Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Do Non-Profits Still Make Sense?

Diane Ragsdale · Thursday, June 21st, 2012

This past Thursday and Friday I had the honor of attending a convening on global performance, civic imagination, and cultural diplomacy at Georgetown University, hosted by Derek Goldman and Cynthia Schneider. By bringing "leaders in international theater and performance together with foreign policy leaders from academia, think tanks, and government," the stated hope of the organizers was to bridge the gap between the fields of politics and culture, to the mutual benefit of both. Over the course of the first two days of the convening some questions began to emerge:

- When we talk about cultural exchange and cultural diplomacy what, exactly, are we talking about—and are these acts different from simply doing a performance in another place, or for another people, than one's own?
- Before, or as, we discuss these issues at the global level might we acknowledge the necessity for this work on the local level and examine the possible connection between the two?
- Is the impact of this work measurable? Must we be able to measure the impact of this work in order to make the case for its support? Or can we trust that it makes a difference?
- Is the best work in this area government sanctioned, organized, and subsidized? Or is it best when furthered through the decentralized, grassroots relationships that are formed when one artist or one presenter or one company sets out with the intention to forge individual connections?
- Are the goals of art and the goals of cultural diplomacy aligned; or in asking the former to serve the latter are we compromising artists and the aims of art?

I left Friday afternoon (a day early, unfortunately) with these questions on my mind. On my way out the door to grab a cab to Union Station I ran into a playwright (now based in the US but originally from outside the US) and we had a quick chat. In the midst of our conversation she commented on the nonprofit system of organizing and funding the arts in the US, making the point that the system is flawed because it puts all art in service of social or educational goals—and in doing so constrains artists and art. Her point was that all work created under non-profits must serve the instrumental ends of education and be in service of a mission. Her perspective as a playwright, in particular, was that nonprofit theaters create mission statements, and then programmatic strategies to fulfill those mission statements, and that such strategies inevitably filter or limit the types of plays that can or will be selected. The question she seemed to be asking: What happens to the artists whose works falls between the mission cracks, so to speak? Cynically I thought, "Oh, well in the US, they simply go open their own nonprofit organizations." On the three hour train

ride to my next stop I found myself thinking about this issue of art in service to instrumental ends, which came up both at the convening on cultural exchange and in the conversation with this playwright. I began to mull on the following:

- Are the mandates (educational/social) that come with nonprofit status appropriate for artists that simply want to make work without having to put that work in service of an educational or social mission? In other words, for those that bristle at the idea of "instrumental ends" for the arts, is the nonprofit form a legitimate and beneficial form? If not, what would be a better fit? L3C, perhaps, as I've written about before?
- Have some or many of us set up nonprofit institutions because the nonprofit form is a vehicle for accessing capital for money-losing art, rather than a vehicle for society-serving art?
- Since the nonprofit form is preferred by so many seeking to produce or present artistic experiences is the underlying belief that all art serves society? If not, how would we discern the difference between "art that serves educational and social ends" and art that serves some other ends?
- How constraining, really, is nonprofit status? That is, do the majority of artistic leaders even think about the works they are producing or presenting as being in service of educational or social goals? Or do they simply program works they like and believe in, regardless of such instrumental ends?
- If the nonprofit form is not all that constraining then is it all that meaningful?

Returning to the topic of the Georgetown convening – cultural exchange and diplomacy – I have found myself at many of such meetings over the past several years and at each one I have made the following point: Many US artists rely on performances overseas for income. In other words, what is motivating them to perform in Europe or Asia is often the touring fees (i.e., money)—not "cultural exchange" and certainly not "cultural diplomacy." While I don't think that cultural exchange and diplomacy need to be government funded or organized to be legitimate I also don't think that anytime an artist hops on a plane and performs at a festival that this constitutes "exchange" or "diplomacy". The difference would seem to be one of intention, at the very least. I think the same is true of nonprofit status. When we were forming our institutions 5, 10, 20, 30 years ago was our intention to serve society through art? Was our intention to educate through art? Or was there at the outset (among some or many of us) simply the practical consideration that calling oneself nonprofit would (a) provide legitimacy and (b) provide a possible business model for sustaining art (maybe worthy, maybe not-so-worthy) that would not make it on box office alone? We are nonprofit in name, but are we (by-and-large) nonprofit in spirit? Are we nonprofit in purpose? If losing money were the only or even primary criteria for nonprofit status then plenty of commercial films and Broadway musicals could also be nonprofit. If we have been using this form to achieve ends other than the social and educational ends for which it was created, then perhaps it is time that we created a way to exist that has integrity with what we really are, or want to be in the future? *Re-posted with permission from Jumper. Image from Cultsha Xpo, an annual event presented by CultureWorks spotlighting the Richmond, Virginia, region's non-profit arts and culture organizations.*

This entry was posted on Thursday, June 21st, 2012 at 4:23 am and is filed under Lifestyle
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