

Keynote Address by Ben Cameron
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Thank you for that lovely introduction—and a special thanks to Betsy Baun and the board of SETC for this opportunity. I am always delighted to be back in my native South—knowing I don't have to explain that men who call their fathers Daddy do so out of emotional strength, rather than mental deficiency; that true haute cuisine is a plate of barbecue, a side of hush puppies, a jar of sweet tea and a Krispy Kreme donut; and that the three most important words in the English language are “Anybody but Duke.” Thanks for welcoming me home.

We gather today in a moment when there are possibly more theatres in America than at any time in our national history. This is the culmination of a movement begun in the 1950's by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations; joined by government in 1965 [with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965] and the subsequent creation of state arts agencies in every state, and local arts agencies in many communities—the first in the nation being proudly Winston Salem, North Carolina. This movement was expanded through both corporate foundations—AT&T, Dayton Hudson and Philip Morris, to name a few—and was deepened by innumerable family foundations and by individual donations, decentralizing the arts beyond the major metropolitan areas of New York, San Francisco and Chicago, to cities and communities in all 50 states, as far flung as Blue Lake, CA, Whitesburg KY and Douglas AK. These are all homes to major arts entities today. Designed with a threefold purpose—to expand and serve artist audiences all over the country, to improve employment opportunities and wages for artists, and to encourage experimentation and growth of the art form-- this effort succeeded beyond our wildest dreams, expanding non-profit professional theatres from fewer than three dozen in 1961 to roughly 2,000 such theatres today—catalytic philanthropy at its best.

Those early days of extraordinary funding now seem all too remote, especially as we gather this afternoon in the shadow of a global economic crisis—a crisis in which the nonprofit arts have been deeply challenged. That same philanthropy at every level that helped us thrive has been deeply shaken: many funders have abandoned the arts, audiences are plummeting, and theatres are facing what has been termed “a new normal”—a time of diminished resources, downsized staffs, reduced expectations—which often are translating into smaller cast shows, fewer productions, shorter runs, and indeed are producing a wave of theatre closings. These include most notably the Tony Award winning Theatre de la Jeune Lune in Minneapolis and Madison Rep in Wisconsin, and numerous other emergency campaigns, including those currently underway at the Intiman Theatre in Seattle—winner of the Tony Award for best regional theatre just five years ago—and Actors Express here in Atlanta, to name just two.

As depressing as this can seem, I would humbly suggest we disserve ourselves if we define our lives in terms of the financial crisis. Indeed, to be even bolder, while our collective financial fortunes—as meager as they are—are under assault, the crisis in the arts is not financial.

To explain. At the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation where I work, our late benefactress charged us in her will with the care of “actors, singers, dancers and musicians in the presentation and performance of their work”—a directive that, in intersection with her lifelong

passions, has led us to dedicate our resources to artists working in jazz, contemporary dance, and theatre, and the organizations who nurture, present and produce them.

As we entered our 10th year of grant making in 2007, we convened more than 700 artists, managers, administrators and board members in 22 meetings to explore the issues they faced in the new millennium.

We heard three kinds of issues in these conversations. We heard idiosyncratic issues—issues particular to one field but not to others; such as issues of career transition for dancers, who train in many cases foregoing college and other vocational training and at the age of 35 find themselves at the end of their careers with no clear alternatives about how now to spend their lives. This is a powerful, hugely challenging issue but one that does not resonate for theatre, where actors and directors can work into their 70's, 80's and 90's and where the discussion is centered instead on language barriers in a time of rising internationalism and union restrictions inhibiting international exchange.

We heard chronic issues—issues of under-capitalization and under-compensation, not only of artists, but of managers, administrators and technicians. Indeed, when we talk about the philanthropic support for the arts—the donations of individuals, corporations, government and foundations—too often we forget that we are an industry predicated on discounted labor and that the single largest philanthropic sector of all is the artists, administrators and technicians from whose lives the work is made.

While these issues are hugely critical—and indeed, we must continue to work to overcome them-- we call them chronic because, quite frankly, those of us old enough to remember heard the same issues in comparable conversations 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago and more.

Four issues, however, emerged as especially powerful in all fields, and are especially particular to our 21st Century.

First, we heard concerns about the increasing dysfunctionality of the 501(c)3 model, including the breakdown of old fundraising strategies, the difficulties of managing boards, and the hunger for new models. Arts leaders, increasingly overwhelmed, said “I went into this business, not from desire to manage a large organization, but because of a love for the arts. Now my life is about fundraising, board cultivation, school board policy, advocacy and the like. Weeks go by without my setting foot in a rehearsal hall; artists come and go in our building whose names I don't even know. Something is wrong with this picture: isn't there another way for us to finance and support the work we are called to do?”

Second, we heard concern about an impending generational transfer of leadership—an especially apt topic for today. Much of similar past conversation focused on where we might find these new leaders of tomorrow. Young people have different expectations regarding higher compensation and shorter hours; in essence, they have less patience for the sacrificed lives of dignity and the financial masochism that were the givens for so many in my own generation. The conversation was revealing in a new way, “There are plenty of us eager to give ourselves to the arts, but we don't want to be the mere custodians of those institutions you have already made,” the young people in the room said. “Unless we are given the same authority to reinvent and reshape organizations as you yourselves were given, we are not interested.” This point of

view focuses the issue, not on the identities of heirs apparent, but on organizational capacity for flexibility, re-invention and change.

We heard about the erosion of audiences in every field—declining subscription renewals, difficulties in attracting single ticket buyers, increased “churn” [a term reflecting the high percentage—typically 70-75%—of audience members who attend a single event in a season and do not return], the collapse in the window of social planning post 9/11, when seemingly overnight audiences shifted from committing, not two to four weeks in advance, but more typically purchasing on the day of or, if you’re lucky, 24-48 hours in advance. This disorienting shift continues to plague box office and marketing departments, who struggle to understand the implications on a Tuesday for a sparsely sold Saturday performance. Even before the economic collapse, we faced a populace characterized by over-scheduling and exhaustion—a time in which 42% of men and 55% of women say they are too tired to do the things they truly want to do, and where the #1 answer to the question of most eagerly anticipated use of a free evening is no longer dinner with friends or a movie or a performing arts event, but is instead “a good night’s sleep.” After decades of growth, theatre audiences are shrinking with every passing year. Our own financial needs, driven in many cases by escalating fixed costs of facilities, insurance, health care and more; in tandem with negative shifts in funding, means that escalating ticket prices threaten to place attendance beyond the reach of so many in our communities that we wish to serve.

Finally, we heard the struggle to understand more fully the impact of technology on live performing arts. While many of us greeted the internet as a potential new force in marketing, its realized potential is, if anything, too effective. In trying to attract the attention of potential ticket buyers, we now compete with (depending on who you read) the three to five thousand different marketing messages a typical American sees every single day. In fact, technology has emerged as our biggest competitor for leisure time: Gen X-ers spend 20.7 hours of leisure time every week on TV and online combined, the majority TC; Gen Y-ers spend even more—22.8 hours, the majority on line—and growing by leaps and bounds. And by the time many of you graduate from college, you will have spent more than 20,000 hours on the Internet and an additional 10,000 hours playing video games. This is a radically different cultural market in which computer games now outsell movie and music recordings combined.

Most profoundly, perhaps, technology has altered the very assumptions of consumption: thanks to the internet, we believe we can get anything we want, whenever we want it, customized to our own personal specifications. We can shop at three in the morning or ten o’clock at night and have expectations of convenience and personalization that live performing arts organizations—organizations who depend on set curtain times, specific geographic venues, attendant inconveniences of parking, travel and the like—simply cannot meet. And in an age where young people especially access culture on demand through YouTube and iTunes any time they want it and for little or no apparent cost, what will it mean in the future when we ask a potential audience member to pay \$100 for a symphony, opera or dance ticket, when that consumer has been accustomed to downloading music on the internet for .99 a song or for free?

However particular these issues feel to us in the arts, we are not alone: we are essentially in the midst of a realignment of cultural expression and communication—a realignment that is shaking the newspaper and television industries, the publishing and book industries, and (in an

indication of what may be yet to come) has left the recorded music and music distribution industries in disarray.

Surely we see ourselves in the words of poet Adrienne Rich in *The Dream of a Common Language XIII*: “We’re out in a country that has no language, no laws...Whatever we do together is pure invention. The maps they gave us were out of date by years...”

And so I say, the crisis the arts face today is not financial. The crisis we face is one of urgency and relevance: the financial merely redefines the resources we bring to bear in confronting the crisis.

And aren’t you glad Betsy invited me here to brighten your day?

In looking to the future, I find inspiration in the words of two different thinkers: our 19th Century American President Abraham Lincoln, who in his second inaugural address said, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so must we think anew and act anew.”

And Wayne Gretzky, the Canadian ice hockey player, who when asked to account for his greatness said simply, “I skate to where the puck will be.”

In this journey, we must begin by asking: why must we exist today? Because we have a building is no longer good enough. Because we have a staff and board is no longer good enough. Because we have a history of critical reviews and awards is no longer good enough. What is it in the world that mandates that we continue forward and flourish today?

Every organization must begin by asking itself three questions:

- 1) What is the value of my theatre or my work for my community?
- 2) What is the value my theatre alone offers or offers better than anything else? In this competitive world, duplicative or second rate value is unlikely to survive for long.
- 3) How would my community be damaged if my theatre closed its doors tomorrow?

If we cannot answer these questions, the only supporters we are likely to find already sit in our seats.

But with the passage of time, I have begun to think that these questions are perhaps too limiting, that they invite us to view our communities through the lens of our organizations as we have known them today. Perhaps the more critical questions are those that lift us outside that organizational context. To use dance as an example, a dance leader must be prepared to answer:

1. What is the value of drama or theatre the art form (not just of my theatre company) for my community?
2. What is the value theatre alone has or that theatre fulfills better than anything else?
3. How would my community be damaged if it were abandoned by theatre tomorrow?

4. And how might my organization be optimally structured, poised and focused to be my community's best conduit to theatre? A question that invites us not to jettison all we do, but to keep what is most central and viable, to expand, to embrace the new possibilities we may not have seen, and to discard past behaviors that do not and will not serve us in the future.

Whether we are theatre professionals or those aspiring to be so, we face a context where these questions are critical—and indeed where the very notion of who the artist is and how she behaves is shifting.

Chris Anderson, editor of *Wired* magazine and author of a book entitled *The Long Tail*, for example, sees in technology the unleashing of a veritable tsunami of creative energy. With the invention and now affordability of cell phones, mini cams, computer software and more, he notes, the means of artistic production have been democratized for the first time in human history. In the 1930's, people who wished to make a movie had to work for Warner Brothers or RKO, for who could afford cameras, lighting equipment, editing equipment and more? Now who among us does not know a 14 year old hard at work on her second, third or fourth film?

Furthermore, the means of artistic distribution have been democratized. Again, in the 30's, the major studios played that role; now upload your film onto YouTube or Facebook, and you have instant world-wide distribution with the click of a button.

This double impact is occasioning a massive redefinition of authorship and the cultural market. Today everyone is a potential author, and while the market for traditional arts audiences may be eroding, the market for arts participants—those citizens who dance, write poetry, paint, sing, or who make their own films is exploding. The arts market paradigm is shifting from consumption to broader participation in which attendance is only one option. We are witnessing an exponential growth in the number of amateurs doing work at a professional level—a group dubbed elsewhere as the Pro-Ams—a group whose work populates YouTube, Film festivals, dance competitions and more. This group is expanding our aesthetic vocabulary, even as they assault our traditional notions of cultural authority and undermine the assumed ability of traditional arts organizations to set the cultural agenda. Indeed, a debate I witnessed in Montreal three years ago culminated in a government minister essentially saying, “You people”—(never my favorite phrase)—“should just declare victory and move on. Virtually everyone in my district writes poetry or reads fiction, paints pictures or listens to music, plays an instrument or acts in the local community theatre. You professional artists could disappear tomorrow and no one would even notice the difference”—a stunning rebuke of the entire nonprofit sector and the professional artist that the assembled found themselves unable to adequately counter.

It is in embracing rather than denying this shift from consumption to participation that the possibilities and the necessities for a new chapter in the arts and in our arts practices arises.

Already, the role of the vocationally dedicated artist has begun to shift, especially among an emerging generation. One of the most exciting developments of the last decade has been the emergence of the hybrid artist— the professional artist who chooses to work outside of the traditionally hermetic arts environment, not from financial necessity, but because the work she or he feels called to do cannot be accomplished in the narrow confines of the gallery, the concert hall or the theatre. These hybrid artists are rejecting past divisions of professional and

amateur and are expanding our sense of aesthetic possibilities—even as they assault our traditional notions of cultural authority and undermine the assumed ability of traditional arts organizations to set the cultural agenda.

Today's theatre world is defined, not only by great institutions like the Steppenwolf of Chicago, Arena Stage of Washington DC or New York's Public Theatre, but by a dense network of small ensembles and groups dedicated to community building and social action. These groups include Cornerstone Theatre of Los Angeles—a company where community members play the leading roles, guided by professionals. Their faith based project brought together 10 religious communities; including Bahai, Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, Native American and even gay and lesbian believers, to work -- both within faiths and collaboratively across faiths -- to create plays to bring diverse religious congregations together to explore common beliefs and engage in social healing in the aftermath of 9/11. It is defined by independent artist Taylor Mac, whose LILY'S REVENGE offered a 50-cast member, five hour extravaganza combining blank verse, disco, camp and politics into a stunning theatrical experience. It is defined by Elevator Repair Service, whose GATZ was a radical re-exploration of F. Scott Fitzgerald, with [at its center] a cover to cover reading of THE GREAT GATSBY; and by The Civilians, who solicited tales of parental divorce over the internet as source material for their newest piece, or by Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who works in environmental festivals to raise awareness of global warming.

As Consultant Alan Brown wrote in a recent evaluation of our Creative Campus, if the arts are to be relevant and gain an audience, “a new breed of artist will need to be cultivated. These artists will be open to critical feedback, vulnerable to new collaboration and new ways of thinking, willing to work with diverse constituents, and comfortable discussing their creative processes in a laboratory environment.”

You are precisely those artists of the future.

Now lest you think you hear me crying for the death of institutions and the charging of the metaphoric institutional Bastille, let me be clear: I for one believe the best of our current arts institutions will continue to be important. Just as the Religious Reformation did not obliterate the Catholic Church—a church which 600 years later provides deep meaning to millions worldwide--the best of our current institutions will continue to be worthy of our investment as they too continue to offer spiritual experiences. Moreover, they represent the best opportunities for lives of economic dignity for many artists, and the logical place where artists who need and deserve to work at a certain scale can find an appropriate home. Many of you will populate those institutions, and some of you may well lead them. And God bless you for it.

But the Reformation reconceived and broadened the universe of how religion would operate, when and where it would operate, who would be empowered to act, giving rise to new denominations, new religious rituals, new opportunities both for clergy to practice in radically new ways and for the common lay person to assume responsibility for her own spiritual experience. Such new opportunities surround us today. And just as today's major theatres were for the most part begun by people in their 20's and 30's who forged paths and roads where none had existed before —people like Gordon Davidson at the Mark Taper Forum or Robert Brustein at Yale Rep or Zelda Fichandler who started the Arena Stage fresh out of

graduate school at Catholic University as a for-profit theatre, selling shares to finance seasons and never running a deficit until she became a nonprofit—our arts landscape is at a comparable moment of evolution now—a moment in which a new generation of pioneers will be responsible for creating new paths and new ways of behavior, where none have existed before.

And so in this changing moment, I want to challenge each of you: which kind of artist do you truly wish to be—a reformer or a pioneer? And why is it that you want to do this at all?

You have already decided what you want to do by virtue of your majors; the curriculum is designed to help you master how to do that—but what are the core values that will guide your lives—the things you will go to the mat for, not most times, but every single time—the things you will consider to honor and nourish even if you are punished for doing so? Financial stability? Risk? Innovation? Honoring of tradition? Ensemble? Power? Service? Fame? The list goes on and on—and no individual can embrace as core values more than 2 or 3 or these. How does your work in leading in the arts fulfill and promote these values? Why must you pursue the work you have chosen?

Clarity about values provides a matrix for decision making, lets you measure and assess the many opportunities and crossroads you will encounter to see whether an opportunity keeps your life on track or throws you off that center. It arms you to lead a life worth living: without such clarity, our lives are random, opportunistic, fragmented, ultimately more likely to lead to uncertainty, stress, confusion and despair. And in the day to day, it arms you against burnout---the fatigue that proceeds from disconnection from those core values. Burnout is not about hours on the clock---We all know the thrill of working 18 hours a day on things that connect to our cores--- and the fatigue of 2 hours on projects unconnected--- it's about failure to define and connect to what is most important to our lives.

I for one am optimistic about the future of the arts, although I have not sounded it until now. Two years ago, I decided to plunge myself into the belly of the proverbial beast and attended Pop Tech, an annual conference in Camden ME for 500 high tech folks, bringing them together to listen to—and interact with—high level thinkers of every stripe and description. Contrary to my expectations, this was not a conference designed to talk about startups or financing: it was—and is—a conference where we listened to world thinkers about the human brain. Topics included global warming, international warfare and terrorism, AIDS research, and the arts. There were many artists participating on panels and each session was followed by a live performance—Vanessa German, a spoken word artist who blew the roof off with her raw evocation of feeling, a hip hop dancer on crutches, and a Gospel Choir of HIV+ singers from the African continent.

While arts conferences are often dominated increasingly by prospects for survival—how will we compete in a market-driven world? How will we keep ourselves on the funding agenda? What will it take to raise an endowment?—the issue of survivability was never raised at PopTech. The assumption is that many will not—and perhaps should not—survive. Instead, here the issues were not how we will survive financially, but how we will change the world. How we will solve global warming. How we will solve AIDS issues. How we will leave the world a healthier, ecologically balanced, less poverty ridden place. Indeed, the unspoken agenda was that there is nothing that we cannot do, and in the world of high tech, truly anything is possible.

You might call this arrogance.

You may call it hubris.

But what became clear to me is that within this world of infinite possibilities, there are new possibilities for us in the arts.

On the one hand, I was encouraged that this group fought to get there. Camden, ME is not an easy place to access, and if any community can convene virtually, this one can. Yet through PopTech and TED and more, this community insists on coming together because of the unique value of live, face to face, collective experience, to conspiring—meaning to breathe together, to breathing the same air. And throughout PopTech, a minor chord, a palpable hunger throbbed in the background. This group was desperate to slow down, to lead less frenetic lives, to find the courage to live for their passions. More and more, they placed premium on contemplation, on captivation, on focus and extended surrender to single experience—experiences that would captivate, resonate emotionally, and at its best enhance spiritual value—to the very things that we in the arts do.

They recognized the ultimate irony of their own success—that prosperity without spiritual enrichment does not bring fulfillment, and in the face of a growing culture dedicated to convenience—to no-iron shirts and microwave meals, to hands free parking and more, all striving to convince us that ease is good and effort is bad, there is value—irreplaceable value in the difficult, in the complex, in the ambiguous and the real.

Especially now, in an age of demonization and fear of difference, of intolerant social policies and politicians who encourage us to view our fellow human beings with fear and hostility and suspicion—an age of announcements to report suspicious behavior to the authorities nearest us—we must seize our role in the formation of our national characters, remembering that we gather audiences to look at our fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. However dramatically our business models will change, the urgency of this quest will remain the same. In giving yourselves to the arts, you honor the past, commemorate the present, and shape and change the future in a way that does honor to all and violence to none. You are activists, pledged and dedicated to a world of understanding, of tolerance, of compassion, of hope.

Let me leave you with a benediction from theatre director Anne Bogart, who, in *A Director Prepares*, wrote the following:

- 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 until 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.

I salute you as you begin your great journeys. I promise you the hand of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation is extended to you in friendship both now and for years to come. And I thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this afternoon.

Thank you and God speed.

Note from SETC: This speech was adapted for print. May, 2011.