

**Ben Cameron: Keynote Speech KCYA
Arts for Living and Learning Luncheon
April 7, 2005**

I am so delighted to be here among such a distinguished group of artist supporters. I would love especially to thank Chris Hudson who played the guitar so beautifully for us out in the lobby before the event, and Hing Wah Hatch for the demonstration we just had, in part because I think it's the embodiment of what we've learned about the best of arts education—that it's the ability to witness the professional artist at work, in combination with direct participation in learning firsthand what it means to be a creative artist, that instills a lifelong relationship with the arts together.

I always worry when I am asked to follow artists that we will now engage in a trajectory from the sublime to the ridiculous. That said, I'm aware that I'm standing in the midst of a celebration here in Kansas City in the midst of what is nonetheless a time of unprecedented stress and anxiety for the national arts community. Once a year, Theatre Communications Group, the organization I lead, does research about the health of the arts around the country, based on our members' audits. Here's what we found in our most recent survey about the health of professional theater coast-to-coast:

- State funding for theaters has fallen by almost 40 percent over the last three years. I know you've had challenges here in Missouri: no state, however, has experienced greater stress than California, which a year ago had roughly a \$30 million Arts Council budget and this year has a \$1 million Arts Council. In fact, there are no state arts council grants this year: instead there's a skeletal staff in Sacramento, asking "How do you run a state Arts Council on a million dollars a year especially if you're this size, breadth and diversity of California?"
- Local funding for theaters has fallen almost 20 percent over the last five years once adjusted for inflation.
- The number of corporations supporting professional theaters has fallen 48% in the last four years.
- Foundation giving, often working out of a base calculated on averaging three years of assets, has been paralyzed by a fairly static stock market, resulting in either flat or declining giving levels.

Probably summarizes this state of affairs more effectively than the ultimate bottom line. Just four years ago 71 percent of professional theaters had a surplus: last year 59 percent had a deficit.

In short, it's a grim time of unprecedented stress and anxiety. But at least part of the conversation in our field is a shift in thinking. What happens if we look at these numbers, not as causative of future woes or present danger, but as feedback? What if the reason the numbers are going the direction they are is that we have not yet adequately made our case for the importance of theater and the arts? When times are stressful and decisions are hard, are audiences are saying to us, "You're not a priority. Perhaps you are a frill." Just as Glenda said to the Wicked Witch of the West in the *Wizard of Oz*, are our communities saying to us, "Be gone; you have no power here"?

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If that's the case, I would contend it's not because of the quality for what we've had to do. Indeed, we've witnessed the power of art firsthand today in its highest degree. And over and over quality is what we *have* been able to talk about. We talk about it every time we have a grant application: every funder asks us about the artistic quality of the work. We talk about it every time we rehearse: how do we get a better scene, how do we get a better performance, how do we make the work better? The critics in the paper call us to task over the quality of the work. And every one of you who manages an arts organization knows really the reason you want a bigger budget is because you can afford to hire better talent and the work gets better.

But while we've been talking about quality, the rest of the country has moved on. It's not quality, but *value* that determines where people spend time money and energy.

Some of you may know I used to work at Target, or Targé, as we always called it, and certainly I know you called it the same. One of the things they taught me at that point was, is the central importance of *value*. You can have the best toilet paper in the world on the shelves, but if people don't see the value of coming in the store in the first place, they don't get to see if you've got the good or bad—and p.s. if you promise them the best, you better have it, or they won't come back twice. But *value* precedes quality when determining where to invest time, money and energy.

Fortunately we in the arts community are getting better and better and better about quantifying our value a number of ways, but nowhere can we do it with more pride and more effectiveness, than when it comes to talking about kids and young people today.

Shirley Brice Heath, of Stanford University, has issued perhaps my favorite report. A researcher but; not an *arts* researcher, Shirley was engaged to study all after-school activities for kids. She studied sports, she studied Girl Scouts, she studied arts after-school programs, and more, working with high risk kids in inner-city Palo Alto California, an economically and culturally distressed area. After several years of gathering information she came back and said, although I paraphrase, "I have to tell you, it's the Arts kids that have blown everybody else out of the water. It's the Arts kids who do 80 to 120 points higher on their SATs, than the non-arts kids in the very same schools. It's the Arts kids who subsequently become four to eight times more likely to participate in math and science fairs, eight times more likely to run for class office, show a dramatic drop in disciplinary infractions and absenteeism, and are exponentially more likely to graduate from high school than their non Arts-involved peers." That statistic is even more powerful when we remember that the single biggest indicator of time in a federal penitentiary is the absence of a high-school diploma.

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Her studies, which are fantastic about the value of the Arts for kids, are supplemented by reports from MIT, that demonstrate that kids that study Shakespeare have greater complexity of thinking, greater verbal acuity, greater tolerance of ambiguity, greater self-esteem, and greater self-control.

Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*, among other well-known books, said recently at a conference in Michigan, (and again I paraphrase) "You know, in the wake of school shootings especially, we worry that kids today are so beset with pressures and so unhappy" But he went on to say, "You know, it's not that kids today are any unhappier than you and I were. We were every bit as unhappy and angry at our parents as kids today." (A statement that, speaking personally at least, I can affirm as true.) "What is *changed* in kid's lives is the amount of structured time kids have today with adults." When we were young and had those murderous feelings, we had in our lives an adult who would look at us and say, "I know you want to kill the world, but that's a bad idea." Increasingly, kids today not only don't have that time: they have communication means like BlackBerry Wireless, cell phones, etc., that entrench peer reinforcement and pull them even further away from adult. The Arts, as Malcolm note, is a promise of structured time with an adult. And was I the *only* person who read the coverage of Columbine in the New York Times and noticed that those kids said in the campus where there were shootings, the only place where they could come together, where the cliques didn't hold sway and where they could hear each other in different ways, was the Performing Arts Center?

All of this is amplified further by even a report from UCLA, one of my favorites, which notes that a high-school senior who has been in a play is 42 percent less likely to tolerate racist behavior than a kid who has never been in a play.

In short, if you care about the *intellectual* development of your children, if you care about the *emotional* development of your children, if you care about the *social* development of your children, you *must* care about the Arts. And just as would we have said in every school system that every child has the *right* to develop their full *intellectual* potential, every child in gym class has the right to develop their full *physical* potential, *we must say*, as a nation, every child *must* have the right to develop his or her fullest creative potential if we are to thrive and move forward in society.

Ken Robinson, an educational expert, heightens the importance of this even further. in his book, *Out of Our Minds*. Basically he says that where he travels in this country, when he talks to people on the streets, one of the first things they talk about, about their concerns, is the quality of their educational system. All of us here today *know* it's in trouble. We *feel* it often groaning under its own weight. We *worry* that the system is broken. And Robinson asks, "Why is that?" Basically he concludes every educational system was designed as a hierarchy: Math and Science at the top, Humanities in the middle, Creativity at the bottom. That system was designed to solve the problems of the industrial age, a hierarchy that reflected the

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time in which public education was created. Now, however, we deal as if in a *post*-industrial economy, and if we are to thrive, that hierarchy *must* be inverted. While all three are clearly important, creativity must hold sway, *if* we are to be competitive as a world culture, *if* we are to be competitive as an economic culture.

And yet, I don't think you need me to praise to death works to tell you what in your heart you already know.

When I was at Target, or Targé, I traveled all around the country in my role managing the charitable giving division. Last year, Target gave away \$126 million in grants to nonprofits last year alone—grant to their priorities of education, domestic violence prevention and the arts. Now I don't even work at Target anymore, but the more you shop at Target the more they have to give away...And if anyone offers you my old job, you take it: it's the best job in the country. In fact, there's a saying about corporate giving: "Welcome to corporate philanthropy, you've just had your last bad meal and your last sincere compliment."

As part of my job, I'd visit communities where we were opening stores. We'd say, "We're coming to town, we give away a lot of money, and here's how you might qualify for a piece of the pie."

And in every community where I spoke, invariably a hand would go up, and somebody would say, "Well, you're not from here, you're from Minneapolis where you're headquartered, so let me share some things with you. You may not know we have AIDS exploding through the ceiling, we have welfare-to-work issues, we have a home shelter without enough beds, we have a food shelter without enough food, and we have a school system they can't put most of the kids in. Why the hell do you people give so much money to the Arts?"

And in virtually every community I said, "Well, okay, how many of you grew up singing in the church choir, acting in the school play, painting pictures, whatever." Most hands would go up, and I'd say, "What did you learn from that?" Somebody would say, "Well, I learned to exit stage left." "I learned to read a musical scale," and then somebody would say, "I learned punctuality. You could ditch class and show up 15 minutes late with the greatest of ease. You didn't show up at 8:15 when the curtain was up at 8:00." Somebody else said, "You know, I learned delayed gratification." Especially the piano players, who practice those scales a hundred times, and one day they just bloom in a way you'd never expect. Somebody else would say, "I learned teamwork. When you sing in a church choir, it's not how well you sing, it's how well you listen and blend with everyone else." I had a retired Marine muckety-muck in Jacksonville, North Carolina, who said, "I didn't learn discipline in the Marines, I learned discipline playing the French horn."

And when it came to theater, people said, "I would see the world, I would hear the world, I would taste the world through somebody else's eyes, ears, nose, and throat, and bring it onto my own." If we can't do that—if we can't hear and see the world

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through somebody else's perspective other than our own—then when it comes to AIDS, and Welfare-to-work, and homelessness, and starvation, etc., we can't even have the conversation.

As I said, these times are tough, and there are more perils than there've ever been, and if we're going to continue to do our work, we need your help more than we have ever needed it. For those of us in professional theater, I hope you know that for every dollar we spend, 47¢ of that comes from contributions: only 53¢ comes in at the box office.

And so in my closing moments, I'd like to ask you today to ratchet up what you mean by being here today, and stop thinking of yourself as an arts supporter, and start thinking of yourself as an arts *activist*. An arts activist means a couple of key things: an arts activist writes letters to the Editor when the Arts budget or their Arts Council is in peril, because in that moment, (and I tell you this firsthand as somebody who worked at the NEA during Mapplethorpe and Serrano), the voice of the arts community is deemed too self-interested to be heard, and it's the banker, it's the lawyer, it's the PTA mother, it's the stay-at-home housewife, those voices are heard when artist's voice cannot be.

An arts activist goes upon the hill to lobby, understanding that no legislator ever understands an issue until a voting constituent explains it to him or her. The arts activist lobbies.

An Arts activist sitting on the board of directors goes on funding calls. I can tell you how easy it was at Target, when I looked across the table at the Arts official, to say, "Gee, I'm sorry, the money's all gone." When that arts representative had a board member with him or her, not only did that make a statement of how important the arts groups were to them, but especially if that board member had a relationship with my CEO, the money was magically found.

Even more important - arts activists take a kid to the Arts EVERY TIME THEY GO. Every adult with a meaningful relationship had that experience seeded before the age of 18. Even better, an arts activist takes a kid and a kid's friend, because it's peer reinforcement even more than parental example that cements Arts allegiance.

And finally, an arts activist exercises their sphere of influence in your *most* creative way to leverage support for the Arts.

A board member of Steppenwolf Theater has been deeply inspiring me for this. Steppenwolf Theater, which every year until this year, auctioned off a walk-on on *Frasier* as part of their annual gala auction. Now we're talking a walk-on, a fleeting run by the camera: this does not include staring soulfully into Daphne's eyes over cappuccinos or riding the elevator up and down with Niles. It came with first-class airline tickets to Beverly Hills and a suite at the Beverly Hilton where it was filmed. The first year I went to the auction, it was purchased by a CEO, who paid roughly

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45 thousand dollars a pop. But the activist part was this; he never did the walk-on. Instead, that CEO held a contest in his corporation about why the arts were important, and the employee that wrote the best essay got the walk-on. That's Arts Activism in a way that every person in this room has the power to achieve.

As a closing image, because times are hard, let me give you an image of our future. There was a Harris poll several years ago that said if your house is on fire, what is the first thing most people grab when they walk out the door? Anybody know this one? Your photographs. Your family photographs. I say to you, with all sincerity, the arts are our family photographs.

As a man whose ancestors came from England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany: the plays of Shakespeare, the plays of Goethe, the plays of Beckett are my family photographs.

As a man who was born and raised in the South, the stories of Carson McCullers, the novels of William Faulkner, the plays of Tennessee Williams are my family photographs.

As a man working in America today, the plays of David Rabe, the plays of Lanford Wilson, the plays of David Mamet are my family photographs.

As a gay man, the plays of Tony Kushner, the dances of Bill T. Jones are my family photographs.

And in America, as an American, the novels of Toni Morrison, the poetry of Maya Angelou, the architecture of Maya Lin, the songs of my Latino and Chicano brothers and sisters, the stories of my Native American brothers and sisters, all these and more, these are *our* family photographs. And if we do our work correctly, these photographs will live and breathe as testaments to who we were, what we thought, what we felt, just as it's the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides that are the living photos of Ancient Greece, not the records of wars won and lost.

You know, in those NEA years, it was hard to stay true to that vision, especially in the wake of some of the attacks from Jesse Helms. But I feel it's important to stay to that path, because *really* what we do when we get ourselves in the arts, is we honor the past, we commemorate the present, we shape and we change the future in a way that does honor to all and violence to none.

I don't care how much that we may try to be shamed from that path, this is God's work we do. I would like to thank you for your part in doing God's work by your support of the arts here in Kansas City, and especially today for Young Audiences. I would like to assure you that the hand of friendship from TCG is stretched out to you if we can ever be of service to you in any way at any time. And I would like to thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me today. God speed you in your work.