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Charity Takes Center Stage

How nonprofit groups use theatrical presentations to help them understand thorny issues

By Darlene M. Siska

A man in his 20s, who has just joined the board of his family's foundation, is bright, enthusiastic, and bubbling over with new ideas. But he soon begins butting heads with older board members and their established thinking. Just as the situation reaches a boiling point, the individuals stop talking to one another — and look to a watching audience for a resolution.

This is *Stalemate*, a play performed by professional actors that dramatizes generational succession issues in family foundations. It is produced by the Shaking the Tree Foundation, a nonprofit group in New York that creates performances about the challenges grant makers face.

Shaking the Tree is one of several theater groups that perform for foundations or charities and their professional advisers. The groups draw upon advice from psychologists, financial advisers, and other experts as they assemble scenarios to help nonprofit audiences work through difficult issues.

During performances, actors stay in character after the situation they are depicting reaches a crisis point, answer questions from the audience about the situation, and act out alternate endings suggested by viewers who may face the same challenges.

Rich Bakal, a trustee of his parents' organization, the Max and Bessie Bakal Foundation, in Costa Mesa, Calif., saw a performance of *Stalemate* and was astonished at how caught up he got in the play's storyline.

"Seeing the issues acted out in front of you convincingly is, in my experience, enormously more effective than just having someone stand in front of you explaining how someone can handle problems or such," he says. "It shows you how powerful drama can be."

True Stories

That drama can be more effective than listening to speakers behind microphones — the usual fare at most conferences — is due to the elements theater combines, says Erik Muten, a psychologist and cofounder of DramaWorks Interactive, in Northampton, Mass., which mounts performances for nonprofit groups and other audiences.

"It's a powerful tool for people to understand multiple perspectives simultaneously," he says, adding that such understanding can lead people to transform their behavior.

And even though most arts groups are suffering cutbacks because of the recession, theater

companies that focus on nonprofit audiences say the number of performances they are being hired to give has not decreased.

The issues audiences want to see played out are often similar, according to Christopher Ellinger, who founded True Story Theater in 2001.

The group, in Arlington, Mass., uses a form of dramatics it calls "Playback Theatre," in which audience members tell stories from their lives and watch them acted out on the spot.

Mr. Ellinger is a co-founder (with his wife, Anne) of Bolder Giving, a Boston organization that encourages affluent donors to increase their philanthropy. The theater group gives performances for charities and grant makers, as well as those who advise them.

Donors, he says, are often interested in family-related issues, like legacy and succession, and the challenges of working with different family members. For charity staff members, issues often concern their values and relations with boards; for donor advisers, he says, drama is an opportunity to explore their own role in giving and help them learn how to work better with their clients.

In 2006, Clare Dowd, executive director of ArtCorps, a nonprofit group in Boston that uses the arts to promote social change in Central America, hired True Story Theater for a party her group held to celebrate its status as an independent charity, after long operating under the auspices of a foundation.

"Instead of having a talk about how we use arts to promote social change, we decided to work with True Story and have them tell the story through Playback Theatre," Ms. Dowd says.

The leaders of ArtCorps met with Mr. Ellinger before the party and decided his group would do two stories, one about Martine Kellett, who created the group after a yearlong sabbatical in Guatemala and Africa, and the other story about ArtCorps's work.

The actors were a "parrot of the audience almost," Ms. Dowd says. "They didn't hear the stories until right before the performance."

The event was not a formal fund raiser, she recalls, but some people in the audience made contributions even though nobody asked them to do so, bringing in about \$5,000.

Heather Gee, vice president for development and donor services at the Philadelphia Foundation, said her exposure to True Story's Playback Theatre, at the Advisors in Philanthropy conference in Chicago last year spurred her to rethink how she deals with donors.

The players asked the audience for good and bad experiences they had had with philanthropy. Ms. Gee told about an incident in which she had felt coerced to make a gift. "My arms felt twisted, and it didn't feel good," she says.

Having the incident reflected back to her by the troupe made her think, she says, "about how as a fund raiser my words or actions may come across, because the person who'd asked me for a gift wasn't really trying to force me." She says she is now more conscious of the way she approaches her work.

Judy Wicks, president of White Dog Community Enterprises, a nonprofit organization that promotes economic development in Philadelphia, recalls attending a workshop four years ago presented by DramaWorks for the Social Venture Network, in San Francisco, a membership group for social entrepreneurs. At the time, says Ms. Wicks, a board member of the network, newer members of the group were feeling excluded by its veterans.

At social events, older members of the network were meeting and chatting, oblivious to the presence of the newcomers, notes Mr. Muten of DramaWorks. Under the direction of DramaWorks, members of the Social Venture Network joined with DramaWorks actors to perform in scenarios in which a new person was made to feel uncomfortable.

It was a revealing experience, Ms. Wicks says. "DramaWorks helped us to open up to some situations to make people feel more comfortable, such as at cocktail parties," she says. "You get caught up talking to your buddies, so we acted out how to do it better. It's been very effective."

'Fundamental Issues'

The emotional component of performances can move nonprofit audiences to new ways of working, says John Lapham, an actor with True Story Theater. (As a self-described member of a "sort of monied family," and a fund raiser and volunteer for many charities over the years, Mr. Lapham says he has multiple perspectives he can draw on for his performances.)

True Story Theater helps people understand that it is OK to learn from mistakes, he says. He adds that he "understands that grant making can be isolating and confusing at times, so people love to hear how other people do it, and that other people share the same challenges and obstacles, confusions and fears."

When playing to charity audiences, his troupe tries to emphasize an organization's mission, "what moves people internally to do the work, what inspired them to be involved as a fund raiser," he says.

In *The Big Payday*, a piece by Shaking the Tree, a family has just sold its business and needs to figure out what to do with the money. The parents have decided to put the bulk of the proceeds into a foundation, much to the dismay of their three children. Andy White plays the middle brother, Peter, who functions as a family peacemaker

Although his background is very unlike that of the character he plays, Mr. White says the issues involved are universal. "The family in the play has considerably more means than my own family had, but it's been my experience that things are the same when a parent dies or any time you're working on estate matters such as property," he says.

"Whether there are two zeros after a dollar sign or more, it's all the same stuff," Mr. White says. "There are always the fundamental issues — jealousy, control of communication. It's the Greek classics."

Frank Discussions

Costs for performances like those staged by True Story, Shaking the Tree, and other theater

companies can range from \$2,000 to \$10,000 or more, say troupe leaders, although some do pro bono work for charities. Work on a scripted performance may start up to a year in advance of being presented to an audience.

Sometimes those productions do not achieve all that the nonprofit organizations that commission them hope.

John Harvey, executive director of Grantmakers Without Borders, an association in San Francisco of donors who give internationally, hired True Story Theater to perform at the group's annual conference in Miami in 2004. The plan, he says, was to bring some Latin American charities to the conference for conversations with donors.

"We thought it would be really interesting to bring a group together because the power relationship [between donors and grantees] can be challenging to navigate, and you're also crossing cultural barriers that can pose challenges," Mr. Harvey says.

Using True Story Theater was an attempt to see if discussion could be sparked.

"Right at the beginning we encouraged everyone to be as frank as possible," he says.

But interaction between grantees and donors never blossomed.

Partly, he says, this was due to language barriers, but also because some of the personal stories contributed by grant makers weren't necessarily relevant to the grantees' concerns.

"I think what happened, as I believe often happens with True Story Theater, is that it goes where it wants to go in the room, and we found some very frank and interesting contributions by some of the funders in the room," Mr. Harvey says.

However, he acknowledges, drama productions aimed at nonprofit audiences create "space for people to share things they may not have had the opportunity or comfort level to before. And it's not for everyone — some people want to get down to issues like microfinance. But for those who appreciate artistic ways, it's a great way to go."

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