BUILDING COMMUNITY-BASED DECISIONS TO GENERATE CIVIC DIALOGUE

Joe Gfaller
Managing Director
Metro Theater Company, USA
OVERVIEW

- RECOGNIZING THE OPPORTUNITY
- SOCIALIZING THE CHANGE
- BUILDING THE NETWORK
- CREATING THE PROGRAMS
- LISTENING, BUILDING, AND REBUILDING TRUST
- TRACKING RESULTS
- CONTINUING TO ADAPT
ORGANIZATIONS AND PROJECTS

■ OPERA THEATER OF SAINT LOUIS
  - Engagement + Inclusion Task Force
  - Artist Community Tours
  - Opera Tastings
  - New Works, Bold Voices
  - Representation & Responsibility

■ BARNHART FILMS
  - *Flint: The Poisoning of An American City*

■ METRO THEATER COMPANY
  - Say Something, Do Something
RECOGNIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

OTSL IN 2011

Vast majority of audience is old and white. Out of close to 5,000 ticket buying households, 151 are Millennial, 296 are Gen X, and 329 are non-white.
RECOGNIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

new audience members
not enough joining to replace those leaving

current audience members

"Leaky Bucket"
RECOGNIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

“No shortage of planning went into reviving The Death of Klinghoffer... A uniformly outstanding cast... riveting... consistently exciting... what the opera has to say is worth hearing...”

- THE NEW YORK TIMES
BUT...

Convening community is not:

- CREATING COMMUNITY
- TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY
- BEING TRANSFORMED BY COMMUNITY
SOCIALIZING THE CHANGE

■ Find internal allies
■ Recognize your internal blind spots
■ Create a safe space in which change can begin
■ Narrow your focus to create an early big win
■ Wait to engage key detractors until equally influential supporters within their networks are on board
■ Know what you want to accomplish – and don’t be afraid to say it
BUILDING THE NETWORK

■ Start with references from within your internal allies
■ Leverage the right introductions
■ Admit fault
■ Approach new members of the network with the sincere and curious mind of a learner
■ Don’t assume everyone ought to join your network just because you asked
■ Stay humble
■ Be patient
BUILDING THE NETWORK

PERCEPTIONS OF OPERA AS AN ART FORM

- Formal
- Elite
- Exclusive
- Intense
- Overwhelming
- Foreign
- Old
- White
- “Audiences aren’t like me”

“. . .maybe I would be in like a really expensive evening gown, with a clutch purse, riding in a Maserati . . . very snooty,—everything is ritzy, upscale.”
In focus groups we heard: “The opera audience isn’t like me”

- Throughout life they had seen film, TV, and other mass media that presented opera clichés.
- In fiction, listening to opera is used to suggest that a character is erudite, calculating, or a criminal mastermind.

“I’ve never been to the opera but I would expect it to be like you see on... like Frasier or I don’t know, some show where people go watch a lot of opera and... I expect there to be an intermission where you have a glass of champagne or wine in the middle and then you go back... It just seems like the people are more—they have [a] more uppity type of vibe.”

—from Inclined Rejecter

“I don’t know why, there’s just something about the opera... I think the last time I remember seeing anything about the opera was in... Interview with a Vampire or something. It wasn’t a really good experience and I don’t know, it gave me anxiety a little bit.”

—from Inclined Rejecter
BUILDING THE NETWORK

DIVERSITY MAKES THE WORK RELEVANT

- Many noted the diversity of both the audience and cast at OTSL as a highly positive aspect of the overall experience. OTSL’s focus on diversity made the Theatre feel contemporary and inclusive.

- Seeing diverse casts caught their attention, and made the performance stand out—some said it fostered feelings that the work was new, modern, and relevant.

- A few felt that this diversity could make it easier to convince their friends to attend opera, because it indicated a more contemporary show.
BUILDING THE NETWORK

ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION TASK FORCE

Opera Theatre’s Engagement and Inclusion Task Force began as an informal network of supporters, committed to helping the company grow an audience that more fully reflects the rich diversity of the St. Louis region. In the fall of 2018, the group formalized its role and now meets every other month to discuss and develop opportunities to achieve this vision.

The Task Force is grounded in a belief that by bringing audiences from diverse backgrounds together to share a common operatic experience, we build community, create opportunities for dialogue, and ultimately, strengthen our region.

OVER THE YEARS, THE GROUP HAS HELPED:

PLAN A WIDE RANGE OF EVENTS, INCLUDING:

- #WishNormandy: A Concert for Peace and Unity at Normandy High School, the school from which the late Michael Brown, Jr. was a graduate, in support of the “Friends of Normandy” Scholarship Fund;
- Residencies with artists such as authors Charles Blow and Salman Rushdie, composers Terence Blanchard, Ricky Ian Gordon, Huang Run, and Jack Perla; librarians David Henry Hwang, Rajiv Joseph, Michael Kors, Kasi Lemmons, and Royce Vanek; singers Julia Bullock, Jennifer Johnson Cano, and Kandall Glenden; and director/designer Isaac Mizrahi;
- Panels and community discussions in partnership with Arts & Faith St. Louis, the Diversity Awareness Partnership, Harris-Stowe State University, Jazz St. Louis, the Jewish Community Center, John Burroughs School, The Links Incorporated, Missouri History Museum, the OCA – St. Louis, the Saint Louis Club, the St. Louis Press Club, St. Louis Public Radio, Saint Louis University, Urban League Young Professionals, Washington University, Wells Fargo Advisors, and many more;
- Opera Tastings, a fun and informal culinary introduction to the sounds and flavors of opera;
- And many more! (see pages 42-49)

MEMBERS OF THE 2018-2019 ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION TASK FORCE:

- Zakita Asquino
- Gail Bokar
- Sara Burks
- Adrienne Davis
- Janet Daye
- Philip Deitch
- Lisette Dennis
- Vickie Denson
- Kim Eberlein
- Caroline Fan
- Yvonne Foo
- Kari Haller
- Calieta Harlan
- Marcela Hawn
- Deb Hollingsworth
- Naretha Hopson
- Steve Houlsworth
- Mark Kent
- Ivan Niederhoff
- Nicole Roach
- Donald Suggs
- Thong Tam
- Maria Tramont
- Emily Underwood
- Rita Van Niel

If you are interested in becoming involved with this group, please contact staff liaison Anh Le, Director of Marketing and Public Relations, at a@aleopera-stl.org.
CREATING THE PROGRAMS

■ COMMUNITY TOURS
  – Mezzo soprano Kendall Gladen (2012, Carmen)
  – Composer Terence Blanchard (2013, Champion)
  – Director and designer Isaac Mizrahi (2014, The Magic Flute)
  – Composer Ricky Ian Gordon & Librettist Royce Vavrek (2014, ‘27’)

■ SPRING SING!

■ YOUNG FRIENDS EVENTS
  – Pre-season receptions
  – Expanded season offerings
  – Re-engaged Steering Committee
CREATING THE PROGRAMS

“Ticket prices probably range in the thousands to hear Denyce Graves’ powerful vocals fill the some of the world’s most popular opera houses. But on this day she stood gifting her talents to an audience for the sake of peace, unity, and healing.”

- ST. LOUIS AMERICAN
CREATING THE PROGRAMS
“Opera Theatre has billboards in my neighborhood, and my wife and I are always like ‘Who chose this neighborhood?’ … No one else will take the time to look at that neighborhood and say ‘This is for you too.’”

“You’re leaving the bar, and that’s what you’re seeing: the Opera Theatre billboard … There just seems to be a concerted effort saying ‘You should try this.’ … I’m going again next year. My perception of opera was totally different than my experience.”
LISTENING, BUILDING, AND REBUILDING TRUST

■ MISSED OPPORTUNITIES
  - Casting complacency
  - No Asian singers in Madame Butterfly

■ CONTINUED PROGRAMS
  - Artist Residencies (Salman Rushdie, David Henry Hwang)
  - Opera Tastings
  - Young Friends events

■ NEW PROGRAMS
  - Representation & Responsibility
  - Encore After Parties
  - Pop Up Opera Paparazzi
TRACKING RESULTS

**Generation X & Millennial Ticket Buyers**

- 2008: 119
- 2010: 136
- 2012: 149
- 2014: 151
- 2016: 178
- 2018: 273
- 2020: 291

**Ethnically Diverse Ticket Buyers**

- 2008: 343
- 2009: 368
- 2010: 326
- 2011: 329
- 2012: 416
- 2013: 411
- 2014: 524
- 2015: 477
RTF Frequency Before/After

Of the 75 RTF who attended Operas after their first OT, avg. frequency increased by an average of 1.

Frequency Before Attending Opera Tasting

58
18
11
5
5
5

Frequency After Attending Opera Tasting

23
16
13
10
8
5

The avg. was 1.99

The Avg. is 2.96
RTF Opera Tasting Bookers

RTF OT Bookers also had a banner year in 2018 with huge increases in yield and frequency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Bookers</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Mainstage Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saw Opera That Year</td>
<td>25 (81%)</td>
<td>26 (70%)</td>
<td>32 (76%)</td>
<td>22 (69%)</td>
<td>71 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Tickets</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>1,399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Income</td>
<td>$8,826</td>
<td>$14,730</td>
<td>$15,004</td>
<td>$20,837</td>
<td>$50,571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Yield/Booker</td>
<td>$353.04</td>
<td>$566.54</td>
<td>$468.88</td>
<td>$947.14</td>
<td>$712.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Yield/Ticket</td>
<td>$43.24</td>
<td>$40.69</td>
<td>$42.87</td>
<td>$43.14</td>
<td>$36.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Donors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Donation Amount</td>
<td>$1,569</td>
<td>$1,340</td>
<td>$2,038</td>
<td>$1,983</td>
<td>$6,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Donation Amt</td>
<td>$314</td>
<td>$268</td>
<td>$204</td>
<td>$180</td>
<td>$347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Frequency</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation of Young Friends Night is overwhelmingly positive.

- Almost all Young Friends rated their experience as excellent or very good and two-thirds said it makes them more likely to attend another OTSL event.
- Affordable price and pre/post show events were the prime motivators to attend Young Friends Night. The particular opera was also influential.
Opinions of OTSL

A series of phrases were tested to see how different audience segments respond to different viewpoints about OTSL. While a significant portion could not answer due to a lack of familiarity, there were several key similarities and key differences based on ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinions</th>
<th>African-Americans (n=158)</th>
<th>Other People of Color (n=70)</th>
<th>Caucasians (n=378)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/not familiar with OTSL</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place to go for special occasion</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For older people more than younger people</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present in the community</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience doesn’t look like me and my friends</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location is out of the way</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Familiarity with Opera

Participants were asked “Do you agree or disagree with the statement: ‘Opera is for someone like me’?”

- **Strongly agree**: 9% (African-American), 9% (Other People of Color), 3% (Caucasian)
- **Agree**: 12% (African-American), 24% (Other People of Color), 13% (Caucasian)
- **Neither agree nor disagree**: 29% (African-American), 29% (Other People of Color), 36% (Caucasian)
- **Disagree**: 18% (African-American), 26% (Other People of Color), 22% (Caucasian)
- **Strongly disagree**: 18% (African-American), 18% (Other People of Color), 27% (Caucasian)
OTHER EXAMPLES:

FLINT: THE POISONING OF AN AMERICAN CITY
OTHER EXAMPLES:
SAY SOMETHING, DO SOMETHING (MTC)