

THEATRE'S EMPTY TRIANGLE

Written by Tiffany Antone

This is a White paper, of sorts. It's also a philosophical argument. And although I work in Academia, I've written it with an editorial voice because this isn't a research paper so much as it is a call to arms. So, maybe it's also a wee bit manifesto. In any case, I'm offering the following "bonafides" to help you place my voice:

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THE TWEET

Listen, theatre is not inherently a public good. Yes, we say we welcome everyone, but we don't. There are gatekeepers all over the fucking place, companies get tribal, artists get catty and resentful, ticket prices go up and up and up (not to mention the cost of parking!)... none of this is actually welcoming. What theatre *is*, (not due to a philosophy, but rather due to its very operation) is collaborative. It takes oodles of people to make a play. And that does mean it has the potential to bring people together. But we have to stop assuming that community is a given. Community is an action.

And that's why your theatre space, should you own one, needs to be MORE than just a theatre space. It needs to be a third space. It needs to have a coffee shop or wine bar, or sandwich shop... it needs to have reading nooks and community art space, and live music and OPEN FUCKING DOORS. It needs to be integrated into the community – not just plopped down somewhere and offered as a culture stop “because culture is good for you!” Like we're some kind of soul vitamin.

Theatre can be a soul vitamin, if it wants to, and if it is looked at as an act of service. And I don't mean it has to be volunteer – service organizations can still pay their personnel. But the inherent philosophy and its actions/engagement need to shore up. If you just want to make plays for people, you ain't a vitamin; you're popcorn.

And I like popcorn! I really do! But I don't *need* popcorn, you know what I'm saying?

Anyway, what follows is basically a manifesto of sorts, with diagrams, asides, and a lot of research (as much as I could get done, anyway... no one is paying me to write this) And I'm going to be honest: I started working on this before the pandemic, but then the world went sideways and the whole goddamn theatre system screeched to a halt. I almost had a (much more academic version) of what you're about to read published during year one of the pandemic, but the book fell through, so now I'm publishing here (with a fair bit of swearing) because fuck it. Maybe it will be useful.

FOREWORD

I'm going to start things off with an anecdote. The story is not my own, rather it was told to me years ago and stuck. I've employed it in various lesson plans and teaching moments over the years, but it feels especially apropos here.

The story goes like this: A mother is making ham dinner for Easter. She gets out the ham, cuts it in half, places each half into a different baking pan, and puts both in the oven. Her daughter watches all this and asks "Mom, why do you always cut the ham in half?" The mother brushes the question off with "Because that's how you bake a ham." Her daughter presses her "I've never seen anyone else bake ham that way." Her mother laughs, "Well, that's how *I've* always done it." Her daughter isn't satisfied though: "Are you trying to cut down the cook time or something?" The mother pauses, annoyed, but realizes in her irritation, that she doesn't *know* why she cuts the ham in half. It's how her mother had taught her to bake ham, and that's that. She tells her daughter that the reduced cook time is probably the answer, now can they get back to preparing Easter dinner, please? But the question sticks with the mother, because she doesn't like not knowing the answer. So that night she calls *her* mother long distance and after the usual "How do you do's" and "Happy Easter" chit chat, she asks her *why* you need to cut a ham in half in order to bake it. Her mother laughs, and says "You don't." The woman insists: "But, that's how *you* always made ham. And how you taught me to make it!" Her mother thinks a moment... then answers "Are you talking about when you were growing up? In our old house? I had to cut things in half because the oven was so short. Are you still cutting things in half? Lord, that's funny!" The woman, red cheeked, thanks her mother and never cuts the Easter ham in half again.

The prevailing theatre model in the US is one that's been handed down to us. Its design, and the circumstances under which this system was codified, belong to generations past. And yet, we continue to recreate this model again, and again, because "that's how we've always done it."

And oh lord, are we paying for it now, or what?

Theatres across the country are shuttering their doors, hitting "pause", and laying off staff in a desperate bid to diagnose the problem so that it can try drafting a cure. But the very system pausing itself, excising its extremities and furloughing its life-blood in the hopes of rebranding, rebooting, and resurrecting itself, IS the problem.

Maybe we should just let it burn?

Because then, like the phoenix rising from its ashes, theatremakers will be able to repurpose the "Theatre That Was" (beautiful, yes, but also transactional, classist, patriarchal, and racist) into the thing that theatre might become: ubiquitous, transformational, inclusive, and sustainable.

And it begins by admitting we're not all working with the same oven.

THE EMPTY TRIANGLE

So, non-profit Theatre in America – which is a big goddamn country, huge even! – looks pretty homogeneous. Whether it's a LORT theatre, a community theatre, or something in-between, if it's a non-profit theatre, chances are good that the organization follows a predictably hierarchal order of operations. Which means it's probably got a number of administrators working an insane number of hours to keep the theatre operational via ticket sales, grants, and donations. At every level these administrators make choices with the best of intentions: *To stay open! So that we can make more theatre!* But this top-down model comes with a host of problems – chief among them being that it grants administrators power over the artists they employ while also rewarding themselves with greater financial security.

Which, in brev-speak, boils down to this:

- Theatre's administrators, the granting organizations/big donors they must suck-up to, and the critics/tastemakers who whisper-shout about it all, are Theatre's Gatekeepers. They have the Power.
- The artists and audience are the only truly necessary part of the Theatre puzzle, but they only get to play if/when the Gatekeepers say so. They make the Magic.

It's easy to get stuck inside a system of power, know that it's fucked up, but not be able to pinpoint WHY. Well, here you go, eyeballs – do your thing:

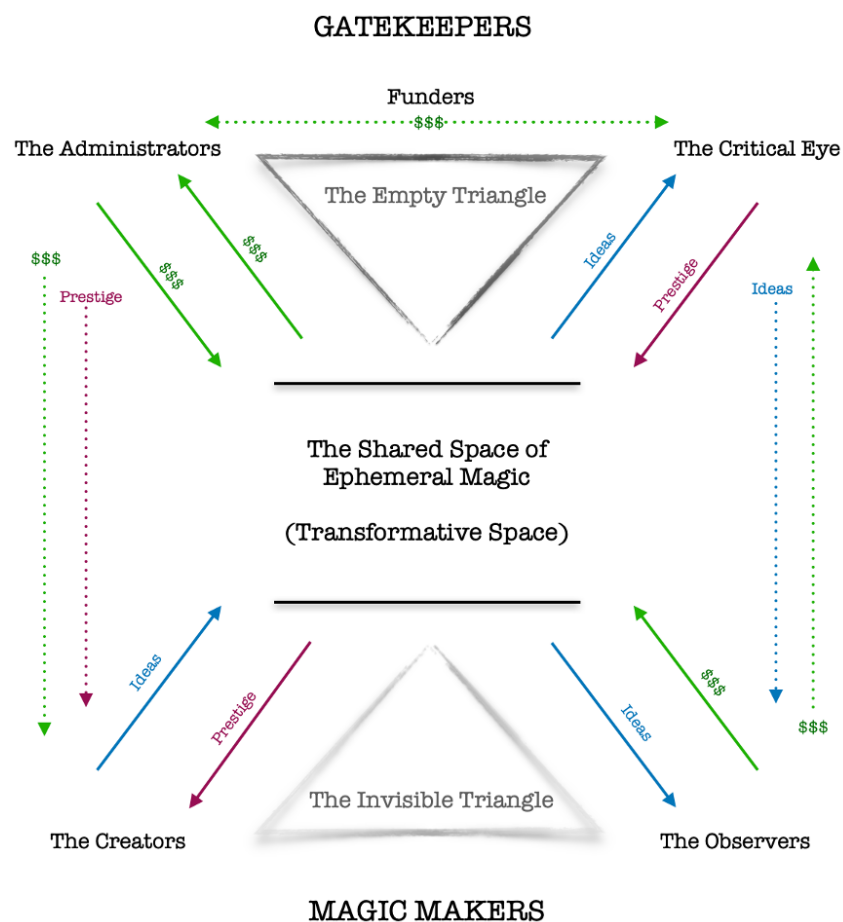


Fig. 1 – "The Empty Triangle"

A diagram of the American Theatre Industrial Complex (Tiffany Antone, 2020)

Yes – this is a visual map of the American Theatre Industrial Complex. Ain't it pretty? Here's what you're looking at:

The map diagrams what each of the primary “players” in American Theatre bring to the proverbial party. The cast includes Funders, Theatre Administrators, The Critical Eye, Creators, and Observers. All five of these entities work in service of bringing plays to life in what I have dubbed The Shared Space of Ephemeral Magic (which is just a really fun way to talk about the physical place where Art and Audience meet).

The whole system relies on ideas, prestige, and money to operate. In tracking each entity's “Power Lines”, you can see what everyone brings into, and takes away from, the Shared Space.

And, as you look at the diagram, you can probably SEE why everything feels broken right now: inequity is literally baked into our prevailing model, making it nearly impossible for any of us to create with equity at the center of our work.

So yeah, it's pretty clear why we're all so fucking frustrated.

And yes, there are very real financial reasons theatre currently works the way it does, but the diagram shows us that there are under-valued nexus points already in play in the predominant operating model which we can refocus our energies into mobilizing.

So, if you're still with me, I'm going to spend a little time breaking the model down for you and address the obvious questions (Why are you calling it the Empty Triangle? What the heck is the Invisible Triangle? Power lines? What? Do you honestly think you can do better?)

To the last point: Yes, and this whole thing ends with a push for us to invest in an *Abundant Circle* model of practice instead. So hang with me a bit, and then ya'll can chew things over and decide for yourselves what – if anything – you want to do about it.

SOME NUMBERS

Fun Fact: American funding for the arts is basically a blood sport.

SHOW ME THE MONEY... PLEASE?

The US currently allots only .003 percent of the federal budget to arts funding. In 2020, that amounted to a mere \$162.5 million appropriation for the National Endowment of the Arts, but only \$6.36 million supported theatre and musical theatre projects across all 50 states. (National Endowment for the Arts Quick Facts, 2020). Adding to this disparity is the fact that all states are not awarded equally. In 2020, the District of Columbia received NEA grants totaling \$3.68 million, of which \$355,000 went to theatre and musical theatre projects. But in my home state of Iowa, none of the states' \$958,440 in NEA funding went to theatres. This gross deficiency in federal funding leaves theatres in the lurch, breeding a scarcity mindset that only serves to underline capitalist practices.

This breeds a (not unfounded) scarcity mindset and means A LOT of an administrator's job (and I include Boards in this category) is just trying to find the money.

In his article, *The American Theatre Is Not Built For Us*, Chicago director and theatre practitioner, Monty Cole, explains that "The American non-profit theatre company has five main streams of income: single ticket buyers, subscribers, donors, board members and foundations/sponsorships". With limited federal funding available, theatre companies spend considerable time courting these other sources of income. Cole continues diagnosing the problem:

"For the most part, in order to allow a company to pay a living wage (most of them don't), theatre companies rely on members of the upper class to support the theatre where the government can not. The upper class make up the board, the subscribers, the donor base, and therefore, oftentimes, the single ticket buyer too. How many times have you talked to an Artistic Director who's directly controlled by their subscribers, their board, their local critic? Without appeasing these revenue streams, they won't be able to keep the company alive. Their concern can't be in serving the art, they have to serve their revenue streams first. The task should be in straddling both, but values get confused in dire times. The system is not built to serve us.

Cole's final sentence – a truth-bomb if I ever saw one – is the crux of the problem. Most non-profit theatre orgs claim that, even though funding is a constant struggle, they are still able to work in tandem with the artists and communities they rely on to stay in business. These organizations often say they are centering audiences, cultivating a collaborative theatre making process, and that they are doing it all in name of The Art but reality paints a very different (and inherently unequal) picture.

The COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on the cracks of our inherited frameworks. It was an unheralded moment of potential reimagining ripe for those of us geared, as playwright Caridad Svich so eloquently stated in her article *This is What We Do Now* (*American Theatre*, May 2020) "to imagine the future while being in the present and acknowledging the past at the same time". And while many theatremakers used the beginning of the pandemic to imagine new ways of doing things, Theatre (the industry) is an Egregore, and so – as soon as it could – it went back to doing things the old familiar way!

AN EGRE-WHA?

Have you read Jesse Cameron Alick's article *The Spirit of the Thing: Why the American Theater can't change*? It's brilliant. You should absolutely read it! An excerpt:

"An Egregore is an occult concept that originally comes from the Book of Enoch and has its roots in ancient Hebrew mysticism. In brief, an Egregore is a non-physical entity that is made material and brought to existence by the collective belief of a people. Egregore's are not often created consciously – in fact, it's most likely for an Egregore to be created unconsciously, accidentally by group think – The Egregore is consensus made manifest. From the first moment the Egregore is born, it has Purpose. It knows what it is there to do, and it seeks out to do it immediately. Just as quickly, the Egregore separates itself from the people that created it, and though it maintains an energetic tether to them, the creators no longer have dominion over the creation. The creation is an organism all unto itself. It will continue to feed off the love of the family or the hatred of the village, but it doesn't take orders. The Egregore lives to do two things; its given task and, like every other organism, to maintain its own existence."

In Svich's article, she goes on to issue a call to action: "In this moment, which may be longer than a moment, or may even be the eternal now (can we think about that yet?), is there a future we can not only envision but map out collectively, without, you know, leaving lots of folks behind as collateral damage – that charts an equitable way forward?"

Svich was, of course, absolutely correct – and in good company. Artists like Raja Feather Kelly, ([Has Anyone Asked Artists What They Need?](#)) and Genevieve Beller ([Rebuilding a Better Theatre Industry Post-Pandemic: A Punch List](#)) also wrote incredibly thoughtful essays about how we could respond to the pandemic pause with compassion and innovation. [We See You White American Theatre](#) (WSYWAT) issued a very clear (very [downloadable](#)) list of demands for a new social contract within the theatre world. Hell, they wrote a whole guidebook about how it could be done – like, literally step by freaking step! – and for a while, it *felt* like they were being listened to.

But then American Theatre's stubborn nostalgia won out, landing us where we are now: an inter-COVID schism.

I'll be honest, I came up with the Empty Triangle model in Fall of 2018, well before the pandemic began. It was, for me, a way to begin to examine the new-play pipeline (I am a playwright, after all), but life intervened (I got pregnant with my second child) and my research paused. Then the pandemic hit, and my research changed. I pitched the model and a different form of this essay to a book about pandemic management shifts in American Theatre, where it got accepted, but then the book stalled out.

So I've just been sitting on this thing, this visual map of American Theatre's "Empty Triangle" and meanwhile theatre continues to deepen its schismatic fracture and this thing which might actually be of use has just been, like, HAUNTING my laptop.

Well now it can haunt yours, bitches!

SO, WHAT'S WITH ALL THE TRIANGLES?

Let me bring the diagram back so I can answer this question while you're looking at things with me.

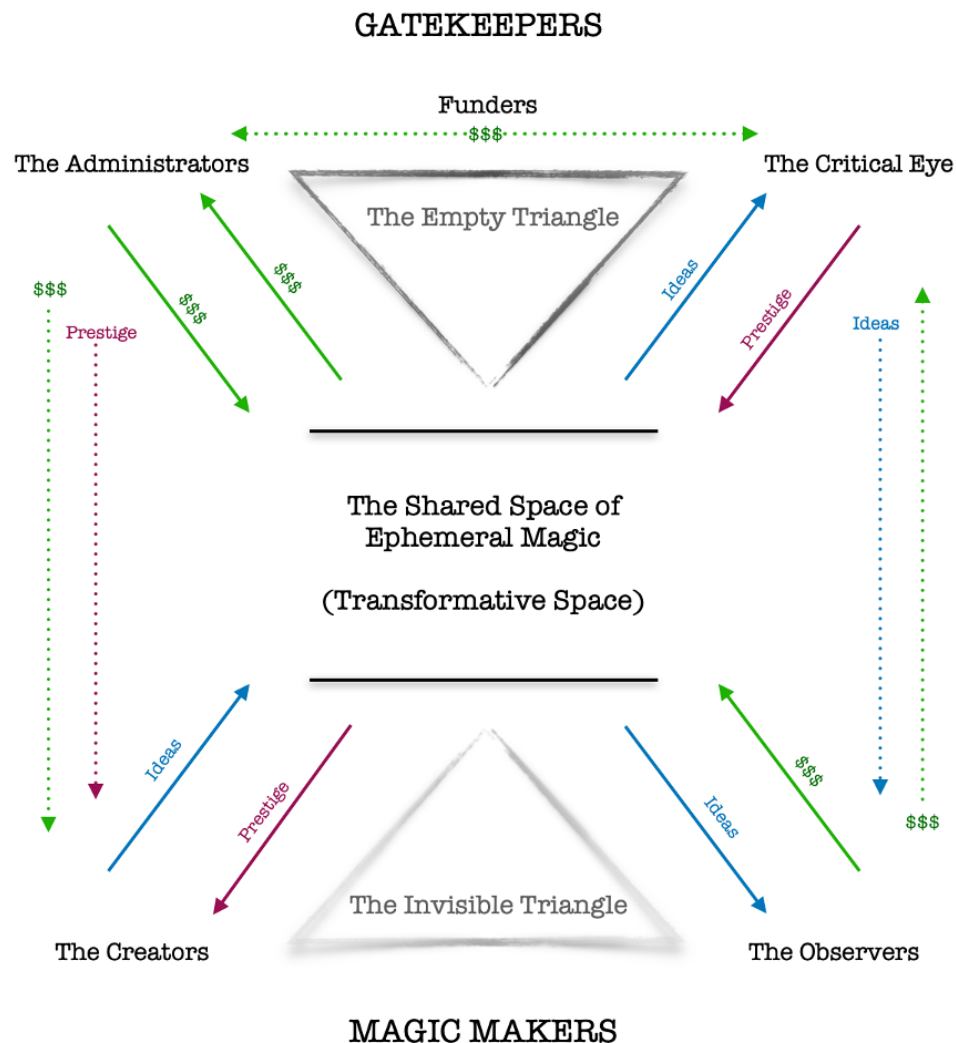


Fig. 1 – “The Empty Triangle”

A diagram of the American Theatre Industrial Complex (Tiffany Antone, 2020).

The Empty Triangle is the power nexus between Gatekeepers which forms above the Shared Space of Ephemeral Magic. Fundors and Theatre Administrators bring money and prestige to the shared space. The Critical Eye brings criticism and prestige (which in turn brings audiences and funding opportunities). But none of these entities bring The Magic. The Creators and The Observers do that. Hence, the triangle above the Shared Space is “empty” of Magic... it is empty of Art.

Conversely, the Invisible Triangle (below the Shared Space) is empty of power and money, leaving its makers (The Creators and The Observers) unable to capitalize on their shared goals: to make and experience The Magic. Both Creators and Observers surrender their power to the Gatekeepers and

Critical Eye, not by choice, but as a result of a business model which all but ensures the most vital pieces of the theatrical puzzle remain apart – and indebted to – The Gatekeepers who curate The Shared Space.

In other words, this business model keeps Artists and Audiences dependent on/indebted to the Gatekeepers, and – yes – theatre's been doing alright this way for a long time, but the pandemic helped redirect a lot of eyeballs to all the cracks and "us" shaped holes in the system.

Also, audiences haven't been returning at their pre-pandemic numbers, which is why the triangles are collapsing.

Let's talk about that.

THE SHARED SPACE OF EPHEMERAL MAGIC

Listen, owning your own theatre space is a boon to the creative process. You have your own space? YES! Now you can fill it with the equipment you like, the costumes you've been storing in your parent's garage, the boxes of tax returns in your closet... And you no longer have to worry about your patrons getting confused about where each production will be!

Total. Victory.

But, lo, all that space (and new equipment) takes money! So. Much. Money.

So now you're sweating your balls off trying to make enough money to pay the rent/taxes/etc.

And this is how, in a perverse twist of fate, the space begins to own you.

This is how we start to forget that *a building is just a meeting space for the ephemeral magic to be shared*. This is how we forget that the truth is, *any* space will do. All that is *required* in order for a space to host Ephemeral Magic is that it has room for Creator and Observer to meet.

Comfortable seats are just, like, a really excellent bonus!

The "rules" of Shared Space are simple:

- The Shared Space of Ephemeral Magic can be everywhere and all at once; Ephemeral Magic does not require, or even care about, curated spaces;
- Ephemeral Magic occurs regardless of an audience's "numbers";
- No matter what they tell you, Ephemeral Magic **does not** belong to the Gatekeepers (Gatekeepers may seem all-powerful, but they are actually just glorified doormen and accountants);
- No matter how you slice it, *Creators and Observers are the only ingredients necessary for the Magic to happen*.

When Observer and Creators meet, wherever that may be, transformation can occur (transformation is the high we are all chasing!) You don't NEED a building, expensive lights, or A-list stars for transformation to happen! (Of course, these types of bells and whistles can be used as justification to charge higher ticket prices)

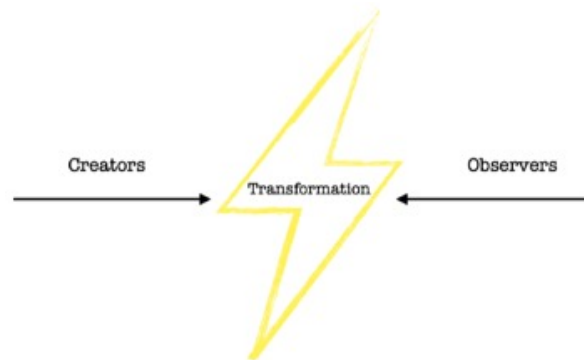


Fig. 2 – “The Shared Space of Ephemeral Magic”
A diagram of Ephemeral Magic occurring between Creators
and Observers (Tiffany Antone, 2020).

And yet, so many theatremakers yearn for owned space! We consider it to be an enriched space, a better space, and I get it! I would 100% be thrilled if I never had to guerrilla-theatre my way through another production! However, this is where my whole pitch for making your theatre a third space comes in, because Theatre alone doesn’t need a building, and (moreover) *Theatre alone won’t support a building*. You will always be chasing your financial tail in order to justify the expenses, the refurbishments, the new/cooler light board, the sound system that doesn’t crackle....

Make your space a third place, and Theatre alone is no longer responsible for making the rent. Of course, many of our LORT theatre spaces were not designed as third spaces at all, but rather designed as alters to The Theatre; built solely for the function of its players and adoring masses to worship the art form. So, if I have to pay to park in order to pay for entry into your building (where my children aren’t really welcome so, yes, I’ve had to pay a babysitter too) and where there is only The Play or The Reception happening... well, excuse me, but of course I’m only going to be able to make such an offering to Dionysus once in a blue moon, while I look for a third space somewhere more accessible.

A THIRD WHAT, NOW?

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the phrase in his book The Great Good Place, where he defines Third Places as social surroundings separate from our primary social environments of work and home. The third place is a physical location with little to no financial barrier to entry, and where conversation is the primary activity.

And we could talk about Third Spaces all day – we will in fact come back to it in a few pages – but this is not the only issue we need to discuss when it comes to The Shared Space. We’ve got to talk about the Gatekeepers.

GATEKEEPERS: THE CAST

Gatekeepers control access to the Shared Space. There are three primary Gatekeepers in an Empty Triangle model: Funders, Theatre Administrators, and The Critical Eye. Each exercises control over who is, and is not, allowed into The Shared Space of Ephemeral Magic, although *how* they influence this varies.

(There are, of course, additional players operating as invested individuals who can, and do, serve as Gatekeepers without the benefit of institutional backing. However, they are usually able to influence institutions due to similar reasons: they possess significant resources and/or they have amassed “enough” prestige.)

Funders consist of both public and private granting organizations and donors, and award considerable financial support to theatre organizations, helping them function. Per Theatre Communications Group's 2019 Theatre Facts, which profiled 129 theatres, foundations contribute an average of 12.7% of theatre's expenses, with individual donors contributing an additional 14.9%. Granting foundations are able to exhibit various degrees of control over how their funds can be utilized, which in turn influences programming decisions on the part of theatres who need these funds to survive. It is absolutely understandable that foundations want to make sure their financial support doesn't go “to waste”, but through strict vetting processes, they limit the number of organizations that can even apply. Narrow eligibility begets a smaller pool of viable applicants, ensuring that their financial support also lends a certain amount of prestige going to the organizations they fund.

Theatre Administrators (specifically Artistic Directors, Governing Boards, and other executive leadership) decide which Creators get to work in their spaces. Additionally (and even though theatre administrators are DAMN THIRSTY for more and more diverse audiences) decisions about what to produce, who to hire, how much to charge, and/etc./everything else, determines which type of Observer will be “allowed” into their Shared Space. Theatre Administrators demand money from audiences so they can deliver a percentage of that money to the artists they hire. Administrators are the only entity in the model whose predominant Power Lines are the same in both directions: Money.

The Critical Eye deals in prestige and encompasses both professional and academic criticism/practice: Professional Critics and Academia.

Professional Critics lend their prestige to institutions and artists they deem “worthwhile”, and often prioritize White, patriarchal “norms” as deserving of accolades, which results in very limited material getting pushed out to the masses. Tanuja Jagernauth and Regina Victor wrote an excellent article for Howl Round about the need to cultivate critics of color to disrupt this pattern. As they noted in their argument, a critics' influence “heavily determines who works in theatre, which shows sell out or flounder, and even who gets funding”. Unfavorable reviews can dampen a play's future prospects for regional and community theatre runs, which means Critics hold long-reaching sway in whose stories get told and remembered. A Critic's primary currency then, is the prestige their opinion brings to the Shared Space. Second to that, is their connection to Observers and the transference of ideas that occurs within a well-read review.

Academia, on the other hand, both influences the model and reinforces its hold on emerging Creators by replicating an *Empty Triangle* model on college campuses across the nation. As Gatekeepers within the model, Academia engages in study and criticism of theatre, which can lend prestige to the theatre institutions and artists its members deem worthy of scholarship. This is seen in the myriad Academic

conferences, papers, journals, and so forth, which Academy members use, in turn, to earn prestige within Academia/satisfy tenure requirements and so forth. Academics bring prestige to the Shared Spaces by taking its ideas with them as potential publication and teaching material.

As an institution itself, Academia replicates the Empty Triangle Model on campuses across America and trains young artists to work within its problematic confines. In so doing, Academia lends credence to the notion that The Empty Triangle model is *the* model by which theatre is made. In this way, Academia exports ideas into the field, while those it is training bring money to Academia by way of tuition.

GATEKEEPERS: IN ACTION

Traditional theatre models place Gatekeepers at the entrances of the Shared Space. These are Administrators who make decisions about what kind of Creator and what kind of Observer can congregate in an established meeting place. There are many different organizations and many different Shared Spaces to study, and one would think the sheer number of Shared Spaces would present incredible variety...But the prevalence of the Empty Triangle model yields a depressingly homogenous pool of theatre administrators who share a common checklist for entry, both in regard to who is allowed to make The Magic, and who is allowed to witness it.

Bay Area theatre artists and producers Rebecca Novick and Evren Odcikin tracked the demographic data of Artistic Director changeovers nationwide between 2015 and 2021. Out of 114 outgoing Artistic Directors, 95 were White, as were 74 of those hired to replace them. An increase of 21 POC in AD positions is definitely an improvement, but with 64% of the incoming ADs identifying as White, theatre leadership continues to fail at reflecting the global majority. Additionally, it must be kept in mind that the numbers from Novick and Odcikin's report only looks at AD openings between 2015-2021, not the total number of ADs. Another sobering fact Novick shared with the NY Times is that "the bigger the theater, the less likely the board is to hire a woman, and especially a woman of color", so the numbers do not yet reflect the kind of revolution necessary to create a true changing of the guard.

Now, the data I just quoted is from 2021, and a lot has happened in the two years since, namely that quite a few boards, in – what at the time felt like – a responsive-to-the-moment act of good faith, hired theatremakers of color to lead their companies through this "great moment of transformation" – only to scapegoat them when ticket sales did not immediately bounce back once theaters re-opened. The best examples of this ugly phenomenon are Nataki Garrett's death-threat plagued run as AD of Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Ken-Matt Martin's shamefully short-lived tenure as AD of Victory Garden's Theatre in Chicago.

NOT SO VICTORIOUS...

Nataki Garrett and Ken-Matt Martin's respective journeys are well documented, and I'm going to assume if you're here reading this, it's because you're an engaged theatre-maker and thus probably already aware of the grisly details. But, in case you somehow missed it, or (more likely) there's just been so much of this type of shit going on lately that you can't remember the particular details, you can read about Garrett's initial hiring HERE, you can read about her decision to resign HERE, and you can read Ken Matt-Martin's statement on his tenure HERE.

I highly recommend you read Martin's [statement](#) in full, but want to draw attention to what Martin says about the American Theatre at large:

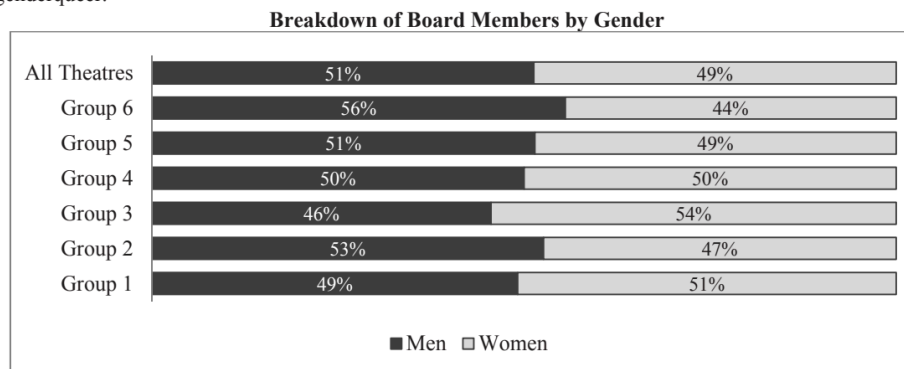
"American theaters are not built to center the needs of the artists or the staff. They are top-heavy institutions that cater to donors' preferences, that twist themselves into pretzels to fit foundations' latest giving priorities, and that give boards composed of professionals from other fields ultimate sway over how theater is made." He later reiterates that his experience is not an outlier, but rather a systemic fault line: "I am hopeful that everyone can see our current predicament not as one institution's dysfunction, but as an example of the industry-wide need to seriously reevaluate our models and modes of operating," before ultimately asking "What if we truly embraced a spirit of abundance instead of reinforcing a culture of scarcity?"

Which brings us to the truly big swingers, the people pulling all the strings, the Administrators at the top of the Administration food chain (cue ominous orchestral score)...The Board of Directors.

As we all know, AD's work (or don't) at the pleasure of their boards, who are (at least at most of the big theaters) predominantly White. (The most recent stats – pictured below – on theatre boards appear to be [this 2013 report from CTG](#). I would love to know if another, more recent, study has been done – I couldn't find one.)

Racial/Ethnic Breakdown of Board Members, by Budget Group (men and women)							
	All Theatres	Group 6	Group 5	Group 4	Group 3	Group 2	Group 1
White/Caucasian	89%	88%	93%	91%	90%	84%	72%
Black/African American	5%	6%	4%	5%	5%	5%	12%
Latino/Hispanic/Chicano	2%	2%	1%	2%	1%	2%	10%
Asian American	2%	2%	1%	<1%	2%	3%	1%
South Asian American	1%	<1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Multiracial	1%	<1%	0%	<1%	1%	1%	3%
Middle Eastern	<1%	1%	0%	0%	<1%	1%	0%
Pacific Islander	<1%	<1%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%
Native American	<1%	<1%	<1%	0%	0%	<1%	1%
Other	<1%	<1%	0%	<1%	<1%	0%	1%

- Overall, the average board's gender balance is 51% male and 49% female. No theatres reported board members who identify as transgender or genderqueer.
- Women outnumber men on the average Group 1 and 3 Theatre's board. Generally, the percentage of men on the board increase as theatre size increases.



- Less than 1% of board members identify as having a disability.

Fig. 3 – Screenshot of data from [CTG's In Whom We Trust V: Theatre Governing Boards in 2013](#)

I mean, how can any one honestly look at American Theatre's leadership history without seeing that we're just one giant White voice echo chamber?

American Theatre has been, and continues to be, predominantly led by White artists who, as a result of their own inherent bias (self-aware or not) create theatre (intentionally or not) for predominantly White, middle and upper-class ticket-buyers. And this isn't a "touchy feely" statement – it's a goddamn fact:

- The Count 2.0, the Dramatist's Guild's most recent examination of who is getting produced in the US, revealed that 84.9% of all produced playwrights between 2011-2017 were White and 70.8% were men.
- According to The Broadway League's most recent report (on the 2018-2019 season) 75% of Broadway audiences were White. (I haven't been able to find a similar study of LORT theaters nation-wide, but it's widely known that many of those theatres are struggling in terms of diversifying their audiences)

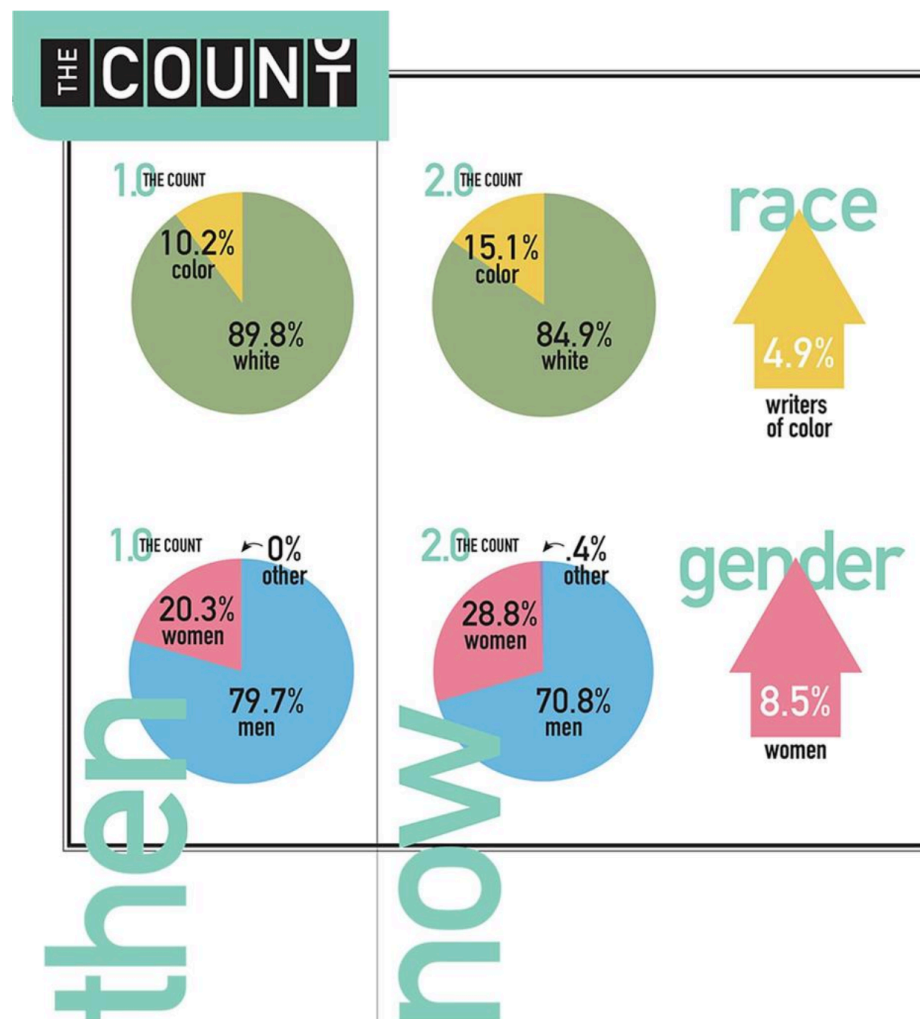


Fig. 4 – Screenshot of data from Dramatists Guild's The Count 2.0

Thus, those predominantly White, predominantly male, Gatekeepers' shared biases (both conscious and unconscious) wind up determining who is, and is not, allowed inside our dominant Shared Spaces, which then gets replicated by smaller companies who look to the "Big" theatres as tastemakers/trend-setters. Thus, the rules of the shared space ripple outwards (and downwards) resulting in a twisted sort of nation-wide curation of what gets produced and who gets to see it. These ripples influence regional, community, and academic theatres alike. The shared Empty Triangle model has essentially created an ripple effect from the top of the theatre industrial complex down to its bottom, with theatres at every level mimicking one another's programming decisions, while prioritizing profit and prestige (in order to survive) over artist empowerment and community engagement (the ingredients that help theaters thrive).

But, for all their power, prestige, and influence, Gatekeepers do not experience the full magic of the Shared Space. They occupy the "Empty Triangle", remember? It's actually the Creators and Observers who leave the Shared Space transformed.

THE MAGIC-MAKERS

Creators and Observers are the magic makers. Without Gatekeepers to curate their work, Creators are left to find their own Observers. This is familiar territory for any artist who has not yet been invited into an established Shared Space – the pandemic and its resulting schism put artists' uncurated ingenuity on full display. (Remember all those un-curated zoom pandemic room invites?) Large theatres have a harder time turning the ship. Small, nimble, scrappy (and most often under-funded and under-supported) artists are able to respond quicker to a changing landscape. Creators think like entrepreneurs because they ARE entrepreneurs; well-versed in inventing, re-inventing, and constantly pitching themselves and their work. As artists for-hire, they are already adept at responding quickly to both scarcity and opportunity. They are one of the most flexible and responsive entities in the model. They are ambitious individuals working within the system but are not part of the system themselves.

CREATORS

Creators are the artists who bring Ideas into the Shared Space. They are playwrights, directors, actors, designers, stage managers, carpenters, etc. *They are the individuals who literally make the art happen.* The ideas which they bring into the Shared Space are the foundation on which all of The Ephemeral Magic is built. Ideas may begin small, but they have infinite potential. Developing those ideas into a full-scale production, however, is dependent upon many factors.

In an Empty Triangle model, the Creator and their idea must first be invited into a Shared Space. As we all know, the invitation process has many steps and only a select few invitees actually see their projects brought to life. In fact, few Creators ever get past the first handshake, audition, or reading in a small room tended by institutional Gatekeepers. For the artist whose work does make it all the way to a curated Shared Space, they are rewarded with prestige in the form of a new credit on their resume and the increased likelihood their work will be invited by other Gatekeepers into their respective Shared Spaces. If the artist is working at a professional theatre, there will most likely also be a financial reward in the form of a weekly paycheck or project stipend. As contract workers, however, even when paid, most artists exist in a state of constant economic precarity.

MORE NUMBERS:

Per *Theatre Communications Group's 2020 Salary Survey*, union actors earned – on average – \$765 a week, with non-union actors averaging \$423 a week. Looking closer at the numbers, however, we can see that those averages overshadow the fact that the lowest union rate reported was \$67 a week, and the lowest non-union rate was a mere \$15 a week. In the same report, a guest directors average per-production stipend was \$7,133 (although the lowest reported stipend was just \$100) and Lighting/Sound/Costume designers each averaged around \$2,600, with their lowest reported rates set at \$150.

Even if the average union actor worked 52 weeks a year (a feat reserved only for those fortunate enough be contracted for a show that enjoys a year-long run) their annual salary would only be \$39,780, whereas top theatre administrators (Artistic and Managing Directors) in the report average \$137,800 annually (*TCG 2020 Salary Survey 2021*). Obviously, theatremakers salaries vary (the TCG Salary Survey is itself a wealth of disparity, reporting on wages earned from theatres with annual operating budgets of \$90,000 to \$58 million), and in many non-professional and community theatres, artist and administrative staff alike wind up working for nothing more than prestige, but what is clear is that contract work for Creators is unreliable and oftentimes one of the lowest earning positions in the prevailing Empty Triangle model. As a result, most Creators rely on “day jobs” to survive, with a fortunate few augmenting their survival through individual artist grants.

Though few and far between, artist grants foster growth for Creators with much of the same type of restrictions they place on Theatres. The problem, however, is that there are precious few direct-to-theatre-artist grants available. The NEA ceased funding individual artists in 1994 after a years-long legal “decency” battle with performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller (since dubbed The NEA 4) for their “frank treatment of themes of gender, sexuality, subjugation, and personal trauma”. By “passing the buck” to arts institutions instead of awarding grants to artists themselves, this shift essentially doubled the gatekeeping Creators had to navigate in order to get funded. Private foundations that award individual grants are vital for many artist's survival, but these foundations still act as Gatekeepers, and many Creators go their whole careers without “unlocking” what limited foundational support exists.

However, when Creators and Observers meet directly, the results are immediate. Without a middle-man brokering the introduction, they're able to jump right into The Magic together. One only has to look at street performance, found-space events, and artists' self-produced performances to see Creators side-stepping Gatekeepers and connecting directly to audiences on their own terms. There are, of course, drawbacks to this. As I've already mentioned, *The Invisible Triangle* between Creator and Observer is most often devoid of power and influence and is very often personally-funded by artists themselves, increasing financial risk for Creators.

Creating accessible and affordable Ephemeral Magic (whether in-person or online) is not always financially fruitful. The self-produced artist rarely gets away with charging the same kind of ticket fees that large institutions do. Instead you're likely to see Creators granting low (or no) cost access to their art, while inviting Observers to contribute to their Patreon, or directing audiences to their website in the hopes of growing their social media base. But why? Are artists correct in thinking audiences will be reticent to pay a fee directly to artists? Are they less inclined to “risk” ticket fees on un-vetted art? Are audiences skeptical of artists? Skeptical enough to feel more comfortable paying a middle-man for the art than paying artists directly? And if so, how do we course-correct for any of this?

I theorize that audiences have been “trained” to trust Gatekeepers more than artists. The prevailing American ideal that you must “Work your way up the Ladder of Success!” carries over into audiences’ relationship to art. Until a Creator has achieved name recognition, it falls on Institutions to qualify artists as trust (and investment) worthy. It is an unfortunate capitalist side-effect that audiences want artists to accumulate a certain amount of prestige before they are willing to pay them directly.

Thus, Creators rely on Theatres to connect them with Observers and earn meaningful income from their work. But the pool of artists invited into the meaningful income circle is small. Which brings us to the question: Is there a way to lessen both the power and sway that Gatekeepers have over Observers? Is Gatekeeping the reason the traditional theatre model rewards Administrators with so much more security than Creators in the first place? Can Theatre Administrators function more as facilitators and conduits, rather than Gatekeepers and tastemakers? And if so, what would that look like?

OBSERVERS

The average theatre goer— hell, the average non-theatre goer— surrenders their taste-making power to Theatre Administrators by obeying the transactional order of the traditional theatre model. But theatres struggle with this responsibility and are constantly asking how they can attract new and more diverse audiences. The question persists because the Empty Triangle Model really doesn’t offer audiences very much. Sure, the Shared Space of Ephemeral Magic is a wondrous and worthwhile place to visit... but is it really fair to demand audiences pay increasingly higher ticket fees just for the pleasure of observing Magic that they had no voice in selecting and may not know how to access?

An article for American Theatre by writer Jefferey M. Jones encourages theatres to follow the example of visual arts organizations and create a season catalog aimed at educating and empowering audiences so that they may be better equipped to access, and appreciate, theatrical work.

“Starting shortly after the Second World War, advocates of the visual arts in this country put an enormous amount of effort and energy into disseminating a core set of terms and concepts by which the “difficult” stuff could be discussed and understood. By the mid 1980’s, their battle was essentially won, and the halls of the Guggenheims, Dias and MOMAs still swarm with gray-haired ladies and their descendants. Theatre, unless I have been missing something, has spent almost no effort or energy in defining, let alone disseminating, a core set of terms and concepts by which new plays might be discussed and understood. And I believe even the gray-haired ladies aren’t subscribing the way they used to.”

A democratizing step like this is exactly the sort of thing that can help prime audiences for adventure, rather than leave them feeling forgotten by a theatre’s foray into unfamiliar art, while also empowering them to engage in constructive dialogue with the theatre itself.

Of course, a season catalog won’t solve everything. The fundamental problem with Observers in an Empty Triangle model is the fact that they are just that: *observers*. The Empty Triangle treats them as transactional outsiders to be entertained, and not as integral pieces of the whole. This isn’t for lack of trying on theatre’s part – but when art is treated as a commodity (and a fairly expensive one at that), Observers have few other options than to play the role of unreliable consumer.

In Toward a Future Theatre, Tarek Iskander, artistic director Battersea Arts Center digs deeper, explaining that Theatre doesn’t view its Observers holistically:

“We don’t really see people: audiences, artists, participants. We establish rituals, hurdles and restrictive parameters at every opportunity and expect everyone to fit into these (then get angry

when they don't turn up). It's not inclusive, it's not creatively productive, it's not the best version of ourselves. The word theatre comes from the ancient Greek word "to behold" but we don't do much 'seeing' of others these days."

So, what happens when, rather than hoping/praying/marketing the hell out of their season to try and convince Observers to buy their "product", theatres actually build healthy and mutually beneficial Power Lines in cooperation *with* Observers? Well, they begin to break free of the Empty Triangle model and towards something... better.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I cannot talk about the antidote to theatre's Empty Triangle diagnosis without first talking about how this model perpetuates a survivalist mindset. When resources are tight, it is natural to see human beings come into conflict over what resources there are. In an Empty Triangle model, The Shared Space is a competitive one.

Theatre Administrators use what happens in The Shared Space to Fig.ht for funding, grants, donations, and audiences. Creators use what happens in the Shared Space to lobby for future jobs and to grow bigger networks. Academia uses what happens in The Shared Space as fuel in their battle over academic resources. Observers are the only group *not* competing in the Shared Space, although they are Fig.hting for representation and access, which is in itself is worthy of revolution.

Bottom line? No matter how big or small an institution is, art costs money. Even an unaffiliated artist making theatre in a church basement needs to account for their own cost of living. Until theatre in America is fiscally (and equitably) supported, a scarcity mindset and capitalist drive will continue to take center stage in our industry, making the Empty Triangle a difficult model to break free of.

So, how do we "cure" Theatre's ills? If the problems laid out in this essay are hardboiled into theatre's inherited systems/structures, the only way to break free of them is to blow up the old system and build something new. To change how American Theatre operates, we need to completely re-envision what the fuck it is we're trying to do. We need to initiate an industry-wide shift. We need to break free of the prevailing Empty Triangle model and mindset, and build something new.

I propose we look at creating an Abundant Circle.

THE ABUNDANT CIRCLE

Let's begin with another diagram. It's another triangle. It's an image of Theatre's hierarchical power structure.

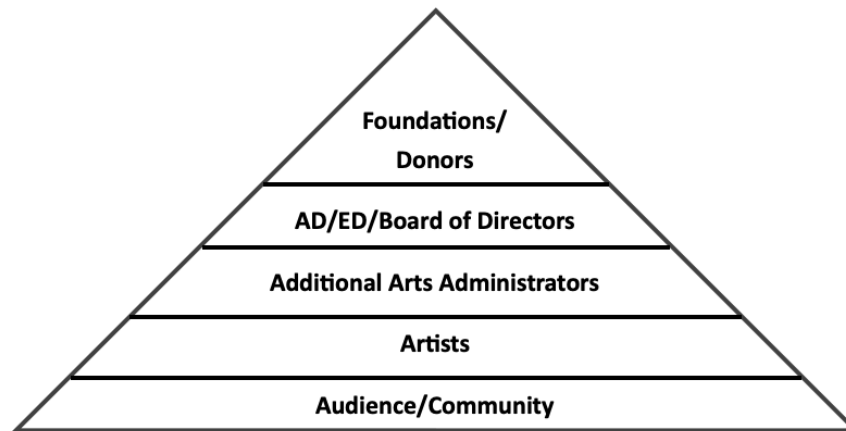


Fig. 5 – Theatre's hierarchal power structure is a pyramid featuring the Board of Directors and Artistic/Executive Director at the top.

Artistic and Executive Directors and the Board of Directors occupy the top of Theatre's "Power Pyramid". And because power courts, and is closely aligned with, money, Funders occupy the second tier. Additional arts administrators come next, followed by Creators, leaving Observers and Community at the bottom.

As Artistic Director of Cornerstone Theatre, Michael Garcés, explained in *Toward a Future Theatre*, "You walk into most theaters and the structure is hierarchal and it's a pyramid. The artistic director (or whatever the title) is on top. And while the optics may change in terms of who has power, the pyramid stays the same, which means nothing has changed. It's a class hierarchy. Capitalist theaters will not change capitalism. "

If we're going to dismantle this hierarchal system (because, by the Gods, someone needs to), we need to get some perspective, so let's zoom out...

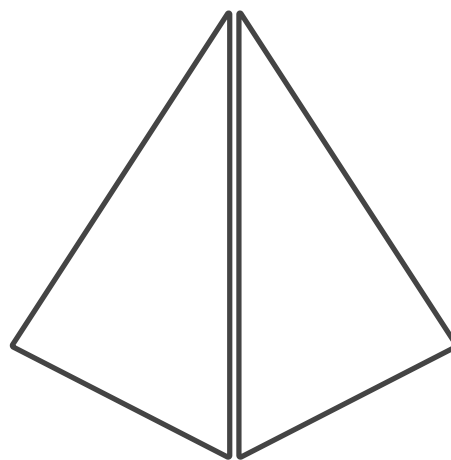


Fig. 6 – A three-dimensional picture of a pyramid from the side.

And up...

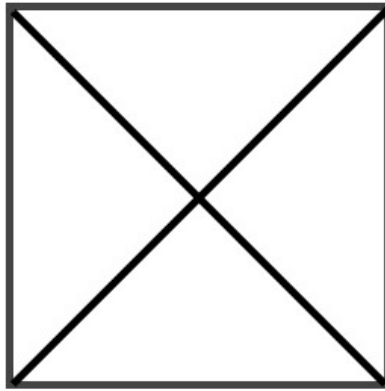


Fig. 7 – A diagram of a pyramid from above

And now we can see that our heavy, seemingly immovable pyramid, when examined from above, is actually a square and that the foundation of this pyramid, which is comprised of the Creators and Observers, is much more powerful than the mere tip it supports.

It's so powerful, in fact, that it can actually set itself in motion, and a square in motion becomes... a wheel.

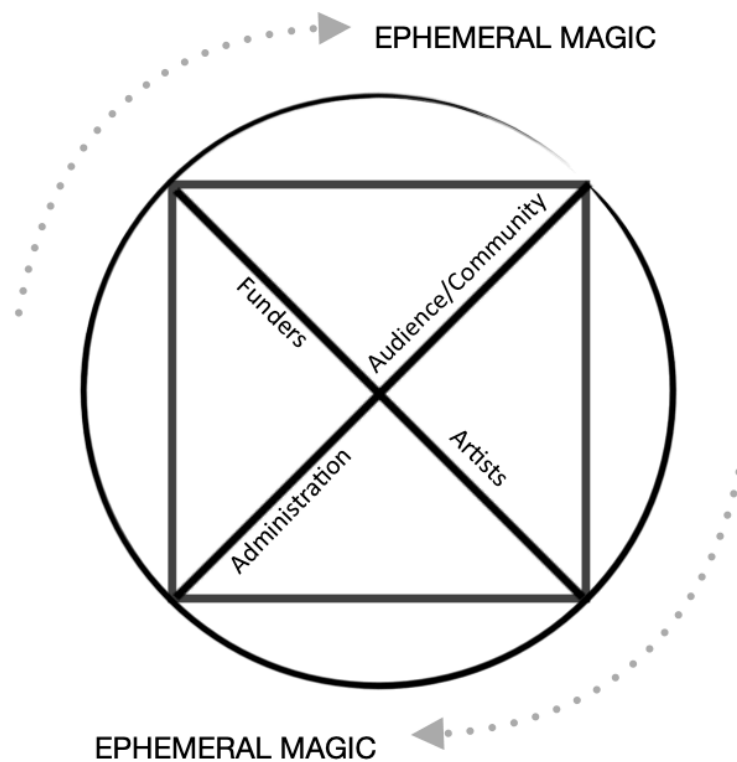


Fig. 8 – "The Abundant Circle"

A diagram of an alternate theatrical power structure (Tiffany Antone, 2020).

The Ephemeral Magic, in this model, is created through collaborative and equitable forward momentum. The Magic only happens if the power lines within are equitable and working together. This is what creates The Abundant Circle. As you can see from the diagram, there is no hierarchy in an Abundant Circle model.

Transforming our pyramids into wheels will require a seismic philosophical shift in how we do business, and it won't be easy because it requires power players to give up some of their power. So let's talk about that...

"POWER OVER" VS "POWER TO"

In Torben Bech Dyrberg's *The Circular Structure of Power: Politics, Identity Community*, he writes that, generally speaking, there are two broad categories of characterizing power: A conception of power that is asymmetrical "stresses that power entails conflicts of vested interests, that power struggles are zero-sum games of winners and losers, that power, consequently, is 'power over.' This is because it secures compliance or control or is a relation of dependence or a hierarchal relation of inequality. A view of power on these lines emphasizes that power by prohibiting, restricting, dominating and so forth, establishes or maintains relations of superordination and subordination".

A symmetrical or communal conception of power, on the other hand, "stresses that power is a collective capacity, a kind of community resource, which is more closely related to consensus than to conflict. In the case of conflicts, we have a plus-sum game, meaning that everybody can gain, which in turn is based on the assumption that power, basically, is 'power to'. In this more benign view of power, phenomena such as conflict and domination that are associated with 'power over,' are typically seen as parasitic upon, and as a perversion of, 'power to.' This approach stresses, when it is slanted towards an emancipatory interest, that superordination/ subordination is not a 'necessary' feature of social relations".

Now, the average theatremaker would probably ascribe themselves with a "Power to" philosophy, since theatremakers love to champion the egalitarian facets of theatremaking. However, Theatre as an institution and industry, tends to follow the "Power over" model. How then, do we realign our institutions/industry to empower, rather than subjugate, artists and audiences?

I argue that we must first stop thinking/talking about theatre as a commodity. In a capitalist society, nothing exists which cannot be commodified. But theatre, at its essence, is a form of shared cultural knowledge. In examining and illuminating the many truths of human experience, theatre artists create living texts which contribute to our communal growth and evolution. In this regard, theatre is less a thing to be sold than it is a living, breathing record of our shared humanity, and the act of making theatre is less a job than it is an act of service.

When we create theatre as an "Act of service" rather than as a "Commodity", we automatically bring a "Power to" philosophy to our work. Engaging in acts of artistic service means I am working as a part of something greater than myself, rather than trying to make something great work for me – one cannot act in service to the whole without decentering the self, after all. This practice therefore dispels with the I/Me/My/Mine so prevalent in Empty Triangle thinking, and reorients theatremakers towards the We/Us/Ours thinking of an Abundant Circle model. If art is bigger than myself, then the practice of being an artist demands I contribute to my craft through shared and equitable practice. At the risk of sounding

cliché, an Abundant Circle model requires us to ask not “What can my art do for me?” but rather, “What I can do for my art?”

A look at Lewis Hyde’s The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World, offers another, related, perspective. In it, Hyde proposes that works of art “exist simultaneously in two ‘economies,’ a market economy and gift economy.” The language we use around artists is that of the gift economy: a great artist is often recognized as “gifted,” and artists often talk about their practice as a form of channeling/tuning into the muse. It’s as though the art comes from outside and beyond ourselves – as though it is a gift from some sort of beyond. Hyde clarifies, stating that “an essential portion of any artist’s labor is not creation so much as invocation.”

When audiences meet a great artist, they often feel a sense of the divine about them. They are not mere mortals; they are maestros of transformation! As Hyde explains, art which matters to us, which *transforms* us, is therefore received by us (the audience) as a gift.

Well, Theatre is an art form. Does that mean theatre is a gift? But if so, why is it so often treated as a commodity? Can’t we have the best of both worlds and declare “Theatre is BOTH; we *sell* the *gift* of transformation!” Well, no. Because, as we learn from Hyde’s deep dive into gift economies, you cannot purchase a gift – it must be given to you. And you cannot hoard a gift, lest it cease being a gift. As Hyde writes, “One man’s gift must not be another man’s capital.”

American Theatre, however, has built itself around the idea that you can – through a combination of patronage, box office, and sheer grit – administer art as both some sort of public good and a commodity.

But, as the saying goes, you can’t ride two horses with one ass, sugar bean. (Sweet Home Alabama, 2002)

Dr. Melissa Hillman, a diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant specializing in education and the arts, posits that the commodification of theatre is the reason theatre cannot break free of its hierarchical and elitist structures. Writing on her blog, Bitter Gertrude, Hillman calls theatre “a luxury good. And that? That’s not a compliment. It’s a calamity.” She goes on to say:

“Theatre is a shared artistic experience, both in its creation process and in its performance. In human history this shared artistic experience has been framed in a multitude of ways – as ritual, as religious observance, as entertainment, as propaganda, as resistance. And while it has been – and will continue to be – all these things in modern America, what it is primarily for us is a commodity. Framing theatre as a commodity is at the root of every major problem we have.”

If we believe ourselves to be purveyors of transformation – as so many of us say we are – then we must be willing to at least chew on the idea that theatre is, at the very least, *not* a commodity to be sold. And if we’re willing to do that, well, maybe there’s hope.

Before I move on from Hyde, I want to point out that he does not offer us a playbook for how to solve the challenge of making art while also trying to survive capitalism. Hyde himself, at the end of the book, talks at length about how this challenge is particular to the times each artist lives in. And as we don’t live in a gift economy, even if we decide that yes, theatre is a gift (or an act of service), the American Theatre still has to survive in a market economy. But in order to do that well, we’ve got to be honest about what we believe theatre is, and how that belief determines the framework shaping our field. As I said at the start of this whole shebang – it’s fine to commit to a “Theatre as commodity” perspective

(the popcorn analogy), but you need to be honest about it. (And maybe don't act surprised when your audience decides it doesn't *need* what you're selling anymore.)

Illustrating this, Hyde writes:

"The artist who sells his own creations must develop a more subjective feel for the two economies and his own rituals for both keeping them apart and bringing them together. He must, on the one hand, be able to disengage from the work and think of it as a commodity. He must be able to reckon its value in terms of current fashions, know what the market will bear, demand fair value, and part with the work when someone pays the price. And he must, on the other hand, be able to forget all that and turn to serve his gifts on their own terms. If he cannot do the former, he cannot hope to sell his art, and if he cannot do the latter, he may have no art to sell, or only a commercial art, work that has been created in response to the demands of the market, not in response to the demands of the gift."

And here it is so abundantly clear that what Theatre's Empty Triangle does is inject Gatekeepers between the artist and the audience, acting as a sort of broker – telling audiences what they should like to see, and issuing invitations to the artists creating the art they think fits that bill. This intentional power vacuum divorces artist and audience, disempowering both, while also incurring an enriched suffering for Gatekeepers wherein they are caught in an eternal juggling act trying to keep ALL the balls in the air, lest the whole fabricated thing come crashing down around them.

On that note, Hyde offers us one more banger of a quote that feels super appropriate:

"But if it is true that in the essential commerce of art a gift is carried by the work from the artist to his audience, if I am right to say that where there is no gift there is no art, then it may be possible to destroy a work of art by converting it into a pure commodity."

I think what happens in the Empty Triangle is just that: the art gets transmuted into pure commodity. The gift becomes a series of numbers on a balance sheet. The triangle is empty because the only people allowed at the proverbial table are those who speak in dollar signs.

As I wind down what has turned into a sort of "Read Hyde's book already!" section, I want to share one more quote. In the book's introduction, he explains his intention to "write an economy of the creative spirit: to speak of the inner gift that we accept as the object of our labor, and the outer gift that has become a vehicle of culture."

And just, wow. "A vehicle of culture." I love that. (I called it shared cultural knowledge earlier, so you know I'm obviously a fan of this phrasing.)

Theatre is a complex, beautiful, and collaboratively built vehicle of culture.

I think that makes it a gift. I think the act of sharing that gift with our communities is one of service. And I think that makes it worth doing better.

I will pause here to acknowledge that while my philosophical argument probably makes sense to a lot of Creators, it is not going to sway the Egregore. (Seriously, if you didn't read that article yet, [go do it now!](#)) As Alick says, the American Theatre Industrial Complex ain't gonna change! If WSYWAT's demands didn't land, my philosophical argument sure as shit ain't gonna do much either. And it's this reality

which makes me say that, even though I LOVE my art, maybe we just have to let our crumbling towers come crashing down.

It's up to us to build something new. To put the Abundant Circle into practice. To begin in earnest to be the difference. To live up to our potential as agents of transformation.

CAN A TRIANGLE BECOME A CIRCLE?

I am an idea engine. I am also an agitator. And I have been chewing on the question of what to do about any of this for quite some time. I am also a cis, straight, White woman who came from a working class family, but who has somehow managed to eke out a precarious position in America's middle class (knock on wood). I do not, and cannot, know THE CURE for all of Theatre's ills. But if you are interested in building an Abundant Circle, the next portion of ideation is for you as I will attempt to offer some ideas that have come as a result of my lived experience, my research, and my obsessive brain. I will also reference and recommend a variety of other sources because I am but one of many people who are researching and writing on this topic.

And even though I have said Theatre ain't gonna change, I am (secretly) a bit of an idealist. (Maybe YOUR theatre organization is willing to try to break out of the Empty Triangle!) So the following also includes some power shifts/focus changes that theatremakers can take to move Empty Triangle institutions closer to an Abundant Circle model.

In profiling these changes, I draw on the work of contemporary theatre practitioners and revolutionaries to outline clear steps towards a better theatre model. I also often defer to WSYWAT's incredible roadmap towards equitable practice outlined in BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre. The work they've done offers a clear guide for how American Theatre can confront its intrinsic racist inequities, which our industry must do if we are to have any hope of operating in abundance. Equity for BIPOC theatremakers IS equity for all, and equity is the backbone of an Abundant Circle Model. However, although I am about to make frequent reference to WSYWAT's list of demands, in no way should my interpretation of their demands take the place of reading the original document.

Funders

As previously mentioned, the US currently allots only .003 percent of the federal budget to arts funding. In 2020, a mere \$162.5 million went to funding the National Endowment of the Arts. The simplest and most obvious first step toward creating an Abundant Circle Model would be for the federal government to step up public funding. (Are you reading this, Feds? SHOW US THE MONEY!) Even the NYTimes is imploping the Feds to increase arts funding... which is nice, right?

Of course, more federal dollars wouldn't solve Theatre's structural problems; but it would give everyone a little more breathing room to do the work we need to do. Barring a miraculous shift in how our nation views the arts, however, we must turn our attention towards Foundations and Donors... which is still a mighty ask. Are they gonna read this and think "You're right, Tiffany! Gifting money with restrictions isn't really gifting, is it? I will change my gifting ways!"

Probably not. But, let's talk about how they could do things differently just in case.

Looking to Bitter Gertrude again, Hillman offers the following possibilities in regard to re-envisioning how funding works:

"Imagine more equitable funding. Imagine removing financial gatekeeping from grant applications. Imagine not caring if the money is 'used well,' defined by the creation of a successful commodity. Imagine paying theatremakers a salary because they are theatremakers, whether they are part of a company, a production, or not. Imagine funding for operating costs, removing the need to lie on grant applications that all funding goes to production costs for that one sexy world premiere. Imagine funding playwrights because they are theatremakers, not because they wrote a sexy world premiere starring a celebrity. Imagine not caring about celebrity."

She goes on to suggest that we "Imagine the circle of theatremakers, including funders, all looking at each other and saying, 'We have decided to care for one another, as one community, to protect theatre as a shared human experience rather than a dog-eat-dog construct that values the privileged only.'"

Convincing foundations to change will require a ~~miracle~~ great deal of effort, probably some lobbying, and a concerted, industry-wide effort (or miracle). That said, I have to wonder if some changes are more in reach than we think. For instance, what if:

- Foundations prioritized lower earning institutions over high, and made equal pay a guideline for awards?
- Foundations refused to award institutions with inequitable payroll structures? (WSYWAT suggests administrators should earn no more than 10 times that of the lowest paid employee – so let's start there!)
- Foundations refused to award institutions whose boards and staff aren't comprised of a least 50% global majority (non-White identifying) individuals?

Are you on the board of a granting organization? Do you feel like joining one and mounting a revolution from the inside out? Maybe if we approach the Funding world with equity at the center of our reformative demands, we *can* incite change. If empowering Foundations to take on the responsibility of policing the institutional structures (rather than those the institutions employ) then there could be a monetary reason for the institution to change along these philosophical lines.

WSYWAT outlines thirteen steps Funders must take to ensure equitable funding practices. If even half of them were enacted, theatre funding would take a huge leap towards a more egalitarian process.

Individual donors, it should be noted, will most likely continue to donate to organizations per their personal choice and ambitions. In this regard, individual donors with an eye towards justice may be able to influence this culture shift within institutions, while donors who are inclined towards funding lobby renovations will continue to do so. We as an industry must find a way to appreciate individual donors, while disallowing the practice of letting donors become Gatekeepers.

Board of Directors

Does a Board of Directors work for the theatre? Or does the theatre work for the board? I think this question has gotten muddled to the point where no one is entirely sure anymore. It's like a board of directors and egreore ouroboros (oh, to be able to sketch that image!)

Looking back to Bobbit's article, he asks "Is the board managing the leader, or is the leader managing the board? And if it's the latter, doesn't this become a sort of second staff to manage? Does the staff leader need the board to help make decisions when they already have a staff and/or a network filled with industry professionals?"

Ay, there's the rub.

It's no secret that a theatre's Board of Directors often hold significant sway over organization's operations, so when I propose we renovate the board, it is with an understanding that there will likely be significant push-back from theatre and power-holding board members themselves, not to mention the fact that some of this work may require changes in organizational by-laws and other such processes...

Just look at the board at Victory Gardens for an example of a board 100% doubling down for "The way it's always been!" with their fucking claws out, no less. That board ain't gonna change.

But the organization sure did. It's reputation has. And Victory Gardens (if it survives this moment) will never be the thing the board was trying so fiercely to maintain.

So, yeah. Boards are tricky.

Which means, if you're an organization just starting out, it's a good idea to interrogate whether or not you actually NEED a board at all. I mean, maybe Uncle Sam requires you to have one because they are obsessed with Gatekeeping, but clearly defining who will serve on your board and what your board's purpose actually is, along with defining who answers to whom and in what ways... well, you probably can't get it 100% perfect, but you can certainly use an Abundant Circle ideology to build one that's better than what most organizations are doing with their's right now.

Theatre Communications Group's most recent snapshot survey of Theatre's Board of Governors reported that out of 116 theatres, 89% of their boards were comprised of White/Caucasian members (*In Whom We Trust V: Theatre Governing Boards in 2013*). Perhaps most interesting is the fact that theatres with the lowest operating budgets (\$499,000 or less) "have the lowest representation of White/Caucasian members and by far the highest representation of Black/African American, Latino/ Hispanic/Chicano and Multiracial members." But even then, this group's boards were 72% White/Caucasian. Also of import: less than 1% of board members from this survey identify as having a disability.

Looking at gender across all 116 theatres, the report shows a 51% male, 49% female split with zero reported trans or gender-queer members. The majority of board members were aged 50 or older, although smaller theatres tended to be more age-diverse. From this data we can infer that the adage "Theatre is run by a bunch of old White guys" is statistically valid.

While recent shifts in theatrical dialogues on equity may reflect positive changes in demographics on TCG's next Governing Boards Survey, the trend of smaller theatres leading the way in regards to better representation will probably hold true. The larger the theatre's operating budget, the whiter and wealthier its subscriber base. Members of the American upper class collect board member titles like merit badges. And yes, these wealthy and well-connected individuals bring cache and financial support to theatres. But they also reinforce a Gatekeeper/Curator mindset built on primarily elitist and White-centric values. Continuing to preserve this model of oversight would be a gross misstep, and a roadblock to forming an Abundant Circle.

In addition to changing who sits on their governing boards, Theatres need to find ways to reimagine how boards operate. In [an article for American Theatre magazine](#), performing arts leader Michael J. Bobbit tells us "Boards should be ambassadors, not overlords. They should support and uplift the staff and mission, connect with other boards on industry issues, advocate for funding, fight oppressive and inequitable practices, encourage risk-taking, forage for resources, and spread the word in partnership with staff and artists". This type of philosophical shift in how boards function is exactly what is needed

to shift away from the Empty Triangle's "Power over" model, and instead embrace the "Power to" practice of an Abundant Circle. And if an institution's board won't make that shift, it's time for the theatre to get a new board.

WSYWAT's demands regarding how boards function reflect this sentiment and offer very clear steps for centering equity and global majority voices, including that boards "overhaul their memberships to be more inclusive and to better reflect the fact that White people make up just 11.5% of the global population." Additionally, WSYWAT offers the following accountability plan:

"We demand an account of how your theatre is adhering to its obligation as a 501(c)3 to be in service of the public good. We, BIPOC, are a part of that public. Boards of directors must require that institutional annual budgets reflect the institution's mission and values with respect to EDI work. Budgets are to be audited by an independent reviewer, and public funding is to be dependent in part on that independent reviewer's audit."

Boards *should* reflect our global community. Creating a diverse board of directors who bring a wealth of lived experience to the table will be far more beneficial in ensuring non-profit theatres are living their mission— *and* that their mission truly benefits the community.

Artistic Directors

Asking Gatekeepers to throw open the gates feels like a fool's errand, which is exactly why we cannot ask. We must make it happen. If we're building anew, this feels more manageable than working to change the hierarchal patterns of an Empty Triangle model. It's easier to build with an empowerment mindset in the first place, than it is to ask those who hold power to share their power with others.

There are very exciting theatre companies working in non-traditional formats which reflect an Abundant Circle mindset. Many of them would probably tell you that breaking free from "traditional" power structures ain't always easy, but it is worth it. I'm going to talk for a bit about just a few of the companies I've studied who do this well.

The Rude Mechs are an award winning, nationally recognized theatre collective based in Austin, TX. This company uses collaborative creation to build art through shared leadership and community revision. The Mechs describe themselves as a non-hierarchal collective who center gender equity in their work, with company responsibilities shared between six COPADs, or co-producing artistic directors. Their audience members are not just ticket buyers, they are storytelling stockholders who help shape play development. The company's commitment to accessibility and community is central to their work: "We believe creating art through a collaborative and consensus-based process will lead to expansive thinking and the creation of a just world." Their mission reads:

"Our collective makes performance.
The work is new, live, and deeply collaborative.
We provide a home for creation and performance where people gather, experiment, and share new ideas.
Everything we do is gritty, affordable, and accessible."

The Rude Mechs have been breaking norms and making theatre since 1996, and as a nationally celebrated company of artists, it's fair to say that theirs is a model worth emulating.

D.C.'s The Welders is collective of playwrights who commit to producing one play by each of the group's member playwrights before passing the entire organization to a new generation of artists. Aside from

collaborative leadership, the Welders realized early on that in order to stay true to their mission, they needed to redefine success.

“What we decided was that success wasn’t about putting great new plays into the world. That’s not to say, mind you, that we don’t want to make beautiful work. Of course we do! What artist wouldn’t? But we decided that at the end of the day – or at the end of our three years – we’re going to measure our success by how well we live up to the last clause of our slogan: passing The Welders on. The more we have to give to the artists who take over the organization after us, the prouder we’ll be.”

What is key for The Welders, and I argue something that all theatre organizations could look at adopting, is the collective’s driving awareness that they are part of something bigger than themselves. According to founding members Gwydion Suilebhan and Jojo Ruf, “We’re trying to build a machine and then set it in perpetual motion. We’re planning to pass The Welders on to people who are also going to pass it on to others who will pass it on ad infinitum.” Isn’t longevity at the heart of every non-profit’s mission? Of course, unlike most other theatres, The Welders have literally built term-limits into their operating structure which help keep this mindset at the forefront of their work, but what would Theatre look like if every Administrator thought this way?

There are also some pandemic related changes in leadership to keep our eyes trained on, like the mini-revolution that took place at American Shakespeare Center after Ethan McSweeney resigned due to fifty-two full and part-time employees submitting a letter to the board alleging McSweeney created a “toxic” work environment and mistreated women and artists of color.

LEADERSHIP FAILS

McSweeney’s resignation came on the heels of a slew of other artistic directors resigning or getting fired by their institutions for similar complaints. PlayPenn’s founding director Paul Meshejian left his position after allegations of “white bias within the organization and allegations of sexual harassment by a former board member”. Ari Roth, founder and Artistic Director of Theatre J, resigned due to the fact that staff had leveled charges of “White supremacist culture and management practices” against him.

(Sidenote: Are you familiar with Lauren Halvorsen’s Nothing for the Group newsletter? It’s a wealth of information and perspective, plus she has a “Regional Game of Thrones” feature which comes alive whenever an AD changes seats. Highly recommend!)

Instead of searching for a new Artistic Director to fill McSweeney’s shoes, the center pivoted to an actor-led model, reminiscent of how things worked during Shakespeare’s time. In a 2021 interview in the NYTimes, chairman of ASC’s board, G. Rodney Young II, said that the company was “moving away from a top-down, vertical approach to producing plays,” with a particular focus on improving POC members’ experience. Two years later, and the proof is in the pudding. The company has gone all in on a distributed leadership model and they’ve even devoted a page on their website to its success:

“In a nutshell, our version of shared or distributed leadership looks like this: In order to represent all interests in Operations, Production, Programming, and Engagement, the Management Group (MG) is composed of at least one team lead or department head and

occasionally solicits input from other Company employees and outside resources to provide additional expertise, perspectives, and information to the MG to better inform decisions. Right now MG consists of eight people in our company of around 55-60 employees, representing all facets of each department from finance to education to production management. These individuals co-equally and collectively make decisions on behalf of the organization.”

Another company doing things differently is Red Eye Theatre, a 38-year old producing organization in Minneapolis, MN. The company switched to a collaborative leadership model in 2019, wherein seven Artistic Directors share leadership responsibilities through a horizontal structure and consensus-based process. In [a conversation for HowlRound.com](https://www.howlround.com/conversations/jeffrey-wells), the team discussed the benefits of this change:

“Jeffrey Wells: There’s something about working in collaboration that provides a real sense of support and safety, that allows me to push forward the creative risk, or the helpful or exciting risk, that I want to take. And it mitigates the system risk I would rather not have to deal with alone.

Hayley: In more traditional structures, there is a separation of management, finances, and the artistic work. By having seven people working together, we’re all leaders in all the areas.

Theo: When you say traditionally, Hayley, it’s like, whose tradition, right? What the seven of us are doing isn’t terribly revolutionary. The only difference is that we backdoored our way to traditional funding structures and resources. Now we have the backing of a thirty-eight-year-old organization but can apply a more community-focused, person-focused lens to it.”

Whether central to their founding mission, or the result of a recent pivot, each of these companies’ operational systems center equity and stand as models for Abundant Circle practice. There are others out there! Go forth and be awed – and then follow their lead!

(Of course, if you’re part of a company that is currently working in the Empty Triangle model, you’re going to have a harder time. Institutions like to stick with what’s familiar, hiring new Gatekeepers to pick up where the previous one left off. Internal and external pressure might convince your organization to change... or maybe it will have to collapse in on itself before it listens. How’s that for optimistic?)

So, to sum up: In an Abundant Circle model, power is decentralized, leadership is shared, and administrators function more as facilitators than directors. They work to:

- Empower artists and audiences alike
- Ensure equitable practices for every theatre employee, volunteer, and guest
- Ensure open access and transparency.

Referencing WSYWAT’s list of demands, we see specific equity-centered compensation and hiring demands that can be incorporated by new and existing companies alike:

- We demand that the theatre’s highest paid executive staff members make no more than 10x the yearly salary of the lowest paid full-time staff member.
- We demand divestment from bloated executive packages and bonuses.
- We demand an immediate end to oppressive hiring practices.
- We demand that BIPOC comprise the majority of leadership positions and the majority of middle management, including production department heads and company managers, across your organization.

Taking steps to ensure Administration is inclusive, representative of the communities in, and with, which they work, and actively sharing power moves Institutions is a vital step to building Abundant Circle.

Creators

The two major hurdles a Creator must overcome are money and time. Art takes both money and time to make, and you can't make time if you don't got money. So whatever institutions can do to eliminate those obstacles for Creators is what they should be doing. It's actually very simple: Give Creators time. Pay Creators money.

And yet, institutions often get caught up in the scarcity mindset, treating Creators like curated contractors for hire.

In an Abundant Circle model, Creators are:

- Given (and empowered by) time, access, and money.
- Allowed seat at the table – and on the Boards! – of the institutions they work with.
- Paid a living wage and are part of the institutions they are working with – not just brought in to meet grant requirements for new play development projects or as diversity hires.
- Reflective of and connected to the community in which they are working. (Yes, that means hire local!)

Additionally, institutions working with an Abundant Circle model establish firm anti-racist policies to ensure equitable hiring of, and collaboration with, Creators.

Bottom line: In an Abundant Circle Model, Creators are empowered members of the theatres with which they create. This not only empowers Creators, but it enriches Institutions. Creators are, after all, the reason audiences show up. Creators are the conduit between your organization's mission and the freakin' world! In an Abundant Circle Model, they are treated as such.

Observers

An organization working from an Abundant Circle model engages Observers on a foundational level, resulting in a shared sense of community. The Abundant Circle audience is recognized as a *fundamental* part of the institution; they are never just ticket buyers but are instead valued constituents. If your organization owns or rents a building, that building is designed as a third space, not just an alter to The Play.

Theatres working with an Abundant Circle model give back to the communities in which they work. They engage in active listening with their communities, to ensure that outreach projects are wanted. They actively seek out community input, involving community members in planning these projects and put them on their board, ensuring the institution is serving its community and not the other way around.

In an Abundant Circle model, Observer and Creator connection is encouraged and nourished, and Institutions hire and support community artists. Theatres see themselves as hosts, rather than venues. They treat *all* audiences as welcome friends, rather than customers. They do not police audiences for how they dress, sound, or respond. In short: there is no room for elitism in an Abundant Circle model.

Recognizing that our industry actually leans into elitism as a means of survival is an important step in moving towards an Abundant Circle. As Hillman said, while theatre "is a shared artistic experience, both in its creation process and in its performance," it has primarily become an American commodity. "Framing theatre as a commodity is at the root of every major problem we have".

Writer and arts critic, Diep Tran, seems to agree with this position, writing for Token Theatre Friends: "I believe that one of the reasons that the arts are considered frivolous, and elitist is because the industry itself promotes that image."

Add a dash (or a whole book by) Hyde, and it's abundantly clear that this central question about what theatre is, must be reconciled if we are to have any hope at all. And, really, Theatre is rotten as a "commodity" – who looks at a play and says "Let's build a whole business around selling *that!*" Only Broadway producers, because Broadway is a for-profit operation (and even then, Broadway's history is a museum of financial volatility! Why emulate that?) In a nutshell, Non-profit theatre needs to reconcile this contradiction – and it's audiences will thank them for it.

The Critical Eye

The Critical Eye is not featured in my Abundant Circle model because – in many ways – they're not really necessary to make the wheel turn. This does not mean that criticism and academia cease to be important, just that the way in which they file an Abundant Circle are, like, healthier.

When theatre institutions work in lockstep with their community, critical reviews lose power over institutions and audiences. By ensuring that Observers are constantly engaged and a secure part of the Abundant Circle, institutions lessen the Gatekeeping ability that the Critical Eye holds. This allows the flow of ideas to run between Artist, Institutions, and Observers directly, resulting in a better informed and empowered public.

Now, calm down! I'm NOT saying we need to get rid of critics. What I am saying is that if Theatre is operating as an Abundant Circle, professional criticism will be able to continue its vital work of recording experience and interrogating artists and institutions while lessening its Gatekeeping powers.

Academia? Well... (takes a deep breath)

While it continues to educate tomorrow's Creators and Administrators, Academia will need to undergo its own institutional revolution in order to graduate individuals with a "power to" philosophy towards theatre-making. To fully analyze and outline Academia's Abundant Circle transition will take its own essay, as college theatre programs are embedded in an even larger, more entrenched, structure than the American Theatre Industrial Complex; the American Education Industrial Complex. Knowing this shouldn't intimidate academics into inaction though, and I will outline some potential first steps here.

Educators are already well-versed in working around systemic roadblocks to make art happen, so shifting their departments towards an Abundant Circle mind-set *is* doable if yet another exercise in creative systems management. The first thing Academia can do is recognize that indoctrinating emerging artists into an Empty Triangle Model is ethically bankrupt. Instead of operating as Gatekeepers themselves, educators need to be empowering students to outwit Theatre's oppressive and elitist systems. There are thousands of professional Gatekeepers out there. An educator's aim should be to arm students with as much "Yes, and..." energy as possible, and then get out of their way.

In an Abundant Circle model, Academia holds the Theatre Industrial Complex's feet to the fire through critical analysis of its systems (hey, I'm an Academic, and this is definitely lighting a sort of match, so I'm walking my talk, ya'll!) and by prepping future artists to tackle these systems head-on. They model their own willingness to challenge the status quo in and outside the classrooms and prioritize a "Roots" over "Fruits" approach to graduating nourished artists who aren't afraid to advocate for change.

Since academic programs rely on their parent institutions for funding, and enrollment numbers for validation, an internal philosophical shift will not be enough to completely revolutionize programming – but it will be a start. And if Academia commits to the critical study of theatres who are working with an Abundant Circle model, scholarship can build a case for similar shifts in higher ed theatre programs. So,

while it is important to note that building Academia's Abundant Circle is another piece of my ongoing research, it is also very much connected to the future steps our industry takes at large.

CONCLUSION

I'm putting the final edits on this at an interesting time. Both the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and SAG-AFTRA, Hollywood's primary titans of creativity, are on strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). At issue are several labor concerns, pay inequities, and a push to prevent Hollywood from replacing artists with AI.

A. Freakin'. I.

But don't worry – I asked ChatGPT if AI would replace artists and it said probably not...

"AI-generated art is often based on patterns and data from existing artworks, which limits its originality and creativity. Although AI can mimic certain styles and create novel combinations, it lacks the depth of human emotions and experiences that inspire truly groundbreaking art. Art is not just about the final product; it involves the artist's unique perspective, emotions, and storytelling abilities. Human artists bring their life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal insights into their creations, making each piece an expression of individuality and humanity." – ChatGPT

Even AI knows it's just a really good mimic. But it seems some people in charge of Empty Triangles (and oh, boy, is Hollywood full of 'em) will do anything to keep themselves fat, happy, and on top. That's because Hollywood has gone all in on the "art is a commodity" theory. So we can look to our digital brethren as a bellwether of what happens when Gatekeepers commodify the hell out of an art form. Maybe it's a little easier for them – unlike the ephemera of theatre, a film is a tangible (and re-watchable) piece of property. And while yes, films can be transformational, the business of making them is cut-throat AF. Just look at the [list of demands made by the unions](#) – aside from the (kind of terrifying, actually) AI issues, most of their asks are just "Please treat us better, and pay us what we deserve." And the AMPTP is like, "Nah."

Hollywood offers us a glimpse of how, even with billions of dollars at their disposal, those who engineer (and profit from) the sale of commodified art choose to continue strengthening triangles rather than create level playing fields. Profit and power will always be hoarded by those who already have it.

The American Theatre doesn't rely on studios systems, and that's a good thing. Even though we have Broadway, Broadway's producers pretty much stick with the for-profit sector. Meaning, every non-profit theatre is its own entity. It may feel like a cabal, but really the American Theatre Industrial Complex is just a collection of individual machines built off shared blueprints. We mimic each other, we feel pressured to tow the same lines, but – really – we have actual agency in our communities to make theatre the way we – and our communities – want.

We just need to wake up to the fact that we are not bound to the Empty Triangle. It's time to capitalize on our intrinsic power and ingenuity as theatremakers, and jump into the rich work of transforming our practice.

Thus, my conclusion is a call to action. Hell, this whole thing is a call to action – one call to action amidst a mountain of calls to action, made by tons of brilliant, passionate, and dedicated artists who just want an equitable playing ground on which to deliver their gifts to the world...

It's time to dismantle our Empty Triangles, y'all!

So read the articles I've linked to, start a book group with your friends and dig into *The Gift* and *Toward a Future Theatre*. Read up on circular and shared power structures. Let the companies I've referenced be a spring-board to researching other shared governance organizations out there! Interrogate the systems you're currently working in and draft a vision statement for the system you dream of working in. Then build a roadmap to getting there.

And if you're part of a theatre organization looking to change but also feeling overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the task (it is genuinely hard to break patterns, y'all!) check out [The Circle of the 9 Muses](#). Aside from having a very aesthetically appealing cover (I mean, who doesn't want to open that thing up?) David Hutchens' book offers tools to help readers "discover your organization's hidden narrative assets, use different templates and frameworks to tell the stories of your past, present, and future and then draw team members into rich meaning-making dialogue that translates into action." Yes, it's a story-work book – and it's fabulous. Why not check it out from your library (or buy it), read it, and then apply its teachings to uncover a deeper analysis of your organizations inner/outer workings/failings. There may not be one way to fix American Theatre's mess, but clarifying the stories we tell ourselves about what we do, how we've been doing it, and what we want to do moving forward, is an electrifying place to start.

I want to close with an analogy.

[Foucault tells us](#) that theatre, just like a mirror, is a heterotopia. Heterotopia is his word for describing spaces that serve as "worlds within worlds", or: "real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."

Foucault is fascinating, and dense, and goes hard on a great deal more points than we need to dig into here. But this idea of the Theatre as a heterotopia – a place which all the "real" sites of a given culture can be represented, contested, and inverted?

Well, that's just poetry.

It's also true.

And so if Theatre thinks of itself as a mirror, Theatremakers must think first of the culture we aim to reflect. It is not our culture to curate, but theirs; the audience's. For it is they who will stare into the mirror, and thus be able to see clearly what they are unable to see on their own – what they in fact turn their backs to – in the real world. In this way, the act of attending a play is a means of gaining entry to the entire sphere of human experience. But, if our invitation to the mirror is merely transactional, the experience becomes bookended, flat, and finite. It becomes just one more product to be reviewed on Yelp. If, however, we practice an Abundant Circle model in which the audience is welcomed to the center of the sphere of experience where they are met by empowered artists able to help them see, hear, and feel their way through the mirrored heart of the whole...

Well, that's transcendence.

And I believe transcendence is what called most of us to The Theatre in the first place.

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