

Ben Cameron's Closing Remarks
Theatre Communications Group national conference
Atlanta Georgia
June, 2006

Well, here we are again. Forty-eight hours after we began—or perhaps more accurately, eight years, nine days and eight hours after we began this TCG journey, all of you and I—we now sit on the verge of saying farewell to one another. Every TCG Conference in my experience has its own flavor, its own unique dynamic—and this has been for me like the best of southern storytelling—juicy, heartfelt, punctuated by laughter, gentle, graceful, worthy of a good listen—a dynamic in keeping with and befitting our first journey to a southern city. But before I try to bring us to some collective closing, let me say a few thanks, asking you to hold your applause until the end. First, to our fantastic funders, without whom we would not have been able to convene at all; to our Atlanta community of theatres, the extraordinary Atlanta volunteers and especially our host theatre—the Alliance Theatre and the Woodruff Arts Center. Thanks to all of our speakers, panelists and moderators for their exemplary work in exploring a range of issues; to our sign language interpreters for their beautiful and—especially given the speed in which I speak—fleet and indefatigable work. Thanks to all of you for taking time in your busy lives to be here together and perhaps within that a special thanks to our theatre board members, whose lives are called in other directions professionally but still have made this journey with us today; and thanks from the bottom of my heart to my TCG board and staff, who you met at varying points on the agenda and whom I hope you have sought out and met personally. A board of the wisest counsel and deepest commitment and a staff who works at a remarkable pace, whose investment in the field is total, sincere and ravenous, who are the real heart and soul of all TCG does for you and strives to do in the future.

And most especially our conference director—Jenni Werner. No one has worked harder to make this come together than she, and even with having a baby in the middle of all this planning! To Jenni, a special, special thanks and know that we expect Casey to be running the conference when you pass the mantle 25 years from now—but not a day sooner. And the biggest thanks of all to my partner in crime these eight years, the remarkable and sublime Joan Channick.

Now it falls to me to bring some closure one last time, to try to make some sense of what has transpired in these last few days. Certainly you don't need me to replay the conference for you—indeed, with the wide variety of programming options, the conference as any two of us remember it is not likely to be one unified vision but instead two separate conferences, with different memorable moments and highlights.

So in the spirit of Ferlinghetti—who waited for the rebirth of wonder—I want to share with you some of the things I'm wondering about today. In the wake of arts controversies in the late 1980s, the theatre field—caught blindsided by the possibility of public indifference to the arts—rallied to try to place our work more firmly on the public agenda. Our friends in various legislative bodies, our allies in foundations and corporations, turned to us for ammunition, pushed us to think in more quantifiable terms about our work. For the first time, we assumed a value-based orientation, moved to measuring our impact, greeting with relief and enthusiasm every financial multiplier report, every educational study, every Richard Florida and Daniel Pink, all building an argument for the arts today and in the future. With newfound authority, we pointed to the leveraging of dollars for local economies, the enhanced test scores for students, the inevitability of the role of the arts in a post-industrial, creatively driven, meaning-hungry age. And while the events of 9/11 could have given wholesale permission for us to be stricken permanently from the public rosters, our recovery in every facet of contributed income—with all levels now exceeding pre-9/11 levels—indicates perhaps that our value-based efforts have largely taken hold—that in policy and foundation circles, our place remains tenuously secured, even while it remains far short of where we believe it should be.

But even while we made these arguments, we whispered behind closed doors of our discomfort. However true it may be that these advantages accrue to a community through our presence and our hard labor—and we should never stop proclaiming these or taking credit for them—they frankly felt inorganic. They were only rarely the reasons any of us had chosen the arts in the first place and certainly they were relatively useless in encouraging our audiences to go. Who among us has ever said, "Gee honey, if we go to the theatre tonight, it will generate an additional \$5–\$7 for the local economy and our kids will score 120 points more on their SATs than if we stay home?" For all of our power in articulating our financial, educational and civic value, our most recent *Theatre Facts* data, in noting consistently declining subscriptions and relatively stagnant single ticket sales—stagnating at levels far short of several years ago—suggests that we have failed to make a compelling case for our emotional value, our unique place in nurturing and engaging an interior landscape. How do we claim a place in such an arena?

How do we attract the audience we want most fervently—the audience that will respond to our work—often to our riskiest, most provocative work—in the numbers that will make our lives easier and our theatres healthier?

The answer is not a simple one, for being a not-for-profit theatre invites a kind of organizational schizophrenia. The more we emphasize our ability to meet social need—that criteria that in part qualifies us for not-for-profit status—the more our contributors respond to us, even as our audiences show indifference. The more we succeed in the market at attracting audience, the more we try to create desire over need, the less comfortable our funders are, with funding seeming to decline in direct proportion to market success in some quarters. And frankly, the less comfortable we often are with one another. Large subscription bases, the occasional hit production and treasuring our subscribers, especially if they are older and affluent, often meet with disdain. As a field, we often take pride in our poverty and have a complicated, uncertain relationship with market effectiveness, being less than generous with those of us who smack faintly of commercial success.

If our speakers repeatedly endorsed one key theme, surely it was that there is no one fixed monolithic audience—rather they are a moving dynamic, as Colin Greer noted; they are many audiences, each a complex confluence of factors—socio-economic, personal, cultural and experiential, as Kevin McCarthy told us; they are even multiple audiences within each of us, as Guy Garcia noted—each offering distinct possibilities and challenges, even while we have focused as a field on certain overarching demographic trends—the emergence of an older audience, a more racially diverse audience and a younger audience, shaped and formed by forces far, far, different than those that shaped many of us.

We have already worked hard in our theatres to reach many of these future audiences, launching education programs, community engagement programs, offering discounts for senior citizens or the economically disadvantaged. Just this week, however, I found myself in a conversation that has resonated with me throughout the Conference—a conversation that well may be yesterday's news to you but that was a major light bulb for me, especially as we seek to increase these audiences.

On the heels of a three-hour conversation about issues facing arts groups, a professional sociologist whom we had asked to attend but who had yet to venture an opinion, closed our discussion with an overview of what lay behind our challenges. Our issues were extraordinarily complicated, she said. Moreover, she added, "Of course you can't isolate one area for investigation in an organization without affecting every other one. Each organization is a system and systems are complex, difficult things to change and impossible to change quickly."

Somehow, I had always—at heart—thought of audience development as additive. Name the new group of your choice. Young people? We'll add them in. People of color? Added in. Older audiences a new venture for you? Add them in. Somehow, if we could only find the right formula,

we could increase our numbers, adding without fundamentally changing and reinventing our organizations in their entirety—never really recognizing that the addition of any new group, if seriously engaged, not only has the potential to displace and redefine the old, but will almost certainly do so. Indeed, our collective insensitivity to this basic truth of systems may well account for our largely unsuccessful attempts to truly diversify our audiences—whatever diversify means to you relative to your current audience base, whether by virtue of age or sexuality or gender or race or a host of other possibilities. Our opportunistic intersections, often by virtue of title, have failed to produce sustained interaction, perhaps because quite simply, the concept of mere adding doesn't work. An invitation to merely attend without an invitation to participate in real reinvention may not be any invitation at all. It may be simply market exploitation.

Are we truly ready to reinvent and redefine? If not, we can, like the Irene Diamond Foundation many of us so admired, embark on an ultimate exit strategy—spend out our assets and close shop in whatever time frame we define—a perfectly viable alternative. We can hone our work to our highest levels without encumbering ourselves with issues of longevity or long term sustainability—and arguably, the entire arts ecology, like the rotating of crops, will be made stronger by periodic exits to balance the ongoing entrance of new organizations.

But if we DO want to engage new audiences, we must, as Colin Greer told us today, approach our new allies with a spirit of humility, listening deeply and harvesting what we hear as a prelude to action.

Especially for those who wish to thrive into the long term future, redefinition will be unavoidable—redefinition, that while it will imply changes in content—remembering that Oregon student and the desire of all audiences to see themselves upon the stage. But of all the ways of reinvention, perhaps the most urgent are those dealing with social interaction and our own sense of cultural authority, especially as we look to engage younger audiences.

Why should a generation—a generation able to publish their own work on the web or produce and release their own CDs, a generation who increasingly turn to one another for their most powerful instruction rather than to the trained professional at the head of the classroom—why should this generation cede to mine any sense of cultural authority or power, regardless of our training or where we stand in physical relation to them? While historically the power to tell the story has been ceded to the artist, the internet makes every person a potential story-teller, and no one appreciates this power more than the young.

As long as I'm confessing my own naiveté—and belaboring the obvious in the process—it has taken me far too long to appreciate that the deepest impact of the internet has been social—not merely a footnote to Robert Putnam but perhaps a substantive rebuttal. Bowling aside, we may be socializing far, far, more than before. For the internet is not a media space, nor a content space. The internet is a social space—and online content exists most optimally not for mere dissemination, but as a rallying point for social congregation.

We've seen the explosion of craigslist and MySpace—a site, incidentally that yields disappointing results if used merely as a marketing device to profile a theatre but yields far more powerful results if used to showcase audiences and show social activities at the theatre. HBO got it right with their campaign—the reason we watch TV is for what it means around the water cooler the next day and the *American Idol* phenomenon is less about talent than it is about active audience interaction and its role as a springboard for conversation. In the provocative *Get Back in the Box*, Doug Rushkoff makes these arguments and describes the demise of Napster as less driven by legal proceedings and injunction than by its essentially inert capacity, relying on merely downloading without convening. The podcast—the opportunity to extend one's personality into cyberspace and stimulate reaction—and the blog would have ended the Napster tyranny even had it survived far longer than it did. The success of Barnes and Noble has less to do with scale perhaps than by its own redefinition as a social space—encouraging lounging, free reading,

social presence, and its website relinquishing effective business practice focused solely on protecting sales in favor of activities making users the partners in advocating literature. In posting book reviews, book readers may have the power to limit sales of a particular title—bad business perhaps on a title by title basis but in aggregate, fantastic practice in amassing a substantial base of participants, not consumers.

Rushkoff predicts an inevitable progression in audience behavior—consumption to manipulator to creator, the kid who goes from video game player to game hacker to game inventor. In *The Pro-Am Revolution: How Enthusiasts Are Changing Our Economy and Society*, Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller write:

The twentieth century was shaped by the rise of professionals in most walks of life. From education, science and medicine to banking, business and sports, formerly amateur activities became more organized, and knowledge and procedures were codified and regulated. As professionalism grew, often with hierarchical organizations and formal systems for accrediting knowledge, so amateurs came to be seen as second-rate. Amateurism came to be a term of derision. Professionalism was a mark of seriousness and high standards. But in the last two decades, a new breed of amateur has emerged: the Pro-Am, amateurs who work to professional standards. The Pro-Ams are knowledgeable, educated, committed and networked by new technology. The twentieth century was shaped by large hierarchical organizations with professionals at the top. Pro-Ams are creating new, distributed organizational models that will be innovative, adaptive and low-cost.

The Pro-Ams, like Wendy Puriefoy's description of students, emphasize collective, lateral learning and interaction, as opposed to hierarchical, linear ones. Already, Pro-Ams are creating films, CDs, photography indistinguishable from high level professional work, standing apart really only because of the life choices the artists have made. In response, and catching this new wave, the BBC has posted historical archives expressly for downloading and remixing and reposting, seeing audience not as consumers but as collaborators in creative exploration. And beyond our traditional definitions of an amateur class, with the annual graduation of 400,000 arts MFAs every year in this country—a number far too great for the arts professions to absorb—the likelihood that an entire class of newly skilled, highly educated but avocationally, rather than professionally, oriented artists will emerge. How will we respond to the Juilliard actor who leaves the field for law school, or the Yale director who abandons the theatre for politics? Many will want to continue their creative life without abandoning their new professions. When high caliber musicians like Emmanuel Ax and Itzhak Perlman choose to play in public with professional politician and trained but amateur pianist Condoleezza Rice, more than mere political appeasement is on display.

Are we ignoring, as Wendy Puriefoy suggested about schools, the new modes of receiving knowledge and clinging to 100-year-old models of transmitting it, perhaps too entering the last throes of an industrial model? This ultimately begs to consider carefully. Do we want audiences or collaborators? Do we want consumers or co-creators? Do we want to nurture theatre institutions or stimulate dramatic expression and performance?

Organizations designed to cross this divide are likely to appear in increasing numbers, but existing theatres face a complex set of challenges as they face evolution. I was surprised—as you undoubtedly know—by Anne Bogart's recounting of my Barnes and Noble experience—the freedom of book selection, the tripping over the young person sitting in the aisle reading, coffee in hand, music playing over loud speakers—all a sharp juxtaposition to the hushed silence, the comfortable chairs, the insistence on "no food and drink" and the sense of authorized distribution that characterized the library, which was the center of public reading when I was a child. What Anne didn't tell you were the other two pieces of the "aha" moment for me. Looking more closely, I saw that the kid was reading Henry James—a sign that, even while the social environment had changed, the potential ability of the material to engage a young mind had not. And my sense that, while many might argue that libraries today need to play music, get rid of the chairs, allow coffee

in the stacks and more if they are to compete in today's world, there are nevertheless people who deeply love those echoing marble halls, who treasure the sense of almost religious cathedral-like sanctity and silence, for whom the libraries have deep meaning and who have contributed so much to sustain them—and that if we were to make wholesale changes that may seem apparent, those long-time supporters would stampede through the exits with lightning speed. Many of us have inherited the libraries of the spirit, as it were. How do we evolve in a way that embraces our supporters and takes them on our journey, if indeed we wish to do so, rather than inadvertently alienating them, however positive our intentions may be?

Many, many theatres that exist today are already beginning to engage in a new social transaction, expanding the potential for optional social interaction. Anne Bogart has opened her rehearsal hall permanently. Martha Lavey at Steppenwolf shared with us all in a past Field Letter her passionate desire to see the audience as a circle of collaborators, invested in the organization in a way that transcends like or dislike for an individual production. Lisa Adler of Horizon Theatre reports an entire organizational rejuvenation and redefinition in the wake of a mission change, leaving the primary purpose of "to produce the great plays" and replacing it with a new mission, "to connect people to the great plays"—a slight yet profound realignment that is changing every part of the organization. These moves—taken strategically, carefully, organically and yet patiently—indeed reveal the optimal strategies—those that invite revolution even while acknowledging the need for patience and long-term vigilance.

Whether reinventing or creating anew, we must remember what we have long known but can easily forget in the wearing grind of the day to day. Our task must be to strive for greatness, not mere survival—greatness that springs most often not from optimal circumstance, but often in spite of it, as Anne suggests in her advice to directors but which just as easily applies here:

- Do not assume that you have to have some prescribed conditions to do your best work.
- Do not wait.
- Do not wait for enough time or money to accomplish what you think you have in mind.
- Work with what you have right now.
- Work with the people around you right now.
- Work with the architecture you see around you right now.
- Do not wait for what you assume is the appropriate, stress-free environment in which to generate expression.
- Do not wait for maturity or insight or wisdom.
- Do not wait till you are sure that you know what you are doing.
- Do not wait until you have enough technique.
- What you do now, what you make of your present circumstances will determine the quality and scope of your future endeavors.
- And at the same time, be patient.

Good to Great author Jim Collins finds the path to organizational greatness not just in connection to a resource base but in connection to passions and understanding of uniqueness, just as Colin Greer links triumph to commitment and as Rushkoff attributes the success of Google to innovation—innovation driven not by fear of competition but by their passion—a passion that leads naturally to reinvent and remake, innovation that, springing from passion, continually drives them to go deeper and deeper into their core skills, not to go wider or diffuse.

As we move through this journey, we may re-orient ourselves, weighing our individual places in a landscape of theatres, accepting that our pursuit of depth rather than breadth may lead us to more frequently saying no, recognizing that no one theatre can offer every experience or serve every potential audience member. As Kevin McCarthy noted, "Organizations that do everything risk doing nothing."

We may, in the true understanding of systems and individual action, need to weigh the consequences of our actions against the whole. Nothing in the last year has chilled and startled me more than a comment made at our field conversations last spring. "Running a theatre of color," one leader said, "is like watching the integration of baseball. However good it was for the players, it was the end of the Negro League and the end—for an entire generation and more—of African-American owners and coaches and managers." For all of our good intentions, do we truly measure and understand our individual actions on the field as a whole?

We may need to rally more often to one another's aid and defense—celebrating the small theatres for the risk and adventure they can undertake, celebrating the large institutions as our best hopes for lives of economic dignity for those who work within them and as the entry point for many of those who move into the more avant-garde.

There are many maybes and there are signs that this will always be a journey rather than a destination achieved, that we, like the pyramid on the dollar bill that Guy Garcia told us about, will never be finished, will never reach the ideal. But beyond what we may need to do, what we must do is accept that it will undoubtedly be different.

We cannot hope to thrive if our deepest intentions are on preserving our theatres and our institutions as we know them today. We must be willing to seize and embrace the change that is sure to come. Just as the not-for-profit theatre field of 50 years ago—a field of a mere two dozen professional theatres—bears scant resemblance to the field we know today, the field of 50 years from now will look different, will act different, will be different than the one we know today.

As will TCG.

For it is time for me to say goodbye to you all, to yield the reins to someone else, in part to invite its transformation. Even as the TCG today is in many ways very different than the one I was blessed to inherit, the transformations have not meant the eradication of all that went before. Our changes have, I hope, responded to conditions, responded to your needs, led us deeper and deeper into our commitment of service to you. TCG's positive change will be in direct proportion to the energy and investment you give it, especially in these coming months. I leave feeling that we have brought it to a new point of strength—indeed, I could not leave in good conscience if we were in a point of peril—and because the organization will be best served by periodic change. I can only hope my successor will be given the same openness, the same generosity, the same affection that all of you have afforded me.

As I close, just as you have been so generous in saluting me, I must take a moment to salute you. Marge Piercy, in her poem "To Be of Use," unknowingly drew the best picture of you all that I know when she wrote:

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shadows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.

Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
But you know that they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

You are the people I have always loved best, from the first moment I stumbled into a rehearsal hall in 1974. You are those people who dive, who harness, who move and pass the bags and move in a common rhythm, who cry for—and create—the work that is real.

At our best, we have known—and accepted our responsibility—the part of our mission that lies increasingly in molding and defining our national character.

We know that if a nation aspires to true greatness, it will do more than intone stale and mindless slogans of patriotism; it will do more than wallow in the drab literalness of the day to day. We know that if a nation aspires to true greatness, it must nurture and cultivate the collective imagination—the ability to imagine life other than as it is lived, our only road to the new solutions, not only to the problems that currently confound us but to the problems we have yet to see. We know that if a nation aspires to true greatness, it must constantly ask of itself, "Can we get along with one another," as Anne asked. As artists, we labor in the hopes that our nation aspires to that greatness—a greatness that means it must support the arts.

We want that greatness—and no matter who we are, or what kind of work we pursue, or what our own religious or political beliefs may be, we all believe in the transformative power of theatre, we all believe in what happens when the lights go up on a darkened house and a voice begins to speak, we all know that imagination—deep, wild, passionate imagination—is as valuable a national resource as economic impact and educational test scores.

Our deepest values, as we must increasingly claim, lie not only in those instrumental and extrinsic benefits, but in the ones—captured like those in the Wallace Foundation's *Gifts of the Muse*. Engagement. Delight. Playfulness. Passion. Rapture. Communion.

At our best, I can only hope that we have extended these values to one another—engaging and delighting, sharing our passions, transporting to rapture, achieving communion. That we have together at our best been, like Anne said, "Heroic, poetic, intense, beautiful." Your generosity—your astounding generosity—the affection and respect and love I have felt from you—every time you have opened your homes to me, with every note and letter, with your presence here, indeed, for every moment of the last eight years, will be with me as long as I live, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for it all.

My name is Ben Cameron and, even as I now relinquish this role, I have been honored, humbled and deeply grateful every day of my tenure to be your executive director, to work beside you, with you, for you. God speed you in your travels, God speed you in your work, God bless you in every aspect of your lives. The 2006 TCG National Conference is adjourned.