

Mission Accomplished

I got into this profession because I was inspired by the magic of the proscenium and the dimming of the lights, the costumes, the performances, and, most of all, the transportative power of storytelling. But I did not stay for that. I stayed for the people: cherished collaborators, audiences who gasp together, and artists who expand my perspective. And right now, the people are all that's left. When we can dim the lights again, let's remember that the art lives inside the people. Let's honor the humanity we bring to life onstage by honoring it off: taking equal care of the people as we do the art.

I don't mean the touchy-feely stuff (yoga breaks, emotional check ins before meetings, breathing together). I adore being in an industry that invites these kinds of things in, even if I pretend to roll my eyes at it. But they are token ideas that often stand in for real substantive change. I mean enforcing healthy work/life balances in your theaters instead of talking about how overworked we are. I mean making space for hard talks, committing to living wages, allowing time for processing and then pivoting that into action steps. But most of all, I mean valuing those things *as much as the art*.

I have one small idea to help. Let's reframe our mission statements into value statements. When I look at mission statements I often see bold declarations and vague language that is almost exclusively about the art, sometimes with community engagement or audience thrown in as the recipients of that art. Enrichment, engagement, innovative, transformative, bold, vibrant. Inspiring language, but what do those words mean in practice? And, more importantly, how can this bold vision be manifested in your working environment and in your community?

A statement of values tells me if the things that matter to me matter to you--on *and off* the stage. If they do, chances are, your work is for me. Instead of an elevator pitch about who we are, let's try naming what we believe in. Let's include specifics so audiences, artists, and staff can hold us accountable. Let's put in as much about the administration of our organization as we do about what we stage. The what is important and a concise description is a useful tool, but it isn't as important to me as the why or the how.

As an example, here are some of my values around values statements:

- I value specificity: let's leave the vague language behind and make a list of concrete, actionable beliefs
- I value inspiration and aspiration: values should be bold and ambitious and help your organization point towards a future. You don't necessarily have to be there yet.
- I value a process in which multiple different stakeholders contribute to the creation of a living document and hold each other accountable.
- I value flexibility: mission statements often lock organizations into an identity, which is why many missions are broad. Instead of a broad short umbrella, let's choose values that can be applied in many different ways: artistically, administratively, and in our community work. Flexibility also means that we should be adaptable in our values and regularly re-examineing them to make sure they still fit us.
- I value visibility. Internally and externally. Let your audience and guest artists know what you stand for and let them be part of the ongoing project of holding you accountable.

Some of you already have core values statements. That's a great first step. For you, I challenge you to reverse the hierarchy: place your values over your mission statements on your website. Make the first declaration be about what you believe in rather than what you make.

The mission statement is an old model. It served a clear purpose back when regional theater audiences were shopping around for subscriptions and funding models all looked the same.

Grants still require them; donors ask for them. They want the easy snapshot of an elevator pitch. But the subscriber model is dying and younger audiences are increasingly making decisions about who gets their loyalty based on ethics. Boards are diversifying to include all kinds of folks not previously granted seats at the table and bringing with them new ideas and (yes) values. And some funders are adapting (admittedly slowly). Funding organizations are going through the same EDI work that we are, and are becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which their systems are perpetuating inequalities. Challenge funders to share your core values or at least respect them as much, or more than, your mission. We have power in this moment, and we can use our values to help make change. But first, we've got to name them.

A Coda: The End is the End is the Beginning
or another way to keep the mission

We are in a moment of forced pause, impossible to have conceived even a few months ago. But what if it wasn't? What if in every life cycle of a theater was a moment built in to formally stop for a significant period of time and assess? Every 10 years go dark for a year. Keep staff on salary but stop producing and use that time for reflection, assessment, and planning. What if that year was used to take stock of what is happening in our community, what it needed, and where we can fit in? What if we polled our artists, staff, and audiences to find out what felt urgent to them? What if we committed to coming out of that year with a new strategic plan, a new mission, and a new identity with new goals? I know at least a few founding Artistic Directors who would relish a chance to start fresh with the resources they've accumulated and the knowledge they gained but without the baggage of holding on to an urgent idea they had when they were 25. Or maybe we emerge from that year with new artistic leadership, more reflective of the direction we want to go in, who have had the luxury of a year of planning, learning, processing, and re-structuring without the pressure of producing on top of that.

Or, more extreme, what if theaters took a cue from 13p and conceived the end at the same time as the beginning? What if theater life cycles were determined by artistic imperative rather than financial solvency? What if we planned for and celebrated the end of that life cycle? If the end of a theater company was as celebrated as a 25 year anniversary. Forgive the analogy at this time, but what if we gave theaters a good death? For in that sleep of death what dreams may come? What if we turned the remaining resources (buildings, funds, mailing lists, non-profit status) into compost for new companies? What if when one theater's life cycle ends, it mentors a promising theater in its infancy? Or two? Or three? What if we didn't hang on so tightly to the limited resources we have, but embraced the idea that we can still move things forward even if we're not around to see it? To quote Janis Joplin: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." If we give ourselves permission to end, who knows what beginnings we can make? Even if our theater isn't there anymore, we can grow anew in the compost of the old.

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