

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Why Artists Aren't Making a Living, and Artistic Directors Aren't Making a Difference

Diane Ragsdale · Friday, December 2nd, 2011

Saturday night I went to Joe's Pub to see playwright-lounge lizard Ethan Lipton & His Orchestra perform his new work, *No Place To Go*, about a playwright-lounge lizard that must decide whether to relocate or stay in the 'the city' when the company that has provided him with a steady 'day-job' (part-time no-benefits employment) for a decade decides to relocate to Mars. It's funny, satirical, and poignant. As you might have inferred, the piece is inspired by events in Lipton's life.

Some of my friends who are actors, playwrights, composers, or directors are able to make something close to a living alternating between paying gigs and unemployment (if you can call having a gross income just above poverty level and no health insurance 'making a living'); but many of them have (like Lipton) been able to pursue their careers as artists only by working day jobs (many of which have become harder to obtain or hold onto during the rather brutal current economic climate).

There was a time when one of the first principles of resident theaters in this country was that they would hire a company of actors and then cast them in multiple productions throughout the season in a combination of large and small roles. I recently re-read a speech given by W. McNeil Lowry at the Ford Foundation in which he mentions that Ford started investing in theaters in the 1960's in part to improve circumstances for actors. While 'acting ensembles' still exist they are mostly in the form of 'artist-driven collectives' that produce shows but operate with a bare bones administrative budget. There are exceptions, but by-and-large, and for a variety of reasons, resident theaters lost their resident acting companies decades ago.

Over the same period of time, however, the administrative staffs of these same theaters became quite substantial to the point where NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman has recently questioned whether we need "three administrators for every artist" in America. I'm not familiar with the research that underpins that question/statistic, but it certainly seems that artists with salaries are generally artists that have become arts administrators.

The past year or two I've begun to hear artistic directors express dismay at the fact that we give administrators salaries but we hire actors, directors, designers, and writers on a 'contract' basis. Unfortunately, these conversations never seem to go anywhere. I don't hear anyone going so far as to suggest that theaters try to 'get the acting company back together again' or even that theaters should be paying higher wages to artists to compensate for the fact that they no longer provide stable employment. They all seem to shrug their shoulders and shake their heads as if to say, "I

wish I could do something about this”. It’s like they’ve forgotten that they are the leaders of these organizations and responsible for setting the priorities and values.

I’m no artistic director, but I can think of a few things larger theaters in the US might do for actors short of reconstituting their acting companies and their repertory models:

- What if theaters maintained a minimum ratio between ‘wages or fees paid to artists’ and the total operating budget?
- What if investments in the buildings, administrative budgets, and salaries of full-time staff of theaters were matched with a relative increase in artistic budgets and, specifically, wages or fees paid to artists?
- What if LORT A theaters paid wages to artists comparable to a Broadway production contract?
- What if, in consideration of the fact that an actor must begin working on a role before rehearsal begins and often needs time to find employment after a show ends, actors were paid a minimum of 12 weeks of salary at any LORT theater (even though they were working at the theater for only 8 of those weeks)?
- What if theaters opting to do a play with 5 or fewer characters doubled the weekly wages of the actors?

I know ...these ideas are preposterous.

I remember hearing Michael Halberstam at Writers’ Theater in Chicago speak at a TCG conference (at a brilliant session with Mike Daisey discussing his insightful and rather incendiary work *How Theater Failed America*) and learning that Writers’ Theater had long ago made a commitment to invest in actors (and local ones at that) and pay wages comparable to the wages paid by larger theaters. It sounded so right when I heard it, and it was clear that in this room filled with artistic and managing directors from around the country that Michael Halberstam was considered a radical for doing this.

Why is it an outlandish idea to pay as much as you can to the artists and to keep administrative or other production costs as low as possible in order to do so?

And why do we accept this strange idea that doing a play with more than 5 characters is going to bankrupt a theater with a \$5- or \$10- or \$15 million operating budget?

Pffff.

Ethan Lipton is clearly a talented artist. As much as I’d like to hope that he will suddenly be able to make his living fulltime as an artist in this country, realistically I know that I should probably hope that he gets another part-time day job that will let him continue working as an artist.

This makes me sad. I bet it makes many artistic directors sad, as well. But we need to do more than shake our heads when we discuss that arts administrators can make a living wage in this country and that even really talented actors (and musicians and dancers) too often cannot.

We want to tell ourselves that it is not possible to do more for artists but this is simply not true.

At large institutions across this country, of course more can be done.

I welcome other outlandish suggestions ...

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