



Community Theatre Network Convening 3 Tues. August 1, 2023 Meeting Notes

Present: Ruth Anne Baumgartner (Westport Community Theatre), John Cusano (CAFC), David Green (CAFC), Nova Hall (Town Players of New Canaan), Hugh Hallinan (Downtown Cabaret), Nancy Herman (Eastbound Theatre), Lorie Lewis (CAFC), Paige Miglio (Milford Arts Council/Eastbound Theatre), Sam Mink (Westport Community Theatre), Marie Reynolds (League of Professional Theatre Women), Joel Reynolds (Town Players of New Canaan), Erika Wesley (Westport Country playhouse - GUEST SPEAKER), Carla Sullivan (Center Stage Shelton); Lou Ursone (Curtain Call)

Ten representatives of 7 community theatres, together with guest speaker Erika Wesley, 2 Cultural Alliance staff members, and guest John Cusano, met at Center Stage Shelton on August 1, 2023.

We opened with a welcome from Carla Sullivan describing the history and current space and facilities of Center Stage and then proceeded with brief introductions.

We then went straight into a presentation by Erika Wesley. Erika has been EDI Coordinator at Westport Country Playhouse since October 2022.

- A literary artist, this is her first position at a theatre. Most of her career has been in nonprofit management.
- Fascinated by organization leadership, she approaches DEI issues from a process point of view. Understands people are energized around DEI but the question is "how do you propose to proceed, to implement?" How do you practice this from your role in the organization?
- **It all comes down to strategy. She hears many ideas but for her, "equity is the outcome of strategic, consistent and well-resourced organizational initiatives."**
- Resources=financial+institutional (history comes along on the journey)+intellectual;
- **Equity should amplify a sense of belonging, physical and psychological safety, and diverse experience for all.**
- **Belonging is key:** do people (esp children) feel they belong in your space?
- Psychological safety = freedom to express yourself.
- Diversity is huge so segment it - gender, racial, etc.

- First thing to work on at Playhouse was in defining **value systems** <15:52>
- Asked to describe values, the group responded with: welcoming; belonging, listening, flexibility, accepting challenge (David commented that belonging and challenging were parts of a dialectic between opposites); accommodating; variety
- Erika commented that often there were competing value systems (like between being held by the past and curiosity about an innovative future). And often it was particular individuals who are driving particular values. Do traditional value systems compete with the interests of DEI?
- Erika recommended starting with a **self-assessment**, a listening tour of staff/ volunteers - “what has been your best time and your worst time here?” This should give a good sense of what’s happening between people. So where do we begin.
- The Playhouse started an **affinity group**: the “Justice League” meets biweekly “one singular space where power does not exist.” An intern has as much power in the group as the artistic director. Goal is to have a space to demonstrate the values of inclusion. About 10 people. They go through the organization looking for areas to improve by creating micro-projects - for example in ticketing - how do we honor the indigenous community? - 3-4 people will work it and immediately put the results into practice. Importance of implementing quickly (“Just do it!”). Other times we’ll just do a check-in with everyone about how this work is progressing.
- Erika recommended **thinking collectively about what changes can be made** - and how do you pace yourself for making the change? Important for everyone to show up - but some may listen more than talking.
- When asked if there’s any pushback from the board, Erika said it would come if the League asked the board to do something. However those instances gives them pause to think about the changes they (the board) could make once they see those with little power suggesting real change.
- To a question about whether there is any cost for those in the League. Erika responded that it was important to have **allies** (29:17). One example was how the Artistic Director gave support to some programming ideas from the League - and this sent a message to the Board. This underlined the importance of relationships - and the importance of knowing who your allies are.
- Erika asked for the ad hoc DEI committee to be made into a standing committee (which meant by-laws had to be changed). While board members cannot be part of the Justice League they can be on the DEI committee - so there’s a space for everyone.
- Joel raised the fact that with community theatres the board is usually the volunteers putting on the shows - so it’s a different beast. Also have to reach out for funding carefully and to be sure that the theatre isn’t seen as a private clique. The fear of alienating groups is real.
- Erika responded by pointing out the importance of creating a **Community Action Group** -with audience regulars and donors and others you want to cultivate a relationship with. Could be a valuable and interesting space where inclusion and equity are modeled - everyone’s voice is included and you can tease out ideas for programming that honors the past and gives space to think about the future. Such a group could **build longterm community partnerships** that really model belonging. In

fact every theatre should have such a group - everyday people, volunteers, donors, creatives - could be a great space for thoughtfulness and creativity. Joel agreed but emphasized the difficulty of getting that kind of representation - esp the younger people.

- John Cusano made the point that we don't have to keep using old (board) structures - we can and should do something new: reinvent governing structures.
- Erika accepted these points but emphasized the core issue of finding the common interest among people. **Bringing people together with common interest. Find the thread that we can use to find a way to weave people together.**
- Paige Miglio, speaking as the person running an arts council that oversees many different kinds of activities said she was trying to create a space where the community comes out. They do this to a certain extent with the annual meeting - but she's looking for a way to bring people together specifically to give feedback (38:17). "Could you come twice a year to give feedback?"
- Erika on the **iterative nature of building a community**. Justice League took two years to really get settled. (40:20)
- Lorie on "the thread" - its almost always a basic human need.
- Erika saying that DEI should be working *across* an organization - everything everyone is doing should function with the lens of equity. **Make sure any decision in the organization is made through the lens of inclusion.** It's valuable too to bring in other perspectives: in a conversation about education include artistic, even fundraising into the conversation. Impt that DEI considerations are always there - that someone is asking: "Who is this serving? Who does this marginalize? Who does this help? Who is funding this?"
- When you have DEI activated it can really help you get new ideas out there that can help you reach some of those strategic goals you might have around DEI (45)
- How do you start? First **identify two people who will focus on assessing**. Assessment/listening is the way you can figure out where the gaps are - **what's missing?** If the gap is the audience - have people focus on "who's not here?" Try stepping into the audience - sit in the thick of the theatre: "Who's in here?" Have that curiosity and write this out. So first see who the problem is. Having more than one person helps with accountability.
- **Once you have a team then figure out the next step.** So Erika meets with senior staff to talk about what she's finding. Who can help with the next step? Where's the low-hanging [fruit](#). **You have to build momentum so start with the easy stuff.** You can't shouldn't try to do everything. <47>
- **Do DEI that fits with the mission of your theater.** First steps will look different for different organizations. "What's the thing we can do that doesn't cost a lot of money?" It could be a revamp of your website (e.g., WCP had Google translate their website in Spanish) 48:15. Since 2010 there's been an increase in Spanish speaking so we need to accommodate that. Also build people's excitement about the work - share with the board.
- Then when you come out of some small success like that then it's important to **message your intentions and successes**. This is where many fail - "the silent game is not working in 2023" - message out what your ambitions are with DEI. Tell people

the journey you are on - and emphasize that its a journey. "We are becoming a more inclusive organization and here is how were starting." 49:51 Once you open up you'll be surprised by who wants to join you. Say what you did and then based on the assessment you've done - this is the next step. Email; press release; web series. **Tell people the journey you're on; make it very tangible** - otherwise you may get fear — a visceral response. Once you start the work - keep the communications going. Good for funders to see too. Be transparent - admit when you make a mistake. None of this are doing this work perfectly. ("I refuse to own perfection")

- Once you've built momentum start working on internal relationships. Make sure everyone is experiencing equity from the inside as well as on the outside.
- Someone commented on the importance of **"intersecting identities"** - she wished boards could say yes let's look at all these intersecting identities. Getting people to understand that we all have more than one identity. Equity isn't about "oh I'm not a minority, or I'm not female, so this doesn't apply to me."
- **Erika on an exercise where everyone has to identify their identities** - gives people 20 minutes. When we all think about the complexities of who we are then we can recognize the difficulty of solving these problems. The systems we live in are complex because they are created by people with their own complexities. So having people think about all the different types of people they are is a way of getting people who think they are not part of the conversation to recognize that they are. 56:03
- It's important to start to tease out the different threads of equity. Racial equity in Fairfield County is still a difficult topic. Its easier at the Playhouse to talk about gender equity and for people to think about an all-girls production team - but when you state to talk about black there it gets very difficult....57:17
- Start where you can build momentum and then educate where there appears to be challenge - and you're molding something. Identity conversations are really important because it gets people thinking about who they are and how they show up, and we can have much more courageous conversations about race, power, justice and art and how all that fits together.
- David asking - this is all organic. Many have taken **DEI Training** - where does that fit in to this. Asked who had training: one theatre had 3x4-hour sessions, and one had 3x2-hour sessions. Erika then asked what happened after the training; who owns the training. Yes it creates awareness which is a starting point. But then what? Sitting in awareness is not enough. She encourages organizations to think about the goal. If the goal is change then training is just the point of entry. It should be mandatory - this is where we are, this is what were doing, this is our goal....
- Another low-hanging fruit is with the volunteers you attract and your hiring practices. You can see what's happening in an organization by looking at the "About Us" section on the website - look at the staff page. Who are your volunteers? How do you find them? Importance of moving from awareness into action. Who is doing the doing? Who is on the team.
- **Importance of check-ins.** Justice League has mandatory quarterly check ins. Lunch is provided and everyone checks in. Each department checks in with our EDI driven Smart Goals with Soul - and reports on their SMART Goals (1:02:48)

- Nova Hall reported that in New Canaan working with racial diversity is a hard thing to start just because of what the town looks like (85% White; 7.9% Asian; 5.3% Hispanic; 0.3% Black; 2.7% Mixed) and they're finding sexual identity diversity much more fruitful - and finding the common thread is the key. In addressing the board - half of which says their common thread is "humanity," and the other half says "we need to pay the bills" - is a challenge. "For show selection we say we could do this show that would engage the entire rainbow coalition, or this one that has none of that, or this show, in the middle that introduces the subject but in a way that won't alienate our base."
- Erika thought they were on track - being artful about finding the balance is hard. She reported the Playhouse did *Ain't Misbehaving* but they had many who said "what does this have to do with why I subscribe?" Beforehand, staff discussed what kind of relationships they would target to sell the show. And how would they follow it? The next was *Dial M for Murder* and artistic director Mark Lamos' answer was to have really diverse casting that the play did not naturally call for. So where is the middle? Its an important conversation to keep having: looking for the balance and being transparent about what you are doing.
- It's hard working with boards and the way forward is to probably **make new boards**. knowing that boards are governing entities means that we have to start there.
- Joel said but **how are you going to sell DEI to the community**. Said they are always getting pushback for the land acknowledgement at the beginning. Another question was was how to sell to potential auditioners.
- Noma answered by saying that it was important to have a clear intention and to broadcast that intention. In New Canaan they tried very hard and got 2 diverse cast members auditioning for *12 Angry Men* and just cast a Halloween show and were able to cast a person of color there too. It wasn't easy and they were reaching out to everyone saying "Do you know any black actors - we need black actors."
- Erika saying again that black actors know where **safety** is and where its not - so its hard for them to go out on a limb.
- Erika told the story of a white person saying how great the police were in stopping you if you were leaving the Playhouse late at night and asking if you knew where you were going. That made them feel safe. But it would terrify Erika. Just going out to any place at night there's a whole list of questions you run through about what you have to do to be safe. For the communities we want to target, we should do that work in assuring safety, or being aware of their concerns and answering them. It's up to us. Get the message out through word-of-mouth, through sharing lists of actors and technicians etc
- She did mention the work of David Dreyfoos at the Playhouse who put together a list of available theatre people and he has his DEI list
- **To Joel's question of selling Erika replied that she didn't sell**. What she thinks should be done is for theatres to authentically do what they're doing in this area and to pace themselves. So yes a land acknowledgment is important but she doesn't think the Playhouse did the right work and in the right steps in preparing for this kind of statement in the rather audacious form it took - so the outcome is difficult. **There are ways of doing the work that creates safety for everyone.**

- Now there are people who don't want to be part of this journey - we can't worry about those people. I can't worry about every subscriber.
- Fairfield County is changing and if I were to sell that's what I sell: The Fairfield County you knew is not the Fairfield County of today. It's different today from the Fairfield County that she grew up in. There is progress. And the more we can unify, the more the unbelievers will be the minority.
- People are holding on to the history that they think was.
- Lorie: the idea of selling - you "become it" Be in the process, be in the journey, and it comes through. No shoving the message in someone's face.
- There is new housing going up (even in New Canaan) - these are the indicators of change and potential new audiences. Be as authentic as you can about your intentions. have your proof points and the new audience and new board members will come from the new population.
- Paige made the point of it being really important to find ways of reaching out to **young people** - they really get it - they live it. Most incorporate art somewhere in their life. Bringing more diverse performers and observe how the audience players. Younger artists bring in more diverse audience members - welcome them after the show - come back and see something else.
- Erika thinking "identity work." We've touched on band, staff. Communities that are "artful" but are not connected with other groups. She spoke about [Poetz Realm](#) in Downtown Bridgeport that she attends and that might be something, say, that the Cabaret might present for one night. Look for these **cross-community opportunities**.
- After lunch, provided by our host Carla Sullivan, David introduced the issue of funding and the disaster of the legislature not thinking collectively, not passing funds through to support more of the CT Cultural Fund, instead giving extra line items to favored institutions, including \$10 million that went to 17 of the larger theaters across the state. He introduced Lou and Hugh who spoke more about the funding issue and how smaller organizations, especially theatres, got left out in an immensely inequitable arts budget. One example of political favoritism was the theatre 63-seat theatre in Norwich with an annual budget of \$124,000 that will get \$639,000 over the next two years
- Lou reminded the group that Liz Shapiro, as head of the Office of the Arts, was interested in the details of how community theatres were doing - so made another appeal for them to answer the call for recent budget numbers.
- There was little now that could be done at the state level but advocacy was the only way to move forward and our best chance is at the federal level for real support (both financial and in other ways)
- Hugh shared a draft of a letter that we should all sign on to. David would organize the collection of signatures and send it out to Federal and state representatives. We would then send out to theatres asking their patrons to send to their representatives.