

Good afternoon. I'm delighted to be at this Michigan Non-Profit Presenters Network conference. I want to thank President Katie Trzaska-Miller for inviting me, and my good friend Bryan Jao for suggesting the idea.

Today I want to talk to you about the role of art, and more importantly the role and responsibilities of arts leaders and art institutions.

Art -It is the second oldest profession of our civilization. The oldest profession will likely get you arrested....except in Nevada. Theatre and performance has its foundation in ancient tribal ritual. Tribal dances celebrating harvests, marriages, gods, wars, or any other event which merited a party. That's one of the reasons I gravitated to theatre – we throw great parties! This type of theatre was participatory. The entire tribe was to be part of the celebration to not anger the gods or fate- it was your civic duty – which ensured the health and sustainability of the community.

Each era – from the Greeks forward continued to use theatre and music to celebrate harvests, victories, and holidays. Coliseums and then theatres were constructed to allow thousands from the community to attend. The arts unified the city around politics and therefore were a central platform of economic prosperity. The arts were used to influence, gain favor, mold community attitude and unite a population. That is still true today.

In the early days of American history, in the first decade after we declared our independence, there was an explosion of theater construction in this country. Those 18th and 19th century American theaters presented a variety of genres -- opera, plays, music, and minstrel shows. They also hosted community events, dances, dinners, and lectures. In rural communities, a theatre was a place where young people could meet each other and engage in social activity.

What was an early American theatre like? Most had no toilets. But there *were* bars and saloons. It wasn't until the early-2000's that drinking in the theatre was again permitted on Broadway. In San Francisco and New Orleans, they even had gambling rooms that were part of the theater. The theater was a place where everybody from the civic leaders to the shopkeepers to newly arrived immigrant laborers gathered. Throughout history a theatre space has represented more than art for a community. A theatre, because it represented art – a subjective matter, has always been a gathering place welcoming and inviting all aspects of a community.

But at some point in the late 19th century, theatre quieted down and stopped being for everyone. The communal exhilaration that had been going for 2,500 years – since the Greeks first paid tribute to Dionysus with boisterous goat songs – was finally and completely hushed. Theatre became more like a religious service. A place to be respected, revered, refined and eventually relegated to the elite in our community. It was no longer the gathering place for open conversation for all classes and perspectives.

Fast forward to 2016: Broadway had a banner year with a record \$1.45 billion in sales. But what about the rest of the country. According to TCG, 125 LORT theatres reported audiences were down 4% from 2010-2015 and 9% over the past decade. The National Endowment for the Arts released an exhaustive study in 2015 that showed nationwide participation at “benchmark” arts events — classical music, theater and museums among them — between 2002-2012 declined nationally 3%. Why? If you’ve done surveys, are any of these familiar as your top 10 reasons?

1. Ticket prices are too high – 53%
2. Stories are not as interesting as they once were – 41%
3. Prefer entertainment “on my own schedule” – 30%
4. Prefer to spend money on other activities – 29%
5. Can see other entertainment – 24%
6. Prefer going out to dinner – 19%
7. Don’t have as much disposable income as a year ago – 18%
8. Decline in overall theater experience – 16%
9. Online content is equally entertaining – 13%
10. Too many people using phones and tablets – 10%

Do any of these sound familiar to you? When you’re trying to determine why audiences aren’t attending your arts events, do you hear responses like that? Do you think you’re ceding ground to more popular forms of entertainment? According to an article in Indie Wire, these are the top reasons why people don’t want to go to the movies anymore.

So it’s not just the live performing arts. There’s a shift happening in how we connect with one another in our society.

We talk about the decline of arts audiences as though the arts are in danger of disappearing. I don’t believe the arts are in danger of disappearing. 80% of young adults use electronic media to view, create, and edit art – but that

activity is typically done as a solitary activity. It is still art, but there is nothing to connect each individual to one's community or country. I do believe the arts as a social and civic outlet are disappearing. THAT is a threat to society as a whole. THAT is something we as arts leaders must take responsibility to not allow to be lost.

The arts strengthen the most important pillars of our society – education, religion, politics, economy and family. Yes, family. How many of you have fond memories of one of your parents singing or reading to you? The arts have been our backbone for thousands of years. For all of our showmanship, we have always been willing to let science and math take the front seat. But I believe that we have fallen behind – and I believe that we in the arts need to step up and make a difference.

If you want to build the ship to prosperity and vitality in our communities, we must do more than bring the tools, we must do more than supply the lumber or teach the engineering. If you want to build a ship, first we must get our communities, our people, our children to dream and imagine the immensity of the sea of success. That's how you find the reason and the vision to build that ship. We aren't the sails or the rudder, but the arts are the wind and waves that drive the Ship of Success forward.

And yet there are a lot of folks out there who don't believe that arts = strong communities and strong economies, but I think that's because they haven't looked at the data.

Robert Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard University did a comparative study in the area of social capital in his book *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. His book, written in 1993 was a study of regional governments in Italy comparing the success of democracies based on communal bonding that forms social capital. In other words, he studied how success is generated within a community. Putnam wrote that the numerous community guilds, clubs, and choral societies which have existed for decades in northern Italy led to an elevated civic involvement and greater economic prosperity. Whereas, Southern Italy which traditionally has invested less in social capital has been also less successful economically and democratically. Greater cultural and social engagement led directly to greater community prosperity. Putnam defines 'social capital' as "networks and norms of civic engagement," and mechanisms that allow members of a community to trust each another. When trust is created between people, bonds are created and

people are more willing to trade, buy, and lend money – all of which are necessary for economies and democracies to flourish.

That's right – he's not saying that the arts do well because a community is thriving economically and politically. He's saying that a community thrives economically and politically *because* people are engaged in the arts together. The arts come first.

Putnam does make a distinction between 2 kinds of social capital: Bonding Capital and Bridging Capital. Bonding Capital happens when you socialize with people who are like you – same religion, same age, same politics, etc. Bridging capital is when you form bonds and friendships with others who are not like you – socially, politically, racially, etc. To create a peaceful, diverse community you have to have both. Bonding capital strengthens one's ability to invest and create bridging capital. And conversely, less bonding also equates to less bridging.

I have two sons, Martin and Benjamin. When they were growing up I believed each needed exposure to everything at least once to give them a taste of different activities and experiences. I took them to a hockey game, to opera, to baseball and to ballet. Martin's first experience with ballet, *The Nutcracker*, started fabulously. He was excited to be at his first ballet. The music started, the curtain went up, and after several minutes he whispered to me, "Dad, dad – when do they sing?" I shook my head and whispered, "They don't sing." A few more minutes went by and he asked, "Dad, when do they talk?" I shook my head, "They don't talk." Another minute passed and with folded arms and a much too loud voice he declared, "What's the point?"

So.....what's the point?

Regardless of one's personal, political or social worldview in this room, we can agree that more social bridging will be a good thing for our country. So how do we get there?

Before I arrived at Geva Theatre Center, the artistic team wanted to create an initiative to involve more African Americans in our audience. The Geva audience was white, straight, religious and leaned heavily to the left – typical modern arts audience. To generate the interest of the black community, Geva decided to produce an August Wilson play in each of its next five seasons. I entered the company in its second season of this commitment. The organization was convinced that if they built it/produced it, that the black

community would respond – they would come. It was an all-black cast directed by a black director about black topics. This is perfect for them. In both its first and second year, very few from the black community came. Even worse, Geva’s subscription audience – the community’s white elite also did not come. The August Wilson series in its first two years was the worst attended show each season.

Why? Evidently the black community did not understand this was for them. Clearly the marketing department was failing to advertise properly. Or the tickets were too high for the poorer black patrons – or lack of public transportation near the theatre – or, or, or...

So during the second season of the Wilson series, I ventured into the black community – meeting with community and religious leaders and asking them if the community was aware of Geva’s commitment and investment in their heritage. Each leader responded the same: Yes we know about the August Wilson series, but it has nothing to do with our community or heritage. Geva failed to invest in bridging capital as described by Putnam. They did not:

- 1) Involve the black community in the original conversation
- 2) Ask for support and assistance with the project (no “skin in the game”)
- 3) Create intimacy with the community by allowing it to mold the experience overall

In year three of the series, we did these three things. Firstly, we invited the black community to be involved with the performers and artists – even attending rehearsals. This created a local buzz far beyond what our advertising could do. That particular community, as seen in the August Wilson dialogue, relies heavily on porch conversation – word of mouth.

Secondly we asked them to help bring in people to see the shows. They suggested that we give free tickets to pastors and preachers, being certain to invite each pastor to special occasions. By showing respect to their religious and community leaders, we respected their society’s democracy.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we allowed **them** to create their ideal theatre experience. I learned that singing is a very important part of that particular community’s group gatherings. The group also often surrounded itself in color – vibrant color. For the majority of performances, we invited different black chorales from churches and schools to perform before the show and

sometimes during intermission. It not only brought in mothers, father, and neighbors to hear someone sing – it added to the overall experience for the white, elite members of the audience. They enjoyed the night more with the singing.

Lastly, we invited black local artists to display their work in the theatre lobby – adding color and texture to complete the experience of our black Rochester patrons. People ended up staying after in our theatre lobby bar to both share experiences from the evening, but to also continue to relive the experiences through the art on the walls.

In year three, ticket sales soared – by black and white patrons. We accomplished the exposure to black culture and ideology we desired for our white patrons not by producing August Wilson, but by allowing our black community to produce August Wilson. That is theatre at its best. This is our responsibility as community arts leaders and arts facility leaders to build and strengthen bridges.

Art is best when art connects. Art defines and celebrates all parts of our lives – it always has. Art is the only universal language able to communicate to all people. Art defines for us our values and beliefs – the recent removal of Civil War icons in the south demonstrate this. The essence of who we are is represented in our values and beliefs, and these change constantly in our world and society. Art is more than a “nice to have” for Friday night. Art and performing arts facilities provide necessary support for our socio-economic health.

The Centers for Disease Control have identified a cadre of what they call “social determinants of health” – those things that are necessary for us to be healthy as individuals. In a study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation on those influential determinants, community and social context and education - - which includes everything from literacy, and language to community engagement –play a big role. The arts have always been a catalyst for these things, and I suggest that many of the struggles we experience today are rooted in our declining participation in social and creative bonding.

So – if theatre is so important to our health – to our community, cultural and national health, why is our audience fading? Except for Broadway, every other cultural market is under duress and has been for nearly a decade. According to Tim Crouch, English actor/writer/director, “..audiences still don’t fully believe it’s [theatre] for them....theatre is still not common

language". Theatre used to be a collective place to let go – a place to be vocal on stage and in the audience. Nowadays, we stand at the end of a show not because it was an outstanding production and we are roaring to our feet in emotional gratitude. Rather, we rise, slowly and creakily to our ovation to work out the stiffness in our knees and backs – to rouse the energy to drive home. Participation has always been a critical element to the communal experience- to bonding – to bridging. Lack of activity and participation at our cultural events is, I feel, a driving force to our declining audiences.

At Geva Theatre, this was the next question we asked after learning from the August Wilson initiative. How to engage our audience in the performance and the conversation. Make the patron's theatrical experience relevant! And The Hornet's Nest was created.

The Hornet's Nest was a creation by two of the Geva artistic staff. The idea centered on a focused evening of play reading (i.e. – low tech and low cost) to focus specifically on current events and topics the community and the world is involved with right now. It featured script-in-hand performances of hot-button plays followed by conversations with community leaders. It was an artistic event to allow the community to express opinions and bond beyond each patron's normal, safe boundaries. It focused on topics such as gun control, race and who owns race and heritage, and political rights.

The first two –three events were sold out. The community was engaged and excited. We believed we created the avenue and platform to allow every group and person in Rochester to bring forward one's opinion and be heard. Theatre, finally, was being returned to a voice of the people – all people.

In year two of the program, audience participation began to decline. In the same year, panel participation began to decline. We noticed that, unlike year one, we did not see new faces in the theatre – these were our regular patrons taking advantage of one more performance opportunity. The conversations during and after the show were monochromatic, with few if any opposing viewpoints. Unlike year one of the program, there was no diversity of conversation, no avenue for growth or learning or "bridging" with one's neighbor. Again, leadership questioned marketing – it could not be price, because it was free. Again, I went into the community to ask questions. I did not ask the people who were attending – that crowd already found value in The Hornet's Nest.

We went to the people who we felt would attend an event about gun control – specifically people who opposed it. We already had the ones in favor of strong gun control in attendance – the left leaning liberals who opposed the right to keep and bear arms. What we discovered from the ones who supported the right to keep and bear arms is that each felt the conversation was intentionally skewed. The play presented was against gun owners’ rights, the panelists were in favor of gun control, and to them that signaled that Geva Theatre also supported gun control. It was pointless to attend and participate in The Hornet’s Nest because Geva was not a place they felt welcomed – Geva chose sides – Geva did not represent their civic and community position – Geva did not permit them to have a voice. Geva represented left, liberal propaganda. The Hornet’s Nest failed, in the end; failed to expand our audience. It solidified a part of the community’s belief that art and culture was not-is not- for them – it is elitist. We failed to create art for all. We did not fulfill our commitment to our community, or our responsibility as a civic leader.

What is your role as both an arts leader and performing arts center? Each of you carries more than art on your shoulders. You carry our identity as a people on your shoulders. You carry our national identity as a mosaic of perspectives – limit the conversation to just one perspective and it becomes a monologue that by definition excludes anyone who sees the world differently than you.

Take the collective memory of images out of our museums; remove music from our schools and singing from our communities; lose opera, drama and dance from our performing arts centers, or the books from our libraries; purge each community of its festivals, literature and painting, and what do we have left? Lose the dialogue of a multiplicity of viewpoints and what remains? We are a people without a national conversation, a country without identity, a dead and stagnant society without growth. A society without a soul if we do not have Art.

The declining interest in art and culture is a battle. We are battling for the survival of our society. I don’t know of a time in history when war on man has not gone hand in hand with war on culture. To defeat an individual, you take away one’s life. To defeat a society, you must take away its art.

Yes, you are attending this conference to learn how to be better at the business of art. Be a good capitalist with art. After all, non-profit is only a tax bracket – it is not a financial model. However, the business of art has always

been one's community. When money not people are the focus of your mission or survival, then this is what you hear:

1. Ticket prices are too high
2. Stories are not as interesting as they once were
3. Prefer entertainment "on my own schedule"
4. Prefer to spend money on other activities
5. Can see other entertainment

Three of the top five reasons for not attending movies, like theatre, involve an audiences' taste and preference for feeling welcome and connected to other activities and places. Keep the arts about your community. Involve all segments of your society. Present ideas important to maintain bridges. Most importantly – art and theatre need to be social. Make your centers focused on engagement – inside and out. As Bernstein wrote so beautifully, "Make your garden grow."