



Setting the Stage Report

January 14, 2019

Introduction

Over 40 participants joined Arts Now, Partners for Theater, and the Akron Civic on the stage of the Civic the evening of Monday, January 14, 2019 for a discussion about the changing theater landscape in Summit County and the community's insight as we set the stage for the work ahead. A more diverse set of participants joined the conversation than were represented in the follow-up survey. As there were some members of the community who were unable to attend, a second survey was posted on social media and shared via email to elicit additional feedback on key questions around challenges, strengths, opportunities, and ways backbone organizations (such as Arts Now) can support the theater community.

During the event, participants were asked to discuss the following four questions at their tables and then share key phrases on large flip charts. Worksheets with more detailed responses were also collected. Additional responses were gathered via two surveys: a participant feedback survey and a survey of those not in attendance. The major themes and ideas are documented below.



1. What are the challenges facing the theater community in Summit County?

2. What is going well for the theater community in Summit County?

3. What are the opportunities for the theater community in Summit County?

4. What can service organizations such as Arts Now and Partners for Theater do to support you?

Discussion and Survey Prompt Themes

What are the challenges facing the theater community in Summit County?

Fractured Space

Outreach and Audiences

Collaboration, Coordination, and Communication

Funding

Diversity and Inclusion

Infrastructure

Pipeline

Fractured Space

- More theaters to use but are they affordable to smaller companies
- Affordable theater to unexposed markets
- Siloing of theater companies -- every theater gets a core
- Lack of centralization
- Affordable rehearsal and performance space.
- Space (rehearsal/production)
- Non-centralized - not always close to where "we are"/more spread-out
- Audience Education
- Population density
- Facilities can be difficult
- Fracture between neighborhoods

Outreach and Audiences

- Finding an audience
- Theater administrators are so close to their artistic work that they have difficulty understanding the audiences needs and interests. How can they better reach audiences that are interested in their work? What can they learn from audiences that are not interested in their work? How can they find a way to improve marketing and communications about the work? How can they collaborate to bring audiences together rather than compete for their time and resources?
- Effective marketing
- Building audiences
- The resources to market
- Besides funding, general exposure to the public is poor. People aren't aware of the number of theaters available to them.
- Ability to get audiences interested
- What denotes good theater? / Is the audience too subjective?
- Competing with movies/pop culture
- Reaching out to people who are not engaged
- Audiences (and bringing in new people)
- Marketing more effectively
- Getting word out

- Audience for new works
- Thinking like the majority of non-theater people
- Developing strong public interest/support
- Audience -- education
- Attendance
- Reaching people not used to going to the theater.
- Disconnected from grassroots community; lack of attendance
- Growing audience, attracting audience for adventurous offerings
- Energy!!! and hope for more participation as population grows

Collaboration, Coordination, and Communication

- Siloing of theater companies -- every theater gets a core
- Lack of centralization
- Cooperation rather than competition.
- Theater administrators are so close to their artistic work that they have difficulty understanding the audiences needs and interests. How can they collaborate to bring audiences together rather than compete for their time and resources?
- Duplicated admin costs, isolation within the community, ticket costs,
- Varies theater to theater...a lot of local theaters are horrible at networking and partnering in their own communities
- Lack of knowledge about goings on in theater community
- Calendar of events that encourages organizations not host fundraising events simultaneously
- Cross collaboration/coordination/communication
- Communication among theaters, expressing activities and needs
- People are concerned about sharing too much information -- incentivize cooperation
- Coordination between groups - dare we say collaboration

Funding

- Funding/Sustainable Finances (8)
- Ticket costs
- More theaters to use but are they affordable to smaller companies
- Affordable theater to unexposed markets
- The resources to market
- Cost investment
- Lack of corporate interest (\$ going to Cleveland instead)
- Grants are competitive and hard to navigate (3)
- Finances (for actors/crew) -- disconnect between pros and community theater
- Grants -- finding them and writing them
- Struggling with the day job actors have to have
- Educating local grant organizations on the value of classic theatre. Educating grant organizations on the need to support growing theatre organization as much as individual, one-off projects.

Educating the community about the need to pay local actors and get more help supporting the theatre companies who are doing so.

- Lack of a steady, reliable income stream that would make it possible to hire top-quality staff who will stay and have the resources to build companies with all the components of a home, equipment, staff and creative resources. Efforts to impose a bed tax or sin tax (like the cigarette tax in Cuy County) have failed, but our community would benefit from county funds that regularly support the arts, including theater, in educational workshops and professional productions for people throughout our community.

Diversity and Inclusion

- Diversity
- Varies theater to theater. Lack of inclusivity
- Insularity
- Gender/Race Parity
- Ageism

Infrastructure

- Lack of knowledge about goings on in theater community
- Calendar of events that encourages organizations not host fundraising events simultaneously
- Tie into visual arts
- Transmission of arts/theater activities to other arts
- Poor infrastructure for central website
- Need for source of information
- Mechanism for finding out what going on
- Infrastructure -- user friendly
- SummitLive365 -- not user friendly
- Valuing technology

Pipeline

- Varies theater to theater. You have management and boards so stagnant and mismanaged that you learn to avoid them. Lack of new, locally written, and developed works. Repetitive productions...Plus a shortage of directors doesn't help either.
- Bringing in young people. Getting training in theater arts. Management training.
- Communication with original work and published works
- There are not enough quality venues producing musical theatre productions
- Schools cancel trips when levies fail
- No pipeline for fostering new talent (see #2 above). No playwright development; no local playwright production. We don't mentor new directors or tech.

What is going well for the theater community in Summit County?

Community Support

Work with Schools

Growth

Dedication of Individuals and Organizations

Talent and Quality

Other

Community Support

- Committed volunteers. Amazing base of talent spanning all ages and ethnicities.
- Incredible commitment on the part of the people who have run the companies (and acted in them), keeping them going with their own hard work and thin margins. (Dennis O'Connell and Holly Barkdoll come to mind, as do the leaders and cast of the Ohio Shakespeare Company.) Interest from the community at large.
- Variety of theatre projects/genres. Solid presence of professional theatre. Good non-profit collaborations.
- Seeming strong attendance at the various venues.
- There are foundations committed to supporting theatre in summit county.
- Outreach events like Stagefest
- Strong, loyal supporters
- Community, grass roots interest
- Stage fest is helping to bring new light to new audiences

Working with Schools

- OSF going into high schools and bringing Shakespeare
- TACA is a great resource
- High schools like Firestone are doing great things

Growth

- Diversity of companies. Positive reputation in the community. Open to change.
- Theaters are branching out
- New generations of young theatre artists entering the scene.
- A diverse cross section of styles
- Variety
- Diverse offerings
- The indie theatre community is well-represented and thriving
- Plenty of choices.
- More opportunities -- As an actor, stage, or audience
- Casting policies, theaters stretching
- Number of opportunities (2)
- Small theatre is growing in numbers

- Quantity of theater
- New theatres are popping up
- Lot of it (young "start-ups")
- Growing scene
- Growing awareness of each other. Increase of new companies and new work.
- There is a lot of variety of theatre in Akron.
- Amazing # of groups and offerings.
- Vibrancy, Lots of shows

Dedication of Individuals and Opportunities

- Diversity of companies. Positive reputation in the community. Open to change.
- Committed volunteers. Amazing base of talent spanning all ages and ethnicities.
- Incredible commitment on the part of the people who have run the companies (and acted in them), keeping them going with their own hard work and thin margins. (Dennis O'Connell and Holly Barkdoll come to mind, as do the leaders and cast of the Ohio Shakespeare Company.) Interest from the community at large.
- Willingness to take risk
- Individuals and organizations dedicated to its preservation and expansion

Talent and Quality

- Diversity of companies. Positive reputation in the community. Open to change.
- Committed volunteers. Amazing base of talent spanning all ages and ethnicities.
- Theaters are branching out
- New generations of young theatre artists entering the scene.
- Creativity / All of the companies in this area
- Quality of production
- Repository of talent
- Quality
- Great performances
- Development of talent
- Their talent
- Great Theater, good parking, quality shows.
- the incredible local talent
- "Quantity. In theaters and talent.
- Quality in talent that is very often under-utilized due to all the reasons stated above."
- There are spaces, traditional and non-traditional that can be used and there are so many theatre professionals willing to work with community members.

Other

- Smaller, denser area
- Cheap to do
- Music scene paved the way

What are the opportunities for the theater community in Summit County?

Outreach and Marketing
Collaboration, Coordination, and Communication
Unique Venues
Professional Development
Subsidized Tax

Outreach and Marketing

- Branding, marketing, community outreach and cooperation. Theaters could partner with other organizations for certain productions (e.g. Domestic Violence Shelter for a play dealing with those issues) to spread awareness and raise funds.
- Underserved markets
- Unite and organize; collective marketing, collective awareness, theater hops, festivals, blogs, news media articles, etc.
- Summit Stage Fest. Investigating new ways of working via collaboration. Expanding audiences through outreach and inclusion efforts.
- Customer research
- Use theatre to increase tourism in Akron with repertory seasons, particularly in summer months, potential to combine with other non-profits for tourist packages (e.g. Akron Zoo, Stan Hywet Hall, two local theatre)
- Finding better ways to let potential audience members know about upcoming shows is a continuing opportunity to grow audiences. New World Performance Lab's use of advertising by UA Myers School's Design X 9 has provided a highly professional look. Many times, I find out at the last minute about performances I would have considered attending. Radio spots on public radio would reach me.
- Customer research -- how to gain access
- Directory of venues
- Audience education (s)
- Untapped clusters of potential theatre goers.
- Develop a festival that allows access to multiple venues/shows ("like a passport")
- Build culture of theater

Collaboration, Coordination, and Communication

- Branding, marketing, community outreach and cooperation. Theaters could partner with other organizations for certain productions (e.g. Domestic Violence Shelter for a play dealing with those issues) to spread awareness and raise funds.
- There are spaces, traditional and non-traditional that can be used and there are so many theatre professionals willing to work with community members.
- Unite and organize; collective marketing, collective awareness, theater hops, festivals, blogs, news media articles, etc.
- Summit Stage Fest. Investigating new ways of working via collaboration. Expanding audiences through outreach and inclusion efforts.

- Customer research
- Consolidation. Incubating and promoting local writers and material. Adult classes. In house mentoring for directors, designers, etc...
- More collaboration between theaters
- Sharing space
- Communication
- Collaborative website just for theater -- eblast, social media, full page ad
- Partnering with University students for business plans video ads
- More collaboration, cooperation, sharing of best practices and mentoring by established companies of emerging or struggling companies.
- Stronger presence with better coordination among theater groups.
- shared resources and venues, collaboration, centralized supporting networks
- To share resources, volunteers and talent
- Pool resources to expand productivity both in quality and quantity.
- Shared resources

Unique Venues

- Shakespeare, comedy, musical, drama, youth, community, professional.
- We have a lot of talent and it gives us the capacity to do challenging work.
- Weathervane -- Black Box
- Distinct visions for theater artistry
- Stages to fill
- Spaces in downtown area
- Growth with the newest downtown residents
- Building more around magnet theater programs

Professional Development

- Unite and organize; collective marketing, collective awareness, theater hops, festivals, blogs, news media articles, etc.
- Consolidation. Incubating and promoting local writers and material. Adult classes. In house mentoring for directors, designers, etc...
- Traveling theatre intern program
- Producer education

Subsidized Tax

- Bringing in sponsorship for subsidized tax

What can service organizations (e.g. Arts Now & Partners for Theater) do to support you?

Resource Sharing/Support Collaboration
Support Inclusivity and Diversity Efforts
Promotion and Outreach
Information Sharing Opportunities

Resource Sharing/Support Collaboration

- Professional development
- Marketing assistance
- Branding development
- Mentoring and education
- Perhaps establish a central office/committee/department for mediating and/or reporting HR conflicts.
- I also think it would be helpful for theaters to coordinate their calendars so that shows don't run on the exact same weekends (staggered instead), and the region can offer more varied productions. I realize that some theaters are very protective of their prospective season (fear of theft), so perhaps a 3rd party can establish a central, confidential department/committee for such a thing."
- Prop database/prop depository
- Sharing of resources
- An administrative coop for small groups -- runs nuts and bolts for a group of small organization

Support Inclusivity and Diversity Efforts

- Gumdip Theater -- They present immigrant theater
- More diversity in the theatre -- marketing -- giving to immigrant
- Increase accessibility (ADA style)
- Establish a borrowing library for accessibility: ramps, captioning devices, assisted hearing, sign language interpreter lists.

Promotion and Outreach

- Working as an advocacy group (lobbying, etc.)
- Help get the word out. Promote theater in their arenas.
- Promote & collaborate (3)
- Promote attendance. Create awareness of the importance of live theater.
- Partners for Theater would help us if they attended more of our shows so they could spread the word that we exist.
- Let public know that these organizations exist -- outreach
- Audience information
- Come to theatrical events

Information Sharing/Training Opportunities

- Administration (accounting, legal, payroll, grant writing, etc.), advocacy (with government and corporations)
- A lot of local theaters need to learn how to structure themselves, operate legally, and get help with marketing. You don't want to see what is really happening at the board and management level.
- Keep us informed of grants/ money for accessibility/diversity.
- Service organizations should bring in consultants and offer technical assistance to improve the overall sector. Many of the theater administrators understand the craft but they struggle with the business. How can they strike an appropriate balance of creativity and analytical development? Also, more opportunities for the small theaters to see what's happening outside of Akron. Rather than living in a glass globe, look nationally and internationally for the systems that work in other regions.
- Maybe a theatre publication that includes all the theatres and their seasons and shows
- Quarterly theater meetings between counties, different venues
- More communication to what is offered and where more gatherings like this
- Continue building spaces for the sector to come together