Stony Brook University

The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.

The Public Arena: A literary office without walls

A Thesis Presented

by

Erin Kathleen Treat

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Dramaturgy

Stony Brook University

December 2012

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Erin Kathleen Treat

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

Master of Fine Arts degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this thesis.

John Lutterbie – Thesis Advisor
Chair & Artistic Director, Department of Theatre Arts

Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew – Second Reader
Lecturer, Lighting Design and Technology, Department of Theatre Arts

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Interim Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

The Public Arena: A literary office without walls

by

Erin Kathleen Treat

Master of Fine Arts

in

Dramaturgy

Stony Brook University

2012

American regional theatres are in crisis. The economic downturn of the past four years has resulted in an intensification of existing challenges facing nonprofit theatre institutions, and the result has been a resurgence of aesthetic conservatism, an unwillingness to take risks on new playwrights and innovative productions. Recently, the growing perception of literary departments as irrelevant middlemen between institutions and writers and the necessity of belt-tightening throughout the industry has led to the elimination of literary and dramaturgical staffs at many regional theatres. However, some literary departments have survived by shifting their focus towards audience engagement, becoming spokespeople and advocates for their institutions and their productions. The Literary Office at Arena Stage is one such department; along with other departments, it has become part of an Artistic Development team, whose task is to develop a series of literary-focused audience engagement initiatives called The Public Arena. This thesis explores the need for new approaches to engagement, the development and implementation of The Public Arena, and the program's potential as a model for engagement initiatives at other theatres. A case study of the Public Arena's various programs and how they work together reveals that there is great potential in refocusing the work of dramaturgs and literary managers toward audience and community engagement and that an institutional environment that values transparency, inclusivity, and connection encourages involvement and investment in the theatre and the work from both within the institution and from the larger communities it serves.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

I owe many thanks to the individuals and institutions who have provided me with their generous contributions of time, resources, and support, without which I could not have completed this thesis. Special thanks go to Arena Stage for allowing me to explore their innovative engagement programming. I am especially grateful to Arena's Literary Manager – and my dear friend – Amrita Ramanan, who has been an invaluable resource throughout the process. Additionally, I want to thank my thesis committee, John Lutterbie and Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew, for their support and for providing valuable feedback; I would also like to thank Steve Marsh for helping me to wade through all the paperwork so that I could clear this last hurdle that stands between me and my degree. Finally, I owe an immense amount of gratitude to my family, who have put up with me and given me the space, time, and unfailing support I've needed these past four years.

Introduction

When Todd London, Ben Pesner, and Zannie Giraud Voss published *Outrageous Fortune* in 2009, they voiced a sentiment familiar to theatre artists and institutions throughout the country: American theatre is in crisis. This precarious state is hardly a new one. Since the mid-20th century, live theatre in the U.S. has been the "magnificent invalid," constantly struggling to survive amidst funding cuts, increasing competition from mediated forms of entertainment, and an aging subscriber base – to say nothing of the growing perception that theatre has become largely inaccessible and irrelevant to the average individual. The first decade of the 21st century has seen these challenges intensify, particularly in the wake of the sharp economic downturn in 2008 and the resulting recession. Unsurprisingly, contributed income from granting organizations and corporations has decreased in response to tougher financial conditions, and attendance has flattened or sharply declined, according to a 2008 report published by the National Endowment for the Arts (*All America's a Stage* 7-8). In fact, the NEA's *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* reveals that audience attendance rates for both musical and spoken-word plays are at their lowest point since tracking began in 1982 (5).

While *Outrageous Fortune* focuses mainly on the effect of these trends on playwrights and new play development, they are not the only sufferers. Many prominent theatres have been forced to make drastic changes to accommodate increasing economic pressures: Season lengths have been reduced, types of shows selected for production have become more limited and conservative, staff positions have been eliminated, and audience strategies – including subscription models, marketing techniques, and even theatres' mission statements – have been completely overhauled. And in some – perhaps many – cases, it hasn't been enough. As the recession plods on, many American theatre-makers believe that the solution lies not in

1

reinventing individual institutions but in reexamining and revamping the traditional nonprofit model itself.

Nonprofit theatre in the United States began in the early decades of the 20th century with the Little Theatre movement, whose aims were to provide opportunities for artists whose work was ill-suited to New York City's commercial theatres, to expose non-cosmopolitan audiences to quality dramatic work, and to encourage local focus and participation in theatre arts. The decentralization of theatre from New York City expanded as experimental and issues-based work proliferated in the 1960s, and as those theatre companies gained stability and a regular audience base, many came to adopt what has become a "standard" model for nonprofit regional theatres. The creation of the "standard" subscriber model is widely credited to Danny Newman, who developed it during his tenure at the Lyric Opera of Chicago in the 1950s and 60s and later promoted it with the 1977 publication of *Subscribe Now* (Harlow, et al. 5). Under the subscriber model, a nonprofit theatre offers a set season of productions and charges a discounted ticket price to audience members who commit to attending each production in the season. A subscription-based revenue stream allows theatres to spend less on marketing each production separately – theatres market the season as a single unit rather than designing a separate campaign for each production – and it depends on subscribers to provide the bulk of its earned income for a given season (ibid.). Additionally, long-term season subscribers often become long-term supporters of the theatre, donating funds beyond the price of their subscriptions and thus adding to the theatre's contributed income as well.

The subscriber model continues to be the standard for nonprofit theatres around the country, but subscriptions have dropped off sharply in recent years. In a report published in 2010, Theatre Communications Group observed a 15% drop in the number of season

subscriptions at nonprofit theatres between 2006 and 2010 (10); during the same period, subscription revenue adjusted for inflation fell by 15.1% (6). Certainly this downward trend is due in part to the poor economy, but it is also partially the result shifting audience dynamics. In a 2011 report prepared for the National Endowment for the Arts, Mark J. Stern noted that the percentage of theatre attendees between the ages of 35 and 60 has remained fairly steady in the past several decades; that age group has consistently made up nearly half of all theatre audiences for both musicals and nonmusical plays since 1982 (38). While the demographics have stayed more or less stable, the lifestyles of that age group have changed considerably. Today's theatre audiences say that their schedules are neither flexible nor predictable enough to commit to a full season subscription (Harlow, et al. 12). As a result, many nonprofit theatres have seen a rise in flexible subscriptions and single-ticket purchases as traditional subscriptions have decreased (Voss, et al. 6). Unfortunately, attracting single-ticket buyers costs far more than convincing loyal subscribers to renew; in 2010, theatres spent 21 cents to produce every dollar of single ticket sales versus 12 cents for every subscription dollar earned (26). Even more dispiriting is the fact that studies show that many first-time single-ticket buyers do not repeat their purchases (Harlow, et al. 8).

How can regional theatres turn this trend around? For better or for worse, nonprofit theatres around the country are reexamining their audience strategies; they are offering flexible subscription options and discounted ticket programs, creating subscription series aimed at specific demographics, and making season planning decisions based on what will sell – sometimes to the detriment of the theatres' aesthetic missions. The call for renewed efforts in audience-building does not stop at marketing departments and box offices, however. Many theatre companies are turning their attention to audience engagement initiatives as a way of

fostering a loyal audience base. These initiatives take the form of education programs, community outreach, even social events. Diverse though they are, they share a common focus: They hope to forge connections between the theatre companies and the communities they serve and on which their existence depends.

This concern for audience engagement is not new – it was, in fact, part of the driving force behind the creation of most nonprofit theatres – but it has experienced renewed interest in recent years. Based on my own survey of League of Resident Theatres (LORT) member theatres' websites, 73 out of 74 currently advertise one or more audience engagement initiatives; most have four or more. Discounting training programs and those aimed at providing arts education in a K-12 setting, the average LORT member theatre has six ongoing (that is, not show-specific) engagement programs currently in place. In general, the types of programs offered can be separated into several categories: lobby exhibits; published materials such as program notes and published play guides; web-based materials, including blogs, podcasts, video, social media, online play guides, etc.; pre- and post-show discussion series; symposia and/or special lectures; process-related events, including new play readings, backstage tours, and audience attendance at rehearsals; and social events, such as wine and beer tastings, parties, GLBT events, etc. The most common types of programming among these theatres are published and web-based materials, and pre- and post-show discussions.

Understanding how these programs enhance a theatre's relationship with its community – and whether that leads to increased (loyal) attendance – will be incredibly important in the development of audience strategies at nonprofit theatres in the future. Efforts to study the effectiveness of these programs are already underway. Beginning in 2012, Theatre Communications Group launched a multiyear research program entitled *Audience (R)Evolution*

to "study, promote and support successful audience engagement models across the country".

According to TCG's website, the program will take place over three years and involve four phases:

> **Phase I: Assessment** – Beginning in 2012, TCG will partner with AMS Planning & Research to assess the best audience engagement models, and explore how and why they work. The theatres that participated in TCG's *Future Audiences* program will make up the backbone of participants, in addition to a broad sampling of theatres from across the nation.
>
> **Phase II: Learning Convening** – In January 2013, theatre-makers will come together to discuss the synthesized findings from the assessment period. Attendees will learn one-on-one from practitioners with track records of successful audience engagement.
>
> **Phase III: Grants** – Ten grants of up to $65,000 each will be awarded to TCG Member Theatres to replicate successful audience engagement models. Additional general operating funds will be distributed amongst the grant recipients. Requests for proposals will be accepted in spring 2013.
>
> **Phase IV: Dissemination** – Theatres at large will have fast access to the project's findings to implement effective programs through TCG's website, social media outlets and *American Theatre* magazine.

The Wallace Foundation has also sponsored a series of case studies addressing ways of improving relationships between nonprofit arts organizations and their audiences, focusing on the engagement model used at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company as an example for regional theatre (Harlow, et al.). Additionally, many theatres – including the theatre used as a case study in this thesis – are undertaking their own internal studies and evaluations of the programs they offer.

While certainly important to theatrical institutions at large, this resurgence of audience engagement initiatives could be of particular moment to literary / dramaturgy departments. It is no secret that literary offices have come under fire in recent years. It has been suggested – notably in *Outrageous Fortune* – that literary managers have become mere functionaries serving the interests of an increasingly corporate industry, and that they've lost their enthusiasm for and

commitment to encouraging new, innovative, exciting work. Additionally, many regional theatres have eliminated or severely downsized their literary departments in response to budget cuts, assigning their script-reading and season-planning duties to other staff members like artistic associates and early-career interns. Fortunately, some theatre companies have chosen to keep their literary departments and – rather than downsizing them – are expanding the role of the literary manager/dramaturg into that of an ambassador for the productions and for the companies themselves. These positions are uniquely well suited for this role; with the exception of the front of house and box office staffs, literary managers and/or resident dramaturgs are often the only members of regional theatre companies who communicate directly with the audience. While this has traditionally occurred in the form of program notes and play guides, these theatres utilize literary managers' skills and enthusiasm and channel it into creating and maintaining a wide range of audience engagement programs.

Indeed, one theatre in particular stands out in this respect: Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage. Arena's literary manager, Amrita Ramanan, discussed the importance of the relationship between literary departments and the audience experience during the 21st Century Literary Office Convening in February 2012. During a roundtable session, Ramanan related how, in recent years, her focus at Arena has shifted away from solely finding and reading plays for upcoming seasons and towards formulating the audience experience, particularly as regards the "dialogue with the audience" (*21st Century*). This particular interest in literary-driven engagement models makes this company an intriguing opportunity for further study. Located in the nonprofit theatre hub of Washington, D.C., Arena has a focus on theatre of discourse and strives for diversity in its work and in its audiences. It has long been a major player of the D.C. theatre scene – Arena is currently in its 62nd year – and it has grown accordingly, both in terms of real estate – number of

stages and seats – and budget. Studying the engagement models of this theatre provides an opportunity not only to look in-depth at an exciting approach to the theatre-audience relationship, but also to explore literary-driven engagement from both a general and theatre-specific perspective.

For the purposes of this thesis, I approach Arena's engagement model as a case study in literary-driven audience engagement initiatives. My research has focused on primary sources such as interviews with theatre staff members, engagement materials (blogs, social media posts, online play guides) when available, and the theatres' websites. Additionally, Arena's artistic staff has granted me access to some internal research, and I have also consulted media sources for references to these programs. Much of the research is anecdotal, though more objective data is provided when available.

The case study begins with a brief introduction to the theatre, its mission, and its audience. I then present a general overview of the engagement programming currently in place at Arena, followed by a closer examination of individual programs that the theatre has found to be particularly popular or interesting. The success of the programs is explored in terms of anecdotal audience response, community response expressed by continued relationships with community groups, etc., audience interest and receptiveness expressed by participation levels in the initiative and its programs, and audience loyalty expressed by subscriptions and ticket sales. The study concludes with a look into the future of these engagement programs at Arena and their potential as models for other institutions.

It is true that American theatre is in crisis: a crisis of funding, a crisis of creative courage, a crisis of relevance. Many nonprofit theatres believe that audience engagement may be a possible solution to some – if not all – of these crises. Engagement programs can help to create a

strong and vital relationship between a resident theatre and its community, which may result in higher box office revenue as well as a higher level of discourse between art makers and audience. Engagement can prepare audiences for aesthetic risks and provide valuable feedback to the producing theatre. If audience engagement is a key to renewing the strength and vitality of nonprofit theatre, engagement models like the one studied in this thesis may provide a wealth of opportunities for literary managers and resident dramaturgs to expand their roles within their companies – and the industry at large – and to continue to be essential collaborators in the creative life of the American theatre.

The Public Arena: A literary office without walls

"Unique methods of interaction and conversation with audiences become essential, viewed as the broth for a soup rather than the saltines sprinkled on top."
- Amrita Ramanan, "Breaking Down the Walls"

Arena Stage has long been a major player in the world of American regional theatre. It is one of the oldest nonprofit theatres in the United States, founded in 1950 in Washington, D.C., by Zelda Fichandler, Tom Fichandler, and Edward Mangum in order to create an artistic home for American plays and playwrights ("Our History"). Since then, it has been honored with numerous Tony Awards for regional theatre and has developed and staged many plays that have gone on to successful Broadway runs. Over its more than sixty years in operation, it has grown into a multimillion-dollar organization whose work is known and respected nationally and internationally. Today, Arena Stage occupies the Mead Center for American Theater, the second largest performing arts complex in Washington, D.C., with three large and technologically sophisticated performance spaces, an on-site café, and a spacious reading area dedicated to students of American theatre ("The Mead Center"). It has an annual operating budget in excess of $18.5 million and serves an annual audience of nearly 300,000 ("D.C. theater").

While it certainly has not been immune to the industry-wide problems of funding cutbacks and aging subscribers, Arena has fared better than many nonprofit theatres in the wake of the recession. In fact, it has actually increased its subscriptions over the course of the past three seasons; according to a study published by Target Resource Group, Arena has increased its subscriber base by 57% and its subscription revenue by 73% since 2009 (1), though their demographics continue to skew towards affluent, middle-aged patrons (Ramanan, Telephone Interview). Of course, this has much to do with marketing and pricing strategies, but it may also be related to a change in priorities with regards to audience strategies in general and to engagement programming in particular. Prior to the 2011-2012 season, audience engagement

opportunities at Arena were fairly limited: a pre-show discussion series with waning attendance, subscribers-only post show discussions after select performances, a heavily marketing-oriented blog, and dramaturgical notes in playbills (Dower, et al.). That season, however, saw a number of significant changes with regard to the theatre's approach to engagement, not least of which was ending the theatre's open script submission policy and shifting the literary office's focus away from the "slush pile" of incoming scripts that resulted from it and toward developing programs that would encourage discourse between audience and artists. While the shift caused some understandable trepidation, and will certainly draw fire from some playwright groups, Arena hopes that the benefits of more time for production dramaturgy and audience engagement will outweigh the drawbacks of closing the submission policy (Ramanan, Telephone interview).

This shift began as part of the Arena Restaged period, during which the organization overhauled all of its operations in preparation to move back into the newly renovated Mead Center. During this period, Arena closed its script submission policy, created a new department called the Artistic Development team – made up of the Literary Office, the Casting Office, New Play Development Activities, and Season Planning and Scouting, and headed by the Associate Artistic Director – and empowered the new department to launch the Public Arena, a coordinated audience engagement initiative that would "reflect the artistic ambitions and strategy of the company and current best practices in the field" (Dower, et al. 1-2). This new initiative was inspired by the Public Square, a similar initiative originated by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, which used a variety of engagement programs and platforms aimed at creating long-term, meaningful relationships with their audience and which would get the audience more involved with the theatre over time (Harlow, et al. 12). The Public Arena has similar aims, and as

in the Steppenwolf model, most of its programs are closely tied to dramaturgy and the work of the literary office.

To a large degree, the focus of these programs grows out of a changing sense of what "literary" means at Arena. Arena's Literary Manager, Amrita Ramanan, discusses the organization's new vision of the literary office in her manifesto, "Breaking Down the Walls," presented at the 21st Century Literary Office Convening held in February 2012. In it, she describes an "office without walls", where "the barriers of ego, elitism, and exclusion have been removed", and where "the term dramaturgy […] is owned by everyone". Her ideal of Arena's future literary office is inclusive, not just of the other creative and administrative staff, but also of the audience and the entire D.C. community. She recognizes the need for expanding audience engagement efforts in order to restore vitality and relevance to theatre: "The idea of engagement pre- and post-show celebrates the experience of the art and the dialogue generated from it, rather than assuming that two or three hours in a dark house are enough. Long gone are the days when we took the intimacy of the work onstage so seriously and didn't care about the tone set from the moment the audience steps through the door […] The value of a fun, synergetic atmosphere and more face-time becomes customary rather than an anomaly". This shift toward transparency and inclusion for all drives much of the work of the Public Arena.

The overall goals of the Public Arena involve increasing the level of engagement among the theatre staff and artists as well as the audience. The strategic plan for the initiative, as presented to Artistic Director Molly Smith, lists its overall goals as follows:

- o To develop and communicate a coherent narrative that connects the stated mission and purpose of the organization directly to the audience and to our world via the art;
- o To help the staff, Board, and artists understand and advance the organizational and artistic vision inside each project;

- To advance the notion of Arena Stage as a center for American theater by providing a rich array of avenues for engaging with the ideas expressed via the art and the process through which it is made;
- To activate the sense of Arena Stage as a public forum for engagement with the ideas expressed via the art – within the building, in our community, and around the field. (Dower, et al. 1)

Of particular interest to this case study are the first, third, and fourth goals, since these directly inform the engagement model as experienced by the audience. They clearly express Arena's desire to communicate with the audience in myriad ways, and to create multidirectional relationships between and among its artists, staff, and audience. It is no longer enough simply to produce theatre and leave it to be consumed by the audience; the Public Arena initiative hopes to build a sense of community around and through the art – to create a true forum, in which a multitude of voices and conversations are welcome.

The Artistic Development team began piloting programs for the Public Arena during the 2011-2012 season with the goal of having a complete, established initiative in place for the following season. The pilot initiative – a mix of previously-existing and newly-launched programs – can be broken into four major categories, each containing several sub-categories: web-based programs, on-site programs, off-site programs and hybrids, and staff-focused programs. The first three are primarily focused outward, providing opportunities for the audience to learn about and discuss the work on a deeper level, initially with members of the staff and creative teams, and then (hopefully) with each other. While the last category is primarily inwardly focused, programs in that category energize the members of the organization and provide a unified vision for the initiative as a whole. As such, these internal programs must be examined first, even though they have little, if any, direct effect on the audience's experience and perceptions of Arena Stage.

Staff-Focused Programs

Each production process begins with Page One, a meeting with the director, playwright, and creative team, led by the Artistic Development team. The meeting is open to all staff members and aims to focus the entire organization on the artistic vision of the play and to help create a consistent institutional narrative from show to show (Dower, et al. 4-5). Other staff-focused programs include research packets developed for each rehearsal process and available to the entire staff and creative team – as well as to the audience, via one of the web-based programs – an as-needed dramaturgical support system for the rehearsal room, and the "Play Club," in which the entire staff helps to shoulder some of the script-reading load usually tackled solely by the literary staff (5). While the readily available research packets and dramaturgical support in the rehearsal room are certainly helpful in keeping the staff motivated and focused on the ideas at work in each play, this type of work is fairly standard throughout nonprofit theatres, though it is significant that Arena has opted to let their directors decide how often the dramaturg needs to be "in the room," leaving him/her with more free time to work on audience-focused engagement activities. The two more original concepts with respect to staff engagement are the Page One meetings and the "Play Club."

Both the Page One meetings and the "Play Club" encourage an organized, unified approach to engagement that begins with season planning. By sharing out the script-reading responsibilities among the entire staff, the "Play Club" not only frees considerable time for the literary staff to focus on other projects, it also involves the entire organization in the season planning process. It ties back to the notions of inclusivity and synergy discussed in Ramanan's manifesto; this concept allows more voices to contribute to season selection and planning, which in turn helps develop unified seasons with a variety of potential engagement opportunities. For

example, a marketer may read a script under consideration and come up with a potential community partner whose work is aligned with the play's themes or aesthetics; a group sales manager may have an idea for an off-site engagement event; a costumer may see an opportunity for a series of blog posts about the show's unique design demands. The "Play Club" invites the staff to have a greater investment in all the productions of the current and future seasons, and it encourages a free flow of ideas with regard to building the institutional narrative and creating ideas for community engagement.

Page One meetings have similar advantages with regards to a multitude of voices and ideas contributing to the overall artistic vision of a production. Like the "Play Club" these meetings create a culture of inclusion, but they have more of a direct effect on the audience's experience. By scheduling these meetings as early in the season as possible and by including as much of the staff as possible, the Artistic Development team can facilitate a coordinated, institution-wide approach to a play that informs marketing strategies and publicity, production decisions, dramaturgy, and engagement activities. Page One meetings help to ensure not only that the production will find an audience, but also that the audience receives a consistent, sustained vision of the play before, during, and after the performance. It also provides further opportunities for the staff to brainstorm ways of connecting the play and the theatre with the larger world.

Web-Based Programs

As in most other industries, theatre companies are finding that the Internet is becoming the predominant means of achieving connections between art and audience. It is no secret that a web presence has become more or less essential for any organization hoping to attract the interest of younger generations, but this phenomenon is by no means exclusive to Gen Xers and

Millenials[1]. Its potential as an engagement platform is enormous, and theatre blogs, podcasts, YouTube videos, and social media accounts abound. But the tremendous connective power of the Internet is a double-edged sword; it takes a skilled hand (or, more probably, several skilled hands) and a concentrated effort to create and maintain a consistent, relevant, and engaging web identity. The Public Arena's online efforts focus on programs that provide depth and context to the theatre's productions, production archives and research resources for other theatre organizations, and opportunities to discuss the work with the staff and with other audience members.

The online world of the Public Arena primarily consists of two blogs, a "virtual dramaturg," and active accounts on Facebook and Twitter. While both blogs operate under the auspices of the Public Arena, each has a different specific focus. *Stage Banter* covers material related to productions – playwright/actor/designer interviews, rehearsal room discoveries, research tidbits – as well as the goings-on at the theatre at large; it also functions as a means of advertising other engagement programs. The *New Play Blog* covers the activities and interests of Arena's Playwright Residencies, a program that offers three-year residencies for a handful of playwrights to develop new work under the auspices of Arena Stage. Due to shifts in the management structure and the departure of the American Voices New Play Institute for Emerson College, this second, newer blog has not been as fully realized as *Stage Banter* as of yet. Arena's "virtual dramaturg" is titled *Sub/Text,* and it allows audiences – or anyone else, for that matter – access to the dramaturgical materials produced for each of the theatre's productions, including research packets and supplementary materials. While the social media accounts are primarily

---

[1] I refer here to the birth cohorts and generational names used in Mark J. Stern's report for the NEA on the effect of age on arts participation. The term "Generation X" or "Gen X" refers to individuals born between 1965 and 1974. The term "Millenials" refers to individuals born between 1975 and 1984 (Stern 15).

used for marketing and publicity purposes, they also function as engagement tools used not only as forums for discussion but also as advertising for on- and off-site engagement events.

The *Stage Banter* blog predated the Public Arena initiative by several years, but it was only as an engagement tool that it became successful. At the beginning of the 2007-2008 season, the Artistic Development team took over management of the blog – it had previously been managed by the Communications department – and made a conscious shift in its focus, away from advertising and publicity and toward "process transparency and content distribution" (Dower, et al. 2). When the Artistic Development team took control of it, they made several significant changes that directly contributed to its success: They altered the blog's tone, they switched from a single blogger to multiple contributors, and they made major changes to both content and format. The revamped *Stage Banter* quickly gained readership, which had been extremely low prior to the change in management. Today, it is "a lively and information-packed destination on the Arena Stage website" (7). It gets updated multiple times per week and reaches an estimated 3,000 readers per month (Ramanan, Telephone interview). It is currently one of the Public Arena's most successful web-based engagement programs.

Tonally speaking, the entries dated prior to the change in management read like those from a personal blog rather than a professional one; they are relatively short, conversational, and focused on personal anecdotes and impressions (*Stage Banter*, 2006). The entries are peppered with casual, first-name-only references to other people and details of the blogger's home life, and they end with a signature rather than begin with a byline. While a highly conversational tone can help readers feel personally connected to the blogger, it is likely to alienate a reader who connected to a professional blog in order to learn more about the organization. Essentially, this sort of tone makes the blog about the person, rather than the institution. The entries posted after

the *Stage Banter*'s re-launch are still relatively personal and informal, but their overall tone is far more appropriate to a blog run by a professional organization. The focus is on the goings-on at the theatre, and while personal impressions certainly find their way into the entries, they do so only insofar as they relate to the artistic culture and work of the theatre (*Stage Banter*, 2007 – 2012). The blog becomes a curated experience for the reader rather than a casual conversation; it represents the theatre and its mission and vision as a whole, not just the blogger.

The shift in tone coincided with a major change in the blog's authorship. Beginning in August 2007, *Stage Banter* switched from a single contributor to a team of regular bloggers augmented by frequent guest writers. The original team, led by then-Producing Artistic Associate David Dower, consisted of a handful of members of the Arena artistic staff and several community members, who signed up for one-year blog commitments ("Welcome to the 2007/2008 Season", *Stage Banter*). The advantages of this system are obvious. Practically speaking, sharing blog duties among a team enables each blogger to spend more time and consideration on his or her individual posts without compromising frequency of updates – a necessity for attracting consistent web traffic. But the virtues of a blog team go deeper than that, especially as regards the Public Arena's emphasis on inclusion, discourse, and community; more contributors means more voices, which means a more comprehensive picture of the theatre's process and projects. It also encourages discourse by providing multiple points of view and points of entry from which readers can engage with the work (Ramanan, Telephone interview). For example, in March of 2012, *Stage Banter* posted ten entries of varying lengths by six different contributors representing the literary, marketing, publicity, and development departments. Additionally, some of the entries included interviews, adding still more voices to the conversation. Arena's Literary Manager serves as the blog's curator and editor in order

maintain a consistent institutional narrative throughout the posts and to ensure the quality of the blog's content (ibid.).

Stage Banter covers a wide range of topics, but they all relate either to Arena's productions or to the theatre company as a whole. The majority of its posts are single articles that apply to a single production, but it also hosts several regular series that serve to keep readers current with the goings-on at the theatre, including spotlights on company members and announcements of ongoing Public Arena activities and special events. Additionally, the blog features frequent miniseries based on individual productions; for example, Arena's 2012 production of Ah, Wilderness![2] inspired "An Actor's Journey into the Wilderness," a series of blog posts in which actor Jonathan Lincoln Fried detailed his process from casting through performance (Stage Banter, Nov. 2011-Feb. 2012). The series meets the two declared goals of Stage Banter: process transparency – how an actor does his job – and content distribution – Mr. Fried's research and impressions of Sid in Ah, Wilderness! Many of the blog's posts perform this kind of double duty, and all of them have the added aim of making the reader feel included in the life of Arena Stage. This is likely a major reason for the rapid increase in readership over the past five years. Another contributing factor is the use of a variety of formats within the blog; while most blogs rely heavily on text, Stage Banter mixes traditional, written articles with still images of design elements and inspirations, as well as audio and video clips of interviews, rehearsals, previous productions, etc. The mixing of formats keeps the blog entries fresh and varied enough to encourage readers to return frequently in order to discover new resources.

However, Stage Banter is not without flaws. Like many theatre company blogs, Stage Banter is somewhat difficult to navigate. To access the blog, a reader must either search for it

---

[2] *Ah, Wilderness!*, by Eugene O'Neill, is a coming-of-age play about Richard Miller. Compared with other O'Neill works, the play is very lighthearted, but there are touches of his characteristic darkness in the alcoholism of the Uncle Sid character, played in the Arena Stage production by Jonathan Lincoln Fried.

directly using a search engine like Google or Bing, or connect to it from Arena's homepage using a link hidden under the heading of "News/Press". In either case, a reader likely needs to know about and be looking for the blog in order to find it; few are likely to stumble across the link during a casual perusal of the main website. Once a prospective reader gets to the blog, navigating through the individual entries can be challenging; the layout is such that a reader can see the most recent blog posts, but there is no navigation bar to enable linking back to posts older than a few weeks. Again, a reader can use the embedded "Search" function to find a specific blog entry, but that necessitates knowing the entry's title, as there is no way to search by posting date. In order to browse older blog posts, the reader has to link back a single entry at a time, which can be both frustrating and time consuming. Subscribing to the blog – which is easy, thanks to the "Subscribe Now" widget located along the right side of the website – helps mitigate this to some extent, as it enables a subscriber to receive regular emails alerting him/her to updates. Still, *Stage Banter* could be a more effective research resource by altering its web design to some degree to allow easier navigation to and within it. As in all elements of the Public Arena, *Stage Banter* is a work in progress, and the Artistic Development team actively seeks feedback through the blog's "Comments" section in an effort to improve the audience's experience.

The second prong of the Public Arena's web-based programming is *Sub/Text*, Arena Stage's "virtual dramaturg." The Artistic Development team created *Sub/Text* during the Arena Restaged period as a way of expanding the audience's access to dramaturgical materials beyond what was available in production playbills (Dower, et al. 2). This decision grew out of their desire to create an inclusive literary department, one that would function as an ambassador to Arena's community:

[W]e rethought the notion of the literary support of the work on stage, which up to that point had only been available to the audience in the theater through their playbills, expanding the amount of dramaturgical content that we supply our stakeholders […] The end result is that all dramaturgical content is now available to anyone before, during, after any performance, and even whether or not they were able to attend at all. By maintaining the archive of this content online, it also now follows the play throughout its production life around the world" (ibid.).

This further affirms the Public Arena's commitment to engagement through the increased exposure of "literary," or dramaturgical work. *Sub/Text* enables "stakeholders" – which includes members of a production's audience as well as any other interested parties – to enhance their experience of the work through guided, curated research; it also exposes them to the dramaturg's contributions to production process. Further, it actively seeks reader feedback, which strengthens the sense of a bi-directional relationship between Arena Stage and its community.

In essence, *Sub/Text* resembles the online play guides and companion publications offered at numerous other regional theatres. Each "issue" focuses on an individual production in Arena's season and includes four standard sections: "In Rehearsal", which offers insight into the development and rehearsal process; "From the Wings", which gives background and biographical information about contributing artists; "Spotlight On…", which investigates topics and issues surrounding the play; and "Encore", which offers resources for further research (*Sub/Text* homepage). The number of pieces in each section differs based on the production's needs and the research team's interests, but every *Sub/Text* to date uses a range of formats to present the information, including text, still images, audio, video, and links to outside web sources. It is in part this concerted attempt to take full advantage of the Internet's potential to share information through a wide variety of media that sets *Sub/Text* apart from most online play guides.

Another of the project's innovations is the way in which this considerable workload is distributed. While the Artistic Development team – and the Literary Office in particular – provides oversight and final editorial control over what appears in *Sub/Text*, most of its content is actually generated by volunteers. Beginning in 2012, their ranks have expanded, and their focus has been shifted away from script reading – enabled by the implementation of the "Play Club" approach to new scripts – and towards providing research support for the Public Arena (Dower, et al. 2). This farming-out of research frees up the Artistic Development team for other projects, but more importantly – at least, from an engagement standpoint – it brings nonprofessionals from the community into the theatre and into the production process in a more active role than that which most audiences experience. It necessarily fosters relationships between the theatre, the productions, and the outside world in a way that is productive and mutually beneficial for all involved parties: The theatre makes efficient use of its resources, and the volunteers get to participate "behind the scenes," to make a contribution, and also to gain insight into how Arena Stage works.

In general, *Sub/Text* is more user-friendly than *Stage Banter*, which might account for its higher visitor rates. According to the Public Arena's internal tracking system, the virtual dramaturgy site attracts between 2,500 and 7,500 unique viewers during the run of each production (Dower, et al. 6), as opposed to *Stage Banter*'s 3,000 unique monthly page views (Ramanan, Telephone inteview). Accessing the site is somewhat easier than accessing the blog due to more intuitive link placement. Each production in the season has its own page branching off the main Arena website, and each show page has a link to its *Sub/Text*; this increases the likelihood that someone who is interested in a particular production but unaware of the dramaturgy site would stumble across it accidentally. The site can also be accessed directly from

the main Arena page by clicking on a link under the heading of "Shows/Tickets". Once a user has found *Sub/Text*, navigation around the site is very straightforward. The main page explains how the site works, and a navigation menu located on the side of the page allows users to link to the *Sub/Text* for individual productions, organized chronologically by season. Each production's page contains the four clearly labeled sections – "In Rehearsal", "From the Wings", "Spotlight On…", and "Encore" – with brief descriptions of the individual pieces in each section. The piece titles are accompanied by icons that denote their format – video, audio, still image, text, or hyperlink – to facilitate the user's experience. The straightforward web design makes *Sub/Text* effective not only as an easy-to-use audience engagement tool, but also in its secondary function as a virtual production archive for other theatre artists and scholars (Dower, et al. 6). The hope is that the *Sub/Text* archives will provide valuable production details and insights to researchers of all levels, regardless of whether they attended an actual performance.

On-Site Programs

In addition to its Internet presence, Arena Stage offers a number of on-site engagement opportunities to community members who attend performances. In the past, many of these events/activities were only available to season subscribers, but the Public Arena initiative has begun to create more on-site opportunities for single-ticket buyers as well. These range from the somewhat passive – program notes and lobby exhibits – to the very active – post-performance conversations, panel discussions, and Theater 101, a unique engagement program that enables audience members to experience the entire production process from first read-throughs to performance (Dower, et al. 6-7). Some of these programs premiered during the 2011-2012 season, and several others saw significant changes during that period with an eye toward fostering an inclusive and active audience culture. As with their web-based counterparts, the

Public Arena seeks to use these on-site programs to foster dialogue and to create bridges between the work, the institution, and the community.

Perhaps the most basic of the Public Arena's on-site components are the dramaturgical notes that appear in each production's playbill. Historically, the amount of material in these has "ebbed and flowed with the fortunes of the company" (Dower, et al. 2), and most of it has been focused on providing the audience with supplementary information like glossaries, historical notes, and articles discussing the issues explored in the play. However, with the introduction of *Sub/Text* – which performs much the same function, and in much more depth – during the 2008-2009 season, the focus of the program notes has shifted towards the cultivation of the institutional narrative. Today, Arena's program notes explain the rationale behind a show's selection and production: "We make explicit attempts to connect the choice of the show to the mission and strategy of the organization" (6). The material for the program notes generally comes from the Literary Office, which helps maintain consistency between the playbill and the online resources. Further, the playbill features the URL for that production's *Sub/Text* in order to encourage the audience to take full advantage of all the resources offered (ibid.).

An example of new twists on existing programs is the "living lobby." Lobby exhibits have traditionally been static installations, but that idea was revamped for select shows during the 2011-2012 season. These instances saw the transformation of an "exhibit" into an "interactive lobby experience," in which the Artistic Development team collaborated with the production artists to extend the experience of the play outside of the performance space (Dower, et al. 7). Arena's 2011 production of Sophie Gilbert's *The Book Club Play*, for example, featured several interactive lobby elements aimed at setting the tone for the audience before they entered the playing space (Ramanan, Email Interview). In consultation with the playwright, the Artistic

Development team created three separate displays that fostered a personal connection between the audience, the production, and the theatre (ibid.). For the "Hello, My Favorite Book Is…" installation, incoming audience members received nametags at the lobby doors and were instructed to write the title of their favorite book on the tag and wear it throughout the performance; at the end of the performance, they were invited to add their nametags to a display that remained in the lobby throughout the play's run ("Atmospheric Resonance", *Stage Banter*). As a tie-in to the production's web presence, staff members recorded the book titles from the display and posted them to a regularly updated list on the *Stage Banter* blog, which audiences could instantly access on their smart phones using a QR code (ibid.). Elsewhere in the lobby, audience members had the opportunity to record video "confessions" of their literary guilty pleasures for use in *Stage Banter*, and audio recordings of Arena staff reading excerpts from their favorite books played through speakers placed along the ramp leading to audience seating (ibid.).

The living lobby for *The Book Club Play* clearly embraces the principles of inclusivity and collaboration that guide the entire Public Arena initiative. The Artistic Development team sought opportunities for collaboration from the playwright as well as the staff and the audience: They consulted the playwright as to what kinds of interaction would best prepare the audience for the performance, the staff contributed to both the video and audio recordings, and audience members themselves participated in the creation – not just the appreciation – of the exhibits. Further, community members were able to connect to the experience and to each other via the online tie-ins, even if they were unable to attend a performance. The living lobby was a resounding success for Arena; according to Literary Manager Amrita Ramanan, more than 2,000 people posted nametags or created a video, and the lobby-related blog entries were frequently visited throughout the play's run (Ramanan, Email Interview).

In another example of revisiting previous models, the 2010-2011 season explored dual post-show discussion strategies with an eye toward refocusing existing programs. Post-show discussions – which in the past were offered once per run and open only to subscribers – were extended to every performance of select productions and open to any audience member who attended that performance (Dower, et al. 6). *Trouble in Mind*, by Alice Childress[3], served as a test case for the Public Arena's café chats – post-show discussions held in the Catwalk Café following each performance. Ramanan explained the choice in an email interview: "The main impetus for this [was] that the play organically provoked so many insightful and universal questions that audience members […] wanted to engage with the play, the cast, and each other long after the curtain went down. We often referred to the conversations as the final act of Childress's play. She intended to leave us in a state of inquiry"[4]. During the curtain call for each performance, a cast member invited the audience to join select members of the cast and Arena staff in the Catwalk Café to discuss the play and production (Ramanan, Case studies 1). The chats were moderated by a facilitator – usually a member of the Artistic Development team – and lasted from 45 to 75 minutes, depending on the level of interest and discourse from the audience (ibid.). The discussions were largely freeform and audience-driven, beginning with prompts and then flowing naturally based on the audience's responses to the work.

The café chat program for *Trouble in Mind* was a successful endeavor overall, but it was not without challenges. The chats were generally well-attended – internal tracking shows that the number of participants per chat ranged from 30 to 120 – and some participants attended as many as five times during the course of the production's run (Ramanan, Case studies 2). However, while anecdotal responses from participants have been overwhelmingly positive, the Artistic

---

[3] *Trouble in Mind* was written in 1955 and was optioned for a Broadway run but lost the option in 1957, due to the play's controversial handling of race, gender, and social issues.

[4] The email interview was conducted on 7 Sep. 2012. See Works Cited.

Development team recognizes areas of concern and opportunities for improving the café chats moving forward. Leading discussions after each performance requires a sizeable time commitment, and while moderator responsibilities were successfully shared among the theatre's artists and staff for the single production, extending the program would require a consistent and considered approach to managing the additional workload equitably (Dower, et al. 6). Additionally, crew costs and re-set times argue for continuing to move post-show discussions to the café; however, the café is remote from performances, and the change in location results in the loss of some audience members who might have participated had the discussion remained in the theatre (ibid). The Artistic Development team plans to continue to explore the possibilities of hosting a discussion after every performance on a season-long scale, but they will continue to pursue dual post-show discussion strategies for the 2012-2013 season.

Perhaps the most exciting of the Public Arena's new on-site programs is Theater 101. The initial idea arose as a possible solution to a concern expressed by many nonprofit theatre institutions: the lack of an (aesthetically) educated and open-minded audience base. In *Outrageous Fortune*, Todd London, Ben Pesner, and Zannie Giraud Voss emphasized the negative effect that artistically inexperienced audiences tend to have on regional theatres: "[T]he decades-long erosion of arts education is creating a preponderance of 'cultural illiterates' who, unlike audiences of thirty years ago, are not predisposed to appreciate theatre" (209)[5]. The onus of educating audiences now falls on the theatres themselves. Most nonprofit theatres have well-established education departments, but these tend to focus on training children and teens to be theatre makers rather than on teaching their adult audiences how to appreciate a variety of dramatic styles and aesthetics. According to the authors of *Outrageous Fortune*, this is not

---

[5] This perception has been supported by several studies, including Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard and Alan S. Brown's *Beyond attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation*, which point to a direct correlation between decreasing arts education in public schools and decreased arts participation in formal arts events.

enough; they summarize an argument made by playwright Jeffrey M. Jones an article he wrote for *American Theatre* magazine[6]: "We need to provide the audience the tools to 'get' the work. We need to equip our audiences not to just understand a spectrum of theatrical experimentation, but with the means to experience 'the pleasure compounded both of enjoying the show on its own terms and feeling the self-congratulation which comes of "getting" something [that is considered difficult]'" (245).

Theater 101 combines two schools of thought about audience education through engagement: instruction in theatre appreciation and an introduction to the new play development process. The program began with Arena's 2010 world premiere production of *Every Tongue Confess*[7] as a mechanism for giving their audience a firsthand look at the process of new play development from inception through fruition (Ramanan, Email Interview). "We hoped that [an inside look into the development process] would help more audiences become advocates for new play development," Ramanan explained in an email interview[8]. "The program generated so much excitement and curiosity around the rehearsal and production process as a whole that we decided to expand it." The 2011-2012 season saw the expansion of Theater 101 to several productions, including *The Book Club Play* and Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man* (ibid.). What began as an attempt to include audiences in the new play development process for one specific work has grown into an engagement program in its own right and a major facet of the Public Arena.

Theater 101 is open to the general public – subscribers, single-ticket buyers, and even people otherwise unaffiliated with Arena Stage alike – on a first-come, first-served basis and is advertised on Arena's website under the heading of "Artistic Development". The program

---

[6] The article they reference is "Thinking About Writing About Thinking About New Plays," originally published in the October 2003 issue of *American Theatre*.
[7] *Every Tongue Confess*, by Marcus Gardley, was commissioned by Arena Stage in 2010. It was later published by New Dramatists.
[8] The interview was conducted on 7 Sep. 2012. See Works Cited.

functions independently from other enrichment opportunities; participants register for the program either through the website or by contacting the Literary Office and pay a small administrative fee in order to enroll ("Theater 101"). Each Theater 101 cycle includes up to 50 participants and involves 10 to 12 sessions, which include lectures led by the Literary Manager and/or Literary Fellow, attendance at specific rehearsals throughout the process, and "interactive sessions where they [the participants] get to create something in correlation with the show" (Ramanan, Email Interview). For example, Theater 101 participants for *The Book Club Play* formed their own book club and read and responded to several books mentioned in the play; for *The Music Man,* participants wrote their own lyrics to the melodies of songs from the show (ibid.). Additionally, Theater 101 participants have the opportunity to meet with members of the artistic and production staff to learn about their role in the production process. The program culminates in attendance at a performance of the play and a special post-show discussion specifically geared toward program participants.

Encouraging audience involvement in the artistic process – particularly in the development of new plays – has met with mixed reception among professional theatre artists. According to the authors of *Outrageous Fortune,* "readings, workshop productions, and talkbacks, during which theatergoers get to give the playwright 'feedback' on the work […] are almost universally derided by writers as unhelpful" (18). Much of the negativity playwrights feel toward these programs stems from the fact that they're often (mis)represented as new play initiatives designed for the benefit of the playwright; however, these programs are often of little use to playwrights, as the audience is often unprepared for innovative or aesthetically challenging work and thus cannot provide meaningful feedback. These programs are far better suited to theatres that self-identify as "audience-focused organizations" – theatres whose

principal goal is to create a dialogue with their audiences – and are more successful when presented as an opportunity to further that end rather than as a way to help "fix" a new play (ibid.).

Theater 101 is an example of such a program, and that is perhaps one reason for its success thus far. Though it has encountered some complications in its first few cycles – such as a few reticent artists and the need to negotiate the terms of open rehearsals with Actors Equity – most of the artists and participants involved have described the experience as extremely rewarding (Ramanan, Telephone interview). Offering community members the opportunity to witness the process firsthand, to trace how a production moves from a table-read to opening night – and, perhaps more importantly, giving them the context to understand the process – not only fosters an environment of inclusivity, but it also encourages participants to invest personally in the production and in Arena Stage, to feel some degree of ownership over the theatre's work. Moreover, encouraging the audience to create as part of the program may actually help to increase their participation at Arena and in other arts events. Studies show that people who participate in art creation are much more likely to participate in arts events as audience members and to financially support arts institutions[9].

Off-Site Programs and Hybrids

In keeping with its mission of inclusivity and community involvement, the Public Arena extends beyond the confines of the Mead Center. The off-site engagement events are the result of community partnerships with organizations whose missions connect to the content or ideas explored in individual productions. These partnerships often begin during the research period that precedes the production process; dramaturgs and research volunteers work closely with

---

[9] See Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard and Alan S. Brown's report for the NEA, entitled *Beyond attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation*.

museums, libraries, etc., to create the research packets used in the rehearsal room and materials for *Sub/Text* (Dower, et al. 7). For many productions, this initial collaboration leads to the creation of special engagement events that take place prior to the run of the productions at other venues. The goal of these off-site events is to "promote the shows, our presence in the community, and create conversation around the ideas/content beyond the walls of the building" (ibid.). Additionally, they build valuable relationships between Arena and other cultural organizations and encourage the cross-pollination of their audience pools, leading to diversification of audiences for both Arena and its community partners.

The 2011-2012 season saw several rewarding community partnerships for the Public Arena, among them a collaboration with the Phillips Collection and the National Gallery of Art. Their production of John Logan's *Red*[10] featured several off-site engagement opportunities: a cross-promotion with the National Gallery's Seagram Murals exhibit; film screenings of *Rothko's Rooms* - a documentary about creating the room that would hold Rothko's murals at the Tate Modern - at the National Gallery ("*Red*: Events"); and a primarily social event called "Phillips After 5," in which the Phillips Collection opened its doors after hours for a mix of gallery talks, live music, and food and drink ("Phillips After 5", *Stage Banter*). While the Seagram Mural exhibit was largely just an effective cross-promotion – rather than a specific partnership event – the film screenings and especially "Phillips After 5" resulted from conscious collaboration between Arena and the other two organizations. "Phillips After 5" is a regular monthly event hosted by the Phillips Collection, but for *Red*, members of the Artistic Development team worked with representatives from the Collection and arranged to "take over" the gallery's regular event and dedicate it solely to activities that related to Arena's productions

---

[10] *Red* focuses on painter Mark Rothko's struggle to finish painting a group of murals for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York City, his tempestuous relationship with his (fictional) assistant, and his theories of art and commercialism.

(Ramanan, Telephone Interview) Programming for Arena's "Phillips After 5" included a "Living Images" workshop that explored theatre inspired by visual art, a game of Exquisite Corpse, and a costume display and lecture by members of Arena's costume staff, among others ("Phillips After 5", *Stage Banter*). The Public Arena also hosted a free public reading and discussion of *Red* at the Phillips Collection prior to the production's opening ("Red at the Phillips", *Stage Banter*).

In our telephone interview, Literary Manager Amrita Ramanan discussed Arena's take on the community partnership events for *Red*: "[They] helped us connect directly with the audience and refract the way in which they perceived Rothko's work and the questions evoked from the play, such as why art matters, color theory, mentorship, the generational divides, etc." The events were universally well attended, and the discussions that grew out of them helped to contextualize the work and how it – and Arena – fits into the real world. Extending the experience and engagement beyond the walls of the Mead Center "allows the work to function as an interdisciplinary form, and as a result, feels more open to everyone" (ibid.). Other community partnerships from the 2011-2012 season included a walking tour of Duke Ellington's neighborhood in conjunction with *Sophisticated Ladies*[11] (Dower, et al. 7) and partnerships with local high school bands for Arena's revival of *The Music Man* (Ramanan, Telephone Interview). The self-guided walking tours took audience members well away from the Mead Center, but the partnerships for *The Music Man* brought the outside world into the theatre rather than bringing the theatre outside; marching bands from local high schools came to the theatre and played "76 Trombones" in the show's finale. Though not an off-site event, the partnerships with schools represented a sort of on-site/off-site hybrid engagement program aimed not specifically at

---

[11] "*Sophisticated Ladies* is a musical revue set during America's Big Band Era (1920-1945). Every song tells a story, and together they paint a colorful picture of Duke Ellington's life and career as a musician, composer and band leader" ("*Sophisticated Ladies* Study Guide" 1).

prompting discussion, but rather at paying homage to the power of music and arts education in communities.

Perhaps the best example of on-site/off-site hybrids, programs that directly connect the work to the larger world through partnerships with community leaders and organizations, is the Public Arena's ongoing panel discussion series entitled Engage@arenastage. These panel discussions feature invited guests both from Arena's artists and staff and from the wider community; they typically focus on ideas or issues at work in a specific Arena production and generally occur on Arena's campus following weekend matinee performances. However, on occasion, these discussions occur as off-site engagement events at other venues during the production's run (Ramanan, T.I). Panel discussions often conclude with the dissemination of informative literature provided by the guest experts, such as the pamphlets for a Smithsonian exhibit on the civil rights struggle that were handed out following the "Black Face in the Media" panel discussion in connection with *Trouble in Mind* (Ramanan, Case studies 2). Whether on-site or off, the point of the Engage@arenastage discussions is to extend the discourse outside the confines of the script and the production and to create areas of connection between Arena, its community, and the larger world.

Special Festival Programming

For both the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 seasons, Arena Stage offered special festival programming dedicated to the works of "giants" of American playwriting. The festivals consisted of "performances, readings, lectures, and lobby displays with the goals of community partnerships and deep study of American work" (Dower, et al. 7). Arena's Edward Albee Festival (2011) featured full-scale productions of *At Home at the Zoo* – produced by Arena Stage – and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – produced by Steppenwolf Theatre Company - staged

readings of 26 other Albee plays directed and staged by other regional theatre companies, and a spate of engagement opportunities – both on- and off-line – created largely by the Artistic Development Team and executed as part of the Public Arena. The Eugene O'Neill Festival in 2012 was of a similarly large scale, including three full-scale productions – *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, both produced by Arena, and the Shakespeare Theatre Company's production of *Strange Interlude* – as well as presentations and partner events with companies and artists from around the country over the course of two months (Bacalzo). Both festivals were part of the regular subscription season, but they were also marketed independently from the season, and many of their engagement events such as open readings and lectures were free and open to the public.

The Artistic Development team created engagement programming around each festival, including extensive coverage in *Sub/Text* and *Stage Banter* as well as open-to-the-public events such as panel discussions, open readings, and lectures. According to the Public Arena's Strategic Plan, "the shape and scope of the Festival [was] designed fresh each time – there is no formula for how all these goals will be met" (7). The engagement activities for the festivals were designed and produced by the Festival Producing Fellow under the mentorship of the Associate Artistic Director and the supervision of the Literary Manager (ibid.). Though technically a separate enterprise, the engagement programming for the festivals fell under the umbrella of the Public Arena, and it utilized many of the same platforms as those used by the Artistic Development team to encourage audience engagement throughout the rest of the season.

The Public Arena took an integrated approach to the engagement programming surrounding the 2012 Eugene O'Neill Festival. Both *Stage Banter* and *Sub/Text* featured numerous articles and multimedia features about the playwright's life, his body of work, and his

impact on the theatrical form. The *Stage Banter* blog entries for the festival included daily dispatches from the festival's producer, Erin Daley, about O'Neill's life and works; a series of blogs by Jonathan Lincoln Fried about his experience as an actor preparing for and rehearsing one of O'Neill's plays for the festival; and interviews with directors and other contributing artists and companies. *Stage Banter* also functioned as a primary means of publicizing live engagement events in connection with the festival, such as Engage@arenastage panel discussions, open readings, and lectures hosted by Arena staff, participating festival artists, O'Neill scholars, and other members of the D.C. community. *Sub/Text*'s offerings consisted of written interviews with contributing artists, biographies, scholarly analyses, historical and dramaturgical background information, rehearsal images and videos, video interviews, and audio recordings of the playwright himself, among others. While many of the live events – which occurred both at the Mead Center and off-site – tended toward the cerebral, there were several activities whose impetus was in O'Neill's work but whose goals were community creation rather than deep discussion of the work; these events included a sing-along of sea shanties in conjunction with *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Recklessness Before Breakfast*, a radio play adapted from O'Neill's early one-acts and produced by University of Maryland students, among others (*Stage Banter*).

The multilevel, multidirectional engagement offerings of the festivals are prime examples of the kind programming to which the Public Arena aspires. The festivals were massive undertakings with myriad events occurring all around the Mead Center, Washington D.C., and on the Internet as well. Each reading, lecture, sing-along, panel discussion, blog entry, etc., worked as a discrete event, but they also referenced and promoted each other, often crossing modes of delivery (i.e.: live events promoting blog entries and vice versa). Precisely what elements became part of the festival was dependent on the needs and interests of the festival

artists and staff as much as on their relevance to the festivals' overall project and their expectations of audience interest. Taken as a whole, Arena's festival programming for both seasons reveals a unified approach to the overall event – the festival itself – while allowing multiple points of entry and discussion for diverse audiences around diverse productions and ideas.

Putting It Together

The Artistic Development team attempts to create that same sense of simultaneous unity and diversity – albeit on a somewhat smaller scale – for every production at Arena Stage. This begins with the Page One meetings, where the Artistic Development team, the director, the playwright, and the rest of the Arena staff formulate the theatre's approach to the production and brainstorm engagement opportunities. Once the general institutional narrative has been decided, the Artistic Development team creates a loose plan for the shape of the production's Public Arena programming. They decide what kinds of events, exhibits, articles, etc., are necessary, relevant to the production, and of interest to the contributors and the community (Dower, et al. 5). They discuss which topics are best handled in which platform, whether it be through blog entries, virtual dramaturgy, panel discussion, community partnership, etc., and they begin to assign tasks and collaborate with community partners to create as many opportunities for audience and community engagement as possible while maintaining the institutional narrative decided upon during the production's Page One meeting (Ramanan, Telephone Interview). The ideal with all Public Arena programming is to create opportunities for discourse, to multiply perspectives and points of entry into the work and the theatre, and to create a series of engagement opportunities that can be appreciated singly but that are curated in such a way as to support each other and Arena's overall vision for the production and the season.

The Artistic Development team customizes engagement programming for each production. For instance, one show may prompt a lot of discussion, so post-show discussions and panels may take priority over videos and lobby exhibit; another production may be visually stunning, placing priority less on themes than on encouraging the audience to engage with the show's aesthetics and sensory elements. In either case, the Artistic Development team works with the rest of the production team and theatre staff to decide on the best delivery method for the programming (on-site, off-site, online, lobby, etc.). Emphasis is placed on using the materials as efficiently as possible and on cross-promoting the other Public Arena programming whenever possible to encourage the audience to take maximum advantage of the engagement opportunities offered.

In an effort to analyze how each facet of the engagement programming worked together to create a unified, institutionally consistent approach to productions, Literary Manager Amrita Ramanan created case studies of the Public Arena programming for two of the productions in the 2011-2012 season. The case studies provide an excellent means of understanding how the many types of programs used by the Public Arena fit together for a single production. Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind* opened the season with its candid exploration of race, class, gender, ethics, and commercialization in art. The Page One meeting for the production decided that the main focus of the Public Arena's programming for the show would be on providing opportunities for honest discourse with and among the audience concerning the play's themes and historical significance. Contact with the audience began through the *Stage Banter* blog and through the dramaturgical materials published on *Sub/Text*. Early *Trouble in Mind* blog entries worked primarily as tools for marketing the production and publicizing the other engagement forums, particularly the information available on *Sub/Text*. Most of the content for the virtual dramaturgy website

provided information about the playwright's life and work, as well as the production history of

the play and the historical backdrop of its setting. These took the form of text-based articles,

some of which were written by Arena staff, and some by volunteers. Other material included a

video interview with an actress from the production, images from the civil rights movement, and

a comprehensive study guide to the play ("Trouble in Mind", *Sub/Text*).

On-site programming took the form of the inaugural round of café chats, two panel

discussions, and extensive program notes. The program note spread featured a two-page note

from then-Associate Artistic Director David Dower inviting audiences to the newly-launched

Public Arena by summarizing the ways in which they could engage with Public Arena activities

for *Trouble in Mind* (Ramanan, Case studies 2). The remainder of the spread featured

information about the playwright's upbringing, early career, and struggles to bring her play to the

stage (ibid.). At the end of each performance, a cast member invited the audience to participate

in the café chats, which had already been previewed in the program notes. The café chat program

formed the heart of the engagement plan and provided the Artistic Development team with a way

to test the waters for a "talkback after every performance" approach to post-show discussions. In

order to both promote the chats, which were open to the public – and many people attended the

chats even though they hadn't seen that night's performance – and to keep the conversation

going, the Artistic Development team utilized the *Stage Banter* blog to grapple with issues and

questions raised by audience members during the chats (ibid.). The majority of these posts -

which included such entries as "The Price Paid: Alice Childress and *Trouble in Mind*" and

"Uncovering the Chidress Files", both of which grew out of the café chats - were contributed by

Amrita Ramanan, the Literary Manager, and David Dower, then Arena's Associate Artistic

Director. The blog promoted the chats, and the chats referred participants who wished to continue the conversation to *Stage Banter* and its comments section as a way to do so.

Considerable effort also went into organizing two Engage@arenastage panel discussions: "No Business Like Show Business: Producing on Broadway" and "Black Face in the Media: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights" (Ramanan, Case studies 1-2). "No Business Like Show Business" was an hour-long discussion that took place before the performance on September 27, 2011, and featured Arena's Managing Director and Commercial Producer Edgar Dobie, who discussed "the mechanics of getting a show to Broadway and compared *Trouble in Mind*'s Broadway option with the Broadway optioning model of today" (1). The discussion from the Q & A highlighted *Trouble in Mind*'s difficulty in being produced in its own era and ignited a debate on theatrical storytelling: what stories should be told, and how, and by whom. "Black Face in the Media" took place on October 12, 2011, Alice Childress's birthday; panelists included Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture Curator Maurice Berger and American University Professor Caleen Jennings (2). This discussion focused on the portrayal of African Americans in the media from the 1950s – 2011, and pamphlets on the Smithsonian's civil rights and visual culture exhibit were handed out at the end of the session as part of a community partnership with the museum (ibid.). "Black Face in the Media" was not only an instance of partnership with other community organizations; the discussion was the result of collaboration between Arena's Literary Office and Group Sales. Both discussions referred participants to their program notes, to the online materials, and to the café chats as opportunities for further engagement.

The case study of *Trouble in Mind*'s engagement programming demonstrates how each individual Public Arena activity worked on its own as a point of entry into the production and

also supported and cross-promoted the engagement program as a whole. Part dramaturgy, part literary, part sales and marketing, part community partnership, the overall execution of the plan was the purview of the Artistic Development team, with the Producing Artistic Associate and the Literary Manager as the primary curators and supervisors of the project. Though many of the individual elements came from diverse sources both within and without the institution, the Literary Office provided a guidance and leadership for the Public Arena as a whole and ensured not only that the various elements were consistent with each other but also that the engagement programming for the production reflected the institutional narrative for the season as a whole.

Looking Toward the Future

At the close of the 2011-2012 season - and the first year of the fully realized Public Arena initiative - the Artistic Development team turned their attention toward a consideration of the pilot program's impact and results. The audience response was overwhelmingly positive; anecdotal responses from individual audience members on the blog or following an in-person activity bespeak an appreciation for the engagement efforts of the theatre, and many indicate that the audience member in question feels a deeper commitment to Arena and its productions as a result of a positive experience with an engagement activity. In response to the free reading and discussion of *Red* at the Phillips Collection, one effusive audience member wrote, "This was a fantastic event! Thank you so much for sharing this with the public for free. I love this artistic partnership between Arena Stage and the Phillips!! Please let me know about upcoming events at Arena, the Phillips, and any *Red* rehearsal opportunities" ("Red at the Phillips Collection", *Stage Banter*). In another example, internal tracking of participation in the café chats showed that some audience members enjoyed the chats so much that they returned as many as five times (Ramanan, Case studies, 1). Many participants even approached Arena staff following talkbacks

and panel discussions to express how much they enjoyed the events (Ramanan, Telephone Interview) In terms of the larger community response, the D.C. news media has largely ignored the pilot season of the Public Arena, but the success of community partnerships with organizations like the Smithsonian, the National Gallery, and the Phillips Collection have forged deeper relationships between Arena and other D.C. community organizations and have encouraged the Artistic Development team to aggressively seek more partnerships with museums, libraries, art galleries, restaurants, etc. (ibid..).

Up to now, Arena's numerical tracking of audience participation in Public Arena programs has been fairly limited. The Artistic Development team has tracked participation in individual programs and activities, but they have not yet devised a way to correlate those numbers with ticket sales and subscriptions, though they hope to begin doing so in the near future (Ramanan, T.I). Unsurprisingly, the highest participation rates occur on the Public Arena's web-based platforms: *Stage Banter,* which records an average of 3,000 readers per month, and *Sub/Text*, which attracts between 2,500 and 7,500 unique viewers during the run of each production (ibid.). This is probably due to the ease and convenience of the Internet as opposed to the more active involvement required of participants in live events. In terms of on-site programming, the living lobby for *The Book Club Play* had over 2,000 participants, who either filled out a nametag for the "Hello, My Favorite Book Is…" installation or created a video confession (Ramanan, Email Interview), and the café chats for *Trouble in Mind* averaged 30 – 120 participants per chat (Ramanan, Case studies). Panel discussions and special off-site activities were also big draws; the average panel discussion for a production in the 2011-2012 season drew 100-200 attendees, and more than 700 people attended the "Phillips After 5" event in conjunction with *Red* (Ramanan, Telephone Interview).

As part of the evaluation of the Public Arena's pilot season, the Artistic Development team has identified not only its successes but also areas of concern and opportunities for growth that must be addressed as the program moves forward and becomes part of the normal life of the theatre. Certainly, they intend to develop a methodology for measuring and reporting the impact of the Public Arena's work, and particularly for tracking the relationship between Public Arena participation and ticket sales (Dower, et al. 4; Ramanan, Telephone Interview) Additionally, they recognize that many of the individual programs may need tweaking in the future; the post-show discussion strategy, for instance, will need to be sorted into a single approach rather than the dual strategies currently in place (Dower, et al. 6). Funding sources and allocation of resources, too, will need to be clarified and standardized in order to ensure the Public Arena's stability in future seasons (4). To this end, the Artistic Development team hopes to secure grant funding for a Public Arena Office with a full support staff in upcoming seasons (Ramanan, Telephone Interview)

The Public Arena Initiative was fully activated as an integrated part of Arena Stage at the beginning of the 2012-2-13 season, headed by the new Director of Artistic Programming, David Snider. Much of the pilot program has remained untouched during this transition, but there have been a few changes, and there are bound to be more as the Artistic Development team has more opportunities to evaluate audience investment over time. According to the Public Arena's Strategic Plan, the general shape and processes of the pilot program will remain the same, if somewhat streamlined. Each season will begin with a Season Page One meeting – in addition to meetings for individual productions throughout the season – during which the staff will consider the season as a whole and "generate ideas for which of the offerings lends itself to which of the various components of the Public Arena, [....] identify the potential for community partnerships,

41

the opportunities for Theater 101's, the narrative connections between the shows, the opportunities for the lobby, etc." (3). Then, the Artistic Development team will create a show-by-show plan that will distribute the Public Arena workload evenly over the season and amongst departmental staff (ibid.). Regular interdepartmental meetings will help coordinate the dramaturgical and logistical efforts across the organization, and the Artistic Development team will recruit and manage an active and skilled volunteer corps to help carry some of the research load for the virtual dramaturgy website and work as staff for pre- and post-show discussions and other events (ibid).

In terms of individual programs within the Public Arena, expansion is the apparent order of the day. Due to its popularity, Theater 101 has expanded from one cycle per season to multiple cycles, splitting into a program that focuses on the development of a new play and Musical Theater 101, which examines the special processes involved in producing a musical (Ramanan, Email Interview). *Sub/Text* has been renamed *Extras & Insights*, though its offerings have remained the same. The Catwalk Café will become the site for pre-show lectures before select performances rather than post-show discussions. The Artistic Development team will continue to pursue dual strategies with the talkbacks for the foreseeable future, but all post-show discussions will occur in the theatre instead of changing locations ("The Public Arena"). Additionally, the success of the off-site events for the festivals and for productions in the 2011-2012 season means that the Artistic Development team will actively seek opportunities to pursue new community partnerships and off-site event opportunities in future seasons.

Regardless of any alterations now or in the future, the hope is that the ideals at the heart of the Public Arena – transparency, inclusion, collaboration, and discourse – will continue to inspire its work and its contributors as it finds its place in the life of Arena Stage. The work of

the literary and dramaturgical staff stands at the heart of the Public Arena as a curator and a guiding force for the initiative's efforts, and along with the other members of the Artistic Development team, it will hopefully continue to pursue Arena's dreams of a future "literary office without walls," in which staff, artists, and community members share equally in the responsibilities and rewards that come from engaging deeply with theatrical work.

Conclusion

Though it is clearly tailored to Arena Stage's mission, location, and community – as well as to its considerable resources - there are some insights to be gleaned from the pilot season of the Public Arena. Many of its programs could be implemented at virtually any regional theatre; in fact, several regional theatres have their own versions of the Public Arena already in place. Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company launched the Public Square[12] in 2007 (Harlow, et al. 33), and fellow D.C.-based company Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company created its innovative Connectivity department the following season (Baker and Harker). Like the Public Arena, both programs feature an integrated, multipronged approach to engagement with a strong literary/dramaturgical emphasis, and both have involved a reconfiguration of institutional infrastructure that encourages interdepartmental cooperation in implementing these approaches. Initiatives like these depart from more traditional engagement strategies not so much in the programs they offer - dramaturgical program notes, theatre company blogs and social media accounts, and pre- and post-show discussion series abound at resident theatres across the country – but in their attempts to create a unified yet flexible engagement strategy that offers the audience a variety of engagement opportunities, creates multiple possible points of entry to the works and to the institution, and encourages greater agency and investment from patrons and their larger communities. While the operational details of these programs must be specific to individual theatres, certain elements of the Public Arena may prove useful for other companies as they consider their own audience engagement models.

---

[12] For more information on the Public Square, see *Building Deeper Relationships: How Steppenwolf Theatre Company is Turning Single-Ticket Byers Into Repeat Visitors*, by Bob Harlow, Thomas Alfieri, Aaron Dalton, and Anne Field.

The Public Arena begins with the notion that audience engagement is important. It is important enough to justify its own initiative – indeed, if the funding comes through, its own office within the institution – with specific goals, dedicated staff, and solid infrastructure. Making a concerted effort to create a consistent, sustainable engagement strategy that represents the values of the theatre and provides a cohesive institutional narrative throughout an entire season is a significant development in audience engagement, and anecdotal evidence indicates that it has yielded positive results in terms of audience investment and relationships with other community organizations. Though it has not yet been quantified at Arena, it stands to reason that this may have a similarly positive impact in the box office, and the constant dialogue between the institution and its audience may help keep it a constant, welcoming presence in their daily lives and in the larger community.

While the Public Arena is too new to have numerical data on the effectiveness of its engagement programs, Bob Harlow, Thomas Alfieri, Aaron Dalton, and Anne Field have collected some data on Steppenwolf Theatre's Public Square initiative in their report for the Wallace Foundation, which sheds some light on the potential effects of engagement models similar to the Public Arena. Steppenwolf instituted the Public Square, a series of engagement programs focusing on building relationships and fostering ongoing discourse with its audience, during the 2007-2008 season; like the Public Arena, their programs take the form of extensive online content – including blogs, discussion boards, audio and video files, podcasts, etc. – nightly post-show discussions, and on- and off-site events (Harlow, et al.). The study found that in the two years since the Public Square was launched, there has been a significant increase in retaining single-ticket buyers. According to the report, the 2008-8009 season saw a 61% increase in the number of non-subscribers who purchased tickets to multiple performances during the

season over the baseline set before the implementation of the Public Square, as well as a higher overall number of non-subscriber ticket buyers (33-4). They also noted an increase in renewals of traditional subscriptions during the first two years of the Public Square: from 78% in 2006-2007 to 85% in 2008-2009 (34). Harlow and his colleagues attribute this jump to the efforts of the Public Square. While this data is of course specific to Steppenwolf and its location and audience demographics, it offers a certain a measure of hope for equally positive results from programs like the Public Arena.

In addition to the significant first step of making engagement a priority, the overall shape and structure of the Public Arena Initiative may provide some useful tools for replicating the program's early successes. The "Play Club" approach to script reading and season planning takes some of the onus the "slush pile" off of literary staff and at the same time fosters an institutional culture of inclusivity that results in greater investment in the work on the part of theatre artists and staff. This, in turn, opens up the literary and dramaturgical staff to use their unique skills, experience, and interests to engage with the audience and to bring them into the theatre and its work to a degree that was not possible under the traditional model. Though there is always the risk that this refocusing of the literary office's priorities may result in the eventual exclusion of literary managers and dramaturgs from the artistic process – placing them farther away from both season planning and the rehearsal room – Arena hopes to find a way to negotiate a middle ground that allows *more* voices to be part of season selection – rather than merely different voices – and allows dramaturgs and literary staff to balance their time between the rehearsal room and the engagement programming. It is partially with this in mind that Arena Stage is seeking the funding to create a Public Arena office (Ramanan, Email Interview). While this would bring with it the potential for creating yet another silo within the institution, there is hope

that the values of inclusivity and interdepartmental cooperation would prevent a possible Public Arena office from becoming too isolated.

Beyond the "Play Club," the Artistic Development team's emphasis on maintaining a consistent institutional engagement strategy for the season and for individual productions while embracing a wide range of delivery methods, platforms, and ideas allows the Public Arena the flexibility necessary for becoming a sustainable enterprise in years to come. Embracing this philosophy could mean any number of things for a theatre company, depending on size and budget: Larger theatres might consider creating dedicated staff positions to oversee various engagement programs or sharing out these duties among the existing staff, but even theatres with more limited budgets could adopt the philosophy simply by organizing regular all-staff meetings similar to the Public Arena's Page One meetings. These meetings are an opportunity for all staff members to discuss the theatre's approach to the season as a whole and to individual projects; at Arena, they include marketing strategies and production decisions as well as engagement activities, but other theatres might adapt their meetings to include other considerations, including audience design and community partnerships.

The main goal for theatres adopting this philosophy would be to organize the theatre's activities around a single institutional narrative – to decide on the theatre's "message," as it were – and then to take steps to ensure that the theatre's engagement activities (as well as, ideally, publicity and marketing activities) stay "on message." Theatres whose budgets may not allow staff members to dedicate time to curating engagement activities might follow another of the Public Arena's strategies and farm out some of those responsibilities to a volunteer corps, provided that volunteers with the necessary skills are available. Certain materials could be created by volunteers from the theatre's audience pool and/or from the outside community,

though it is likely that a staff member would still need to provide oversight to ensure that the institutional narrative remains consistent throughout.

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, a new-work theatre in Arena's home city of Washington D.C., provides an example of how some of the same ideas and techniques used by the Public Arena might play out for a theatre with a different mission, a different audience, and a much smaller operating budget. Woolly Mammoth is about half the age and one-fourth the size of Arena[13], and while Arena focuses on the American canon as a whole, Woolly has a much tighter focus on world premieres and second productions of works that "defy convention" (Baker and Harker). Its engagement strategy has involved the creation of a new department within the institution; the three-person Connectivity department works closely with members of the Artistic, Marketing, Development, and Production departments to provide a range of engagement opportunities for its existing audiences and to devise strategies aimed at bringing new audiences into the theatre. Like the Public Arena, the Connectivity department works to create a cohesive engagement strategy for the season as a whole and for individual productions, while still allowing for considerable variance in the types of activities and materials provided to audiences based on the needs of the show. This begins with season planning – Woolly uses a committee of play readers from several different departments including Artistic, Production, Marketing, and Connectivity to select plays for production in an approach similar to Arena's "Play Club" – and continues throughout the season with a series of monthly "claque" meetings, in which a group of "super-engaged" audience members serve as a sort of "volunteer board of directors" who, together with Woolly's staff and board of directors, make decisions about the specific

---

[13] Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company is now in its 32nd season and has an annual operating budget of approximately $4 million; Arena Stage in its 62nd season and has an annual budget of $18.5 million.

microcultures they want to reach for individual productions and the best way to reach them through the Connectivity offerings for each production (Baker and Harker).

While Connectivity is its own department within the Woolly Mammoth company, its functions are much the same as the Artistic Development Team at Arena Stage - with the notable distinction that the three staff members who work in the Connectivity department are dedicated solely to engagement activities, whereas the members of the Artistic Development Team have other responsibilities outside their Public Arena duties. Like Arena's Literary Manager, the Connectivity Director delegates engagement projects to members of the Woolly staff and volunteers and curates the engagement activities to ensure that they remain in keeping with the theatre's approach to each production (Baker and Harker). The department distributes engagement programming across a variety of platforms, including the lobby, program notes, web materials, and pre- and post-show discussions (ibid.). In both models, interdepartmental cooperation is a key factor in creating the engagement programming for productions, as is a strong relationship with volunteers. Additionally, the goals for each model center on creating opportunities for meaningful discourse about the work, appealing to a variety of audience members who will engage in different ways – in person, online, etc. – and increasing the audience's sense of investment in the institution. Arguably, Woolly Mammoth has taken the idea of integrated audience engagement a step further than either the Public Square or the Public Arena in creating a separate Connectivity department, and it runs the potential risk of becoming divorced from the artistic process; however, Literary Manager John Baker and Connectivity Associate Melanie Harker claim that - so far - they have warded off this danger by espousing the notion of "connectivity" as a value of the company, rather than as merely another silo within the institution.

The overall shape of the Public Arena and models like it serves as an important organizational tool that enables theatre companies to offer a variety of engagement opportunities yet maintains a consistent institutional narrative, and it represents a significant shift in perspectives about how to engage an audience not just with individual productions but with the theatre company as a whole. However, there are some insights to be gleaned from individual programs within the Public Arena as well. As other theatres have discovered, an Internet presence often helps to engage younger audience members as well as interested parties who may not be able to attend a specific performance. Web-based programming is also one of the least expensive engagement methods, as much can be accomplished via blogs and free social media accounts. Theatres with large operating budgets, like Arena Stage – and to a slightly lesser degree, Steppenwolf, have the ability to host their blogs, podcasts, etc. on their company websites, but any theatre company could – and many do – use free blog hosting sites like WordPress and Blogger with links from the main theatre website. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are also free, though there have been rumblings recently that effective dissemination of a Facebook page often involves a certain amount of spending for advertising and for some publishing privileges.

However, while creating a web presence may be relatively inexpensive, using the Internet as an effective engagement tool requires a consistent effort, as the Public Arena's blogs and virtual dramaturgy website demonstrate. Web-based materials must be updated frequently in order to generate regular traffic, and navigation to and through them must be relatively easy. If the theatre's engagement objectives include active participation from audience members, web-based materials must also be set up to encourage comments and feedback from people who visit the site, and moreover, commenters need to feel that the company is receptive to that feedback.

The decision to use the Internet for audience engagement requires a theatre company to devote either staff or volunteer hours – or both, as in the case of the Public Arena– to creating and uploading new, varied materials frequently throughout the season and to moderating online discussions. Though this might incur some expense, it remains one of the easiest of the Public Arena's individual programs to adopt, regardless of a theatre's size.

Pre- and post-show discussions are another of the Public Arena's programs that may be useful at other theatres. Talkbacks in particular tend to offer the most immediate opportunities for audiences to engage directly with the work and with members of the theatre's staff. However, there are pros and cons for post-show discussions, some of which became apparent during the Public Arena's pilot season. Conducting a staff-moderated discussion following every performance requires a considerable commitment of time on the part of the moderators, and as previously noted, can cause some difficulties with re-set times and crew requirements when they the discussions occur in the performance space. Additionally, both the Public Arena and the Public Square found that only a relatively small segment of the audience stayed after the show to discuss the work (Ramanan, Case studies; Harlow, et al. 36). However, those audience members who choose to stay have an opportunity for direct contact with representatives of the institution; post-show discussions also serve to facilitate discourse between audience members with differing perspectives on the work. The Public Arena's audience tracking suggests that their experiment with the "talkback-after-every-performance" approach may have merit – several audience members returned specifically to participate in the discussions even though they'd already participated – though many theatres may find – like Arena – that these discussions may be more effective for some productions than others, and they may choose to host only a limited number of talkbacks over a production's run. Talkbacks might also help to cultivate a savvy

audience pool for companies without a Theater 101 equivalent, which may eventually allow those companies to take greater aesthetic risks.

Last but certainly not least among the elements of the Public Arena that could be easily adapted for use by other companies is the forming of community partnerships. Many regional theatre companies already seek out partnerships with other local arts organizations for specific productions, but sustaining those relationships and extending them beyond the arts scene may have the effect of brining new audiences to the theatre. The Public Arena's partnerships with the Smithsonian Museum, the National Gallery, and the Phillips Collection were a promising start to the venture, as were the relationships with local high school marching bands for *The Music Man*. However, collaboration with other so-called cultural institutions is only that – a promising start, a jumping off point for what partnerships between theatres and community organizations could become. Woolly Mammoth's Connectivity department takes community partnerships a step further, using the "claque" meetings in part to identify potential partners both within and outside of the nonprofit arts scene. The "claque" collectively decides what types of people need to be in the audience to generate the most interesting discussions, and then the Connectivity staff seeks out partnerships with organizations that represent those segments of the community, be they community centers, clubs, businesses, etc. (Baker and Harker). Woolly Mammoth places such a priority on community partnerships that these considerations are beginning to affect season planning; they may not affect the selection of plays to produce, but they do influence when a production might be scheduled during the season so that it falls during other events that mesh with the themes and aesthetics of the production – scheduling a play that deals with GLBT issues during Capitol Pride week, for example, (ibid), This perspective takes the potential of

community partnerships further even than the Public Arena has and demonstrates how valuable such a perspective might be for regional theatre companies, regardless of size.

The core values of the Public Arena and similar initiatives – engagement through discourse, inclusion, and transparency – are deeply ingrained in the institutions' missions and goals, but they are also clearly applicable to almost any nonprofit theatre, regardless of size, budget, or location. If American resident theatres hope to maintain their relevance – not to mention their audience base – contact with the community and the encouragement of open and honest communication within and without the theatre walls is essential. It is not enough to present pieces for passive consumption; theatres need to make an effort to bring the audiences along with them on the production's journey and into the heart of the work, and to do so in such a way that it increases the audience's active participation and investment in the productions and the institution, even to the point of helping to create the engagement experience themselves and advocating for the theatre within their own microcultures. Offering a variety of engagement options that all help to "tell the story" of the production and the institution in a consistent way allows for the possibility of diversifying audiences, as does actively pursuing partnerships from diverse community organizations. Above all, a commitment to collaboration among the theatre's staff, artists, and audience, as well as to breaking down the perceived boundaries between them, has contributed to the early successes of these types of programs, and that commitment should serve as a model for the entire theatre industry.

Works Cited

"About Arena." *Arena Stage*. Arena Stage, 2010. Web. 2 Feb. 2012.

Bacalzo, Dan. "Arena Stage Announces Partners and Additional Details for Eugene O'Neill Festival." *TheaterMania*. TheaterMania.com, 27 Jan. 2012. Web. 18 Sept. 2012.

Baker, John and Melanie Harker. Telephone Interview. 30 May 2012.

"Case Study: Arena Stage Subscriptions are Alive and Well." *TRG Counsel and Cases*. Target Resource Group, 2011. Web. 3 Feb. 2012.

"D.C. theater by the numbers." *The Washington Post Online*. The Washington Post, 4 Jan. 2010. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Dower, David, et al. "The Public Arena Initiative: Strategic Plan." Presented to Molly Smith. 29 Mar. 2012. Internal document.

Harlow, Bob, et al. *Building Deeper Relationships: How Steppenwolf Theatre Company is Turning Single-Ticket Buyers Into Repeat Visitors*. New York: Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, 2011. Web. 15 May 2012. Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences.

London, Todd, Ben Pesner, and Zannie Giraud Voss. *Outrageous Fortune*. New York: Theatre Development Fund, 2009. Print.

"The Mead Center." *Arena Stage*. Arena Stage, 2010. Web. 2 Feb. 2012.

Novak-Leonard, Jennifer L., and Alan S. Brown. *Beyond attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation*. Washington, DC: Natl. Endowment for the Arts, 2011. Web. 10 Apr. 2012.

"Our History." *Arena Stage*. Arena Stage, 2010. Web. 2 Feb. 2012.

"The Public Arena." *Arena Stage*. Arena Stage, 2010. Web. 5 Nov. 2012.

Ramanan, Amrita. "Breaking Down the Walls." *HowlRound: A Journal of the Theater Commons*. HowlRound, 29 Feb. 2012. Web. 29 Feb. 2012.

---. Case studies of engagement programs for 2011-2012 season at Arena Stage, Washington DC. Internal document.

---. Email Interview. 7 Sep. 2012.

---. Telephone Interview. 6 Apr. 2012.

"*Red*: Events". *Arena Stage*. Arena Stage, 2010. Web. 2 Oct. 2012.

"Roundtable Discussion 1." *The 21ˢᵗ Century Literary Office Convening.* Host. New Play Institute. #NewPlayTV. #NewPlayTV, New York, 25 Feb. 2012. Web Television.

"*Sophisticated Ladies* Study Guide." *Arena Stage*. Arena Stage, 2010. Web. 14 Oct. 2012.

Stage Banter. Arena Stage Blog. Arena Stage, 2006 - 2012. Web.

Stern, Mark J. *Age and arts participation: A case against demographic destiny*. Washington, DC: Natl. Endowment for the Arts, 2011. Web. 10 Apr. 2012.

Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg. Arena Stage, 2008-2012. Web.

"Theater 101." *Arena Stage*. Arena Stage, 2010. Web. 16 May 2012.

Theatre Communications Group. "Audience (R)Evolution." *Theatre Communications Group*. TCG, 2012. Web. 11 Mar. 2012.

United States. Natl. Endowment for the Arts. *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*. Washington, DC: Natl. Endowment for the Arts, 2009. Web. 8 Mar. 2012.

---. ---. *All America's a Stage: Growth and Challenges in Nonprofit Theater*. Washington, DC: Natl. Endowment for the Arts, 2008. Web. 8 Mar. 2012.

Voss, Zannie Giraud, et al. *Theatre Facts 2010: A Report on the Fiscal State of the Professional Not-For-Profit American Theatre*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2010. Web. 14 Apr. 2012.