whose national security is threatened.**
- **They are the offset to the materialism of a new and generally affluent society.**

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

**A Harris poll conducted in the United States more than a decade ago asked respondents, "If your house is on fire, what's the first thing you'll grab when you run out the door?" The overwhelming answer: "family photographs."**

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

**As a man whose ancestors came from England, Ireland, Scotland and Germany, the plays of Beckett, the plays of Shakespeare, the plays of Goethe, these are my family photographs. As a man born and raised in the southern part of the United States, the plays of Tennessee Williams, the stories of Carson McCullough, the novels of William Faulkner are my family photographs. As a man in contemporary New York, the plays of David Mamet, the plays of David Rabe, are my family photographs.**

**As a gay man, the dances of Bill T. Jones, the plays of Tony Kushner are my family photographs. But as an American, an American, the novels of Toni Morrison, the poetry of Maya Angelou, the songs of my Native American brothers and sisters, the poetry of my Asian aunts and uncles, these are our family photographs. And if we do our job right, they will live and breathe as testaments to who we were, what we thought, what we felt, - just as we turn to the plays of Aeschylus, Socrates and Euripides as the living photos of ancient Greece - not to some record of wars won or lost.**

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

**In that light, I would like to thank you for your part in doing God's work in your communities across America, regardless of where you come from and the communities you serve. I would like to applaud the work you do here as an association, joining together and serving one another. And I'd like to thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this afternoon.**

**God speed you in your work.**