

CREATING EXHILARATING ARTS EXPERIENCES:
ARGUING FOR A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT

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Major paper submitted to the faculty of Goucher College in partial
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Abstract

Title of Thesis: CREATING EXHILARATING ARTS EXPERIENCES: ARGUING FOR A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT

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This paper argues that by discovering the physiological, psychological, and experiential factors of inspirational moments, performing arts organizations can recreate the conditions, leading to more informed decisions and the ability to articulate a blueprint for creating meaningful arts experiences.

To create and recreate meaningful arts experiences, one must first understand and articulate the internal and external elements that coincide to create an aha-moment. By doing this, arts organizations can create an environment that encourages a journey from being inspired by a performance to being inspired to action. The presentation of foundational scientific knowledge of inspirational moments, while necessary, is used to focus the argument on implications and applications for arts organizations.

Arts experiences engage the whole person by creating a sense of purpose, belonging, and connection, both to ideas and to others. Arts experiences can: provide moments that expand a person's worldview, build empathy and enhance our humanity, foster vulnerability and safety, and create opportunities for connection and a sense of belonging.

To encourage the journey from inspired by to inspired to, an arts experience must engage all aspects of a person—mind, body, and soul. This can be achieved by implementing a holistic approach to engagement, defined as an organizational ethos, policy and practice that creates connection and expands the artistic experience. For arts organizations, it represents long-term strategic thinking with a myriad of practical benefits. If more inspirational moments lead to increased, meaningful engagement, then it stands to reason that it will also raise awareness for why the arts matter, building public will and galvanizing political and financial support.

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Introduction

"At its very best, the theater is a balm for hurt minds. It unites us as human beings, gives us a home, brings us together. You say: That's what it means to be alive, to be human, to feel your heart beat. That's what it means. Theater does that." – Julie Harris

The arts have a power both mystical and measurable to cut through the noise of daily life and shake people to their core. Nearly every artist, arts administrator, or cultural devotee can clearly recall a moment where an arts experience instantly expanded his or her universe, changing his or her perceptions and possibly providing a sense of purpose or a life-direction. Audiences and artists alike recognize an inspirational moment when they experience it. However, too often inspirational moments occur by sheer luck. Without an understanding of the underlying elements contributing to inspirational moments or an overarching philosophy and environment that enables them to flourish, arts organizations miss opportunities to leverage existing resources to build connection with stakeholders. Understanding inspirational moments can lead to more informed decisions and the ability to articulate a blueprint for creating meaningful arts experiences.

Inspirational moments are a combination of physiological, psychological, environmental, and sociological factors that respond to a stimulus—in this case a performance. The term inspiration derives from the Latin word *inspirare*, meaning “to breathe or blow into” (“The Origins”). For the purposes of this paper, it is important to define what is meant by an inspirational moment. Informally thought of as insight plus emotion (Hart 19), inspiration is a motivational state that occurs in response to creative ideas.

Inspiration can be further identified by the presence of three key characteristics: evocation, transcendence, and approach motivation. First, inspiration must be evoked by a stimulus object, person, or idea and cannot be initiated voluntarily (Oleynick et al. 4). In other words, individuals do not feel personally or directly responsible for being inspired (Thrash and Elliot 957). Second, the transcendence of an aha-moment occurs when a person vividly experiences a rush of expanded awareness of new or better possibilities (Thrash et al. 496). Transcendence encompasses insight, which occurs in a cognitive context that enters the consciousness suddenly or spontaneously (Topolinski and Reber 402). The final characteristic of inspiration, approach motivation, is what makes inspirational moments so rare. According to Oleynick and her colleagues, “inspiration is moderated by approach motivation, in which the individual processes the moment and determines a future course of action” (2). To be truly inspirational, the stimulus must evoke, transcend, and also motivate one to a further course of action.

Arts experiences provide moments that impact a person's development and view of the world. An exhilarating arts experience is one that resonates with an individual so deeply and viscerally that it expands one's universe and shifts one's thinking. In this context, elements of inspirational moments can include: connecting the dots, a sense of personal identification or aspiration, a connection with artists and those around them, and an increased sense of community. For the purposes of this argument, meaningful arts experiences are viewed from the perspectives of both performers and audience members, since the two are entwined. Additionally, engagement can be defined as a moment when one's "attention [is captured] in a way that generates an emotional response, resulting in the formation of a memory" ("Our Goals").

Inspiration can be wooed, and a holistic approach increases the likelihood that audience members will be inspired to turn that inspiration into action, allowing organizations to remain relevant in an increasingly saturated cultural climate. To encourage the journey from inspired by to inspired to, performing arts experiences, and therefore the organizations that present and produce them, must engage a person mind, body, and soul. This paper defines a holistic approach as an organizational ethos, policy, and practice that engages all aspects of a person and creates a connection that expands the artistic experience. It is a continuum of moments that creates opportunities for an audience member to engage after the performance on his or her own time and terms. It can also be argued that inspiration itself is a form of engagement. An individual who has an inspirational arts experience might be encouraged to

engage through future attendance, donations, civic engagement or individual creative pursuits. Ideally, a holistic approach can encourage the journey from inspired by to inspired to, ultimately deepening engagement and building community.

This paper includes examples of nonprofit performing arts organizations successfully implementing elements of a holistic approach, the impact it has had on individual artists and audiences, and the resulting deepened connection for the community at-large. Although the clearest parallels can be drawn to nonprofit performing arts organizations, there are lessons to be gleaned from inspirational experiences outside of live performances.

The presentation of foundational scientific knowledge of inspirational moments, while necessary, is used to focus the argument on implications and applications for arts organizations. Although this paper explicitly addresses the performing arts, the concepts and conclusion can also be applied to visual arts experiences. By discovering the physiological, psychological, and experiential factors of inspirational moments, arts organizations can recreate the conditions, providing a more connected arts experience and building a more engaged community.

Chapter I

HOOKED ON A FEELING: UNDERSTANDING THE AHA- MOMENT

As an 8-year-old girl, I [went to Symphony Hall] to attend an Instrument Playground where kids got to try out all different types of orchestral instruments. I picked up [the trumpet] and channeled all of my frustrations...into the shining instrument. I then heard the loudest, most shocking sound I'd ever experienced. Everyone around me stopped and turned toward the startling sound. And clapped. For me. *I'd* made that sound, and I absolutely loved the feeling of having people applauding for me and for what I had created, shocking as it was. That single sound, and the fact that I made it, was exhilarating in a way that soccer, or anything to that point in my young life, was not. In that instant, I knew. I will play the trumpet. ("Instrument Playground")

In order to create and recreate meaningful arts experiences, one must first understand and articulate the internal and external elements that coincide to create an aha-moment. Inspirational moments are a combination of physiological, psychological, environmental, and sociological factors that interact with a stimulus—in this case a performance.

The Process of Inspiration

Although often thought of as an “aha” or lightbulb moment, inspiration is actually an extended process encompassing multiple phases—it can be thought of as peeling back the layers of an onion. It begins long before the individual feels inspired and encompasses various stages including: conscious preparation, the triggering moment, incubation and subconscious processing, and finally, conscious evaluation and reflection (Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer 335). Taking this logic one step further implies that while audiences respond to the performance, they are also responding to each step of the process itself.

In some sense, the primary experience is available only through the refraction of conscious reflection...[which] not only precedes, informs, and motivates future experiences, but may also form a valid and vital element of the lived experience of the performance in the moment. (Reason and Reynolds 72)

In other words, a person’s memory of an event continues to change over time, as he or she continues to reflect upon the experience and deepen feelings of satisfaction or disappointment. Audience members come into a performance environment with cultural and personal experiences that predispose them to anticipate an outcome (Kern 16). In particular, the experienced arts attendee “often enters the theatre with the intention to have a particular emotional experience and is satisfied when they achieve that feeling state” (Gilbride and Orzechowicz 21). This interdependent and delicate process also suggests a

feedback loop underlying inspirational experiences, the shockwaves of which reverberate over time and continue to impact an organization.

As it is common to the majority of literature on inspiration, it is important to understand “flow” theory, both from the perspective of the performer and the audience member. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi 4). It exemplifies both the intrinsic and instrumental benefits of the arts—both the idea of art for art’s sake as well as the growth and pleasure that is often derived from the experience. Although often thought of in terms of a state of creativity in performance or production, it is applicable to audiences engaged in active participation. According to Gilbride and Orzechowicz, audience members “want to be drawn into a performance and they suggest that presenters facilitate ways for audience members to achieve a state of ‘Flow” (30). Flow state allows both artists and audiences to experience emotions beyond those of everyday life, which is a key motivating factor in arts attendance.

Inspiration explains the transmission of an idea, but not the origin—it is not synonymous with creativity itself (Thrash and Elliot 299). It can manifest either in form, as in the quintessential light-bulb moment, or in being. According to Thrash and Elliot, passive inspiration occurs when an individual is inspired by something, which often manifests as discrete emotions including awe and admiration. Ideally, passive inspiration ultimately leads to active transmission, in which

someone is inspired to do something. Active transmission “can take the form of extension, actualization, or expression” (Thrash and Elliot 603), in which a person sees his or her local ballet and is inspired to sign up for a class or volunteer as an usher.

A final piece of the puzzle is the idea of fluency, which is the ease with which one processes information (Topolinski and Reber 403). In an aha-moment, one experiences a rush of insight along with an emotional response that either reaffirms or rejects one’s predispositions. In *Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi shares the recalled memory of a subject who had reluctantly accompanied his parents to the symphony for years:

Then one evening, when he was about seven years old, during the overture to a Mozart opera, he had what he described as an ecstatic insight: he suddenly discerned the melodic structure of the piece and had an overwhelming sense of a new world opening up before him. It was the three years of painful listening that had prepared him for this epiphany, years during which his musical skills had developed, however unconsciously, and made it possible for him to understand the challenge Mozart had built into the music.” (68)

In this case, the power of a rush of insight was able to overcome years of negative association, reframing the experience in a positive and meaningful way.

Inside Out – Physiological and Psychological Factors of an Inspirational Moment

The idea of understanding the scientific and emotional elements underpinning audience experience has gained visibility in recent years, resulting in an abundance of qualitative and quantitative data for arts organizations to leverage. Research indicates that the human body has a common physiological response to inspiration—it is often described as a “feeling of warmth” or a sense of “filling” or “opening.” In 2003, Thrash & Elliot conducted a qualitative study in which subjects were asked to narrate inspirational moments from their lives. The findings of the study indicated that inspirational narratives share underlying themes of both an eye-opening encounter with a stimulus and a desire to express or even actualize the resulting vision (Thrash and Elliot 498).

Physiological responses to inspirational moments occur on both the conscious and unconscious levels. All of the studies included in the research for this paper found that inspired audiences report heightened sensory awareness, often described as “goosebumps” (Hart 17). Unconsciously, audience responses mirror emotional and physiological qualities of the performance itself. A 2011 study conducted by the University of Surrey, examining brain activity in audiences during a dress rehearsal of the ballet *Sleeping Beauty*, indicates that audience members “rehearse” movements while watching dance, an idea also known as Kinesthetic Empathy (Reason and Reynolds 53). In the study, scans of audience members’ brains showed increased activity in the same areas that would be stimulated if they were dancing (Jola et al. 380-381), and audience members’ experience the dance through postural changes or micro-movements

(Reason and Reynolds 53). The study was one of the first to gauge audience engagement in a real-life setting. However, since it was conducted during two separate dress rehearsals with four strangers as subjects, the data gathered by Jola and her colleagues cannot fully account for the social context of a collective experience.

Additionally, a 2017 study by the University College London (UCL) Division of Psychological and Language Services measured audience members' heart rates during a live performance of the musical *Dreamgirls*:

Despite being seated for the performance, the audience's hearts spent an average of 28 mins [sic] beating in elevated range between 50% to 70% of their maximum heart rate – the zone is identified by the British Heart Foundation as the optimal for promoting cardiovascular fitness and stamina. Further, the performance was so arousing, that the audiences' hearts not only beat faster, they actually started to beat together in synchrony. The audiences' hearts were literally beating together. As psychologists are discovering, this sort of physiological coordination between people is a crucial aspect of human social life and bonding.

(Richardson et al. 2)

These findings validated Reason and Reynolds' conclusion that in addition to synchronizing with those around them throughout the performance, "audience members' heart rates and breathing became synchronized with their perception of the movement during a dance performance" (71). By including subjects attending as individuals and parties of two or four, the UCL study addressed two

different layers of social context. Although it is possible to be inspired in a solitary environment, the collective element of the experience adds an intangible ingredient to the mix, allowing for greater vulnerability and wholehearted engagement that reasserts the importance of live arts experiences in a time when individuals have limited time and resources and the variety of entertainment options seems limitless.

Psychologically speaking, there are a variety of factors that coalesce to create an inspirational moment. In his 1998 study on the experience of inspiration, which consisted of seventy long-form interviews, psychologist Tobin Hart articulated four phenomenological characteristics of inspiration: connection, openness, clarity, and energy (12). According to Hart, during an inspirational moment excited arousal and peaceful calm exist either simultaneously or immediately in succession. Participants also described a slowing of time or expansion of internal space to fill the moment (Hart 23).

The experience itself is also filtered through an individual's motivation for attendance and expectations for fulfillment. In their report entitled, *How We Feel About Art: Motivation, Satisfaction, and Emotional Experiences in Performing Arts Audiences*, Shelly Gilbride and David Orzechowicz concluded that arts attendees seek a heightened state of being that is deeper and more meaningful than the emotions of everyday life (21). Other recent research found that individuals who attended a performance with the explicit intention of being "emotionally moved or physically inspired" were more likely to report experiencing those feelings (Rose 20).

While inspirational arts experiences can expand a person's way of thinking and alter his or her worldview, the level of satisfaction and fulfillment of expectations contributes to the likelihood of a person describing an experience as inspirational (Hart). Additionally, the more audience members see a reflection of themselves on stage, either realistic or aspirational, the more likely they are to empathize with the artist's point of view.

Outside-In – Social and Environmental Factors of an Inspirational Moment

One must also examine an emotional moment from the outside-in as there are a variety of external and environmental elements at play. Anticipation and excitement prior to the performance is moderated by both the individual's disposition and the social context surrounding the event, discussed in more detail in the following chapter. Inspiration is more likely to occur in a safe space that gives a person permission to lower his or her guard and be vulnerable. In an arts experience, this can be moderated by whether the experience intends to bombard the senses or provide the opportunity for audiences to acclimate to the world of the piece. For example, classic musicals begin with an overture that warms the audiences' senses and the musicians' muscles. Non-threatening yet lush, an overture familiarizes audience members with musical themes that will be repeated throughout, providing permission to lower one's guard and be more receptive in the moment. Conversely, a piece that intends to shock the senses may begin with a bang in order to spike adrenaline or create a sense of

excitement or unease. The issue is what happens next—both scenarios have the potential to engage one in the moment, but each might be processed or recalled differently later on.

The process surrounding an aha-moment is heavily dependent on social interaction (Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer). The shared element of attending an arts event impacts the way audiences experience and process it. Anecdotal reports in the UCL survey demonstrated increased engagement between members of different social groups during intermission.

This group interpretation of their shared experience will become their memory of the event. Psychologists term this the “shared reality” of the event—by discussing their experiences and beliefs a group will literally form each other’s memories. (Richardson)

The shared experience of the performance is compounded by interactions between groups, strengthening the social and emotional bonds between audience members who were strangers an hour before. The shared social experience creates what sociologist Emile Durkheim described as “collective effervescence”, which provides a sense of belonging to a group with a “concrete, real existence” (Kern 18). Actors, dancers, and musicians have also described the sense of the audience as a collective participant in the arts experience. In a 2019 interview, actor Adam Driver explained that one of the primary draws of theater is that “the audience makes it [spontaneous] every night....The collective intelligence is always different every night...they develop a group personality”

("Adam Driver"). Inspiration can be also consuming or contagious, particularly when experienced in the company of others.

Inspirational moments blur the line between the self and the other. According to Hart, when one's "consciousness expands and experiences deep interconnection, we do not experience the other (in this case, the source of our inspiration) as separate from us, the experience arises without a distinct origin" (Hart 26). Research has also shown that in a state of inspiration, cultural barriers between people decrease exponentially and can even cease to exist entirely. Richardson and his colleagues concluded that "the coordinated physiological response seen during the live performance can help to break down pre-existing social barriers and bring people together" (Richardson et al. 7).

Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi, asserts that "optimal experience, and the psychological conditions that make it possible, seem to be the same the world over" (*Flow* 49). This implies that the flow state embodied during a moment of inspiration can be leveraged to bridge social divides and bring people together, and that performing arts organizations are well-suited to capitalize on these opportunities.

Wooing Inspiration

Although it cannot be willed, inspiration can be wooed and cultivated under favorable conditions. Hart found that three primary aspects led to the emergence of inspiration: setting, set, and mystery (26). Though not synonymous

with frenzy, inspiration is heightened and contagious when it is in the setting of a collective experience. Groups can be more susceptible to persuasion than individuals, and in a group context people act differently than they would if they felt personally responsible (Ehrenreich). Emotional contagion occurs when one “catches” and is overpowered by emotions from those around them. For example, a standing ovation at the end of a symphonic performance might start as a genuinely inspired moment for some individuals that then reverberates throughout the audience.

Set refers to an individual’s internal mindset, particularly the extent to which one is open enough to allow an idea to take root and bloom. In Hart’s study, one participant responded, “when I listen to Puccini, I get inspired. It happens almost every time if I pay attention” (27). This response implies that one’s mindset impacts the extent to which one is available and receptive to an inspirational moment. Characteristics of one’s internal mindset include “level of focus, trust and faith, willingness to let go, and active listening” (Hart 22)—all key components of active participation and audience engagement.

The idea of mystery is perhaps what sets performances apart from everyday life. Performing arts experiences are inherently shrouded in mystery—an idea that is heightened by the fact that one knows he or she is only seeing part of the picture. The mystery and magic of unknown stagecraft creates a sense of wonder and a springboard for reflection. For instance, theatrical and dance audience members are aware that they are seeing a performer through

the added veil of a character, incorporating another layer of mystery in the parallels between truth and fiction.

In 2015, The Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Massachusetts hired Dr. Tedi Asher, the nation's first neuroscience researcher employed by an art museum to enhance visitor experience using data-driven research. The PEM gauges the impact of conscious and unconscious responses to an exhibit's design by using eye-gaze tracking glasses to record where a subject is looking. Additionally, subjects have electrodes attached to their skin, allowing Asher to measure any electric currents that pass between their fingertips ("Our Goals").

Arts organizations can also learn from examples of inspirational experiences outside of the arts in order to understand how to create opportunities for connection and deepened engagement. Literature on both inspiration and arts experiences share a common vocabulary—in the studies conducted by both Hart and Thrash and Elliot, narrative accounts of inspiration used similar language regardless of the evoking event, referring to feelings of openness, clarity, energy, and connection. The modern usage of the word *inspire* dates to the 1300s, where it was defined as "[an] immediate influence of God or a god" ("The Origins"). Focus and ritualistic elements are key to both arts and religious experiences, as is the idea that trust, faith, and letting go are necessary steps to achieving transcendence. Inspiration of a charismatic leader or divine idea can inspire an individual before he or she is physically present in a shared space, augmenting a sense of anticipation. In a sense an arts experience can be compared to a shamanic journey, leading an audience member to a newfound state of discovery

or awareness (Hart 23). Additionally, fervor and increased cortisol levels occur across all types of peak experience, whether it be theater or church.

In order to cultivate an environment ripe for inspirational experiences, arts organizations can look to rousing political and social justice speeches. One of the most famous examples of the persuasive power of an authentic, emotionally connected speech is Mr. Fred Rogers' 1969 Senate testimony that saved the National Endowment for the Arts and secured twenty million dollars in funding. Rogers cultivated an inspirational moment, utilizing emotional intelligence skills and creating a visceral, sudden, and deep connection with Senator John Pastore (Bradberry). That connection changed Pastore's way of thinking and paved the way for Rogers to reach generations of children over public airwaves.

By learning from and leveraging the ever-expanding body of qualitative and quantitative research on inspirational arts experiences, arts organizations can cultivate inspirational moments for their audiences and facilitate more frequent and meaningful engagement.

Chapter II

ARTS EXPERIENCES ENHANCE INDIVIDUAL AND SHARED HUMANITY

"The first time I saw [jazz pianist McCoy Tyner], I can recall that by the end of the performance I was hugging the total stranger sitting next to me, largely so that we could keep each other upright instead of collapsing into a pool of musical ecstasy" – Mike from California (Ratliff)

"God comes to us in the theater in the way we communicate with each other...It's a way of expressing our humanity" – Julie Harris

Arts experiences expand horizons

Inspirational arts experiences engage the whole person by creating a sense of purpose, belonging, and connection, both to ideas and to others. Arts experiences provide moments that impact a person's development and worldview. An exhilarating arts experience is one that resonates with an individual so deeply and viscerally that it instantly expands the horizon of one's thinking, imprinting on a conscious or unconscious level. According to Gilbride and Orzechowicz, the excitement of attending a performance "is associated with

self-improvement through novelty, pushing one's intellectual and cultural boundaries with a new experience" (22).

Reflecting on performances that have moved him, ballet and theatrical choreographer Joshua Bergasse described a feeling of self-discovery and increased awareness that accompanies a powerful performance. "When I leave, I'm a different person," said Bergasse. "Hopefully, I've learned something about myself and other people. I think that good storytelling is the way that human beings grow" (Mandell).

Arts experiences build empathy

Artists and arts administrators alike have long argued that the arts build empathy and enhance our individual and shared humanity. In an article entitled, "A Concept Analysis of Empathy", Theresa Wiseman articulated four defining attributes of empathy: "to be able to see the world as others see it, to be nonjudgmental, to understand another person's feelings, and to be able to communicate your understanding of that person's feelings" (1165). Wiseman and others view empathy as a skill—one that can be honed and toned like a muscle.

In some ways an inspirational arts experience is more human, and humane, than real life. The 2013 play *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* broke ground by being told from the perspective of a teenager with autism. Actor Alex Sharp, who played the protagonist, described the visualization

and direction of the play as a window into an experience far removed from his own.

[*Curious Incident*] lets you inside the head of someone [with] whom in a normal social environment perhaps you wouldn't empathize. Even reading about somebody like that, you wouldn't be able to fully understand. But the way *Curious* is directed, the way it's lit, everything, takes you inside, so that you can empathize on a more profound level. (Mandell)

For an audience member seeing *Curious Incident*, an internal mindset of openness and a willingness to let go and trust in the moment creates capacity for empathy. At first glance, a predisposition would appear to make an inspirational moment more likely to occur. However, live performances have the opportunity to lure audience members in and cultivate that trust over time. Someone who might enter the room a skeptic might, like the boy who suddenly "heard" Mozart, just walk out changed for good.

Arts experiences foster vulnerability and safety

An arts experience, particularly in the performing arts, aspires to be an emotional safe space that encourages vulnerability from both performers and audiences. This vulnerability allows both artists and audiences to fully engage and open themselves up to experiences and responses that might not be socially acceptable in the real world and to experience them more deeply.

It may be that patrons consciously select productions they know will make them angry. It is more likely that, within the context of the performing arts venue, people are able to have an emotional experience of anger without the social stigma or consequences of such an experience. Perhaps the arts, then, provide a safe space to feel aggression and anger where it is directed not at a person or personal situation but at a work of art, something removed from daily life. (Gilbride and Orzechowicz 25)

These findings reinforce the impact of setting, set, and mystery on one's ability to be inspired. The safety of the space is also enhanced by setting and the physical experience of being in a dark room with limited personal space between audience members.

Arts experiences create connection and belonging

Neuroscientist and vulnerability expert Brené Brown asserts that the human brain is wired to search for connection and meaning, which she defines as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard and valued” (Brown). Meaningful arts experiences first and foremost create the opportunity for an individual to connect with his or her inner thoughts and emotions. In Hart's study, participants reported suddenly comprehending a deeply held value or discovering that they needed to trust themselves, which in turn changed their sense of identity (13).

The live nature of a performance can create a sense of physical connection and shared emotional experience between performers and audience members, contributing to the potential for inspirational experiences to occur.

Some of the most focused or memorable moments in life are unscripted as well as shared, and this quality is also true of the live performing arts....The very conditions of live performance help focus attention on the music, and therefore make it more likely that flow will result at a concert than when one is listening to recorded sound. (Kern 18)

The connection between audience member and performer provides a more embodied experience. In some cases, the physical proximity to a performer can heighten the embodiment of the engagement—those in the first few rows of a play might find themselves in the path of an actor’s spit or an errant bead of sweat. Additionally, part of the thrill of a live performance is the underlying threat that at any moment something could go wrong (Reason and Reynolds 58).

According to Reason and Reynolds, “virtuosic or incandescent performances elicit a “wow” factor, often linked to a very embodied engagement” (58). In other words, the thrill of a powerful performance is both the motivating factor and the reward for open-hearted engagement. This embodied experience can create a sense of purpose or higher calling, inspiring an individual to future attendance or personal creativity.

An individual’s sense of belonging and connection is enhanced when he or she can personally identify with the performers they see onstage. Representation is a key element of that connection, particularly for groups who

do not often see themselves reflected onstage. In an interview recalling his experience seeing the original Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Harvey Fierstein stated, “the curtain went up on a stage full of Jews, and it was shocking to me. I felt a part of that world. Remember, this was a time when many American Jews were changing their names, fixing their noses....They knew they were Jewish, but felt they couldn't be Jewish” (Fassler 19). On *Sesame Street*, that sense of belonging and community reflected in representation extends to many of the celebrities who have appeared on the show throughout its history. Commented puppeteer Carmen Osbahr, who play the Spanish-speaking Muppet Rosita, “Gloria Estefan...cried when she walked in, because she said she was able to see herself and identify with somebody on TV” (Ryzik).

These experiences create a psychological sense of community and shared emotional experience amongst audience members, regardless of whether they knew each other previously (ArtsMidwest and Metropolitan Group 13). As discussed in the previous chapter, inspirational moments allow for a blurring of the line between the self and the other—the same is true for performing arts experiences. Richardson and his colleagues found that audience members talked to each other during intermission regardless of whether they knew each other previously (7), indicating a lowering of social mores and a willingness to come together. Perhaps, like the gentleman inspired by McCoy Tyner, they built a memory neither of them would forget.

In that respect, arts and cultural experiences can tap into our shared humanity, breaking down cultural barriers. If a group of people can truly come

together in a performance setting, the implications are endless and can extend into other areas of society.

Chapter III A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT

“[I] grew up adoring ‘I Love Trash’ and called its singer, Oscar the Grouch, ‘a character so singular that he changes the way you see the world at large...On top of that, [the] songs are the closest thing we have to a shared childhood songbook.’” – Lin Manuel Miranda, qtd. in Ryzik

To encourage the journey from inspired by to inspired to, arts experiences must engage all aspects of a person—mind, body, and soul. This can be achieved by implementing a holistic approach to engagement, which this paper defines as an organizational ethos, policy and practice that creates connection and expands the artistic experience. It is a continuum of moments that creates opportunities for audience members to engage beyond the scope of the performance, on his or her own time and terms.

Before delving into each element of wholehearted engagement, it is important to visualize the potential impact of an inspiring arts experience. Ideally, an individual will be inspired in thought and then action, leading to personal growth as well as measurable outward engagement.

An individual inspired on an internal level might find the confidence to take up a form of artistic expression—dust off her tap shoes and take a class for the

first time in decades or learn to play the tuba. It might provide an introverted individual the opportunity to connect and engage at a level that is comfortable for them. It might be a shared experience that creates connection between family and friends with differing political views or provide parents with a way to introduce difficult concepts to children.

Internal inspiration might reveal a sense of purpose, motivating an individual to external action. For instance, one might decide to advocate for a social justice issue after seeing a play. An inspirational experience might motivate an individual to increase his or her involvement with the organization that provided the experience, either as a volunteer, donor, or goodwill ambassador on social media. Finally, nearly every arts professional can point to an arts experience that changed the course of his or her life, providing purpose and direction—today's inspired audiences are tomorrow's artists and arts administrators. The important part is not how the inspiration manifests but why.

Mind

Arts experiences provide moments that impact a person's intellectual development and personal worldview. An exhilarating arts experience resonates with an individual so deeply and viscerally that it expands one's universe and shifts one's thinking by connecting the dots in a new way. It creates an opportunity for organizations to capitalize on that newfound curiosity.

A holistic approach to an arts experience supports the creation of the cognitive, emotional, and social connections that humans are wired to seek. It involves creating an experience that extends beyond the walls and time of the performance space. In today's saturated and fast-paced cultural environment, performing arts organizations must create doors to engagement beyond the parameters of the performance in order to engage new audiences and deepen connections with existing ones. Attending a performance is merely one stage in an audience member's journey—it is a rung on the ladder of audience engagement (Bernstein). Expanding the parameters increases the likelihood of an inspirational moment by encouraging audiences to prime themselves for the artistic experience and continue processing post-performance. It creates the space for introspection, reflection, and conversation.

Jacob's Pillow, the renowned summer dance festival in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, curates learning opportunities over a variety of media to keep audience members intellectually engaged year-round. The organization-produced podcast broadcasts a deep-dive through interviews with creators, dancers and community members (*PillowVoices*). Additionally, the site's robust photo and video archives run the gamut from themed playlists addressing social issues to photos of the festival's storied artists and scenic backdrop. The content provides accessible points of entry for new audiences and roadmaps for current patrons to deepen engagement and recreate a state of flow, using a combination of nostalgia and intellect.

Audience enrichment programs comprised of community events and supplemental reading materials allow an individual to continue expanding her horizons and be inspired outside of the auditorium on her own time and terms. Steppenwolf Theatre Company's curated digital content encourage a "continual generation of dialogue as a way of building ongoing engagement with the theater" (Harlow et al. 20). They are the morsels between courses that keep audiences members' interest peaked and the conversation flowing. For example, Steppenwolf's digital strategy utilizes a "consistent tone in which discussion is frank, open, and unrehearsed so that audience members can grapple with the same questions that confront the artists" (Harlow et al. 20) Content is released to correspond with the timeline of a show's rehearsal process, creating a shared audience experience that parallels that of the artists while providing a peek behind the curtain.

Body

During a performance, audience members both unconsciously rehearse movements and synchronize heartbeats with those around them, finding other opportunities for kinesthetic engagement that can deepen audience connection and increase the likelihood that an inspirational moment will occur. Lincoln Center encourages both active appreciation and creative participation through its annual Midsummer Night Swing festival. Each July, the communal courtyard

becomes home to informal evenings involving dance lessons followed by a live dance party under the stars. The evenings transform what is often viewed as a stuffy yet revered venue into an accessible, fun engagement where people can literally “shake the blues away” (McMahon). At the Portland Playhouse in Oregon, audience members are encouraged to express themselves before and after the performance in the theater’s “creativity pods” located throughout the building (“Portland Playhouse”), running the gamut from photobooths with thematically appropriate costumes to singalongs to arts and crafts.

Soul

In order to create environments where inspirational moments can flourish, an arts organization must display the same empathy it asks of its audiences—it must be willing to meet them where they are emotionally. This empathy must be intentionally reflected in the organizational ethos and practice rather than only being presented externally. Although artistic ego can cloud judgment, staff and leadership need to see themselves in the audience and audience in themselves. Doing so allows people to enter the emotional and empathetic artistic space through a variety of “doors” (Simon) rather than pigeonholing them through a particular identity or opportunity to connect.

When motivated by sensitivity and curiosity, empathy allows an organization to connect more deeply with its audience, modeling behavior and

tackling difficult subjects, particularly for children. One of the most well-known examples of an organization empathizing with its audience is *Sesame Street* and its producing organization Sesame Workshop, although they are admittedly outside of the scope of the nonprofit performing arts organization. On *Sesame Street*, characters are given permission and encouraged to be curious and openhearted without fear. Children feel seen by the characters and feel that they belong in the neighborhood. Additionally, the street setting was intentionally designed to create connection with children who did not often see themselves reflected on the screen by featuring a “a diverse human cast and lovable monsters in every shape, size, and color of the rainbow living side-by-side” (“Mutual Respect”). *Sesame Street* clearly promotes acceptance and tolerance, inspiring prosocial values in its audience rather than dictating behavior. In addition to positively depicting an entire spectrum of characters, *Sesame Street* also provides a clear model for children about interacting with people whose experiences and opinions differ from theirs.

The show also provides a safe space for adults to introduce and work through difficult or painful concepts with children, such as death, divorce, race relations, and national tragedy. Perhaps the best-known example is the show that dealt with the death of its beloved storekeeper, Mr. Hooper. After the death of the actor who portrayed Mr. Hooper, the show opted to address the issue head-on rather than ignore it or recast the character. The ensuing episode featured Big Bird giving presents to all of his friends on the street, struggling to understand why Mr. Hooper wasn't there to receive his gift. The episode

“conveyed three key messages: Mr. Hooper is dead; Mr. Hooper will not be coming back; and Mr. Hooper will be missed” (Fisch et al. 175). This succinct but gentle messaging provided an opening for families to deal with painful subjects in their own lives. After the airing of “Goodbye, Mr. Hooper”, approximately one half of parents surveyed responded that they had “discussed death with their children after viewing the show” (Fisch et al. 176). The show inspired and empowered parents to take steps that might not have been possible without the initial experience of watching the show as a family.

Dallas Children’s Theater (DCT), aims to connect to young audiences by building a season around themes that both inspire children and also instill inclusive values such as kindness and empathy particularly toward people that might be different from them. By repeating themes throughout the season, the theater aims to ensure that it is “a big part of the conversation before the show, on the way home, and hopefully in the acts of our young people for years to come” (“About Us”). Inspirational moments allow adults to recapture a sense of childlike wonder, which is itself a version of a flow state.

An engaged constituency is one whose members feel seen, heard, and connected. Arts organizations cannot expect audiences to be wholeheartedly engaged unless there is an environment that makes it possible. The performance itself is the spark—a holistic approach can enable organizations to fan the flames into actualized inspiration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

“Theatre changes the heart, then it changes the mind, and that makes people get off their asses and do something.” – Terrence McNally

Understanding the science of inspiration leads to more informed decisions and an ability to continually create authentic experiences that encourage a journey from inspired thought to inspired action. By engaging the physiological, psychological, and experiential factors of inspirational moments, arts organizations can cultivate environments in which these moments might occur.

The elements of a holistic approach provide an organization with building blocks for wholehearted engagement. Company One, a social-justice driven theater company in Boston, creates interactive audience-driven lobby installations for each of its mainstage productions where audiences are asked to write and share their opinions on the show and its themes. For a recent production of “Astro Boy and the God of Comics”, audience members were invited to add their responses to the show on a wall of post-its as well as learn to draw Astro cartoons on a chalkboard (“Audience Response”). Following the production, the displays were posted on Company One’s website and shared on social media to gauge what resonated with the broader community. Through the installation, Company One engaged its audiences through reflection, encouraged an embodied action of writing and drawing, and created a space for audience

members to be seen by their peers. According to dramaturg Ramona Ostrowski, the installations have been so popular that they are now incorporated into each of the theater's productions in some form (Ostrowski). Although the long-term effects of its approach remain to be seen, the initial response from audiences and artist alike imply a deepening level of connection between the organization and its community.

Inspiration can be a tool in the arts administrator's toolbox, a swiss-army knife customizable and distinct for every organization. Although there is no one-size-fits-all approach to holistic engagement, there are core principles and practical steps that are relevant and scalable to organizations regardless of size or discipline. Adopting a holistic approach demands that an organization shift its mindset, placing the desire to cultivate inspiration at the center of its ethos and decision-making at all levels. Inspiration should be treated as a value and resource that permeates all elements of an organization.

A logical first step would be to create internal buy-in from staff and leadership on the importance of inspiration, both the goal and the process, as a core value. Educational and professional development opportunities can ensure that all staff and leadership understand both the elements of inspiration and how it intersects with their own work. Scheduling subsequent opportunities for discussion and collective reflection would be invaluable in strengthening communication across departments and infuse those findings into decision making and all elements of the arts experience. These findings can then be translated into resources for audience members to channel their inspiration into

future engagement—it creates a tapestry rather than loosely woven mesh. Once internal audiences are engaged and on board, the gaze shifts outward.

Prominently and publicly sharing these tactics and motivations for decision-making can increase a sense of transparency and build goodwill. Organizations can build connection by asking community members about their own inspiration, provided that they also display a willingness to acknowledge and demonstrate that listening through future action.

For an organization that leverages scientific research to implement a holistic approach, successful outcomes might include changes in knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors. A holistic approach meets audience members where they are and engages them intellectually, physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. It is a first but often overlooked step in the quest for securing donors, institutional funding and audience loyalty. A holistic approach represents long-term strategic thinking with a myriad of practical benefits. If more inspirational moments lead to increased, meaningful engagement, then it stands to reason that it will also raise awareness for why the arts matter, building public will and galvanizing political and financial support. Instead of preaching to the choir, a holistic approach can build a wider congregation, able to find more notes of harmony.

As previously discussed, inspiration can be wooed but not willed, and organizations cannot create inspiration itself or guarantee that it will occur. While it is possible that prioritizing inspirational moments yield immediate results, organizations will not necessarily be able to foresee long-term impacts or measure growth. Inspirational experiences grow and compound over time

through memory, and individuals who have been deeply affected by an artistic experience may not subscribe, donate or engage with an organization in the future. They may, however, go on to be more compassionate, engaged citizens with a clear sense of purpose and values aligned with nonprofit organizations. What it requires is a leap of faith—a concerted effort to serve the greater good without seeing some direct, tangible gain. Part of the magic of the performing arts is trusting that somewhere out there is a person whose universe was expanded by an arts experience—and that the effects will continue to ripple, ebbing and flowing onto distant shores.

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