

Engaging **BROADER** Audiences and **\$** Still Paying the Bills

By Nina Meehan

When the lights come up on a performance by the Honolulu Theatre for Youth (HTY), the first moment is not an adaptation of Hawaii's most popular children's book, or *Aladdin*, or any of the other titles selected for the season. When the lights come up, the first three minutes that the audience sees is a live drama *cum* commercial performed by HTY actors on a health topic. Why? Because HTY receives funding from the Hawaii Department of Health to help spread the word to the children of the islands about healthy lifestyles. This support helps HTY make its season available to every child on the islands, regardless of their ability to pay.

Children's theatre companies across the country struggle with a fundamental conflict between business and outreach. If it is important to bring the experience of live theatre to a child who can afford a ticket, it follows that it is equally important to perform for a child who cannot. Companies reconcile their two divergent needs – meeting the bottom line and serving low-income audiences (those coming from families earning less than \$40,000 per year) – by finding and using resources creatively in an effort to reduce ticket prices and fees.

Challenging Economic Times

The current economic crisis is especially affecting efforts to reach out to those who cannot afford full price tickets. The number of people who don't have the means to pay class fees or buy matinee tickets is also increasing. Schools are suffering because of lack of funding from states and federal government, and those that rely on parent contributions through the PTA or classroom contributions are seeing parental assistance dwindle.

HTY and Dallas Children's Theater (DCT) in Texas are among those theatres reporting more requests for scholarships and reduced-price tickets. Both organizations are still committed to helping those in need. "Even though we have received less funding this year, we are still committed to our 'Angel Fund,' which provides Title I schools with reduced ticket prices for students," says DCT's Public Relations Director Lisa Schreiner. And HTY is using funding from

foundations and corporate sponsors to make up the difference.

Companies are making adjustments either by cutting programs, cutting budgets, or increasing visibility in order to reach new audiences and boost ticket sales. Seattle Children's Theatre (SCT) in Washington is reducing the number of plays in this year's season from the typical nine to seven.

"Families are still loyal about coming to SCT," says Shelley Saunders, the theatre's director of development and marketing. "But many have had to make choices about coming to fewer plays due to their family finances."

HTY is attempting to keep all of its existing programs while implementing a 10 - 15% cut in the budget for next season. And DCT is hoping to increase or maintain its audience size through more aggressive marketing to the local community.

Given the current economic circumstances, theatre companies are forced to employ even more creative strategies to continue reaching anyone who cannot afford a full-price ticket or class tuition.

Tools for Community Engagement

Organizations that are successfully reaching low-income communities use approaches such as touring shows, performing school day matinees, offering classes or workshops, and seeking community partnerships to serve families who can't afford tickets or tuition.

Many theatre companies use touring as a tool for community engagement. Of course, tours can generate income, particularly from local area schools and performing arts venues where the audience or school can pay full price. However, touring shows also allow companies to travel to schools in geographically diverse areas including those that serve economically-disadvantaged students. The cost of touring for the theatre company is significant – vehicles, gasoline, touring sets, increased insurance costs, durable costumes, full-time actor pay – and often the income generated from touring does not cover all of these costs, particularly when touring to venues that cannot afford the full fee. Touring offers both the opportunity for revenue, as well as community engagement, yet many companies

have to walk a careful line to make sure that the tour is serving both needs.

Some companies have developed strategies to offset the cost of purchasing a touring show. For instance, when DCT tours, schools can apply for reduced rates or find funding through city or county sponsorship. Childsplay in Tempe, AZ has directed individual donors who are interested in supporting the theatre's tour to sponsor an individual school. For schools, the per-student cost for engaging a touring show is generally much lower than the cost of taking the entire school on a field trip to the theatre, particularly given the cost of busing.

For theatre companies, one advantage of touring shows is the ability to reach large numbers of children. For example, Childsplay reaches 30,000 people per year with its weekend matinees and an additional 70,000 through school day matinees. According to Managing Director Steve Martin, the scope of a touring show is even larger. "The touring programs reach 150,000 young people a year, and we tour statewide, so we'll be in 200 schools in 40 different communities throughout the state of Arizona – about 65% of the folks being served through school tours and field trips are on school lunch programs," he says, citing the typical scope of their touring efforts.

DCT reaches low-income, rural populations through their touring show, which brings theatre to communities that do not have opportunities for children to see live performances. Trish Long, marketing director for DCT, described her experience when she went on the road with the theatre's touring show in 2008: "I was watching the kids get off the bus. This was a very rural area. They were so excited. They sure don't get an opportunity like this very often," she explains.

Student matinee performances, offered at reduced prices, also allow theatre companies to reach audiences that are different from the family audiences they see on weekends for their main stage performances. "We have two audiences," explains SCT's Saunders. "Our public show audience – that comes Friday, Saturday, and Sunday – is very high-end when you look at investment portfolio, home value, and household income. Now on the other hand, we have a very different audience when it comes to our school

day shows. For that audience we subsidize to the tune of \$1.2 million per year. We provide either a free or reduced-price ticket, based on the percentage of students on free or reduced lunch programs.”

Like SCT, most theatre companies reduce the price of tickets for all students as compared to the cost of tickets for weekend shows, and additional discounts are often available for schools that have a high percentage of students on free lunch programs. Thus, school matinees bring in less revenue on a per ticket basis than weekend performances. However, for Saunders the opportunity to reach a broader audience is worth the cost.

“We do have the rare board member who will say, ‘Well, why are we doing all these school shows anyway? We’re not getting that much money from them,’” she explains. “But then we invite him or her to a school show and he or she is able to see the diversity of the audience. In Seattle and in a lot of our [south side] schools we have a lot of brand-new, low-income immigrant communities. [The board member] sees the value of [kids from] a very wealthy east side school experiencing that same show with children [who may be less advantaged].”

Beyond the shows they produce, children’s theatre companies often reach low-income audiences through their education programs. For instance, Imagination Stage in Bethesda, MD is working with the Montgomery County Parks and Recreation Department to create a program for middle school students from low-income communities, as designated by the county, in which they will use drama to address gang violence and drug usage. This program is

funded by the county, the theatre, and private foundations.

Finding and Using Resources Creatively

Missoula Children’s Theatre, based in Montana, is primarily a touring company, which brings two professional actor/directors, costumes, and sets to a school, community organization, or military base. The actor/directors cast local children in the production, rehearse for a week, and then perform. While MCT performs in major cities like New York and Philadelphia, the majority of its performances are in rural towns, often without many financial resources. When a community wants to bring in the show, the company sends a packet prior to its arrival explaining how to make the show a financial boon for the community. The company charges a set fee to the organization that brings them in, but then allows the organization to charge admission, sell concessions, solicit sponsorships, and use other means to raise money for the show.

Jim Caron, CEO and co-founder of Missoula Children’s Theatre, explains the math for the organizations that bring the actor/directors to their communities. “Well, let’s just say they charge \$10 a ticket, and let’s say that 500 people come to see the show. Well, that’s \$5,000. They’ve already made \$1,000 on the project,” he says. Missoula Children’s Theatre’s business model empowers the communities it visits to earn back programming costs. This becomes a win-win partnership – the town receives an arts program, MCT makes its bottom line, and the town can even profit from the performance. For communities where the

audience cannot pay, the sponsoring organization has the option to charge no admission, sometimes requesting a donation for a local food bank in lieu of tickets.

HTY has a unique touring challenge in that the company must fly its actors and sets to remote locations all over the Hawaiian Islands. Fortunately for the theatre, area companies often sponsor shows in an effort to serve community members. “Hawaiian Electric Company wanted us to do a show [in a low-income area] where the company wanted to make a positive impact,” explains Louise King Lanzilotti, managing director of HTY. “They underwrote a play [there]. All the performances out there were free because of them.”

Both Childsplay and Dallas Children’s Theater have funds dedicated to offsetting costs for tickets and touring fees for audiences that need financial assistance: the Benjamin Fund and the Angel Fund, respectively. “We utilize those monies to make sure that any school or student who wants our programs can have them,” says Martin of Childsplay. “We don’t say no to virtually anybody. The Benjamin Fund is the place where we push a lot of donors. We say, ‘Would you make a \$12 donation so that a child can attend a Childsplay program?’”

DCT receives roughly 30 applications each year from schools looking to use Angel Funds, says Education Director Nancy Schaeffer. “We do not ever turn anybody away,” she says. “We just figure out a way to get the underwriting so we don’t turn any of them down.”

In contrast, SCT uses general operating funds, rather than a dedicated fund, to support programming for low-income audiences. “The



Cinderella, by Jim Caron. Missoula Children’s Theatre, Missoula, MT. Photo by Dan Cripe.



(l-r) Noah Todd and D. Scott Withers in *Eric and Elliott* by Dwayne Hartford. Childsplay, Tempe, AZ. Photo by Jannine Doto.

way I prefer to do it, and the way we have done it for the last three or four years, is to raise \$2.3 million of contributed income," Saunders says. "And, as much as possible, we do not allocate those funds to a special project. We know that, of our \$6.3 million budget, we need to raise \$2.3 million to make the budget balance. So, we try as much as possible not to say that \$10,000 is for this and \$5,000 is for that. There are times we have to do that, but mostly we raise that \$2.3 million to run Seattle Children's Theatre. Part of running Seattle Children's Theatre is giving school children access."

Partnerships to Reach Broader Audiences

Partnerships often provide theatres for young audiences the means necessary to support programming for broader audiences.

Missoula Children's Theatre has an ongoing partnership with the military. The military bases hosting the program don't pay directly, the audience members do not have to pay to attend, and, like all MCT performances, the children participating in the show do not have to pay any tuition. "For the military we would work out what are called central contracts from the government which pays us as a whole to go into all these individual service bases," Caron explains. "And it ends up costing these relatively poor communities nothing."

DCT partners with libraries to open doors to children whose families who can't afford tickets. "We give away 10,000 free tickets to our summer show to the Mayor's Summer Reading Program. It's like 10 or 15 hours of reading through the

summer," explains DCT's Marketing Director Trish Long. In order to promote the reading program, DCT performs small snippets from its summer shows in the libraries to help motivate young readers.

Sometimes a partnership can be life-saving. When Childsplay performed Dwayne Hartford's *Eric and Elliot*, which deals with teen depression and suicide, the outreach coordinator of the White River Indian Reservation in rural Arizona brought the company to the reservation to perform because of the high rates of teen suicide and depression. The performance on the reservation was underwritten by the Mental Health Association of Arizona, so it was free to the community. Counselors from the Mental Health Association were on-site for the performances so actors could refer audience members with questions to professional social workers.

Commitment to Access

The time and energy the leaders of these companies are dedicating to reaching low-income audiences comes from their passionate belief that live theatre plays a vital role in the nation's cultural life and heritage and that all children should share in its joys and lessons. "As long as I'm in charge of this company there will never be a child who does not take part in this program because of money issues," MCT's Caron says. "It's as simple as that."

HTY's Lanzilotti cites the company's commitment to access as a key incentive for her work with them. "If you really want to reach low-income audiences, it has to be woven into the fabric of your mission, and then you don't have

to worry about it," she explains. "That's one of the reasons I came here – I really believe in that mission, that the arts are really important to the lives of everyone."

Many children's theatre companies have incorporated the commitment of their leaders to reach low-income audiences into their written mission statement and strategic plans. SCT recently added the word "access" to its mission statement, which now reads: "To provide children of all ages access to professional theatre, with a focus on new works, and theatre education." While outreach has always been a critical part of its approach, putting that value in writing makes it a clear priority.

"Until fairly recently, access was sort of unspoken, but it wasn't actually stated," Saunders says. "So we added it, because it is really an important part of what we do, and many of our trustees are on the board because they want to provide access."

Children's theatres have successfully sustained themselves while bringing their enterprise to audiences that would not otherwise experience live theatre. The current recession will be a particularly severe test of the creativity, energy, and dedication of the leaders of these companies in the months and years ahead. ■

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