
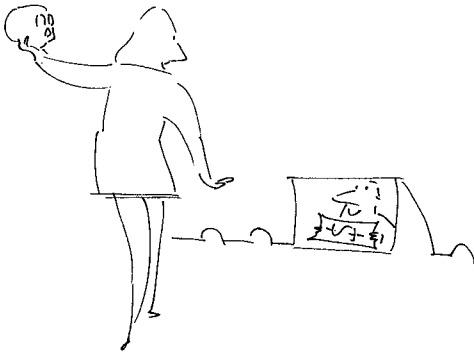


STAGE CRAFT

A photograph of a theater stage. A single spotlight illuminates a single dollar bill lying on the wooden floor of the stage. The rest of the stage and the dark theater seats in the foreground are in shadow.

AS THE PLOT UNFOLDS IN THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS, SMALL ARTS ORGANIZATIONS
ARE CENTER STAGE IN THE DRAMA, SCRAMBLING TO FIND NEW STRATEGIES AND SUPPORTERS
TO KEEP THEATERS AND GALLERIES FROM GOING DARK. IN PITTSBURGH, A REPORT
ON PERFORMERS IN SURVIVAL MODE. BY JEFF SEWALD ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL RICCI



If the recent history of small arts organizations in Pittsburgh were staged as a three-act play, the gripping drama would be sure to pack the house.

In Act I, small arts groups burst onto the scene with fresh ideas and experimental productions. In Act II, they each carve out their niche, overcoming daunting odds to secure a home on the cultural landscape.

That could have neatly ended the play, but in a startling twist, Act III opens with a treacherous economy threatening to wipe out all that the groups have struggled to achieve. Will they survive? What changes will they make to regain their financial footing? What will local philanthropies do?

It's a dramatic climax that's all too real for small arts organizations in Pittsburgh and across the country as they look for new ways to reduce expenses and attract funding during this latest economic freefall.

KARLA BOOS *artistic director*

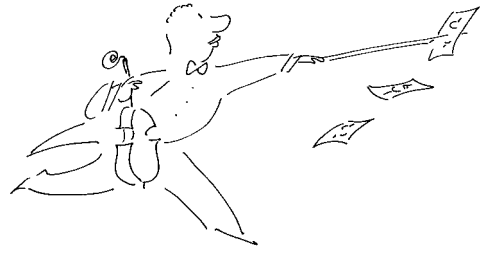
“I can do a lot, cost-cutting and so on, but I can’t easily replace a \$75,000 foundation grant that I was counting on if it doesn’t materialize.”

Known in Pittsburgh for its innovative performance locations as well as its unique plays, Quantum Theatre draws both loyal supporters and curiosity seekers. In February, the company presented Kevin Elyot’s “Mouth to Mouth” in a vacant downtown office building. From left, the actors in the performance are Ken Bolden, Jeffrey Carpenter, John Shepard and Robyne Parrish.

QUANTUM THEATRE

Heather Mull





In one sense, working within the confines of limited staffs and tight budgets is what small arts organizations always do, says Gwen Hunter, the director of Laboratory Company Dance in Pittsburgh. But the current economic crisis has her worried.

“We sent out our individual donor appeal letter in the fall,” she says, “and got back half of what we usually get.” To make matters worse, some of her foundation funding has been put on hold. “We intend to survive, but we will have to scale back our productions.” She sees a limit, however, to the trimming any arts organization can do if it is to fulfill its mission and offer value to its audience.

Many arts leaders in the Pittsburgh region expect government, corporate and individual giving to continue their trends downward, along with bank lending. And the future of foundation grants is a real source of anxiety. That’s why a number of these arts groups are focusing more energy on finding new ways to become self-sufficient and diversifying their program offerings to draw new audiences.

“Everyone’s feeling it,” says David Seals, programs manager for the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council. “We’ve chosen to focus on helping arts organizations plan today for what we see as potentially significant funding decreases down the road.”

Probably nowhere was this foreboding more evident in Pittsburgh than at a packed March 3 meeting in which the Arts Council released a survey showing that only a slim majority—51 percent—of the arts groups responding said they had enough funding to make it through the year. The mood was somber among members of the region’s arts community as they heard those results and listened to a panel of funders, including Janet Sarbaugh, senior program director for Arts & Culture at The Heinz Endowments, give sobering accounts of their grants budgets.

Sarbaugh told the audience that the Endowments is committed to preserving existing

programs and grants, but she also predicted that they hadn’t seen the full impact of the souring economy. Even as the group discussed ways that arts organizations and administrators might be able to devise creative responses to the gloomy forecast, it was evident that hard decisions lay ahead.

Richard Armstrong, former head of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh and now director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Museum in New York, says larger institutions, such as the Guggenheim, with histories of invested money and big audiences will be able to survive. But he and others familiar with the national arts scene describe widely varying fates for other groups.

Mid-size organizations, for example, such as symphonies and museums that attract regional audiences and have sizeable staffs but small endowments, if any, are more likely to face financial binds as contributions and ticket sales decline. Meanwhile, size will probably be an advantage for small groups that are accustomed to creating on the cheap.

“The nation’s 100,000 nonprofit arts organizations—of every size and discipline—are being hurt by the recession, and up to 10 percent of them could close this year,” says Robert L. Lynch, president and CEO of Americans for the Arts, a national nonprofit dedicated to advancing the arts in this country. “However, smaller arts groups are notoriously resilient. Already operating with small staffs and limited budgets, they are often thinking of creative ways to stretch their operating and production costs and can be quite nimble. A little incentive support to small arts organizations can often leverage very big returns.”

Tommer Peterson of the national Grantmakers in the Arts points out that foundations remained steadfast in their grant making during the last two economic recessions. His wish is for them to maintain funding levels until the markets have had a chance to recover and arts organizations have had a chance to retool.



“Some foundations are looking to cut their own administrative costs,” he says, “in order to keep money going out the door.” Peterson believes, however, that more foundations will be expanding reductions to other areas, which will mean that arts groups will need to apply their creativity to their finances. “No matter what funders decide to do, organizations can’t stand there with their hands out. They have to be part of the solution.”

Justin Laing, a program officer for Arts & Culture at the Endowments, has heard the concerns permeating the foundation’s roster of smaller grantees and grant hopefuls, and says the Endowments staff wants to help.

“We imagine the arts community as an ‘ecology’ with various sizes, genres and ethnicities of organizations feeding one another and improving the climate for audiences and participants,” he says. “To ignore the work of small arts organizations would weaken the general environment. Supporting them has been a priority of our Arts & Culture Program since 1995, and it is difficult to envision a time when that would not be so.”

Laing estimates the Endowments’ investments in the local Small Arts and Multi-Cultural Arts initiatives to be \$400,000 each. When other grants to specific organizations are added, the foundation invests between \$900,000 and \$1 million annually in small to mid-size arts organizations.

And the Endowments is not alone when it comes to supporting small arts in Pittsburgh. Several organizations fund select pieces of the local small arts world. For example, the Grable and Buhl foundations often support education-based arts efforts. But five organizations in particular—the Endowments, The Pittsburgh Foundation, the Allegheny County Regional Asset District, the Multi-Cultural Arts Initiative and the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council—have begun talking about how they might work better together to support arts groups.

Still, Karla Boos, Quantum Theatre’s artistic director, believes that raising big money in the current environment will be extremely difficult. So far, ticket sales for Quantum’s innovative and experimental productions have remained steady, which means Boos is not worried so much about today, but about a year from now, especially when it comes to foundation support. “I can do a lot, cost-cutting and so on, but I can’t easily replace a \$75,000 foundation grant that I was counting on if it doesn’t materialize.”

At the Kelly-Strayhorn Theater in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty neighborhood, Executive Director Janera Solomon says the theater’s advanced ticket sales have not kept pace with expenses in recent months. As a result, Solomon may be forced to host only artists whose fees are in line with a reduced cost structure. This is not optimal, but Solomon is philosophical about it.

“Look, we’re not feeding the homeless,” she says. “We work in the arts. Our job is to be creative. And this crisis is an opportunity to show what we can do under pressure.”

As part of its response to this financial crisis, the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council has launched a new market-research effort and an expanded community-wide database for small to mid-sized arts organizations to help them improve their skills in marketing on their own and in collaboration with others. It also is disbursing several corporate-funded grants aimed at audience-building and is offering workshops and pro bono consulting on a variety of pertinent topics, including arts marketing, financial competence and arts law.

“The goal is to facilitate strategic collaboration between the arts and business as well as to support self-sufficiency for artists and arts organizations,” says the Arts Council’s Seals.

For the past 18 years, Chatham Baroque has been captivating audiences at home and abroad with lively interpretations of 17th- and 18th-century



Sam Newbury

CHATHAM BAROQUE

Chatham Baroque has attracted praise locally, nationally and internationally for its ensemble's mastery of 17th- and 18th-century music using authentic instruments of that period. On stage during an October videotaping at Synod Hall in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood are Andrew Fouts, left, on the violin; Patty Halverson, center, on the viola da gamba; and Scott Pauley, right, on the theorbo.

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And we did.”**

JOSHUA FOSTER *executive director*

JEFFREY CARPENTER *artistic director*

“We’re hoping one day to be able to pay for our programming as we go. We know that we have to work within our means.”

During the Bricolage production company's annual Urban Scrawl fundraiser, Pittsburgh artists produce 10-minute plays in 24 hours based on incidents from the playwrights' city bus rides.

The resulting works provide opportunities for actors like George Dalzell, center, to audition for the performances that are staged the day after actors, directors and playwrights meet.

BRICOLAGE

Joshua Frenzo





music played on authentic period instruments. Joshua Foster, the group's executive director, says subscriptions are down slightly. But what's more problematic are looming cuts in government and foundation funding.

Like many small arts heads, Foster has been working as a staff of one since Thanksgiving. But thanks to efforts by his 23-member board, corporate funding has been taking up the financial support slack.

"UPMC Health Plan signed on last year as an underwriter of our performances for children and our main concert series," he says. "I think it was pretty clear that we had to strengthen our ability to demonstrate value to corporations. And we did."

At the Society for Contemporary Craft, contributed income has been holding, and registrations for studio classes, which are taught by artists, have been steady, says Executive Director Jim Wilkinson. There's little doubt, however, that if the recession deepens, students will be more selective about the courses they take, given that they aren't inexpensive.

Then there's the organization's store. "Like a gallery, we sell items from about \$20 up to several thousand dollars," Wilkinson says. And for gallery sales, which account for about one-third of the society's annual revenue, the bottom has fallen out. "We made no sales in January. It's as though we closed the store and didn't know it."

As a result, Wilkinson and his colleagues have been busy rethinking their organization, looking for ways to increase earned revenue. The high-quality craft exhibitions that they produce and dispatch around the country present a significant opportunity. "Exporting what we do is a big part of who we are," he says.

Bricolage Production Company is another organization trying to survive by exercising the entrepreneurialism for which small arts groups

are known. In just its fourth year of operation in downtown Pittsburgh, the group offers six months of free programming plus a staged reading series and several delightfully unusual events. These include an annual fundraiser called the "Urban Scrawl," in which playwrights have 12 hours to write a 10-minute play inspired by a 90-minute ride on a city bus. Then the writers have 12 more hours to ready their plays for production—a "play in a day," if you will.

"We do an annual appeal," says Artistic Director Jeffrey Carpenter, "which usually indicates people's willingness to give—and we're definitely down. So we've decided to cut our number of productions in half, alternating them with a program we call 'Midnight Radio,' which is a source of income for us."

Carpenter describes the program as a cross between "Prairie Home Companion" and "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," featuring classic radio dramas and comedy sketches, music, live "foley" sound effects and an audience "rant box."

Foundations provide Bricolage with 40 percent of its support, with gifts from individuals and proceeds from its fundraiser providing another 40 percent. The remaining 20 percent is generated by ticket sales.

"We're trying hard to bring our foundation numbers down," Carpenter says. "By alternating our free shows with 'Midnight Radio,' we're hoping one day to be able to pay for our programming as we go. We know that we have to work within our means."

In the small arts community, budgets may be hobbled but creative spirits are not. Act III continues with benefactors, funders and lovers of the arts all on the edges of their seats, waiting for a spectacular ending. *h*