

Arts & Science Council
Theatre Task Force Report and Recommendations
February 12, 2007

In September 2006, the Arts & Science Council (ASC) appointed a Task Force to develop prioritized recommendations, both short and long term, or incremental investment strategies for theatre that would strengthen the theatre offerings and infrastructure in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Task Force was composed of both theatre professionals and theatre patrons. Chaired by Jill Flynn, members of the Task Force were: Mark Bernstein, Lon Bumgarner, Ann Marie Costa, Tom Gabbard, Terry Milner, John Moore, Cyndee Patterson, Jim Putnam and Cheryl Queen.

The Task Force met four times between October – December 2006 to identify key issues facing the Charlotte-Mecklenburg theatre community, learn from recognized leaders in the U.S. theatre community regarding national trends in theatre, explore current efforts by both established and emerging organizations interested in developing professional theatre for Charlotte-Mecklenburg, examine current efforts by the ASC and develop recommendations for consideration by the ASC Board and staff.

Short-Term Recommendations

1. ASC should strengthen its efforts to improve its relationship with local theatre artists and companies.

ASC should continue efforts to reach out and better connect with theatre artists and companies across Charlotte-Mecklenburg. At minimum, the ASC must clarify its policies and procedures, as well as grant program changes in order to overcome misinformation that continues to be an obstacle within the theatre community. For example, the ASC has made changes to its grant application process to reduce the paperwork for smaller and emerging organizations.

2. ASC should continue its emphasis on capacity building within the local cultural community for both artists as well as professional and volunteer staff.

ASC's increased emphasis on building the capacity of both individual artists and organizations is critical to the future development of the local theatre community. This initiative to 'teach others to fish rather than just feed them' currently includes marketing and audience development training, strategic career planning training for artists, online resources for artists, technical assistance grants, etc. Resources should continue to be dedicated to this effort.

3. ASC should provide systems to support audience development across the community.

ASC's market research and audience development initiatives have the potential to increase awareness of and participation in local arts and cultural activities as well as improving the understanding of the local market place by theatre companies. This should

result in marketing and promotional efforts which potentially will lead to increased earned revenues. ASC should continue to make this a priority. In addition to current plans, ASC should identify opportunities for additional marketing and advertising efforts and group/block ticket sale support. If audience development continues to be an obstacle for the theatre community, it may be necessary to conduct a special market research project in order to better understand the specific issues facing theatre in this community.

4. ASC should reach out to area institutions of higher education to identify grant panelists with credentials and expertise in theatre.

Grant panelists with credentials and expertise in theatre are important to both the evaluation of grant applications and to the confidence placed in the review process by grant recipients. The ASC should reach out to academics in the local higher education community as potential grant panelists. It may be necessary for these panelists to agree not to be actively involved with local arts and cultural groups during their tenure on a grant panel in order to minimize potential conflicts of interest.

5. Educate corporate and individual donors as well as the community-at-large that a gift to the ASC Annual Fund Drive does not satisfy the need for contributions to local arts and cultural groups

Donors to the ASC Annual Fund Drive are increasingly using the phrase ‘I gave to the ASC’ in response to requests for sponsorships and contributions directly from arts organizations. This is especially true of corporate donors. ASC needs to clearly articulate the need for contributions made directly to individual arts groups. Direct contributions to individual theatre organizations are critical to the financial health of these companies but, perhaps more importantly, cultivating a donor base builds passionate advocates for theatre. In addition, ASC should review its current policies regarding donors ability to ‘opt-out’ of being solicited by Basic Operating Grant recipients as this further places ASC between the donor and the grantee.

6. ASC should reach out to communities that are under-represented in local theatre (e.g. African-American, Latino, Asian, etc.) and encourage artists and organizations to apply for grant funds to advance theatre in these communities.

As part of its access initiatives, ASC should work to engage theatre artists from diverse communities by providing information on how they, as individuals or organizations, can apply for grants to produce theatre projects that represent the growing cultural diversity of this community. For example, the ASC has a new initiative that is being launched in 2007 to provide support for emerging cultural groups serving the Latino community. This initiative includes a steering committee to guide the effort along with programming funds and technical assistance to assist in building the capacity of these emerging organizations to serve the community.

7. ASC should continue to support efforts by the NC Blumenthal Performing Arts Center to co-produce and present professional theatre in Charlotte.

In the short term, the Task Force does not recommend that ASC single out any one theatre company to provide special incentives toward establishing a professional theatre company in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. It was determined that it is best to let this be a more organic process where the company that can, rises to the top.

The NC Blumenthal Performing Arts Center's efforts to co-produce and present professional theatre are providing new opportunities for local theatre professionals as well as a test of new models for economic support for professional theatre. ASC should continue to support these efforts.

The ASC should also support the Center in providing affordable venues for emerging theatre companies. The ASC may want to consider providing support to both Actor's Theatre and Theatre Charlotte in order that they can also provide venues for emerging theatre companies at affordable rates.

8. ASC should keep the current Theatre Task Force active in order to continue to explore successful professional theatre company models from across the U.S.

Members of the Theatre Task Force have expressed interest in continuing to support this dialogue. The first task assigned to this continuing group should be learning more about successful professional theatre companies in similar markets in order to make specific recommendations to ASC. It has been suggested that Black Rep in St. Louis, Cincinnati Rep and Portland Rep are excellent examples of successful professional theatre companies. In addition, the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta should be studied.

Long-Term Recommendations

1. ASC should continue to advance the development of a facility that would provide affordable office, rehearsal, scenery and costume construction, preparation, simple performance and exhibition, and storage space for a wide range of performing and visual arts groups and individuals.

Affordable office, rehearsal, scenery and costume construction, preparation and storage space was one of the most urgent and consistently expressed requirements by almost all performing arts groups interviewed, large and small, during the Cultural Facility Master Plan process. This facility would have an immediate positive impact on the quality of public offerings by almost all performing arts companies in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Space could be found in an existing commercial warehouse, old or new, where large, column-free bays could readily be outfitted as rehearsal spaces, scenery and costume shops, performance space, exhibition galleries, administrative offices and abundant storage.

2. ASC should explore the development of a ‘venture capital-like’ funding program for artists, organizations and groups from inside and outside the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community.

It is time for the ASC to explore new grant making opportunities that may not fit their current models. This exploration should include consideration of a ‘venture capital-like’ fund that would provide either start up funding or transformational funding where there is no long term expectation of ongoing operating support. This type of grant program could provide the incentives needed to create new entrepreneurial ventures in all arts and cultural disciplines. This could be especially true for the theatre community if a ‘venture capital-like’ fund was established to support new theatre companies exclusively. For example, funding and support could be provided over a specified period of time to support paying professional actors and/or directors and designers in a new theatre company. This funding would be considered start-up funding only in support of a business plan that articulates the case for not needing annual operating subsidy from the ASC.

3. ASC should continue to assist the growth of Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s theatre eco-system – both institutions and individual theatre artists.

The ultimate success of theatre in Charlotte-Mecklenburg is contingent on creating an “eco system” so that theatre artists are drawn to live, work and produce in this community. Creating that environment will require a long term, multi-pronged strategy. Ideas that might be explored as part of this strategy include:

- Encouragement of graduates from local theatre programs to stay in the area after graduation and pursue their career here;
- Support for the development of a Master of Fine Arts degree by one of our local universities;
- Establishing a ‘call for productions’ program where grant funds, space, etc. are provided to theatre artists and/or companies that are adjudicated by a panel of theatre professionals. The “call” could be local, regional or national in scope; and
- Establishing a theatre festival in Charlotte.

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Initiatives in Response to Theatre Task Force Recommendations
April 18, 2007

In response to the Theatre Task Force Recommendations, the ASC has developed the following initiatives for FY08 in response:

Participation

- Maintain visibility of theatre offerings in ASC print and online advertisements.
- Continue marketing and audience development training for area artists and arts leaders.
- Develop theatre-specific marketing & audience development initiative(s) in partnership with Metrolina Theatre Association with dedicated funding of up to \$25,000.

Appreciation

- Provide sponsorship funding for 2007 MTA Awards
- Nominate a theatre artist for term on ASC Board beginning July 1st
- Feature local theatre companies in an upcoming ASC Quarterly Newsletter that reaches donors.

Support

- Continue work of the Theatre Task Force and focus on benchmarking successful professional theatre models and how they might work in Charlotte.
- Commit to regular communication between ASC leadership staff and MTA representatives.
- Provide capacity building experiences for MTA and independent theatre companies using funding from ASC Theatre Endowment.
- Reinforce importance of direct financial support of cultural organizations in an upcoming ASC Quarterly Newsletter.
- Advocate for Spirit Square theatre space:
 - ASC will insure that independent theatre community has opportunity for face-to-face meeting with task force developing RFP recommendations for Mecklenburg County.
 - ASC will advocate for preservation of Duke Power Theater, or suitable replacement, for small and emerging theatre organizations
- Recruit auxiliary facility project leader and include in 2008 ASC Workplan.