



Artistic Director Don King outside the Black Rep's Westminster street home

Survival 101

Local Theatres Face Tough Economic Test

By Molly Lederer | Photography by Jonathan Beller

What does it mean to live in recession-era RI? What could it mean for our Renaissance City if the economic slump lasts another year, or five, or more? As we all begrudgingly cut costs and pinch pennies, we may well wonder about the long-term effects of such fiscal conservancy on the local arts and culture. For many of the area's non-profit arts organizations, the results could be damaging, if not devastating. This potentiality begs another question, seemingly obvious, but deceptively so: do we, as a community, value our arts institutions enough to save them?

Downtown, the Providence Black Repertory Company provides an example of the crisis at hand. In the course of an incredibly difficult year, the Black Rep temporarily suspended their theatre sea-

son, canceled one of their productions, and was forced to lay off five of their full-time employees. In a recent discussion with artistic director Donald King, he spoke candidly about the unprecedented challenges that the organization faced this season, as well as the necessary changes that are in store. Though the Black Rep as an institution seems capable of surviving the struggle, some of their finest programming is a casualty.

"The current economic situation is just brutal, across the board, for non-profits, for-profits, major corporations, the government, individuals... This is just a part of our collective reality," King admits. But if he doesn't get too caught up in that mindset, it's because the Black Rep was grappling with a few problems even before the

economic downturn. After opening in the fall of 1996 with a three-pronged model of theatre, education, and public programs, the organization grew in leaps and bounds. Producing works of and inspired by the African Diaspora in an effort to "bring people together, provoke thought, inspire hope, and create understanding," the Black Rep soon achieved artistic success. Financial sustainability was more elusive.

"Perhaps, in retrospect, some of that growth could have been managed a little more carefully," King allows. He regrets not being more aggressive in holding the non-profit organization to certain development benchmarks along the way. Now, he finds that he must do so. "If a program doesn't cut the mustard, doesn't meet certain financial or economic criteria, no

matter how badly I want it and how badly I want to use it as a vehicle to serve the community and enhance our programming, it can't happen. That's a brutal reality. And in some ways, the community suffers." Case in point? Gone is the spoken word/poetry series once held at the Black Rep on Mondays, as well as Tuesday's Caribbean Cultural series; May's First Look Reading series has been canceled. Even more significantly, gone is theatre – at least as the Black Rep once produced it.

"You will not see theatre being produced out of our house to the volume, degree, and capacity that you've seen in the past," King reports. "The volume that you saw in the past came with a price. And it came with a price that, in very many ways, almost forced this organization to close its doors."

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The on-going fundraising tally at the Black Rep

High production costs and low ticket sales on the March production, *A Time of Fire*, tolled the death knell for the show intended to succeed it: August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*. King explains that it has been extremely difficult for him as “someone who’s dedicated his life to theatre, to black theatre in particular, to make a kind of decision like this.” But the Black Rep, simply put, could “no longer financially compromise the organization in the way in which we’ve done in the past, trying to produce theatre.”

To put the financial problems of the theatre programming in perspective, King notes that the Black Rep raises more money in one year producing Sound Session, their seven-day summer music festival, than they have raised in all ten years of producing theatre, combined. “So at some point, I had to be like, okay. What’s the clinical definition of insanity?” King laughs at the old adage about doing something over and over, expecting a different result. Though a responsible and necessary decision, the dissolution of the Black Rep’s theatre program is a great loss artistically – not only to King himself, but to the Black Rep in general, to the many talented artists who have served as cast and crew there, and ultimately to the community at large.

Strictly judging by ticket sales (or lack thereof) for *A Time of Fire*, the community at large seems to be ominously ambivalent at present. “If there was ever a time for the community to come out and support theatre at the Black Rep, it was during *A Time of Fire*,” King points out. Given the dismal economic climate and gloomy world news, could sparse attendance possibly be chalked up to bad timing? Audiences craving escapist fare may have avoided *A Time of Fire*, a dark tale of civil war in Africa, simply on principle. King agrees that some audience members found the play depressing, and admits that maybe it was. “But I never saw it that way. I saw it as a wonderfully written piece of theatre that had a message. Perhaps, if I were a

better commercial producer, I would have thought of [these] things!”

Therein lies the rub. In a congenial, somewhat self-deprecating way, King recognizes that the quality and kind of theatre that interests him as an artistic director is not mainstream, commercial fare. It is neither intended to be, nor (ideally) should it need to be. As King explains, he originally fell in love with theatre because it “opened the world up to me and gave me access to social, cultural, and political realities that were not my own.” Lighter pieces by the likes of Tyler Perry might play better with audiences, but King is quick to note, “That’s just not my bag.” It’s the creative output of the Black Arts Movement of the 60s, the work of playwrights like Amiri Baraka – the “stuff you gotta sit through and think about” – that inspires him. As a result, the Black Rep’s theatre programming has always been rich in classic, experimental, and new works of social and cultural relevance. In the absence of it, there will surely be a void.

With their theatre programming no longer commercially viable, the Black Rep plans to shift from a producing entity into a presenting one. It may be too early yet to predict how much of a role theatre, in any form, will play at the Black Rep next year. In the meantime, they’re hunkering down and focusing on what King calls a “work-out plan for the organization – re-structuring [it], making sure that we can deal with the overall physical and fiscal health of [it].” King sums up the situation by saying, “In a kind of twisted, ironic way, some of this is really fortuitous. It is forcing us to really evaluate *how* we serve, *who* we serve.” In this observation, he echoes the task of many local non-profit arts organizations these days. In the face of economic adversity, what adaptations can and must they make to survive?

Around the corner at Perishable Theatre, artistic director Vanessa Gilbert reveals that they are not immune to financial pressures either. “Perishable is

certainly seeing the effects of the economic recession in a decrease in individual donations and in the loss of a couple of key grantors. But I am optimistic that this is a time to think big and re-connect to the mission of the theatre: to connect RI audiences to groundbreaking works of theatre, mostly by homegrown artists.” In terms of necessary changes, Gilbert reports that Perishable is looking at ways to cut its expenses, “but we operate with such a small annual budget that the response is to hold more small fundraising events driven by the artists who avail themselves of our services.” To that end, she announces that they will be holding a “Yard Sale” at the theatre sometime in May where folks can find some great bargains, purchase a Theatre Arts School class, Rush Hour Dance card, or tickets to Perishable programs. “In the meantime,” she adds, “we have trimmed where we can and worked harder to get the word out about the number of programs that run out of our space.”

Next door at AS220, communications director Cheryl Kaminsky weighs in. “While conditions are more or less unfavorable for any business during a nation-wide recession, Providence is seeing an increased municipal involvement in the promotion of arts and culture.” Kaminsky hopes this energy will translate into the wherewithal to help our creative sector thrive, or at least sustain. A large part of AS220’s mission and daily operations is providing artists with low- and no-cost events, education, and affordable live and work spaces. They are confident that the demand for these things only grows during tough times. Kaminsky adds, “AS220 has a highly diversified income base which offers us some protection; so far, our daily operations haven’t undergone any significant changes as a result of the economic downturn. Lately, we see the effects of the recession mostly among individuals; a number of people have reached out to us for advice or in search of career opportunities.”



Black Rep is not throwing in the towel and promises more focused programming

A few blocks away, even the stalwart Trinity Repertory Company is facing some challenges of its own. As the director of external relations, Richard Jaffe, reports, "There's no question, times are tough." Attendance is down slightly from last season, and earned revenue has fallen below expectations. Audiences feeling the pinch are choosing discounted ticket options instead of paying for a full-priced ticket. Foundation and government funding is also down, as those entities are facing their own budgetary issues. Trinity Rep has responded to these shortfalls by making cuts to the administrative side of their budget. "Neither our artistic nor educational programming is being impacted by budget cuts," reports Jaffe. He further confirms, "Trinity Rep continues to be committed to providing local audiences with shows of the highest quality, outstanding educational experiences, and keeping our theater accessible to the community at large."

While most downtown arts organizations don't seem to be in dire straits (yet), a prolonged period of economic pressure could wreak havoc. Lynne McCormack, the director of Providence's Department of Art, Culture, and Tourism, reports that a lot of foundations have lost at least thirty percent of their endowments, "and we're not going to feel the effects of that for another year or two. So this really is the time to come together and make a plan and figure out how we're going to sustain things. Because it's probably going to get rockier before it gets better." McCormack is hopeful that Creative Providence, a wide-ranging cultural plan for the creative sector currently in development, will help matters. From connecting the arts to economic development, to applying artistic vision to civic problems, the plan makes the most of the city's bustling arts scene. As McCormack says, "We have this incredibly rich quality of work. And this community is very small. We're supporting more creative practice than most communities that are four times larger than us. And so it's a little bit out of balance. The Creative

Providence plan is about trying to get it in balance."

Seth Resler, marketing specialist and president of QuickWhatsUp.com, loves the local arts scene. But he believes that old models for corporate sponsorship of the arts need to be re-vamped to fit the times. "The bottom line is that arts institutions which have relied on the traditional non-profit model of corporate handouts can expect to have a hard time when these corporations are suffering. The old argument of 'the arts provide abstract community value' doesn't work when people are jobless, homeless and hungry." By way of alternative arts programming, Resler recently produced the Gong Show at downtown's Tazza Caffe to great success. "Going Going Gong" was a contest for a wide range of up-and-coming performance artists, from dancers to comedians to musicians. "We exposed these artists to a wide range of media outlets, including magazines, TV stations, radio, agencies and more," Resler notes. This was all part of a for-profit venture that drew big crowds for Tazza. As evidenced by the Gong Show, Resler points out, "Arts and commerce can coincide and, in desperate economic times, *must* coincide."

Back at the Black Rep, director of development Kim Hammann also expresses the need for a fresh outlook. She feels that if organizations are going to weather this financial storm, they need to shift the way they think about development and start stepping outside the box of traditional fundraising strategies. "With the economy suffering on all fronts," she concedes, "we simply can't rely solely on a handful of individual donors, grants, or corporate sponsors anymore. We need to engage in collaborative opportunities in every facet of our work and begin to ask ourselves if finding ten people to contribute \$1,000 isn't as effective as finding a thousand people to give \$10." Will thousands of community members step up to the plate in support of the Black Rep, or any of the other arts institutions we collectively cherish?

The stakes are high, and the odds may be stacked against arts organizations. As Lynne McCormack points out, "RI is dead last in philanthropic giving in the country, and dead last for volunteerism in non-profits. So we have a lot of work to do." She encourages people to get involved in any way possible. Lending a hand does not necessarily entail writing out a check; it can be as simple as volunteering your time and skills to an organization that can use them – or just buying a ticket to a show. "Now is the time to really try to give," McCormack adds, "to fill the seats and enjoy what we have here."

It is arts organizations like the Black Rep that McCormack believes to be integral to the fabric of downtown Providence. Mission-driven, community-focused, and with the ability to "push the envelope" artistically, the Black Rep is a cultural institution well-worth preserving. Meanwhile, Don King remains optimistic about the organization's future. He is confident that the Black Rep's board and staff are primed "to figure out how we navigate the organization through these difficult times, so that we can come out focused, directed, and poised when the tide changes." With preparations for their July music festival underway, the Black Rep is busily focusing on one of its strengths. Sound Session, expected to draw an estimated fifty thousand attendees to revel in the streets of downtown Providence, offers a glimpse of the city's capacity to realize its full potential. As residents, there is no better time to lend our support to events like this. Ultimately it is up to us, the beneficiaries of Providence's vibrant arts scene, to nurture it.

For more information and statistics on how the economic crisis is affecting the local arts scene, visit the RI State Council of the Arts' website at www.arts.ri.gov/special/econ-crisis.

For more information about the Providence Black Repertory Company, visit www.blackrep.org.