

Innovation Stories

Cultural Organizations Doing Things Differently



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The New Pathways Program Curious Theatre Company



About the Organization

"It's not theatre, it's curious," say the artists and staff of Curious Theatre Company. Founded in 1997 by 14 artists who met while producing Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Curious Theatre Company (CTC) is widely recognized for bringing provocative new work and boundary-crossing experiences to Denver. Still operating in the 19th-century church where it staged its first production, the Company now offers a season of five main-stage shows, the Curious New Voices education program, Denver Stories (which honors area luminaries), and numerous special events, classes, and social gatherings.



Starting Conditions: Looking for a New Niche

In many ways, CTC was already a remarkable success, widely respected for its high production values and its commitment to producing plays with strong social messages. Complimented by one community member as having a “singularly strong vision,” CTC had built its reputation in a very short time. “To come from nowhere in ten years, and to establish themselves as one of the top theatre companies in town...that’s hard,” said another community member. Many theatergoers saw CTC as an alternative to the larger Denver Center Theatre Company, offering more affordable and risk-taking productions, and ticket sales had been increasing steadily over a five-year period.

Despite its success, however, CTC had reached a critical juncture in its institutional life, and some critical warning signs were beginning to emerge. Its building—which the organization purchased in 2008—was underused, and the costs of operating the building, along with other fixed costs, were rising more rapidly than earned revenues, leading to consistent operating losses. By 2011, the organization found itself with no reserves for unexpected events or building maintenance, and while contributed income had been rising, it was insufficient to offset increased expenses. Among Board members, in particular, the majority of contributions were coming from fewer and fewer individuals. Financially and organizationally unstable—but still with a highly respected artistic profile—CTC was moving beyond its “founding phase niche,” according to EmcArts facilitator Richard Evans, “and looking for a new one.”

Finding that new niche was the most critical strategic challenge CTC faced as it entered the New Pathways program, and Artistic Director Chip Walton wondered “where we could take our alternative message” since CTC was locked into an established funding level through Denver’s Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD). Many in the organization lamented the irony of CTC’s situation. “We were already struggling financially,” they said, “but in order to qualify for more local government support, we would have to grow our budget, move to another tier, and become even more unstable. The SCFD gives the foundation to begin from, but not enough to take us to another level—not enough to help us innovate.”

New Pathways Program:

Building a Bigger Footprint

Curious Theatre joined New Pathways in June 2010 as one of 16 organizations in the Denver region that participated in a series of three hands-on workshops for the local arts community designed by EmcArts to build a learning community around innovation. During a rigorous eight-month process, CTC determined that its potential impact was not limited to its existing performance space, and that well-designed participatory activities outside the theatre could reinforce what was happening on stage. Identified as “ready to respond with a new approach,” EmcArts selected CTC to participate in the New Pathways Core Program with a carefully selected cross-constituent innovation team and key artistic, Board and staff leaders.

Milestones & Learning:

The Power of Participation

Key Challenges

CTC’s Team acknowledged that its earnings gap was “stark.” Despite increasing ticket sales and a small

theatre, CTC was still selling just 58 percent of its capacity. Doing new work always carries risk, but with only two of the last 12 productions meeting their financial goals, staff began to wonder about the connection between mission and financial performance. “Have we completely disengaged financial success from our season planning?” they wondered. “Is there a disconnect between our desire to produce socially relevant, challenging work and the audience’s appetite for it?” According to Evans, the Team struggled to balance these competing expectations. “CTC has a genuine cult following,” he says, “but they needed to figure out how to have wider community appeal without giving up cutting-edge work—how to turn their own preference for challenging work into something they could use to connect with new audiences. They needed a bigger footprint—not just challenge for the sake of challenge.”

Feedback from the community reinforced Evans’ perspective and suggested that CTC might not always produce the joyous feeling

of experimentation that makes an organization “cool.” One person suggested, “CTC seems to think it’s more important to present a chosen play than anything else,” and the Team itself pointed to the dark side of the CTC ethos: the risk of being ponderous, self-important and controversial for the sake of being controversial, without enough attention to the public’s interest. “Are we too bound up in our own agenda, and is there a potential risk of being a slave to mission?” they asked. Confronting this question led the Innovation Team to some critical observations. “To a degree, it’s what our reputation is based on,” they said, “but there could be an interesting conversation about how elastic a mission can be. There is a danger of established stodginess in the middle of the



spectrum between conventional theatre and the avant-garde.”

So how far could they take this conversation? The starting point was not encouraging: CTC’s audience was not growing rapidly enough to sustain the organization and the organization had exhausted its audience development efforts and resources with little success. The Team reached one fundamental conclusion: CTC needed to use its assets and resources in new ways to better engage the community.

Attacking this adaptive challenge, however, would jar the organization’s culture in unexpected ways. An internal assessment of CTC’s innovative capacity showed that leaders had a strong vision and tolerance for change and that the organization itself demonstrated a relatively high level of adaptability. Yet CTC rated low in its capacity for building stakeholder interest and for incorporating feedback from audiences. Establishing deeper connections with audiences would be critical to CTC’s future program design.

Changes in Assumptions

The Team knew that business as usual would not produce the results they needed, and they soon abandoned their initial assumption that moving to a higher SCFD tier should be the organization’s primary objective, determining instead to grow the Theatre by reallocating existing resources to create greater impact. Although the Team feared that achieving financial stability might require compromising CTC’s mission, they soon agreed it would not. As Board member Jeremy Shamos says, “When we hit the sweet spot of our mission and do a show better than anyone in the country can do it, the audience will come.”

Coming to this conclusion was easy, but Walton admits it took some time for the group to make a second, more transformational, shift. “We started by asking ourselves how

we could create stability and grow the theatre to its rightful place,” he says, “but we moved quickly from the financial discussion to programming. We thought all our programming had to be in the theatre, but now we know we can do compelling things offsite, too.” The Team soon pushed themselves into even more unfamiliar territory. Walton says, “An old assumption was that our artistic main stage programming was always top priority, but we proposed a new assumption that all programming is created equal. This didn’t survive for some practical reasons, but it did dislodge some old assumptive practices so we could devote more effort and resources to alternative programming.”

New Pathways to Mission

How would the focus on alternative programming open new pathways for CTC? In devising programming strategies, CTC wanted to create the greatest possible leverage around their shows by giving the audience multiple entry points into it. Evans says, “Often, the key to sustaining innovation is keeping it tied to what you do very well. While there can be destructive innovation, CTC’s work was more about exploiting its incredible reputation through new strategies.” Walton agrees, saying “We’re not starting from scratch; instead we’re taking what we’re already doing and extending and enriching it for current patrons while creating new connections for future patrons. We’ve always had trouble articulating this, but the New Pathways process has really helped that.”

The CTC Team designed several prototypes during the New Pathways process, but due to staff changes and other competing issues, no prototyping occurred until after the program was completed. “By the time we got to prototype, we had run out of season,” says Walton. The extra time, it turned out, was a benefit. “There was a lot of content in our

final document that didn’t reflect the group’s overall effort,” Walton says, “and when we looked at it, we hit ‘pause’ and asked ourselves how this had happened. We were able to take a necessary time out and pick out the pearls.”

What were those pearls? CTC’s ambition, says Walton, was to create markedly unique and singular experiences in which audiences “feel like participants, not observers.” Under the umbrella of Curious 360, CTC now offers a variety of activities, including talkbacks after every show, broad access to artists, and a program of Urban Adventures designed as “connective tissue” for each production. Some Urban Adventures are ticketed, and some are not, and CTC is holding open the question of whether or to what extent they should be monetized. Generally, these events occur before a show opens, but Walton says that some events are better done “inside the show.” He cautions that the approach requires “a long view of organizational planning.”



Walton describes Urban Adventures as inherently “Colorado” experiences. “There is a uniquely strong set of things that make Colorado Colorado,” he says. “People love the outdoors, and Colorado is the birthplace of microbrews, for example, and we want our adventures to use these things to inspire curiosity about our artistic work—not connected directly like a reception before a show—but outside, in alternative locations where the people are.” In one particularly successful prototype based on a play CTC did about the I-35 bridge collapse in Minneapolis (which had a mystery element), CTC organized a Clues

and Brews Tour—a pub crawl where people got a clue at each location that had a connection to the play. “There have been three new bridges built in Denver’s fastest growing area,” Walton says, “and we organized the tour so that people had to walk across three bridges. It got very competitive.” When CTC mounted *Nine Circles*, a play about an Iraqi war veteran accused of war crimes, a photographer and former infantryman in Iraq displayed his photos at a local wine bar and talked about his experiences. Most recently, in celebration of their upcoming regional premiere of *Red* about the artist Mark Rothko in May 2012, CTC organized a painting workshop at the Denver Public Library in which attendees learned how Rothko approached his art and explored some of his techniques for building depth in his paintings. Paintings by the workshop attendees are on display at the Denver Public Library throughout April and May 2012.

Obstacles and Enablers

CTC’s New Pathways process stalled somewhat because the organization received a simultaneous MetLife/TCG A-ha! Program: Think It, Do It grant from Theatre Communications Group (TCG) to work on innovative ways to put artists at the center of the organization. Walton admits that there was a lot of jockeying for organizational attention between the two programs, and his own attention was split. “The TCG program was more intensive time-wise,” he said. “New Pathways had much more breathing time.” While Walton was devoting much of his energy to the TCG grant, Managing Director Sarah Benvenuti was focusing on New Pathways. In the end, the two programs mutually reinforced each other in positive ways, according to Evans. “In effect, they had a ‘think it’ grant and a ‘do it’ grant at the same time,” Evans says. “The grants were not related, but they got closer and closer. The cross-referencing was a good thing.”

Walton agrees that the unexpected synergy was good for CTC. Between artistic seasons, the Managing Director left the organization, forcing a hiatus in New Pathways activity. “What became clear,” says Walton, “was that there were different ideas about the path of the innovation process, and different levels of facility, so some transition was inevitable.” Although it has taken some time, CTC is now merging the two processes, and while they are still working out details, there is a new management structure in place: instead of a managing director, there are two producers in residence (rotating company members) who are assigned both artistic and institutional responsibilities. Walton says New Pathways, in particular, informed CTC’s thinking about its TCG work on artistic structure. “I found that being able to talk to Richard about what we were doing with the TCG grant deepened our thinking about our company structure in ways I couldn’t have anticipated.”

Evans adds that CTC’s Team was a leading enabler of success. “It was really good,” he says, “with a balance of staff, company members, Board members, and outsiders. The outsiders were critical contributors.”

The Impact

Picking out the Pearls

Walton suggests CTC is just now gaining the experiential knowledge to assess what works and what doesn’t, but he is excited about the prospects. “One challenge we continue to talk about,” he says, “is striking the balance between serving existing audiences through *Urban Adventures* and attracting new audiences. It’s much easier just to serve new participants because it’s like selling another product. But our effort is more multi-dimensional and complex. We want both audiences, and they may have different needs and expectations.”

Walton credits the New Pathways process with having enormous impact on the organization. “I am absolutely and unabashedly stealing the process for our continuing TCG work. One of the great things about it was that we had people at every level of the organization involved, as well as people from outside who brought historical perspective. It’s a great experience to put smart people in a room and talk about your organization.”

The New Pathways Team

Curious Theatre Company Staff:
Chip Walton
 Artistic Director

Sarah Benvenuti
 Managing Director

Company Members:
Dick Devin
 Lighting Designer

John Jurcheck
 Actor

Board Members:
Jaci Casey
Jeremy Shamos

Community Members:
Libby Neid
Michael Potts
 (both former Board members)
Kevin Seggelke

EmcArts Facilitator:
Richard Evans

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