

Zipcar Theater: The Tacoma Theater Project as an Anchor for Audience Development

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Abstract

As theater audiences decline society-wide, university theater programs have felt the impact, with many being cut back as institutions face difficult economic decisions. The Tacoma Theater Project at the University of Washington–Tacoma is an innovative effort to resist this trend. By working with professional theater groups in a partnership inspired by a collective insourcing model, the university uses its resources to support fringe theater groups in order to diversify and grow the local audience.

In 2010, amid numerous institutional changes, Kutztown University in Pennsylvania elected to cut its theater major (Kelly 2010). In 2013, Anderson University in Indiana followed suit by announcing the elimination of its programs in theater and dance, while at the same time, across the border in Ohio, outside reviewers recommended that Akron University shut down its theater program by 2016 (Beyer 2013; Wall 2013). More recently, as part of a well-publicized set of larger university changes announced in the spring of 2014, the University of Southern Maine, a CUMU member, reduced its theater faculty by more than half, a move that left many wondering what the future might hold for the program as a whole (Hall 2014).

These moves are just a few examples of cuts and reductions to university theater programs that have taken place across the nation in the past five years, and they are, no doubt, just part of a larger set of changes occurring in higher education today. Whether they are part of a crisis of the humanities, as some have called it, is an issue that lies outside the scope of this paper. Regardless of that, one fact seems clear: as universities face difficult economic decisions, the relatively high operational costs of running a theater program, combined with the traditionally lower student demand for the discipline, makes theater programs a logical potential target for cutbacks or even elimination.

But is there another way? Is there a way that theater programs, particularly those at urban and metropolitan universities, might be able to adapt to the changing landscape of higher education and the changing role of performing arts society-wide in order to not only help stave off cuts, but also help develop new opportunities for the campus and the community audiences? The answer, we argue, is yes, and this paper presents one innovative approach to a university-community partnership in theater programming that seeks to do just that. By embracing the role of curator rather than creator of theater programming, the Tacoma Theater Project at the University of Washington–Tacoma (UWT) has sought to establish itself as a relevant and sustainable

model for university theater. And while every institution and theater program is different, with their own sets of challenges and opportunities, the vision and the approach to the project can offer inspiration and insight for innovations within theater programs at similarly situated urban universities.

Founded in 1990, the University of Washington–Tacoma occupies a forty-six acre campus in the heart of downtown Tacoma, an area, which until the university's founding, was widely known for its abandoned buildings and its high crime rate and which today still borders some of the most economically depressed neighborhoods in the city. As part of the tri-campus University of Washington system, the university opened this autumn quarter with an enrollment just under 5,000 students, with a target of reaching 7,000 students within the next seven years. Given its recent growth rate at roughly 10 percent per year, there is no reason to believe it will not achieve that goal, and it is this state of rapid growth that perhaps most defines the working environment at the university today, as administrators seek and faculty are encouraged to explore areas for strategic growth in ways that simultaneously serve the university's current students, attract future students, and fulfill the institution's urban-serving mission of seeking to transform the greater-Tacoma region "by expanding boundaries of knowledge and discovery." (University of Washington–Tacoma 2014)

Until very recently, one boundary the university had yet to cross was into performing arts or, more specifically, into theater arts. Despite the fact that the interdisciplinary Arts, Media, and Culture program (AMC) was one of the central pillars of the school from its founding, now, twenty-five years into the university's history, there is still not a single course regularly offered in theater studies. The closest classes one could find at the university would be a course in performance art or courses focused on Shakespeare and dramatic literature offered by AMC, but beyond those, there have been no regular curricular offerings in theater or drama, and, not unsurprisingly given this university context, there have been no theater performances staged on campus.

Perhaps to some, this might not seem that unexpected or even that significant of a limitation. After all, during the past twenty-five years since the university was founded, higher education has been in the midst of a transition, with schools focusing more heavily on STEM and pre-vocational degree fields, and, as we've seen in recent years, many schools have even been cutting their theater programs, either in part or in whole. Furthermore, it has been during this same time period when the arts society-wide have been in decline, with traditional theater arguably being the most impacted area of all. A 2012 study by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) showed that only 8.3 percent of adults had attended a play in the previous year, which represented a 12 percent drop from just four years earlier and a remarkable 33 percent drop over the course of the previous decade (Cohen 2013; National Endowment for the Arts 2013). Both of these figures were the largest declines documented in the study, and so given all of this, yes, perhaps UWT's lack of theater programming, either in the classroom or on the stage, might be somewhat expected. If theater is in decline society-wide and peer institutions are cutting or cutting back on their theater programs, why should the school invest in a potentially withering field as it seeks to grow?

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for the legitimacy or the importance for the discipline of theater arts in general (a complex debate facing much of the humanities today), now that the UWT is maturing, or is in its teenage years as some campus administrators like to characterize it, it is, in general, difficult to defend having such a hole in the curriculum of a comprehensive university of UWT's size, let alone one that was founded with the humanities at its core. For a comparison here, it's important to note that of the current CUMU member institutions, all but two schools, both of which have very different profiles than UWT's, offer coursework in theater arts and/or stage annual theater performances. However, a more compelling argument might be made for the importance of theater at the university and, by extension, at similar institutions, if we consider the urban setting of the university and its urban-serving mission that states that its "fundamental purpose (is) to educate (students) for life as global citizens" (University of Washington–Tacoma 2014). This mission speaks to two things: first, the idea of citizenship, of a person actively engaged in her community; and second, the idea of a global context, of being a part of a community larger than one's own immediate environment, and here we can assume the idea of diversity. Given this, we might rephrase the university's mission to say that its "fundamental purpose" is to educate students for lives in which they are *actively engaged within diverse communities*, and read in this light, there is good evidence to suggest that a theater program can be an effective part of accomplishing this mission.

In a recent study of theater and performing arts audiences conducted at the University of Illinois–Chicago, researchers found that "individuals who engage in higher levels of audience-based arts participation (like theater)" demonstrate "higher rates of civic engagement," "greater levels of social tolerance," and "greater levels of other-regarding behaviors (i.e., respect, tolerance, and acceptance of others)" (LeRoux and Bernadska 2014, 158). These three findings speak to the very heart of UWT's mission to educate "global citizens," and they show, if nothing else, that by continuing to neglect theater arts and other audience-based arts, UWT would potentially be missing out on a proven and effective means to engage its students, not to mention the community, in civic-minded and socially-conscious ways. Despite the larger academic and societal trends perhaps suggesting the contrary, as UWT began to consider theater arts as an area of strategic growth, the question facing the university quickly turned from *if* to *how* the university should move forward. How could or should the institution build a vibrant, relevant, and sustainable program in theater that both respected the university's resources during economically challenged times and, at the same time, held the university's mission at its center? What, in the most concrete sense, could such a program look like?

Of course at this point, the campus conversation started where we might have expected. The simplest way for UWT or any university to develop a theater program would be to go the conventional route: propose the classes, hire the appropriate faculty, and step by step build a traditional theater program from scratch, one that offered the expected curriculum and, in some annual way, produced a set of theater performances to augment the coursework. To do it this way, however, was a difficult proposition, since it potentially risked significant university resources on a program with both a relatively high start-up cost and a yet-unproven student demand.

Furthermore, given the recent trend of declining audiences for theater society-wide, it also seemed potentially to be counter to one of the central principles articulated for the university's vision for its continued growth, which states that the institution is committed to building "strong and mutually supportive relationship(s) between the campus and its surrounding communities" (University of Washington–Tacoma 2014).

Since a theater program, unlike many other disciplines, has by its very nature an outward-facing component (university-based theater performances would logically draw an audience in part made up of members of the more general Tacoma community), UWT's entrance into the local theater scene and any success that might accompany it, could potentially come at the expense of other local theater organizations, whose viabilities are already challenged given the shrinking audience base documented in the NEA study. In light of this, as the university moved to building its theater programming, it needed to be mindful that its efforts support the local theater scene by working to increase the audience in the community, rather than erode it by potentially siphoning off a portion of that audience from other groups and thereby potentially risk the sustainability of those organizations. With these concerns at the forefront, the central vision for the Tacoma Theater Project was born: to find a way to bring theater and all of its benefits to UWT's campus that was both fiscally responsible and mutually supportive within the community.

In order to begin to give shape to the project, it was essential to contextualize the university's efforts within the local Tacoma theater landscape and frame the project within the other stakeholders in the region. Like that of many cities, Tacoma's theater scene is structured something similar to a Broadway, an off-Broadway, and an off-off-Broadway model, with one major theater organization at the top, a handful of smaller but reasonably well established community theaters in the middle, and an ever changing mix of very small, more fringe-oriented theater groups at the bottom.

Starting at the top, the largest performing arts institution in the city is by far the Broadway Center for the Performing Arts, a four-venue theater complex that occupies a series of historic buildings ten blocks from UWT's campus. As a multi-venue organization with the largest theater complex between Seattle and Portland—with seating capacities ranging from 300–1200—the Broadway Center is the unrivalled leader for the performing arts in the South Puget Sound region. It hosts more than one hundred events each year, and it provides both logistical support and performance space to several of the city's smaller performing arts organizations like the Tacoma City Ballet, the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra, and the Tacoma Opera. On its own, the Broadway Center has only infrequently staged any in-house theater productions, and instead it focuses on booking large-scale travelling shows, such as touring Broadway musicals and concerts. In fact, a review of the past three seasons at the Broadway Center shows that only seven, less than 8 percent, have been full productions of plays, not including musicals.

On the smaller community theater level, Greater-Tacoma has three relatively well established theaters, along with one steadily producing university theater. Centrally located, the Tacoma Little Theater, founded in 1918, is the city's longest active theater,

producing half a dozen easily recognizable shows each season for an audience capacity of a little more than two hundred. Moving farther afield from downtown, in a suburb just south of the city, is the Lakewood Playhouse, and in a retrofit strip-mall on the city's west side, is the Tacoma Musical Playhouse. These theaters produce annual seasons of six to eight different shows, all of which are mainstream, reliable audience draws. Between these theaters, during the past three years productions have included shows like *Little Women*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Cabaret*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Dial M for Murder*, *The Rainmaker*, and *The Odd Couple*. Lastly, of a similar size and scope to these community theaters, Tacoma also has the well-established theater at the University of Puget Sound, a liberal arts college in Tacoma's North End, which has a long-standing theater tradition that includes not only a bachelor's in theater arts, but also two faculty-directed productions each year, which, unlike the mainstream productions of the community houses, might best be characterized as more academic-minded plays. In recent years these have included plays like Charles Mee's *Iphigenia 2.0* and Sara Ruhl's *In the Next Room (or the Vibrator Play)*.

On the smallest level, below these established community theaters, there are usually three to four smaller fringe theater groups operating in the city at any given time. In recent years, these have included Assemblage Theatre, New Muses Theater Company, Toy Boat Theatre, Working Class Theatre Northwest, Gold from Straw, and Dukesbay Theater. In all but one case these groups are venue-less, their performances opportunistically being staged in an ever-changing variety of non-theatrically outfitted locations around Tacoma, which in the past have included the back of a bookstore, the upper sanctuary of a church, the curtained-off hallway of the historic post office building, and several vacant commercial storefronts in Tacoma's downtown. Their productions are tenuously supported by shoestring budgets (often Kickstarter and/or self-funded for the most part), and not unsurprisingly, if or when these organizations have continued to produce, they generally stage only one production per year. However, their presence in the city is important to note, because they, unlike the Broadway Center or Tacoma's larger established theaters, often stage more contemporary, more diverse, and less mainstream productions. In many cases, this artistic slant is at the core of the theaters' efforts, as evidenced by the mission statement on the Dukesbay Theater website, which states the group is dedicated to producing "theatrical works that reflect and celebrate our diverse society in the Pacific Northwest" (2014). Despite their best efforts though, with no stable performance space and no stable funding to ensure their continued existence, these theater groups, if able to survive at all, have been unable to establish a consistent enough brand for themselves in order to be able to grow their audiences to sustainable levels and really achieve their goal of diversifying the theater scene in the city. The problem, as the director of Toy Boat Theatre stated in a recent e-mail, is that "name recognition is certainly among the most obvious hurdles; even thoughtful, intrepid theatre goers can be wary of untried, unfamiliar work, especially by fringe companies" (Marilyn Bennett, personal communication).

At first glance, with roughly twenty-five plays of various sizes being produced in the city each year, this might seem if not a wealth, then at least a sufficient amount of offerings for a city of Tacoma's size (population roughly 200,000), and some might

argue that UWT, at least in its outward, community-looking direction, needn't invest resources or push to join an already crowded theater scene. However, when we examine the types of productions being staged in the community and compare that with the demographics of the audience, or perhaps better stated as the *potential* audience in Tacoma, we see that there is a significant gap in the economic accessibility and the audience attractiveness of the shows. This issue becomes even more pronounced if we consider the types of plays being produced in comparison to the subset of Tacoma's audience made up by UWT students.

Historically, Tacoma has had a manufacturing and shipping-based economy, and like so many urban centers with a similar profile, the economic stability of the city has been hit hard in recent decades. Despite some improvements, as of the city's most recent community data report, more than 17 percent of Tacoma's residents live below the poverty line; the city's "median household income is nearly \$10,000 less than the statewide median" (City of Tacoma 2012, 10). Racially and culturally, the city is also statistically more diverse than statewide averages. It is roughly 64 percent Caucasian, with the two largest minority groups being African American and Asian at approximately 11 and 9 percent respectively (City of Tacoma, 2012, 11). Compared to this, UWT's student population is even more diverse. As of the last academic year, the student population was roughly 49 percent Caucasian, 15 percent Asian, 9 percent Latino, 7 percent African American, and 7 percent students who identified themselves as two or more races. Of the university's students, 70 percent receive financial aid, and 65 percent are the first in their family to attend college. These statistics are important to consider when examining Tacoma's theater offerings, because we would expect that if theater is going to matter, if it is going to be sustainable, then it needs to be both *accessible* and *attractive* to the potential audience in the community it serves, and in developing the vision for UWT's theater programming, it is essential that the university be attentive to both the economic realities and the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of its students and the population of the city.

In analyzing this issue, it is easy to see how the current theater offerings in Tacoma are failing on the point of accessibility simply for economic reasons alone. At the Broadway Center, the average ticket price for most shows ranges from \$28 to \$40, and at the four community/university theaters, the prices range from \$23 to \$35 per seat, which already makes the possibility of attending these productions highly unlikely for a significant portion of Tacoma's residents, not to mention UWT students, who simply do not have the means to purchase tickets. To these theaters' credit though, in an effort to combat the economic inaccessibility caused by the relatively high cost of ticket prices, most theaters in the area offer some sort of reduced admission options, including student pricing and pay-what-you-can performances. This might help the matter, were it not for the additional logistical challenge of the theaters' physical locations. Of the five established venues, only the Broadway Center and the Tacoma Little Theater are located in or near the densely populated downtown core, where the city's most diverse and economically challenged residents live. The others are located beyond walking distance from downtown, and, due to service cutbacks in recent years, none of the venues has stable round-trip service via mass transportation during the traditional evening and weekend

theater performance times. What we see from this is that even though the number of annual theater performances in the city might seem sufficient for the size of Tacoma's population, the accessibility of these performances is severely limited, if not prohibited, for a sizeable and important portion of the city's population. As things currently stand, there could be a hundred plays staged in the city each year, but given the current economic and logistical realities of attending these shows, it would still leave a sizable portion of Tacoma residents, including UWT's students, marginalized.

If we look next at the issue of the audience-attractiveness of the annual theater offerings in Tacoma, we find a similar situation: there might be plenty of shows, but based on their subject matter and themes, there are legitimate questions about the level of interest they might generate with the city's diverse audience base. A recent study reviewed the seasonal offerings for the community theaters in Tacoma and found that barely over half of the productions were of plays written since 1970 (Hughes 2014, 7). While this alone does not necessarily mean that the plays would be unattractive or thematically irrelevant to the diverse populations of Tacoma, it does show that, in general, the script selections of the city's established theaters are largely not contemporarily focused, an important aspect to consider since much of the diversity movement in American theater has taken place since the late 1960s and early 1970s. As we might expect then, if we examine these productions more closely, we find very little attention to or emphasis on diversity. In fact, of the largest theaters in the community, not a single main-stage show over the past two years dealt directly with issues of diversity or had parts written specifically for diverse actors in it: the only exceptions being a side-stage production of *The Laramie Project* at the Tacoma Little Theater and a series of staged readings (not fully produced shows) from August Wilson's ten-play series, "The Pittsburgh Cycle," coordinated by the Broadway Center. This phenomenon, it should be noted, does not come entirely at the fault or blame of the artistic directors of Tacoma's theaters. Scott Walters (2012) raised similar concerns for theater nationwide in arguing that the American theater landscape has grown more and more homogenized in recent years, and newspapers from coast to coast have documented the efforts of theater professionals and critics seeking to address the issue of the lack of diversity in the regional theater scene (McNulty 2013; Wong 2009).

While the lack of diversity in American theater is a complex issue and we could trace its causes back to numerous reasons, for the purpose of this argument, we need not look any farther than simple economics. Part of the problem is the difficult balancing act that theaters must play between targeting their current audience, which is largely a White, affluent base, and reaching out to new diverse audiences at the same time. This is, in fact, one of the major challenges faced by theaters in Tacoma. At a recent community summit designed to examine the Broadway Center's programming, held in part in attempt to address issues raised here, the center's director explained the challenge the organization has faced as it has sought to diversify its offerings in recent years. Despite the demographics of the city, the director cited that roughly 70 percent of the Broadway Center's audience was made up of 55+-year-old women who were college educated and owned their own homes (David Fischer, 2014). The number 70 percent is extraordinary in comparison to the economic and racial demographics of the

city, and so, given this and given that the center has enormous operating costs with its four venues, there is the simple matter of economics that the director faces. The Broadway Center can either play to its base audience and then risk not adequately reaching the diversity of the city it serves, or it can play to the city and then risk potentially losing the very audience that—literally speaking—helps keep the lights on. To the director’s credit, the Broadway Center has been attentive to the disconnect in its programming, and it has begun to make attempts to combat the problem, as evidenced by the community summit itself and by the staged-readings of the August Wilson plays the theater has coordinated during the past few years. Unfortunately, these events were only moderately successful. For example, the tickets for the staged-readings were more than \$20 per seat, a price still likely to be a challenge for a good portion of Tacoma’s residents, and even with this, the performances lost money even with the lower production costs of the trimmed-down format. It should be no surprise then, that the vast majority of the center’s programming, along with that of the city’s other established community/university theaters, unfortunately continues to be mainstream in nature, playing largely to the traditional affluent audience base.

All is not a lost cause though, and if we are to look for a champion of diversity issues in the Tacoma theater community, we only need to look at the smaller fringe groups, which, as we’ve already seen, often make a commitment to diversity one of their central missions. These groups usually set their ticket prices at the much more accessible level of \$10 per seat, and if we compare the recent productions from these groups with those of the more established theaters, we find a very different situation. As opposed to largely mainstream choices, in the last several years productions from these fringe groups have included a broader spectrum of plays including *Dakota’s Belly*, *Wyoming*, a play which directly examines lesbian issues; *Stones in My Passageway*, a new work based on the life of the African American blues artist Robert Johnson; and *Tea*, which tells the story of five Japanese women who came to the United States as war brides in the 1940s.

Unfortunately, while they are more deliberate and dedicated to targeting works that might better attract the city’s diverse potential audiences, these small theater groups actually have the opposite challenge of the larger established community theaters in Tacoma. Without their own physical performance venues, they lack the high overhead of the larger theaters and are thus able to make less economic driven performance choices; but at the same time, without a permanent location or captive theater audience from which to draw a stable revenue, they lack the stability to ensure long-term viability, and so far, they have been unable to achieve enough traction to offer regularized seasons and become permanent fixtures in the community. In many cases, these theater groups have survived only long enough to stage one or two shows and then they have folded.

This situation, too, is, unfortunately, not only an issue for Tacoma. A recent study of the changing face of the American performing arts scene found a very similar trend occurring nationwide. Although the number of nonprofit performing arts organizations has actually increased in the past two decades, the size, the operating budget, and the revenue of those organizations has in fact decreased (McCarthy et al., 2001, 71–73).

What seems to be taking place and what we might expect to find in the communities surrounding most urban universities like UWT, is that as the audience society-wide has been shrinking, there's been a fracturing of the theater landscape, where the largest organizations at the top remain focused on their bottom-line (and the traditional audience base that supports it) in order to maintain stability and where the smallest organizations at the bottom struggle to be nimble and adaptable (at a detriment to their long-term viability) in order to continue to survive at all.

As UWT surveyed the Tacoma theater scene, three realities quickly emerged that helped shape the university's vision for bringing theater to campus. First, however the emerging theater programming developed, it needed to be more economically accessible to the city's broad potential audience than the current offerings available. Second, artistically it needed to deliberately target an audience more in keeping with the diversity of Tacoma and our campus community. Third, it needed to make sure that campus efforts didn't come at the detriment to the work of those fringe theaters in the city that are already working toward the same ends. But the question still remained as to *how* the university might go about this? The university, after all, has had no theater infrastructure, and on first glance, outside of financial support, it didn't seem to have many assets to bring to the table. Or did it?

In strategizing what UWT might uniquely be able to offer the local theater scene, we quickly realized that in addition to financial resources, the university had three key assets, both tangible and intangible. First, as part of the tri-campus University of Washington system, UWT is part of the state's flagship university, and as such, its "Husky Purple" association brings with it instant brand recognition and respect within the community. UWT on its own merits has earned an unparalleled regard for being a key leader to the remarkable revitalization that has occurred in Tacoma's downtown during the past twenty-five years, and on account of this, the school commands a beloved spotlight from the community. These intangibles are, no doubt, similar to those enjoyed by most urban and metropolitan universities, which function as educational and cultural anchors for their surrounding communities. Second and more tangibly, as a campus with nearly five thousand students and hundreds of faculty and staff, we offer a built-in and relatively captive population, and any emerging campus theater program would only need to capture a small percentage of this to ensure a somewhat stable and sizable audience for its productions. Third and most concretely, while the university has traditionally had no theater infrastructure, it did potentially offer a performance space in the form of a broadcast studio built for the communications program. The space, while mostly outfitted for video capture, had the basic makings of a black box theater, which included black curtained walls, a lighting grid, and a separate control booth. With the addition of seating for the audience and a handful of theater-specific lighting supplies, it would make a more than suitable performance space for the types of work likely to be produced.

While at first these assets might not seem like much to build on, we realized, in articulating them, that UWT's strengths were an ideal match for the weaknesses of the

fringe theater groups in the city. The university had an identifiable “brand” that brought with it instant community respect and support; it had a built in representative subset of Tacoma’s diverse potential audience; and it had its own dedicated performance venue, which was, in fact, underutilized during traditional evening and weekend performance times. Recognizing this, it was at this point that the university began to consider the possibility of partnering with these local theater groups, rather than simply reduplicating their efforts on its own. This (a university-community collaboration in theater) is not an uncommon practice, and there are already examples of such partnerships at CUMU member institutions, like the Syracuse Stage at Syracuse University. Most often these relationships seem built around a resident theater model, where a professional acting company works in partnership with a university or within university space. Given the makeup of the Tacoma theater scene, however, this did not seem a realistic option in UWT’s case; it wasn’t that there was a single community theater that made a logical partner for the institution, but rather a handful of smaller ones which could benefit from the assets that the university had to offer.

Would it be possible then, to develop a model to fit the unique context of Tacoma and UWT? Perhaps a collaborative structure where UWT provided the umbrella ownership and management of the program, but a variety of smaller theater groups shared the opportunity and provided the artistic oversight and execution of the performances in keeping with the program’s overarching vision? In considering these questions, an analogy was quickly born with that of car-sharing: the premise being that not every person needs to own a car, even though at times every person might need to use one, and it is, in fact, individual car ownership that leads to a host of other problems (excessive emissions, congested streets, etc.). In the same way, the thinking was that not every theater company needed to own its own theater (a principal already embraced by the fringe groups in Tacoma), especially since the expense of ownership can often limit the artistic freedom in the production choices and often lead to inaccessible ticket pricing structures. Thus, the practical working concept for the project was born. The university could create a Zipcar style theater program where the “car” was owned and maintained by UWT, but shared and “driven” by the fringe theater groups in the city.

The Tacoma Theater Project at the University of Washington—Tacoma is built on this premise, only unlike Zipcar which grants access to vehicles through charging membership and usage fees, the program is managed by a curated structure, where theater organizations or theater professionals with proven experience in staging productions can apply for no-cost use of university theater space for rehearsals and productions.

To assist with coordination of the project and to further establish shared ownership of the program within the community, the university has enlisted the support of *Spaceworks Tacoma*, a local nonprofit whose mission is to energize vacant commercial space in the downtown core by contracting with landlords to offer reduced or subsidized rents to local business start-ups. Building on its previous experience working with this relatively similar model of short-term use occupancies, *Spaceworks* will oversee the application procedure for the program. A review board made up of

representatives from UWT (including students, faculty, and staff), local government, and the arts community will then make final decisions about the shows selected for performances during the upcoming academic year. If accepted, groups receive free use of the campus theater space for a three-month period coinciding with the academic quarters and a modest stipend to support their productions. The selected theater groups are expected to coordinate all aspects of the production, including casting, marketing and ticket sales (with UWT institutional support), and in order to apply for the opportunity, the sponsoring theater group must document the following points:

1. The production supports the urban serving mission of the university and it reflects the diversity of the campus and the city.
2. The organization will uphold university expectations regarding equal access, by holding open auditions and encouraging inclusive participation from the community.
3. The organization will involve UWT students in the production in whatever means are best appropriate. These roles could include acting in the production or participating in independent studies or internships focused on stage management, marketing, theater tech, dramaturgy, or nonprofit management.
4. The UWT community (students, faculty, and staff) will receive free or reduced admission prices. Ticket prices for the general public will be no greater than \$12 per show, with additional pay-what-you-can and free performance options to promote access.
5. The organization will engage the UWT academic units through the hosting of educational opportunities whenever possible, for example thematic discussions and post-performance talkbacks.

As of this academic quarter, the program is in the pilot stage, and we have invited Toy Boat Theatre to work as our first community partner. Toy Boat Theatre has a long, though intermittent tradition (for reasons outlined here) of producing socially conscious theater in Tacoma, and this coming spring, the group will begin auditions and rehearsals for the play *Anon(ymous)* by Naomi Iizuka. The play is a modern adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*, only in this case, the main character Anon is not a king in flight, but rather a refugee journeying through a harsh urban landscape, and the dramatic conflicts are not with monsters or gods, but rather with sweatshop owners and hostile neighbors. The play examines themes of cultural displacement, violence, and poverty, and it is difficult to imagine the play being produced in Tacoma without the support of this project; however, it is exactly the type of play the community needs, and it is an ideal debut for UWT in the local theater scene. At the completion of the production, the university will launch the full, expanded version of the program with the operational structure described here.

Perhaps one objection to this model might be that it seems a form of out-sourcing, where the once academically controlled domain of staging a university theatrical

production is ceded to a professional (even if nonprofit) organization. However, we argue that it is more appropriate to frame it in reverse, as a form of in-sourcing, where the realm of the professional theater is brought under the domain of the university, with the resources and the respect of the institution creating a safe-haven for the presently unsustainable efforts of the fringe theater groups in the city. There is, in fact, a somewhat parallel operating model already being used for arts and theater nonprofits. *Collective insourcing*, as it has been called, is a system based on the premise that individual nonprofit organizations waste resources on activities that are in common with “thousands of other nonprofits,” and by working together and sharing the burden of essential support services, the groups can better conserve resources for their primary arts programming efforts. In a theater’s case, some of what might be shared would obviously be the high cost of maintaining a physical performance space, but it could also be the various administrative efforts (fundraising, marketing, and the like) that go into staging a performance.

Advocates of this model have argued that working in a collective insourcing way helps “organizations achieve their missions in collaboration with various stakeholders and through collective leveraging, rather than in perceived competition with each other” (Yarden and Maxwell 2011, 3). This model has already been implemented successfully within theater nonprofits in various communities, but the Tacoma Theater Project represents an innovative approach to the idea by using a major university as an anchor to a collective insourcing structure. This is not to say that UWT’s program is entirely unique in this regard. In the early 1970s, Philip Arnoult founded the pioneering Baltimore Theater Project with funding support from Antioch College. Under his artistic vision, the college supported the performances of new works produced by a variety of emerging theater organizations in the city, and from the program’s conception, the vision for the Baltimore Theater Project was, like UWT’s, that it would promote diversity (and the avant-garde) in theater and that it would encourage inclusivity in its surrounding urban environment by offering all tickets free of charge (Smith 2011). Although the program is no longer university-based, the Baltimore Theater Project continues to operate to this day, and while some of its approach has been altered through the years (tickets are no longer entirely free), it has maintained much of its original vision. It continues to present a diverse array of theater, and very much like the vision for the Tacoma Theater Project, it continues to offer support and performance space to emerging local theater companies under its larger umbrella. It has grown into an award-winning theater organization, and now, more than forty years into its history, it offers good support that the over-arching vision and mission outlined here are sound. Furthermore, given the economic challenges now facing theaters society-wide, it seems an appropriate time for UWT and the Tacoma Theater Project to reexamine the possibilities for a university-supported structure, in line with the original vision for the program in Baltimore.

In the early stages of vetting the vision for UWT’s program within the local theater community, it quickly became clear that the structure was attractive and held many benefits for the theater organizations. Most notably, it offered free space and the artistic freedom that came with that reduced overhead; beyond this, it offered modest

financial support, along with access to student labor and the campus' built in audience base. Additionally, it brought with it the endorsement of the university and the respect associated with the institution, which is likely to carry weight with the general audience in the community, ideally making them less wary to try an unrecognized, less mainstream theatrical production. But what of our students? Would there be a loss, educationally speaking, by moving toward this model? And what of the community? What benefit might the structure hold and what evidence might there be that the efforts could even begin to accomplish the ambitious goals of diversifying and growing the audience base in the city?

It should be noted that for students, the Tacoma Theater Project is just a portion of the movement to grow theater on campus. There are parallel efforts underway to develop a larger curriculum in theater and drama within the Arts, Media, and Culture program, and there are hiring considerations underway to go along with those efforts. Therefore, from a classroom standpoint, the impact would seem negligible, since the curricular work would be occurring either way, even if the university were developing a more traditional theater model. As far as the connection between the classroom and the stage, this model does not prohibit the staging of conventional, faculty-led and student-acted productions. Should student interest in, and demand for, an internal theater program grow to a point where large-scale, in-house productions would be viable, there is no reason to believe they could or would not occur. In the meantime, students now have the chance to get directly involved in a professional production and develop real-world, work-place style experience in nonprofit theater programming, on both the artistic and management sides. As universities increasingly put greater attention on workplace preparation and career development, these opportunities are a tremendous asset, since it helps students prepare for a professional workplace by working in a professional capacity through internships, independent studies, and/or acting opportunities.

For the community of Tacoma in general, there are real questions about the ability of a university-based theater program to help develop a more diverse audience base in the city. However, the program's requirements for reduced or free ticket options, along with the campus's location in the center of the downtown core, immediately accessible by foot or by after-hour light-rail service, ensure that it will be economically and logistically feasible for the full range of Tacoma's residents to attend a production. In terms of trying to ensure a greater level of audience attractiveness of the productions, UWT has worked toward creating a more inclusive approach for curating the artistic selections by both partnering with *Spaceworks* and inviting community leadership to play a role in the application review process.

Of course, only time will tell if this approach will be successful in broadening audience interest within the community, but there is good reason to be optimistic. In reexamining the 2012 NEA study, which documented the decline in the theater-going audience, interestingly, there were several areas where the statistics actually improved. Despite the general trends to the contrary, theater attendance among African American and Latino groups increased over the previous four years. The same was also seen in several other genres of the performing arts, including significant increases in the size

of minority audiences attending Jazz music and Latin dance (Cohen 2013; National Endowment for the Arts 2013). In light of this data, it seems fair to expect that if the Tacoma Theater Project can succeed in diversifying the theater offerings in the city, then there is likely to be an audience there ready and waiting to grow.

Conclusion

In building this program, the relative newness of the University of Washington–Tacoma has been both a hindrance and a benefit. On one hand, the lack of a pre-existing faculty and other resources committed to theater meant that the discussion had to start at the grass roots, so developments were often slow as campus leaders gradually embraced the project. On the other hand, this also meant that the university could be more exploratory and think outside the box in strategizing its approach. Without a preexisting program, there were no delicate discussions to be had about traditions to overturn or, as has been the case in this era of theater cuts, budgets or faculty roles to be re-evaluated.

We realize that this will not be the norm for readers from universities with preexisting theater programs and that the UWT model is not universally replicable whole cloth. For that matter, even without an established theater program, there are countless micro, campus-specific challenges related to creating this sort of university-community collaboration. This paper is not offered as an argument that the structure of the Tacoma Theater Project is *the* solution to the challenges facing every university theater program today. Instead, it is the spirit of inclusivity, collaboration, and the community-responsive nature of the project that we offer as *an* approach for innovative theater programs during these times.

Urban and metropolitan universities often command a leadership position in their surrounding communities and with that position comes responsibility. In this case, as the role of theater is in flux both on our campuses and in our surrounding communities, urban universities have a responsibility to do just that—to lead—even as they face their own internal challenges. If theater programs at urban and metropolitan universities reach out to the local theater community with a spirit of collaboration, they are bound to discover “mutually supportive” ways they can work together, looking for ways that the campus can serve not just as a partner with professional theaters, but as an anchor to the efforts already underway.

For UWT, that has meant first recognizing the gap between the current theater programming in the city and the diversity of the potential audience it serves, and then second, recognizing that the issue was an opportunity, rather than a challenge, to create innovative ways to use institutional assets, both tangible and intangible, to support the community efforts that are already seeking to address the problem. If we look only inward for solutions to the trends facing theater, and if we continue to cut or cut back on our programs in response, without regard for their potential for creating positive change community-wide, we are, in fact, still leading, just in the wrong direction, and so we shouldn't be surprised if the downward trend for audiences continues in the future.

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