



**Illinois Arts Alliance
2009 Members' Meeting and Reception
February 24, 2009 at Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago
Prepared Remarks by Ben Cameron**

Today, we're here to talk about change—ever accelerating, ever confounding, often perplexing change. Just think: one year ago, President George W Bush watched from the sidelines as Hillary Clinton battled Barak Obama for the presidential nomination in a dead heat. General Motors happily cranked out Hummers, and Sarah Palin was unknown outside the frozen north. A-Rod was the embodiment of apple pie in baseball, Michael Phelps had yet to swim (or bong)--and the Dow Jones stood at 12,381. My how much can change in just one year.

With the devastating plunge in our national economy, we now face a future that feels more uncertain, more paralyzing and more daunting than any in my lifetime at least--and certainly the arts industry feels the plunge as acutely as any. Already many of you have seen individual giving fall in late 2008. Comparable drops in government and corporate giving are likely to be felt this year in 2009—and indeed, this could be the year in which both these philanthropic sectors enter free fall. And in foundation giving, severe drops will be felt as well, although the erosion will be more gradual, given the tendency of many foundations, including the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation where I work, to base giving budgets on an average of 24-36 months of assets--a formula that now artificially buoys many giving budgets for the time being and postpones an accurate impact of the downturn until 2010 or so.

Already, many of you have already taken pre-emptive cuts in the 10-15% range for the current year and are planning cuts again at least as large for the upcoming one. Together we can recite the litany of traditional solutions--staff downsizing, hiring freezes, reduced programming (whether in number of shows, scale, or length of engagements), elimination or radical reduction in employee benefits, hikes in ticket prices and, at last resort, fire sale--strategies that increasingly to many of us feel inadequate and perhaps even futile.

Local arts community are coming together—it has been a pleasure to be at comparable meetings in New York, Portland, Seattle, Boston, and now Chicago today--to share information and explore viable new strategies for the future—meetings in which participants at their best embody the pathway of creativity as described by Bill Moyers: “showing up—really showing up---listening deeply, speaking the truth, and letting go of predetermined results.”

Organizations everywhere are increasingly thoughtful about partnerships, collaborations, shared services, reduction of duplicated efforts, the possibilities of mergers—including potentially mergers across discipline lines or involving complementary organizations, e.g. a playwright development program with a producing theatre. Pricing structures, collaborative use of facilities, partnerships with those outside the arts—all are seriously on the table as we examine our future in new, expansive ways.

In a time when scarcity of resources heightens the competitive urge and can make it so easy to turn on one another, we are elevating the discourse to a vision of an arts ecology, realizing that praising theatre while disparaging dance or opera, arguing for the avant-garde while denigrating the mainstream, pleading the case of the smaller at the expense of the larger ultimately advantages no one and harms us all. We are discovering the power of bypassing competition in favor of co-opetition, as Yale author Barry Nailbuff urges—cooperating to grow the pie for us all, even as we continue to inevitably compete for a piece of it.

Recent events in Washington proved the power of this approach in the rescue of the \$50M earmarked for the arts in the economic recovery legislation--an earmark eliminated by the Senate but later restored as a result of focused advocacy, activism and a carefully articulated sense of our importance to our communities.

We need to grab every valuable lesson from that triumph: the value of a strategic cross-disciplinary coordinated message, the value of data in building our case, the power of celebrity spokespeople on our behalf, and the dedication of our Boards and political allies. Indeed, in this time, we need to always approach lawmakers, not with palms outstretched prepared to articulate what we need the government to do for us, but proud and confident, ready to articulate what we will do for the world. We will employ significant numbers—of artists yes and carpenters and electricians, caterers and more, we will stimulate economies, as the lure for tourism we will fill hotel rooms and restaurants, the teachers that reach into the educational system and more—plans of action designed to establish us, not as a source of need, but as a part of the solution.

Feeling battered by economic change beyond our control, it can be sometimes difficult to recall that 2008 for the most part was a year in which we were excited by and sought change—indeed, a remarkable time in which (for the first time I can remember) BOTH political parties eschewed the past and jockeyed to be champions of change. It was a year unlike any other—a benchmark year in which who was elected, how elections were conducted, who was engaged by the process,—in numbers, in age, and in race— who was empowered to act, who led the way—all signaled a fundamental changing of the world order and produced a wave of energy dedicated change, to possibility, to a hopeful future for us all.

What we did, who we engaged and how we engaged them, who was empowered to act, who led the way— key notions that I'd like us to consider as we gaze into our collective future together.

We too in the arts were engaged in change conversations, concerned as we were that many of the behaviors and structures that had nourished so many of us for so long were increasingly unlikely to flourish in the future.

At the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation where I work, our late benefactress charged us in her will with the care of “actors, singers, dancers and musicians in the presentation and performance of their work”—a directive that, in intersection with her life long passions, has led us to dedicate our resources to artists working in jazz, contemporary dance, and theatre, and the organizations who nurture, present and produce them.

As we entered our 10th year of grantmaking in 2007, we convened artists, managers, administrators and board members from these fields to explore the issues they faced in the new millennium.

These conversations, involving more than 700 participants in 22 conversations in 14 cities, were fascinating, revealed a level of stress and uncertainty I have heard in my more than 30 years in the arts fields—stress that predated our national economic turmoil.

We heard three kinds of issues in these conversations. We heard idiosyncratic issues—issues particular to one field but not to others—issues of career transition for dancers, who train in many cases foregoing college and other vocational training and at the age of 35 find themselves at the end of the careers with no clear alternatives about how now to spend their lives—a powerful, hugely challenging issue but one that does not resonate for jazz artists—artists who play often into their 70's, 80's and 90's but who now face the destitution of the road and the collapse of the traditional recorded music industry—an issue that means little to the theatre artist, and so on.

We heard chronic issues—issues of under- undercapitalization for arts groups, only a fraction of whom have—or perhaps I should say had—ample reserves, significant fixed assets, and endowments—and issues of under-compensation, not only of artists, but of managers, administrators and technicians. Indeed, when we talk about the philanthropic support for the arts—the donations of individuals, corporations, government and foundations—too often we forget to cite the single largest philanthropic sector of all: the arts professionals on whose lives the work is made. And while these issues are hugely critical—and indeed, we

must continue to work to overcoming them-- we called them chronic because, quite frankly, we heard the same issues in comparable conversations 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago and more.

Four issues, however, emerged as especially powerful in all fields, and as especially particular to our 21st Century.

First, the increasing dysfunctionality of the 501(c)3 model—the breakdown of old fundraising strategies, the difficulties of managing boards, and the hunger for new models, as arts leaders, increasingly overwhelmed by the time and effort necessary for fundraising, board cultivation, advocacy and the like, asked “Isn’t there another way for us to finance and support the work we are called to do?”

We heard concern about an impending generational transfer of leadership, as a generation of founders retire or depart. And while much of the concern was around where we might find their successors—especially given different expectations from young people around higher compensation, shorter hours, in essence less patience for the sacrificed lives of dignity and the financial masochism that were the givens for so many in my own generation—this conversation brought to my ears, at least, a new strand of the conversation: the unwillingness of emerging leaders to be mere custodians of organizations they inherit. “There are plenty of us eager to give ourselves to the arts.” they said, “But unless we are given the same authority to reinvent and reshape organizations as you yourselves were given, we are not interested.”—a point of view that raises far more questions about an organization’s capacity for change than about the identity of an heir apparent.

We heard about the erosion of audiences in every field—declining subscription renewals, difficulties in attracting single ticket buyers, increased “churn”—a term reflecting the high percentage—typically 70-75%-- of audience members who attend a single event in a season and do not return—the collapse in the window of social planning post 9/11, when seemingly overnight audiences shifted from committing, not two to four weeks in advance, but more typically purchasing on the day of or, if you’re lucky, 24-48 hours in advance—a disorienting shift that continues to plague box office and marketing departments who struggle to understand the implications on a Tuesday for a sparsely sold Saturday performance. We face a populace characterized by over-scheduling and exhaustion—a time in which 42% of men and 55% of women say they are too tired to do the things they truly want to do, and where the #1 answer to the question of most eagerly anticipated use of a free evening is no longer dinner with friends or a movie or a performing arts event, but is instead “a good night’s sleep.” After decades of growth, our audiences are shrinking and that our own financial needs, driven in many cases by escalating fixed costs of facilities, insurance, health care and more, in tandem with negative shifts in funding mean escalating ticket prices that threaten to place attendance beyond so many in our communities we wish to reach and serve.

Finally, we heard the struggle to understand more fully the impact of technology on the live performing arts. The potential of technology as a marketing device is, if anything, too effective: in trying to attract the attention of potential ticket buyers, we now compete with (depending on who you read) between 3-5,000 different marketing messages a typical American sees every single day. In fact, technology has emerged as our biggest competitor for leisure time: Gen X-ers spend 20.7 hours of leisure time every week on TV and online combined, the majority TC; Gen Y-ers spend even more—22.8 hours, the majority on line—and last year, in 2007, computer games outsold movie and music recordings combined. Most profoundly, technology is altering the very assumptions of consumption: thanks to the internet, we believe we can get anything we want, whenever we want it, customized to our own personal specifications. We can shop at three in the morning or ten o’clock at night, expectations of convenience and personalization that live performing arts organizations—organizations who depend on set curtain times, specific geographic venues, attendant inconveniences of parking, travel and the like—simply cannot meet. And in an age where young people especially access culture on demand through YouTube and iTunes any time they want it and for little or no apparent cost, what will it mean in the future when we ask a potential audience member to pay \$100 for a symphony, opera or dance ticket, when that consumer has been accustomed to downloading on the internet for .99 a song or for free?

In short, economics notwithstanding, imperatives for change were and are upon us. Yet however particular these issues feel to us, we are not alone: we are essentially in the midst of a realignment of cultural expression and communication—a realignment that is arguably a decade old (at least) and that is shaking the newspaper and television industries, the publishing and book industries, and (in an indication of what may be yet to come) has left the recorded music and music distribution industries—an industry once dominated by the Tower Records now gone-- in disarray. It is, in short, a time of seismic change or long-term proportion—one in which arguably—in a world of changing demographics, globalism and rising technology, the crisis we face is not financial. The crisis we face is one of urgency and relevance: the financial merely redefines the parameters we bring to bear.

And aren't you glad you invited me here to brighten your day?

Now perhaps you don't recognize yourself in these crisis. If you entered the recession on a wave of rising attendance, rising surpluses, increasingly positive capitalization and rising visibility, you perhaps are those best poised to lead us—and the future may well be about hunkering down a bit, essentializing a bit, but maintaining your direction through stormy waters in hopes of a brighter time.

But if you recognized yourself in the struggles I described, the future promises to be a balancing act: navigating the shoals of financial collapse in a fight for daily survival, while remaking yourselves for the long-term future.

In this moment of change, I take to heart the words of two very different thinkers: Abraham Lincoln, who in an inaugural address said, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so must we think anew, and act anew"—a quote that similarly has inspired our new President as evidenced by his own inaugural address.

And Wayne Gretzky (and when was the last time you heard Abe Lincoln and Wayne Gretzky juxtaposed back to back?) explained his greatness as a hockey player by saying, "I skate to where the puck will be."

Regardless of the financial stress of the present, how do we in the arts skate to where the puck will be?

We must begin by asking, "Why must we continue to exist today?" Because we have a building is not good enough. Because we have a history is not enough. Because we have a staff and a season and a history of awards is not enough. What is it in the world—in the external world—than mandates the flourishing of the arts in our communities and in the world today?

Every arts organization must be able to answer four questions:

- What is the value of the arts for my community?
- What is the value the arts alone bring or bring better than anyone else? In this economy especially, second rate or duplicated value is unlikely to survive long.
- How would my community be damaged if my organization were to close its doors tomorrow?
- And how can my organization be optimally structured and positioned to be my community's best conduit to the arts—a question that invites us not to jettison all we do, but to keep what is most central and viable, to expand to embrace the new possibilities we may not have seen before, and to discard past behaviors that do not and will not serve us in the future, regardless of how they may have served us in the past.

Indeed, fantastic possibilities for the future exist everywhere around us. Chris Anderson, editor of Wired magazine and author of The Long Tail, sees in technology the unleashing of a veritable tsunami of creative energy. With the invention and now affordability of cell phones, mini cams, computer softwares and more, he notes, the means of artistic production have been democratized for the first time in human history. In the 1930's, people who wished to make a movie had to work for Warner Brothers or RKO, for who could afford

cameras, lighting equipment, editing equipment and more? Now who among us does not know a 14 year old hard at work on her second, third or fourth film?

Furthermore, the means of artistic distribution have been democratized. Again, in the 30's, the major studios played that role; now download your film, post it on YouTube or Facebook, and you have instant world-wide distribution with the click of a button.

This double impact is occasioning a massive redefinition of authorship and the cultural market. Today everyone is a potential author. We are seeing the emergence of a class of amateurs doing work at a professional level—a group dubbed elsewhere as the Pro-Ams—a group whose work populated YouTube, Film festivals, dance competitions and more. They are expanding our aesthetic vocabulary even as they assault our traditional notions of cultural authority and arts organizations. In thinking about the future, how do we think, not only about presentation, but about engagement—about interacting with this growing tsunami of creative energy that typically exists beyond the purview of our classrooms, our buildings and our performing arts centers? How do we begin to embrace the real potential of technology—technology not solely as broadcaster (the dominant value for those of a TV generation) but technology as social networker, technology as open source co-creator? How do we engage audiences in the creation of work? How do we expand our vision to be the orchestrators of social interaction—interaction in which a performance is a piece but only a piece of what we are called to do?

Changes in what we do, who we engage and how we engage them, who is empowered to act, who leads the way.

The groups that are most likely to survive are those committed to essentializing—to becoming rigorously clear about their values, rigorously committed to absolute pursuit of mission and absolute irreverence in examining past behavior. Every organizational assumption that guides them will be challenged—from ticket pricing structure to rehearsal policy to programming and more, and they will optimize their assets based on successes—whatever that word means to you (and I certainly would not limit it to financial), making conscious choices about what they will give up in order to free up space, time and money for the experimentation and search for new solutions in which they must engage for the future.

The groups likely to survive will at least entertain the idea of the counter-intuitive, heeding the words of Michael Kaiser of the Kennedy Center whose advice—which I personally believe is far from universally applicable-- urges groups caught in a downturn to expand their investments in artists and programming (which he describes as the source of audience allegiance) and in marketing, noting "You cannot save your way to health."

Many will embrace a higher risk tolerance ----risk, not irresponsibility but pushing past our comfort zones, armed with our best instincts, our best data, the counsel of others more expert than we--knowing as we do that a business that does not risk does not grow, a relationship with husband wife or partner that does not risk does not grow, the artist who does not risk--however capable--is doomed merely to technical excellence but never achieved the true artistic moment for which we all live and work.

If we can do this—individually and collectively--we will remember these times, not as an ordeal for survival, but as a renaissance--a time in which we renegotiated old ideas to reach a new consensual reality—a time of rebirth, yes, but rebirth requiring enormous change.

Like it or not, change is the ever accelerating constant that guides our lives today, and like the famous line in Alice in Wonderland, we must run as fast as we can to stay in the game—and if we want to get anywhere, we must run twice as fast as that. Nimbleness, flexibility, responsiveness, creative opportunism—all will be valued as never before.

As I come around third and head for home, let me share my experience at Target Stores in the 1990's, which taught me invaluable lessons about change and change management.

Target uses a simple exercise to help create a first-hand "sense memory" experience around change—an exercise that, if we had time, I'd lead you through, but given time constraints that I will describe to you instead:

The exercise begins with finding a partner. "Look deeply at your partner in silence for 60 seconds," this starts. Tension in the room escalates instantly: there's a smattering of giggling, usually, some under the breath comments, a real sense of embarrassment and self-consciousness as well. "Now turn your back to your partner and change five things about your appearance." Typically, men loosen their ties, women remove an earring, people move wristwatches to different arms or remove shoes. "Now turn back and find the five things your partner changed." Most folks are pretty successful on finding at least three or four, and a few astute folks spot all five.

"Now turn your backs again and change 10 more" (and you can't undo a change from before and count it a new change). A sense of alarm in the room, some more laughter, inevitably someone saying, "I didn't dress for this; do you want me to strip?" Not everyone even finds 10 things, but once again, you're instructed to turn back to your partner and identify the changes—with a lower success rate over all.

"Now turn your backs and change 20 more." Instantly the room revolts: we can't do this, there aren't 20, you're kidding me, etc. (and this happens in EVERY room that I've ever seen the exercise conducted in.) "OK, OK," the facilitator says. "Let's return to our seats and talk about why this is a metaphor for change." Men put ties back on, women put those spike heels back on, and once we've comfortably restored ourselves and the room stills, the facilitator says:

- 1) First of all, when I told you to look deeply at your partner or didn't tell you why or what was coming next, the anxiety in the room went up. Change always provokes anxiety: in fact, if you're not anxious, you're not really confronting change. Anxiety is not necessarily a sign that something is wrong or that you need to shift direction; anxiety simply needs to be managed.
- 2) Second, change is every accelerating. We went from 5 to 10 to 20, and the next would have been 40. In this world especially, change is operating in exponential, rather than incremental, scales.
- 3) Third, when confronted with change, people tend to react in a competitive, rather than a cooperative mode. No one in the room typically in making those first five changes said, "What are the five most obvious changes I can make that my partner will most easily find?" No one put a shoe on top of her head. Instead, everyone instantly tried to make the five smallest, subtlest changes (which may also be worth noting) that her partner would not find. People caught in change default instantly to competition, not cooperation.
- 4) Fourth, in a time of change, people typically focus on what they must give up. People started taking things off; remember that "I didn't dress for this; do you want me to strip?" Few go back to their chairs and put things back on—hats, jackets, etc.
- 5) The next two for me are perhaps the most powerful of all. Lesson Five: during change, people typically only focus on what is already theirs. If Martha Lavey and I had been partners, and during the moment of 10 or 20, had I turned to Abena Brown and said, "Abena, take my tie; can you let me have your scarf"—essentially if I had been able to turn my focus from what was mine to what was ours—we could have done 20, 40, 80, we could have gone on for hours.
- 6) And finally, when the pressure to change is removed, people revert to old behavior, even if it is a less comfortable place to be. Participants are much more comfortable at the end of the exercise at the end than they had been at the beginning, but as soon as the official exercise was over, those ties go back on, those spike heels back on, etc.—in essence reverted to old behavior because of its familiarity, even when the end result was a far more comfortable place to be.

Especially if you lead an organization, let me urge you to consider these lessons—and especially to free yourself of the burden of the solution by enlisting the partnership of a broader sphere of employees and board members in deriving the solutions that will help you move forward.

I for one am optimistic about the future of the arts, although I have not sounded it until now. Two years ago, I decided to plunge myself into the belly of the proverbial beast and attended Pop Tech, an annual

conference in Camden ME for 500 high tech folks, bringing them together to listen to—and interact with—high level thinkers of every stripe and description. Contrary to my expectations, this was not a conference designed to talk about startups or financing: it was—and is—a conference where we listened to world thinkers about the human brain. Global warming. International warfare and terrorism. AIDS research. And the arts, with many artists participating on panels and each session followed by a live performance—Vanessa German, a spoken word artist who blew the roof off with her raw evocation of feeling, a hip hop dancer on crutches, a Gospel Choir of HIV+ singers from the African continent.

While arts conferences are often dominated increasingly by prospects for survival—how will we compete in a market-driven world? How will we keep ourselves on the funding agenda? What will it take to raise an endowment?—the issue of survivability was never raised at PopTech. The assumption is that many will not—and perhaps should not—survive. Instead, here the issues were not how we will survive financially, but how we will change the world. How we will solve global warming. How we will solve AIDS. How we will leave the world a healthier, ecologically balanced, less poverty ridden place. Indeed, the unspoken agenda was that there is nothing that we cannot do, and in the world of high tech, truly anything is possible.

You might call this folly of youth—and indeed, many of the participants are young.

You may call it hubris.

But what became clear to me is that within this world of infinite possibilities, there are new possibilities for us in the arts.

On the one hand, I was encouraged that this group fought to get there. Camden, ME is not an easy place to access, and if any community can convene virtually, this one can. Yet through PopTech and TED and more, this community insists on coming together because of the unique value of live, face to face, collective experience, to conspiring—meaning to breathe together, to breathing the same air. And throughout PopTech, a minor chord, a palpable hunger throbbed in the background. This group was desperate to slow down, to lead less frenetic lives, to find the courage to live for their passions. More and more, they placed premium on contemplation, on captivation, on focus and extended surrender to single experience—experiences that would captivate, resonate emotionally, at its best enhance spiritual value—to the very things that we in the arts do.

They responded deafeningly to Daniel Pink, (interestingly enough a man in his 30's) in his new *A WHOLE NEW MIND*, writes of the emerging emphasis on right brain thinking, “one that prizes aptitude the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new—as well as the ability to empathize with other, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one's self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning,” to quote him.

They recognized the ultimate irony of their own success—that prosperity without spiritual enrichment does not bring fulfillment, and in the face of a growing culture dedicated to convenience—to no-iron shirts and microwave meals, to hands free parking and more, all striving to convince us that ease is good and effort is bad, there is value—irreplaceable value in the difficult, in the complex, in the ambiguous and the real.

Especially now, in a moment when we all must confront the fallacy of market orientation uninformed by social conscience, we must assert our role in the formation of our collective and individual characters, especially the character of the young, who are increasingly subjected to “bombardment” of sensation through violent film and video. In the arts, we stand instead for contemplation, deep understanding and digestion of experience, especially in a popular cultural context that often seems to value humiliation over humanity. We are living reminders of what it means to be humane rather than merely human. And in an

age of demonization and fear of difference, in a time when the most frequently heard public message is “Ladies and gentlemen, please report any suspicious individuals to the authorities nearest you”—an admonition that encourages us to view our fellow human beings with fear and hostility and suspicion—we in the arts gather audiences to look at their fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. If we have ever needed such capacity in our nation’s history, we need it now.

As we enter the first year of a new political chapter, it seems especially appropriate to close with the words of a politician—the president whose dedication to the arts led indirectly to the formation of the National Endowment for the Arts and the explosion of government arts philanthropy. Less than a month before his assassination, John Kennedy gave a speech at Amherst College in honor of Robert Frost. He concluded by saying:

I look forward to a great future for America—a future in which our country will match its military strength with our moral strength, its wealth with our wisdom, its power with our purpose.

I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty, which will protect the beauty of our natural environment, which will preserve the great old American houses and squares and parks of our national past, and which will build handsome and balanced cities for our future.

I look forward to an America which commands respect throughout the world, not only for its strength but for its civilization as well.

45 years after these words were spoken, while we continue to look forward to that America— you do more than merely wait for its appearance. Although we may elect our leaders every four years, we elect our values and the lives that will be the fulfillment of those values every single day. You know that, in electing to give your support to the arts, you honor the past, you commemorate the present, you shape and change the future in a way that does honor to all and violence to none. You are engaged in more than aesthetic transmission of craft: you are activists, pledged and dedicated to a world of understanding, of tolerance, of compassion, of hope.

I salute you all as activists; I promise you that the hand of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation remains outstretched to the national arts community both now and for years to come; and I thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this afternoon. Thank you and God speed.