



Management Case Study 09-28
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NETWORK OF ENSEMBLE THEATERS 2009

Introduction

Small theaters conceptually are fully as complex as large-scale theater organizations, and they face the same array of sophisticated challenges. They often spend all of their resources on art works, and just as often they have little left over for management of finances, human resources, and external relationships. Their artists often have to divert time and talent away from the art works to the minimum necessary level of management work, risking burnout and feelings of dissatisfaction on both fronts. The theaters exist in a continuing state of imbalance between the sophistication of their artistry and the sophistication of their management, limiting the extent to which the artistry can develop further, receive more generous support, and be more widely seen.

This phenomenon is widely recognized across the country. Among other possible solutions, many observers think the concept of a number of theaters sharing management resources holds significant potential advantages, including the ability to devote more dedicated time to management activities, attract more skilled managers, reduce the diversion of artists' time away from artistic work, and expand each organization's capacity to define success, plan for its realization, and put questions of sustainability into proper context.

Despite these clear potential advantages, the concept of shared management resources has not been adopted widely. But Network of Ensemble Theaters National Coordinator Mark Valdez thought the time and circumstances might be right for a group of member theaters located in New Orleans to consider the idea. The continuing focus on rebuilding the city after the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina is a receptive environment for new ideas that promise to bring effective results in the effort to solve very difficult problems.

The leaders of four theaters agreed with Valdez to study the idea: John O'Neal and Terry Scott on behalf of Junebug Productions, Kathy Randels and Sean LaRocca on behalf of ArtSpot Productions, Nick Slie and Bruce France on behalf of Mondo Bizarro, and Andrew Larimer on behalf of The NOLA Project. All of these people knew that cooperation among independent organizations is generally difficult, and that the discussions eventually could raise feelings of potential loss of

Martha Olivo Jurczak prepared this case study under the supervision of Edward A. Martenson, for the use of the Network of Ensemble Theatres and as the basis for class discussion. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this case study are from interviews or correspondence with the Author.

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independence and control. But they thought the potential advantages – and the severity of New Orleans's reconstruction needs – were too important to overlook.

Overview of Participating Companies

The **Network of Ensemble Theaters** (NET) is a national coalition of ensembles created by and for artists. With a national office located in Los Angeles, NET was formed to keep ensemble practice in the forefront of American theater. It links a diverse array of ensembles and practitioners to one another and to the performing arts field. NET encourages collaborations and bold artistic and civic experiments; serves as a resource to funders, unions, and educational institutions; commissions case studies; convenes member meetings; offers professional development opportunities; and builds organizational and artistic capacity among ensemble theaters. In addition to administering NET, Mark Valdez is an accomplished stage director.

Over its nearly 30-year history, **Junebug Productions** has created and premiered original works in its home city of New Orleans as well as in local communities throughout the country. Its working method is the story circle, honed by Artistic Director John O'Neal and his longtime friend Dudley Cocke, artistic director of Roadside Theater in Kentucky. The story circle is a gathering of community members facilitated by an artist who encourages each member of the group to tell a personal story. Through this process the members of the group come to understand one another, and in many cases the collected stories are brought together into a theater piece. While creating and touring these pieces, Junebug also runs the Color Line Project, an ongoing effort to collect stories about the impact of the Civil Rights Movement. O'Neal is founder, writer, performer, and community activist, and runs Junebug in partnership with Managing Director Terry Scott and Program and Community Engagement Director Kiyoko McCrae. All three work full-time out of an office in the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans's Warehouse Arts District. A fourth core member of the company, Theresa Holden, has collaborated with O'Neal for more than 20 years and works out of Austin, Texas.

ArtSpot Productions, a 14-year-old company currently based in the Lakeview neighborhood of New Orleans, is also founder-led. Director and performer Kathy Randels and her husband Sean LaRocca, a composer and musician, run their company out of offices on the third floor of a Baptist church in an area that still bears the devastating marks of Hurricane Katrina. The ensemble has five members who fill all roles within the company, with LaRocca leading the way on administrative matters and Randels as Artistic Director. ArtSpot creates original works at the rate of about one per year, including site-specific works and solo works by Randels, and performs the works mainly in New Orleans. In the early days of the company touring was a top priority, but while touring remains desired it is less frequent today. Randels, a 2003 Obie Award-winner, was recently named one of New Orleans Top 10 Female Achievers by *New Orleans Magazine*. She is also the recipient of a recent Career Development Grant for Directors from the national service organization Theatre Communications Group (TCG). In addition to co-writing, directing, and performing in many of ArtSpot's productions, Randels teaches in the company's public school-based education program and leads the LCIW Drama Club, a performing arts program based in the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. The company pays salaries to three of its five members, including Randels and LaRocca, who work at ArtSpot full-time.

Mondo Bizarro was founded in 2003 by Nick Slie, Bruce France, and a third partner who has since left the company for a career in film. Slie and France share the role of artistic director, Slie handles the management duties, and three other ensemble members take part in both the artistic and administrative activities of the company. Mondo Bizarro creates new works, which are sometimes site-specific, at the rate of about one per year, often in collaboration with other companies such as

ArtSpot Productions and the Mississippi ensemble M.U.G.A.B.E.E. One such collaborative endeavor is the annual State of the Nation Festival, an art and performance event that is held alternately in New Orleans and Jackson, Mississippi. In addition to its theater work, Mondo Bizarro has created the video story projects I-10 Witness, I-Witness Central City, and I-Witness Seventh Ward, which feature members of local neighborhoods recounting personal stories at the site on which they took place. The videos are posted to a website and the audio can be heard over the phone by entering a code posted on the street at the story's setting. Both Slie and France maintain part-time jobs outside of the company, Slie as a teacher of performance studies at a local community college and France as a freelance videographer. The company pays artists on a fee basis and receives funds from the AmeriCorps VISTA program to compensate one ensemble member for part-time work.

The NOLA Project was formed in 2005 by Andrew Larimer and a small group of his fellow recent New York University graduates. There has been some turnover within the company as founding members have left for graduate school or careers in other fields, and new artists have joined the mix. The company performs new as well as classic plays at many venues around New Orleans, including at the Southern Repertory Theater, the Tulane University Shakespeare Festival, and Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré. The company rehearses each production for three to four weeks and pays its artistic collaborators on a fee basis. For the company's first few years, Larimer managed all aspects of the company, working out of his home. He makes his living through a combination of teaching, graphic design, and carpentry work. Lately the burden of administering the company has been split among Larimer and two other ensemble members.

Conditions and Needs

Junebug Productions: Conditions & Needs

Recently, the 30-year-old company created the Free Southern Theater Institute, a training program designed to "develop and support artists, organizers, educators, and managers who wish to create theater that serves the needs and interests of African Americans in the Black Belt South who are working to improve the quality of life for themselves and others similarly oppressed and exploited the world over." In collaboration with Tulane, Xavier, and Dillard Universities, the Institute's classes are offered to undergraduate students for credit as well as to community members. The Institute's name is a tribute to Junebug's predecessor, the Free Southern Theater, founded in 1965 by O'Neal and two partners as the artistic arm of the Civil Rights Movement. O'Neal says the community was at the center of the Free Southern Theater's work. "The community program was the key program because if we were going to have a Southern theater, as we wished to, the Southern people needed to be the anchor and [it needed to] be rooted in their culture, and the people who had the culture needed to be in the theater so we could come up with a way to work." The story circle answered this need. O'Neal describes it as the "key instrument that we use. We use it to develop material for plays, we use it to develop educational programs and to conduct educational programs. It emerged from our experience with community organizing." O'Neal says the appeal of the story circle is in getting people to listen to each other without argument. "When you tell stories, people relax and they engage and have an empathetic response."

In 1980, when O'Neal felt that the Civil Rights Movement had achieved its aim of desegregation, he dissolved the Free Southern Theater and created Junebug in its stead to carry on its tradition of blending art and community organizing. Junebug takes its name from the character Junebug Jabbo Jones who was at the center of a series of solo works O'Neal created in the late days of the Free Southern Theater. O'Neal says he now thinks using the Junebug name for the new company was unwise, as it has led to "confusion about the distinction between Junebug Productions and Junebug

Jabbo Jones and John O'Neal. That confusion bedevils us today and it's a problem because it draws the fire away from the place where it needs to go." O'Neal says he has always believed in the value of ensemble work and in the importance of giving "the on and off switch" only to the "audience you wish to serve." He says his organization has tried not to become reliant on foundation support because, though he says foundations would be irresponsible if they didn't have their own agendas, those agendas, in his experience, "simply don't include oppressed and exploited people as a priority." As O'Neal prepares to retire in 2010, he has been working with Kiyoko McCrae, program and community engagement director, to document his artistic methodology in order to build a curriculum for the Free Southern Theater Institute (FSTI). McCrae says she sees FSTI as "a way to build the organization" and to "build future leadership" and O'Neal describes "a new artistic direction, a new management direction" that will help the organization through its coming leadership transition. Junebug has received nearly \$300,000 from the Ford and Nathan Cummings Foundations to create a plan for FSTI and O'Neal says the project is in "the pre-development phase right now" and that he and his colleagues are "trying to craft a curricular approach, trying to craft a methodological approach based on the story circle." McCrae has already taught what O'Neal describes as the "introductory or survey course" of the Institute twice, but she nevertheless says progress in their collaborative effort to document O'Neal's considerable knowledge is slow. McCrae says much of this information currently lives only within O'Neal's head and she worries that he will move on to the next phase of his life and career without finishing the documentation process. Curriculum development, she says, needs to be driven by O'Neal and Theresa Holden since they have developed Junebug's methodologies for the creation of artistic work and community engagement. Terry Scott, managing director, is confident the process will be completed, describing it as in its final stages. He adds that he is working to develop Junebug's board, "bringing on board members [who are] going to identify what their expertise is in helping us do this."

Scott describes the Institute as a project with three components, "one is educational, one is artistic creation, the other is community organizing." He has a broad vision for its potential, describing "a social enterprise" that would encompass "a coffee shop with a green market and urban farming, a green building, places for rehearsal." He says a key challenge of the project is to make it generate income while "reinventing theater, Black community, and still making it fun and not being didactic. We want to make sure we achieve artistic excellence in what we do in our productions, [while] at the same time being meaningful to our communities, the physical community as well as the metaphor of a Black community." He says that Junebug's audiences both within New Orleans and on tour have been predominantly white and that "one of our challenges is to really focus on Black New Orleans, to use theater to reflect their needs and concerns and hopes and desires."

What the future holds for Junebug as it currently exists is not entirely clear. No artistic successor to O'Neal has been named. McCrae says, though, that there is no question that all involved in Junebug would like to see their work continue in some form. She says that in its current structure Junebug "suffers from not having clear decision-making processes, clear responsibilities," a problem she says is common to small organizations, and that the "lack of clarity around" these issues can be a challenge to fulfilling her role as "facilitator." She attributes high staff turnover over the past several years to the current slow pace of production. "It takes a very particular person to see the potential of Junebug, to see the history of the work and be motivated by that vision, [when they're] not necessarily coming into Junebug when we're the most productive. So I think people [leave] without seeing the immediate benefits of working with Junebug because we're not as active. We're doing a lot of ground work right now that's going to pay off in the future so you're not seeing the work like it was in its heyday," a period in the early '90s when, McCrae says, Junebug had a staff five times its current size. McCrae explains that when she came on two-and-a-half years ago, her position was half-time and she worked with a Director of Administration whose position was also half-time and who remained with Junebug for only a year. Now, McCrae and Terry Scott both hold full-time positions and she says, "We're slowly moving, trying to rebuild the organization." Still, she says, "the

organization is not at a point where we can work at our potential because we are constantly catching up and putting out fires. We need to think long-term.”

One of the keys to realizing Junebug’s potential, McCrae says, is to “acquire a building or partner with an organization that owns a building so that we have somewhere that we can clearly identify as our space.” O’Neal says Junebug occasionally performs in the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) where the company members share an office, but that the CAC is “not a part of the community that we’re a part of, that we aim to serve.” McCrae says “if we’re really serious about doing more community work, about building this Institute, we have to have a home somewhere. We have to have a personal space.” Junebug has commissioned a study to determine the feasibility of launching a capital campaign and, O’Neal says, “we’re trying to build an endowment and then turn over the task of envisioning, and operating the organization [in a way that will allow it] to accomplish its goals, to new people who are younger and more a product of the current historical circumstance than the previous ones.”

O’Neal says in Scott he has found the unique manager he was seeking and that he thinks “we made the right decision to build a strong management resource inside the organization.” With the arrival of Scott, O’Neal’s focus has shifted. “Our deepest crisis right now exists with a twin center. One, what is the program of the future? Second, what is the leadership design, how do we govern an organization devoted to that program?”

ArtSpot Productions: Conditions & Needs

After 14 years of stretching their energies thin to cover management functions as well as making work, the ArtSpot Productions’ leadership team is in a period of reflection, working to renew enthusiasm and identify top priorities.

Artistic Director Randels favors new work, much of it devised and employing a very physical vocabulary. She prefers to focus on one project at a time and ideally would have 12 to 18 months to develop each piece, but has found this schedule is not conducive to maintaining the interest of an audience. From 2004-2006, the company was in residence at the New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center in the city’s Warehouse District. Sean LaRocca, an ensemble-member and the group’s Business Manager, said the company produced two new works a year during the residency, establishing a real presence in the minds of New Orleans’s arts patrons, but now that the company has returned to site-specific works built on longer timelines, their presence has faded somewhat. Lately, too, the company has focused many of its resources on presenting the work of other companies through the State of the Nation Festival, an annual event sponsored in part by the service organization Alternate R.O.O.T.S., that ArtSpot co-presents with Mondo Bizarro and the Jackson, Mississippi-based company M.U.G.A.B.E.E. Though Randels appreciates the success of State of the Nation, presenting the work of others is not something upon which she’d like to focus. “What is very clear to me is that I don’t want to be a presenter of other people’s work; I mean, every now and again we’ll present, but I don’t want to put energy and focus into presenting other people’s work. I want to put much more energy into creating our work, and I feel like some of our trouble this year has come from trying to present other people’s work rather than doing, trusting, making our work.”

Randels devises, directs, and performs in the productions—most recently *Loup Garou*, featuring Nick Slie of Mondo Bizarro. She also teaches at a local high school, though as of mid-2009 the ArtSpot education program had not yet been funded for the upcoming school year and its future was in question. She also runs a drama program at a Louisiana women’s prison, which she founded 13 years ago, but due to a heavy travel schedule related to her TCG Career Development Grant she was

forced to miss the class required for prison volunteers to renew their credentials and therefore to give up her prison work for a time.

Randels grew up in New Orleans—her father used to be the pastor of the church that houses ArtSpot's offices—but in 2008 she and LaRocca discussed moving out of the city due to feeling “unhappy and weighted down by our organization and feeling like everything was not going well.” With the TCG grant, Randels was able to spend time working elsewhere in early 2009 and says “I kind of got my soul cleaned, and I feel a little better about our organization now, so I think I needed to step out of the situation for a moment and come back with a little bit of freshness.” She and LaRocca say they now intend to stay in New Orleans, but they remain frustrated with what Randels describes as the feeling “like we're not doing the work that we're supposed to be doing because we're spending so much time doing administration and not enough time doing the creative work. I feel like we're not being effective enough in our administration and we're stretched so thin between trying to create professional work, trying to run an education program, and trying to administer the organization, that we're just spinning our wheels...”

LaRocca performs as a musician in ArtSpot's productions, but most of his efforts are currently restricted to the administrative realm and he needs help. “We just have too much day-to-day stuff that we're not getting done. But the problem is finding the time in our day to teach and train [an intern] how to do the day-to-day stuff,” he says. Randels explains that they've had an intern for the past two years, but that the relationship is coming to an end.

ArtSpot's five ensemble members make company decisions by consensus. Each member was given a title at the group's retreat last summer in an effort to clarify responsibilities within the ensemble, but Randels admits that clarifying the roles is still a work in progress. LaRocca is the Business Manager, at the mention of which he groans and rolls his eyes; he says he would prefer to spend his time composing music. Randels agrees, saying that LaRocca is “wearing a few too many administrative hats right now, and not enough creative hats.” The ensemble also includes Ashley Sparks, director of special projects; Lisa Shattuck, director of youth programs; and Shattuck's husband, Jeff Becker, production designer. LaRocca and Randels formalized ensemble membership in hopes of delegating some of the administrative duties, which have grown with the company's expansion from two members to five. As LaRocca explains, this strategy did not increase the company's efficiency as they had hoped:

“Kathy and I did all the administrative work for all those years, [but then]we had a baby, and now we have a house, and we realized we needed to push some of that stuff off our desks; but it's kind of turned out to be the opposite. I mean in addition to the burden that we've put on our artistic and educational programming, the fact is we don't excel at that right now because we're so busy doing administration work. We're also not doing any better at our administration than we were before and probably not as well. [For example], we targeted a few funders that we never approached before, and we just couldn't get [it] together to get the applications done. I'm still behind on the accounting compared to where I would have been a year ago, and our website is out of date, so it's been a struggle.”

Ashley Sparks, who has been involved with ArtSpot for four years, has taken on many administrative tasks, including scheduling, community partnership-building, developing the company's education program curriculum, and generating reports for foundations on the company's use of their funds. She says that as an ensemble company, the members of ArtSpot are committed to remaining involved in its administration, but that she'd like the situation to “evolve to the point where we didn't have to do a lot of the administrative work, or if we were doing a much smaller proportion of it, that would be really exciting. If we could get to a place financially within the ensemble to be able to

support one full-time administrative person that would then allow us to do much more part-time administrative duties as opposed to [spending] ¾ [of our time] on it right now which is kind of how it divides out between Kathy, Sean, and I, primarily—Lisa and Jeff have done admin, but very little. So that would be the dream—we would all be doing less admin work.”

Recently, ArtSpot created salaries for Randels, LaRocca, and Sparks of \$18,000 a year. One of the company's goals is to generate enough income to also create equal salaries for Lisa Shattuck and Jeff Becker.

Randels, LaRocca, and Sparks acknowledge a need for administrative support, citing their inability to appeal to all available funding sources, the absence of an up-to-date system for tracking ticket purchases and recording and acknowledging donations. There are many tasks LaRocca would like to delegate. “There's lots of mailing list type stuff, donor management, things like that. There're a lot of things like minutes, procedural manuals, anything that needs collation, filing could be helpful.” In addition, LaRocca says, “there's a lot of stuff—like having personnel on salary and bringing volunteers in and bringing the public in and accessibility and all that kind of stuff—there's a lot of stuff out there that none of us has [the time] to learn. That requires people with much more experience, I would say, or much more time, one or the other.”

ArtSpot, like all of the other participating New Orleans companies, keeps ticket prices low so as not to exclude any potential audience members. Fundraising is an area in which ArtSpot has the potential for significant progress and the group could benefit from the skills of a development professional. Randels says she would like to work with someone with a great knowledge of the field and lots of innovative ideas. LaRocca suggests that tremendous experience may not be necessary.

“Someone who's a little experienced would be great, but I think as long as they have their time to concentrate on it, I think they can easily get up to the point where we are. We have ten years of experience at it, but we basically have just been doing the same thing every year. I don't think it would take us that long to get someone up to speed in terms of doing grant fundraising especially considering that largely in the beginning they would just be doing the leg work part of it; you know, we'd probably be writing most of it and proofreading all of it and I'd be doing the budgets and as long as they were on the schedule of it and making sure that everybody knew when it was due and that they were working on the parts they needed to be working on and that person was sort of getting the paperwork together... I don't know that it needs to be somebody who's really professional or experienced.”

ArtSpot created a strategic plan in 2007, among the goals of which was to “establish a home.” Randels spoke of her desire to see ArtSpot acquire a space of its own. “I'm very clear that we need a space that we can do all of our work in. We need a rehearsal space and our designer needs a space in which to build our work and we need that space to also be where we can do work-in-progress showings, host mild fundraiser parties that we can manage, and we need a space where we can give workshops.” Many of the company's productions are site-specific so a traditional theater space for public performances of finished shows is not a priority. LaRocca concurs, saying “Because we only generate one piece a year at most usually, we need to figure out a way to create a more visible presence for ourselves when we're not performing, and a location could really help.”

ArtSpot is one of a group of arts organizations assembled by the service organization National Performance Network (NPN) with the goal of securing a building to share. According to MK Wegman, president and chief executive officer of NPN, the multi-tenant building would house offices for NPN and four or five arts organizations, as well as construction space and a rehearsal space that would double as a studio for work-in-progress showings. Wegman anticipates the tenants

“would share back office functions—a receptionist, copy machines, postage meters, internet service,” etc. Wegman says a building has been identified and she hopes the project will be realized in the next year, but that fundraising has proven difficult.

Touring was once a key element of ArtSpot’s activities, but lately it has become more difficult to do. Randels explains, “We’ll put all of our financial energy and blood and sweat resources into the first production, but once it’s up, once we have the piece, we try to tour it to other places, and we don’t. We’re not very active or effective with that, and I think it’s a bit of a catch-22 thing. The most that any of our work toured was in the early years when I was doing solo work, and I had my costume and my props in a bucket and that was it. The larger we get in terms of objects and casts, we don’t tour nearly as much now.” Ashley Sparks says that part of the problem is that no one has the time to devote to bookings. “To tour you have to have somebody who is heavily focused on always being on the hustle in terms of getting your work out there to presenters. We’re stretched too thin to be able to do that in a really proactive way.” Next spring the group will take *Flight*, its recent co-production with Mondo Bizarro, on the road. Ashley Sparks says the ensemble’s process for booking tours is currently “really inefficient.” She says, “right now we have one gig booked for this massive show [*Flight*] that we’ll spend several months on and off in rehearsal to ream out only to take out once. There’s not really one person who’s leading the charge on that, that’s really following up and following through.”

ArtSpot has turned its attention toward securing a work space in New Orleans, which Randels says is essential to her immediate goals for the company. “Some of our mentors have international theater training schools, and I would like to have an international school when we get our space. We have networks outside of the country, so that’s within the realm of possibility. That’s where I’m leaning my energy as I get older. If our work is going to be so hard to tour, once we have a space, we can show the work as often as we want to. And so I’ve become interested in this idea of bringing people here, bring the audience here.”

Randels acknowledges that ArtSpot is currently closely identified in the community with her own performance work, but she says she’d like the organization to have a life beyond her involvement. “I would like to see the art and social justice ideas in practice and programs continue.” Confessing that she and LaRocca are exhausted from the stress of trying to run the business of their art as well as create the art itself, Randels says, “I’m open to any and all help that we can get at this point.” Sparks concurs, saying, “We haven’t really been forward-thinking because we’re constantly in survival mode, just trying to get the day to day done.” Randels adds, “if we can alleviate some of this pressure, [we can] all become more effective.”

Mondo Bizarro: Conditions & Needs

College classmates Nick Slie and Bruce France founded Mondo Bizarro six years ago after completing graduate degrees in performance studies. The company has four members who create new works of theater and produce a series of film projects in collaboration with a shifting ensemble drawn from a core of about 18 frequent collaborators.

ArtSpot Productions is among the company’s closest collaborators. Slie says “we’re really very close. We produce very similar things.” France adds, “We have different sets of books, but we joined to do *Flight*, we joined to do [the] State of the Nation [Festival], we joined to keep this office going. So we’re very intimately involved, but there’s no responsibility throughout the year except when it comes to a project that we have with each other.”

The company makes its offices in a cluster of classrooms that it shares with ArtSpot Productions on the third floor of a building owned and occupied by a Baptist church in the Lakeview neighborhood of New Orleans. The neighborhood was inundated with nine feet of water during the flooding from Hurricane Katrina, and the storm's destructive power is still evident within the building and throughout the neighborhood.

Nick Slie is polished, energetic, and intense. He speaks confidently about his plans for the future of Mondo Bizarro as well as of his involvement with national performing arts support organizations, including the Network of Ensemble Theaters and Alternate R.O.O.T.S. Bruce France, his partner, is reserved, warm, youthful, and enthusiastic.

Slie says he prefers to create work over a period of one to two years, premiering the works in New Orleans before touring them regionally and, in some cases, nationally, and internationally. "I don't want to make work quick. Making work over six-week periods of time, that's not good for me." Currently, the company is in the midst of a two-year collaboration with the Jackson, Mississippi-based ensemble M.U.G.A.B.E.E. on *Race Peace*, a performance project exploring race and racism in America. France is deeply involved in *Race Peace* as writer, planner, and performer, but, he says, he has reservations about the company's overall creative pace. "One thing that's been kind of tough for me is the way that we make work. It's probably because we're an ensemble, it's probably because we write grants for our work, we're making like one big production maybe a year. When I was in school, in each class you'd be making three performances, nine performances a semester, just constantly making work. And because of the way our organization works, because of the way life works, because of a lot of other circumstances, it's now slowed down [so that] we do a big production [and] we take six months, a year, year-and-a-half to develop them, but you know, I guess I sort of wanted an outlet, a means, to do smaller works more regularly."

Slie described each Mondo Bizarro project as a mini-organization, with the project mastermind serving as project manager, overseeing the show budget, gathering information for grant reports, and soliciting individual donations. The company does very limited individual fundraising, often targeting a very small group of individuals. Slie explains, "We figure out what it would cost to put on a night of this work, and we ask individuals to support one evening of performance. So we [say 'we] want you to support this work at \$330, period.'" ArtSpot Productions acts as Mondo Bizarro's fiscal agent (except in the case of a few individual projects that fall under arrangements with other organizations). Of their efforts at individual donor cultivation, Slie says, "We could write people more letters and say your dollars went right here, here, and here, and there's some follow-up stuff that we could do better." Asked if he does research on potential new donors from among his audience members or donors to other local companies, Slie says, "We just don't have the capacity."

Mondo Bizarro does not have salaried employees; artists are paid on a fee basis and the core company members hold down second jobs. Slie teaches at a local community college part-time and, he says, "I'll pay myself through contract work with other people, with touring work, with teaching work, teaching workshops through a grant, and I'll piecemeal together a salary. I don't know an artist in New Orleans that's strictly doing their own thing, that doesn't teach, that doesn't do one other thing." France runs a videography business and is currently negotiating with the Baptist church that houses Mondo Bizarro's offices for the position of building manager. The church would like to see the building, much of which is currently empty, filled with practicing artists. France says, "they want to have music events, they want to have visual art openings, they want to have theater; they're down for all of it."

Over the past year, Mondo Bizarro has been able to compensate one of its regular collaborators with a small stipend (\$12,000) paid by the VISTA program, an AmeriCorps project administered locally by Tulane University. A second collaborator was set to benefit from the AmeriCorps funding when the

current grantee's funding expired this summer. Slie anticipated the next AmeriCorps participant, Melissa Cardona, who has worked on many projects for the company, will turn her focus almost entirely to administration over the next year. He hopes this will help alleviate what he calls the "shortcoming" that results "when you have the artists who are the administrators because you lose in both areas. We lose on the administrative side and we lose on the creative side when I'm thinking about the press releases *and* that problem in the show."

Of his plans for the future, Slie says, "I'm just in the process now where I can see a little bit. I mean, I just want to get this *where it needs to be*." He says he doesn't want the company to become a non-profit organization, but would be happy to see it housed by a non-profit that could solicit funds on its behalf. He is skeptical of becoming entirely dependent on contributed income. "What it looks like to me is that by the time we're ten years old, we're an organization that has the fiscal ability to produce and commission new work at a level a little bit higher than we're doing it now. There're a few income streams that stabilize us on the earned side that come from different places like teaching, touring our work, through the development process somehow—like maybe as a resident company somewhere. We continue to do different types of video documentation work and we continue to limit the amount of contributed income we accept so we stay away from becoming an organization that is strictly about contributed income." France says, "We've never taken a lot of time to do a lot of reflection as to where we've been and where are we going. It's just always move, move, move, move, move. And, that's great because we continue to do great things that we're very happy to be involved with, but we don't do a lot of reflection."

The NOLA Project: Conditions & Needs

Andrew Larimer, artistic director of the NOLA Project, grew up in New Orleans. In 2005, while an acting student at NYU, he recruited a small group of classmates to join him in his hometown for the summer to produce a play. The run of the show was cut short by Hurricane Katrina, but its pre-storm success prompted the team to return the following summer, and a subset of the original group made New Orleans their home after graduation.

Larimer sums up the group's aesthetic as "good plays. We want to do either original [plays] or stuff that hasn't been done here before," he explains, "but I think we've also got a strong interest in classical theater. As a group, we've done a little bit of devised stuff, but I think we're not really that interested in that; I think we're more interested in having a solid script and working from that. Stuff that's socially conscious [appeals to us], not political theater in terms of beating people over the head, but exploring. Something we always ask is 'what is the relevance of this to New Orleans right now?'"

Now four years old, the NOLA Project disbanded for the 2009 spring and summer with plans to return to production in the fall. "Right now we're kind of in this period of trying to figure out where to go from here, because we did a whole lot of stuff last year and that kind of left us exhausted," Larimer says. Recently, the group's interests have broadened beyond live theater, as Larimer explains. "Where we're headed is maybe a split focus of video stuff and then theater." Larimer and his collaborators are creating a web series based on the play *Taste* by ensemble-member Gabrielle Reisman, which the group performed last year.

The group's artistic process is somewhat informal. "We meet and assemble a big list of plays and [determine] what people like and think we should pursue," Larimer says. "We make a smaller list and more people read them, then we discuss it and come to a consensus about what show [to do], and then we figure out from there who we think should direct it. And now what we're starting to do is divide our production units more, like a director and production manager are going to be in charge

of spearheading the production of that individual show and then go from there, and then those two people head it up with the venues, get the designers and cast and staff.”

The NOLA Project has performed their work all over the city, “from out on the beach on the lake to the New Orleans Museum of Art,” and co-produced shows with Southern Rep, a local professional company, and the Tulane Shakespeare Festival. In 2008, the group was in residence at Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré, a presenting house in the city’s French Quarter. “That was a really bad situation,” Larimer says. “They are this professional theater that was really trying to use us like this money-making thing, you know, trying to get us to crank out money for them on the small stage. They wanted us to charge \$20 [for] tickets for everything, and that’s just too much for our audience.” Larimer, quoted in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, originally viewed the residency as a move in the right direction. “This is a big step for us. We now have somewhere to make things happen. Audiences can identify us with a place and find us now. We have a home in which to focus on the creation of new works and explore existing theater pieces we believe in” (March 15, 2008). The residency led to abundant press coverage of the NOLA Project’s work, much of it positive. David Cuthbert, theater critic for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, described the cast of one show as “eight of the most talented young actors in New Orleans” (*Times-Picayune*, December 18, 2008). But the tensions in the group’s relationship with its host institution were not lost on Cuthbert and in an article announcing the final show of the NOLA Project’s Le Petit residency, he wrote of one “disagreement [that] escalated to verbal levels that could be heard through theater walls...” Still, Larimer has managed to forge relationships with many of the major institutions in town. “We did a show at the Marigny Theatre, which is attached to this bar called Always Lounge. We’ve done stuff at NOCCA as well, which is the arts high school; we’ve done several things there. We’re doing a co-production with [Southern Rep] in the spring,” Larimer says. “We’ve been pretty fortunate because we’ve entered into a lot of partnerships with these other organizations and established venues.”

Larimer says a large part of the reason he and his artistic partners have backed off of their work despite their considerable early success is that they are a bit burned out. He explains that as “we were doing one show after the other I was feeling increasingly like administrator and cut out from the creative process of it.” He explains:

“We don’t have somebody that’s willing to do [administration], that kind of thing. For us the big issue now is who is going to take that on. For a long time I was doing all the business management as well as the actual producing day-to-day of the show and the creative side of making shows and that’s been a very draining thing. Nobody else in the group really wants to take [the administrative work] on either, so there’re people who want to do shows and want to do lots of projects, but nobody that really wants to be in the end responsible for everything, administratively. We don’t have the funds to pay ourselves or anything like that. But, even if we did have the funds, I don’t know. I don’t know who we would really... Like a lot of the other stuff just kind of materializes, you know, the good actors, the good designers. I don’t even know how to find those [administrative] people.”

Engaging every member of the ensemble in the artistic process is important to Larimer and he says of any potential administrative partners, “no matter who would be running the [administration of the] company, we don’t want to have a structure that really excludes that person from the process, from the actual art of it.”

The NOLA Project’s current marketing efforts are sporadic. “We’ve been active in the Facebook world and Twitter world,” Larimer says. “We’re starting to really get into club promotion type stuff. We do send out emails, although we haven’t been as good recently about actually putting out that ‘sign up your email’ thing, which is just a huge terrible oversight on our part, with all the chaos of

getting the show ready to go. We really need to be getting that email book out, we need to be doing that." Southern Rep acts as the NOLA Project's fiscal agent, but lately the group hasn't been actively seeking funding, as Larimer explains. "We did a fund drive the previous year, but we didn't this past year because we weren't sure if we were still going to exist. Right now we're not doing anything in terms of applying for grants or fund drives or anything like that because nobody wants to do it, but I think we all acknowledge how beneficial that would be." Despite this lapse in fundraising, Larimer says, "Usually [the shows] come pretty close [to paying for themselves], so they usually kind of fall just short, and we've made up for that historically through donations. We still occasionally get a donation even though we haven't sent out a big ask for it in a while." For co-productions, "we do a profit sharing thing, so with Southern Rep if we put up 20% then we'll get 20% of the box office and they get the rest. And then often we'll do a lot of labor and stuff, we'll help build sets, [etc.]."

Like ArtSpot and Mondo Bizarro, Larimer says the NOLA Project likes to keep ticket prices low. "Ten dollars is probably what we're settling on, like [our show] *Assassins* I think was \$25 [per ticket], but it sold out a lot. So every now and then we'll do that kind of thing that makes a lot [of money]. We've done other stuff like *Get This Lake Off My House*, which was the show we did out on the beach. That was free with donations. But I think we're going to be settling on about \$10 a ticket."

No one draws a salary from the NOLA Project, but the group pays its artists on a fee basis. Designers make \$200 per show and the actors make \$50 per week of performance. The group usually rehearses a piece for three to four weeks. On average, the company works with a budget of \$800 to \$1,000 for a set and \$500 for costumes; a typical show costs \$6,000 to \$8,000.

Inventory of Needs

The most pressing imperative in designing a shared management arrangement is to do so in a way that maintains the creative independence and distinct public identities of the four theaters. For this reason, it would be unwise to expect a shared management resource to be part of the decision-making leadership of any of the theaters. (As John O'Neal has said, "Management is not a coincidental part of an organization; it is a part of the artistic process. We needed to move toward a management that was as unique as we're trying to be, what we're trying to do.") Some of the theaters need reinforcement at the leadership level, but each organization should address that need on its own.

Consequently, the needs that might be addressed usefully by a shared management arrangement are those that are technical, logistical, or process-oriented in nature. (As Sean LaRocca said "If we're talking about someone who's an office manager who keeps us on our calendars and says, [for example], 'you need to have your time sheet in by 3' or 'I need you to write X, Y, and Z for me so I can submit this grant,' I think that's great. If it's somebody who wants to say 'we can't do that program this year because the budgets aren't looking good,' that doesn't work.")

While the four theaters' needs are not identical, all of them could raise their standard of organizational performance and free up the time of their artists for creative work—and thus do justice to their considerable artistic accomplishments—if they had access to the following types of management support.

Facilitation of strategic planning would provide the opportunity for each organization to dream, to be clearer about its future direction, including identification of mission, strategy, and resource

allocations. A clearer definition of success would focus activities and open the way to enhanced resources, while ensuring that an organization puts the costs of sustainability in proper perspective.

Accounting and financial management services would provide better information for decision-making and accountability to external stakeholders, improve budgeting and multi-year planning, and clarify the costs of various activities. This would streamline the processes of grant preparation and reporting.

Employment and other human resources services would ensure compliance with statutory requirements, help to bring the companies into line with best employment practices, and open the way to providing health insurance and other benefits appropriate to maturing organizations.

Data gathering and record maintenance services would ensure availability of key operating data for decision-making and reporting to internal and external stakeholders, as well as quick and flexible access to patron lists for marketing and development. Organizations could use this data to get to know their audiences better, making marketing and development efforts run more smoothly and efficiently.

Marketing and communications services would permit the production of and distribution of quality materials on deadline and at affordable cost, which could lead to the companies' work being seen by more people.

Fundraising services would provide support in collateral materials and proposal writing for institutional funding sources (and other sources as desired).

Tour representation services would ensure the companies attract the notice of booking scouts, and provide support in booking engagements, advance work, and on-the-road management.

Plant and equipment development and management would provide auspices for developing and operating jointly-used facilities and equipment (including IT), if desired.

A shared-management arrangement could be phased in with two or three of these to begin, but it should have the potential to offer most or all of them.

General Note on Alliances

Generally speaking, collaborations such as the ones under discussion are thought about as cooperative alliances among competitors.

Why do competitors choose to cooperate? Among other reasons, they believe that active coordination will ensure that they maintain complementary niches rather than offering the same services to the same people, reduce the costs (or risks) involved in activities they consider necessary, make more productive use of assets if they are shared, and improve performance through shared knowledge and information. They also believe that alliances enhance the reputations of their participants, including among their potential investors.

Despite these widely-recognized potential benefits of alliances, evidence suggests that a majority of alliances are not regarded as a success by the parties. More specifically, of all potential alliances that

seem sufficiently promising to the participating parties to prompt negotiations of the terms of a partnership, only a small percentage actually result in an agreement. Of the agreements that are entered, only a minority are viewed as a success by all of the parties involved. Clearly, the parties to alliances encounter difficulties in implementing their partnerships that they did not anticipate and for which they are therefore unprepared.

During ArtSpot's strategic planning process it discussed the possibility of merging with Mondo Bizarro. Sean LaRocca says he saw many advantages in the possibility. "I feel like Mondo's a really great fit for us in a lot of ways. We have some complementary skills that would really help each other, and I don't think the current situation is as advantageous to us." The two companies ultimately decided to remain separate, and LaRocca says, "In my mind, I don't know that we came to the right solution."

What are the common pitfalls in implementing alliances successfully? The first is that alliances do not succeed on their own, through good intentions. They are complex and difficult, and the occurrence of unanticipated problems is predictable. Commitment is critical, not only on the part of the organizations but among the key individuals whose participation in the governance structure is necessary. If they are not fully – and publicly – committed, such that their reputations are put on the line, the alliance automatically will be at risk. The second common pitfall is a lack of goal specificity in the alliance. Unless all participants know and agree in advance what benefits are sought and how to measure whether they've been created, the alliance automatically will be at risk. The third common pitfall is a power disparity among the participants. In the end, more powerful participants will seek to gain greater influence than the formal agreement provides. The automatic result is friction and greater risk of failure in the alliance. Other generic threats to success in implementing alliances are inexperience (though skills can be learned with practice), cultural differences, and personnel turnover (leading to the dilution of the initial clarity of purpose).

Experience suggests that the best ways to guard against these pitfalls are careful up-front attention to contractual provisions, high degrees of trust among the participants, a "spirit of goodwill" that keeps the greater good in sight, organizational and personal reputational guarantees that the parties will act in good faith to resolve unanticipated contingencies, and the presence of participants with experience in alliances. The four New Orleans companies are well-prepared to enter into negotiations based on their extensive experience with collaborative artistic endeavors, their deep affinity with one another, and their willingness to speak candidly about their needs and expectations, as evidenced by their generosity in contributing to this report.

Three Alternative Forms of Shared Management for the New Orleans Theaters

To prevent this study from being purely speculative, precedents for shared management arrangements were sought elsewhere in the field. They suggest three alternative forms of collaboration for the New Orleans theaters to consider. Regardless of which alternative form is selected as the basic direction, a significant number of important details would remain to be patiently negotiated in a second phase of exploration.

The basic alternatives are:

- A theater consortium, in which the theaters remain independent as creative producing units, but join together to create an umbrella entity that provides economies of scale and coordination of activities.
- Employee-sharing, an arrangement in which the theaters hire one or more employees in common to lighten administrative loads and provide additional services.
- An independent service organization devoted to the management needs of its several theater 'clients,' which remain separate as entities and in their management activities.

Theater Consortium

In this form of shared management, the theaters would create a formal consortium that would employ an administrative staff overseen by a single board of directors assembled from the several existing boards of trustees and the professional leadership of each company. The companies would retain their distinct artistic identities; production schedules would not be melded but could be coordinated for greatest benefit. The consortium itself could be as visible or as behind-the-scenes as deemed appropriate; the advisability of a separate identity for the umbrella would depend primarily on fundraising and public relations realities on the ground. Accounts and budgets could be kept separately within an overall reporting structure, and donor and customer lists could be maintained separately or used in common as case by case circumstances determined. Similarly, fundraising solicitations could be separate or in common depending on the attitude or policy of the individual donors. The consortium could expand to accommodate additional organizations as its members and trustees saw fit.

The Marketing Services Organization (MSO) is a collective marketing firm established in 1994 by four performing arts organizations based in Charlotte, North Carolina with the support of the Knight Foundation. Five years after the MSO's inception a Knight Foundation report credited it with significant increases in gross ticket sales for four of the five member organizations, and an increase in the percentage of revenue generated through subscription sales, which is key to strengthening cash flow. The report found that the MSO had made major advances in "tactical" areas—the day-to-day production of high-quality marketing materials targeted at demographically specific populations—and it also found that despite these quick gains there was a remaining potential for even greater gains through "strategic marketing," including the use of psychographic data, new media, and long-term planning.

This form of collaboration among the New Orleans theaters would be well short of a merger (which is not considered appropriate to these circumstances because of the potential threat it would pose to the creative independence of participating theaters). Nevertheless, a formal consortium would be a tighter form of collaboration compared to the alternatives discussed below. It would involve the creation of a new entity and a system of governance, multi-year contractual commitments that would not be easy to terminate, and substantial commitments of time to initiate and maintain.

Employee-Sharing

Compared to a formal consortium, employee-sharing would be a looser form of collaboration involving more limited legal obligations. The participating theaters would hire one or more managers with specific skills who would split their time among the different organizations while the companies themselves remain separate. One of the theaters – or another organization – would act as fiscal agent for employment purposes, and an individual from each company would be designated to join a supervisory committee. The shared salary costs could be offset by a grant or split among the

participating companies. The shared employees would not be part of the individual theaters' leadership teams, but would have specific responsibilities that lessen the burden of the day-to-day administrative tasks on the artists.

In Chicago, three companies are currently in the planning phase of such an arrangement that will see them sharing the services of a single fiscal administrator. Angel Ysaguirre, a global corporate citizenship specialist in Arts and Culture for the Boeing Company, and a trustee of one of the participating companies, is heading up this collaborative initiative with Deb Clapp, executive director of the League of Chicago Theaters. Clapp says trustees of the three theater companies, the Hypocrites, the House Theatre, and Blair Thomas & Co., were anxious to get more consistently reliable and timely financial reports but realized that their existing people already were overextended. They thought that without designated administrators they would never be able to see an accounting for a production or other activity until after it was over.

The three theaters will each get a day and a half of financial help each week. The collaboration will be kicked off by a consultant paid for by a grant from Boeing who will set up a chart of accounts that will be used at each of the participating organizations so as to streamline the work of the new employee. "It is going to be fairly uniform," Clapp says, "across all three companies, the way that they do the accounting, and the way that they report." The shared employee, Clapp says, "will not be a decision-maker" at any of the three companies. The consultant also will oversee the hiring of the shared employee and define his/her goals, responsibilities, and metrics of success. The new employee, while evaluated by the three participating companies based on the established metrics, will be on the payroll of the League of Chicago Theaters. Clapp says she anticipates that the companies participating in the employee-sharing arrangement may change as "some theaters get to the point where they need their own full-time person so it will be a program that theaters will move out of and move into." Ysaguirre expects that a fourth company will participate in the second year of the program "as we see what the capacity is for this person to start to work with more than just these three companies." In addition, Ysaguirre says, if this initial effort succeeds, he hopes the companies will hire additional shared staff, including, most immediately, a marketer.

This form of collaboration among the New Orleans theaters would lessen the burden of administrative tasks on a day-to-day basis while allowing the companies to remain almost entirely independent of one another. Like a consortium, an employee-sharing arrangement would require multi-year contractual commitments and significant commitments of time to initiate.

Independent Service Organization

The creation of an entirely separate service organization chartered to provide services to the New Orleans theaters would bypass most of the burdens of collaboration involved with a formal consortium or employee sharing. The service organization would be organized as a non-profit and would seek tax-exempt status in order to create the opportunity for independent fundraising. It would have its own governance structure, leadership, and staff, and its range of services – marketing, fundraising, booking, scheduling, government advocacy, and the like – would be designed according to the needs of the 'clients'. Each theater would pay a fee for the services received, and the fee could be at full cost or at a level subsidized by gifts and grants. The fee structure and the service organization's level of underwriting would determine whether the service organization could have sustainable scale serving only the four New Orleans theaters. It is likely that other arts organization 'clients' would be desirable.

A number of organizations in the non-profit sector illustrate this model. A good example is Pentacle, a New York-based organization that provides administrative services to dance organizations and independent choreographers, including booking and tour representation, fiscal

administration, graphic design, and limited government grant preparation and consulting. Over its 30-year history, Pentacle's menu of services has developed, says Aliza Arenson, Pentacle's director of educational programming, "based on the artists we work with and trends within the field," as well as a growing sense of what is practical for an external party to provide. The majority of Pentacle's operating budget is generated through the fees charged to the client organizations, with modest contributions from the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. In the booking and fiscal administration programs, fees are based on an annual retainer, a percentage of the income generated from bookings, and a percentage of gross receipts. Development support is limited to two re-granting programs and preparation of applications to the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. Solicitation of individual donors is not included because, Arenson says, "it is the biggest challenge in terms of sharing administration because it is so much about individual relationships and relationships with specific work." (Other service organizations provide more extensive fundraising support.) Arenson says the list of artists and organizations served by Pentacle changes as "the roster is reevaluated each year." The roster is "curated," Arenson says. Just because an organization "needs the service and can pay for it doesn't necessarily mean [Pentacle] is going to work with [them]," she says. Selectivity in choosing clients ensures that Pentacle will be effective in its effort to book artists on its rosters and that it can provide the highest level of expertise to those for whom it provides fiscal services. Fiscal clients, Arenson says, "need to have a clean set of books" and close out their current fiscal year so that Pentacle can take them on at the start of the fiscal year. Additionally, Arenson says, clients must enter into the relationship with an understanding of any additional costs that will be incurred as a result of adhering to Pentacle's bookkeeping principles.

This form of collaboration among the New Orleans theaters would allow them to take advantage of high-quality professional services while allowing them to maintain their artistic independence and managerial autonomy. It has the advantage of creating a platform for services that can grow with the companies, expanding as their needs change, and the potential to serve the New Orleans arts community in a broad and meaningful way. This form of collaboration would involve the creation of a new entity at significant financial cost—which could not be covered by the participating companies—and would require long-term skilled leadership.

Concerns

As has been frequently observed, there are no benefits worth winning that do not involve costs of one sort or another. As participants consider a shared management arrangement for the New Orleans theaters, they should be on guard against a predictable human reaction to complex situations involving benefits and costs: people tend to give greater psychological weight to the costs than they do to the benefits. One way to guard against this tendency is to identify the potential costs explicitly.

Participants are understandably concerned about **whether a deep commitment is shared equally** among all key players. According to the Knight Foundation, the MSO did not receive a full commitment of all participant-organizations to the extensive planning that is essential to maximizing the potential. "The MSO required constant attention from leaders who championed the effort." Fairness in sharing benefits and costs is a critical concern. France believed Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot did not join together because "It came down to a discussion about literally the name of the organization. Nick and I both said, well we would be happy to come up with a new name, that's fine, we're not married to Mondo Bizzaro, we're married to the type of work that we do. We don't want to stop doing what we're doing, but we think it would be very powerful if we were all working underneath this one organization. And Kathy said no, she wanted to be ArtSpot Productions, so we

were like, well that would be like us giving up our identity to become a part of something that everyone associates with being Kathy Randels's organization; and so we just remained separate."

Participants are understandably concerned about losing **control of their processes and information** they consider proprietary. Sean LaRocca says "It doesn't really make sense to share a development director when you're in the same field with limited funding. How do you avoid just competing with each other not only for the funding sources but for the time of the development director, and how do you avoid the development director sharing knowledge amongst the companies that may be to one company's advantage?"

Participants are understandably concerned about **how the shared management arrangement would be governed**. Of the shared staff arrangement in Chicago, Angel Ysaguirre said the biggest topic of discussion has been about the supervision of the new fiscal administrator. For example, he says, "Who plays the role of the supervisor? And if two companies are having two different experiences, and one company feels the need to give negative feedback, how does that affect the other companies? And who gives that feedback? And if management styles get in the way, how do the companies deal with that? What one company does will impact the others." A shared management arrangement would need leadership to oversee a period of adjustment that may be lengthy and difficult, establish the direction, systems, and modes of communication of the new structure, whatever form it takes, and motivate the collaboration's participants as well as members of the New Orleans community.

Participants are understandably concerned about **the financial cost** of a shared management. This is not a cost-saving proposition. On the contrary, a shared management arrangement will incur additional costs in order to free up artists' time for creative work and raise the standard of management performance. (To be sure, the shared management arrangement would be more economical than the aggregate cost if all four theaters were to develop their own management structures independently.) Any form of collaboration will have substantial start-up costs and will generate new operating costs. These four companies do not have the necessary funds, nor do they have the capacity to generate the funds through earned or contributed income if acting separately. Any version of a shared management structure will therefore need to be funded, both at start up and on a continuing basis, by funders committed to the companies' collective, long-term success.

Participants are understandably concerned about the time commitment that will be required of them in the start-up phase and in the ongoing operation (**coordination costs**). They know that no management-sharing arrangement will run itself, and they also know that the arrangement would have a higher chance of success and serve their needs best if they take an active role in its design. They want to make sure the potential benefits are substantial before they undertake a time-consuming project. Kathy Randels is on the mark when she says "I have some concerns and reservations and I want to be actively involved in shaping what it becomes." Noting that any collaboration might require a large commitment of time and energy up front, Andrew Larimer says, "I guess it depends on that light at the end of the tunnel. If the goal looks really good, then yeah, I think we could make that commitment."

Participants are understandably concerned about **whether differences may prevent them from working well together**. To one extent or another, they are at different stages of organizational development, have differing needs, have different values and organizational cultures, and are led by varying personalities. John O'Neal says "the similarities are easy, but the differences get to be significant. Audience, for example, is major. Our approach to the long-term questions, like 'what would you consider to be a success' [have to match]. Do you want to be here and contribute to the development of this community [or] are you really staging a platform for leverage into the industry?" According to the Knight Foundation, participants in the MSO "sometimes faced difficult

interpersonal and organizational relationships. Inevitably, the collaboration raised issues of turf protection and questions about the loss of artistic identity. They crafted new ways to resolve personality conflicts and organizational differences. In some cases, the [project] required leaders to reconsider basic assumptions of organizational culture.” On the other hand, Ysaguirre attributed the staff-sharing arrangement’s potential in great part to the fact that the participants “know each other pretty well. Their artistic directors talk to each other a lot. Their board members know each other. They work with a similar aesthetic.”

Participants are understandably concerned about their **ability to attract and retain qualified management people**. The entire concept depends on raising the level of dedicated management expertise, and is vulnerable to the problems that would come with high turnover. Of the MSO, the Knight Foundation said “Staff and board changes required leaders to educate new members about the rationale and value of the partnership.”

Participants are understandably concerned about the **cultural fit of a new cohort of managers**, including the conflicts inherent in managers getting paid more than artists. While France says Mondo Bizarro would be grateful for administrative help, he is skeptical about bringing administrative personnel into the organization. “We don’t have anybody who’s like, ‘I just do this job and then I go home.’ Nobody does that here.” Any administrator who joined the organization would need to share this holistic approach to the work, France says. “You get to participate in a much richer sense beyond going and being an audience member. You get to help make it happen in some way, and I guess that’s what I’m talking about, somebody that has that kind of investment. Maybe that’s an emotional investment, maybe that’s a spiritual investment—I don’t know what you’d call it, but something more than just a job.”

Next Steps

Any participant could be forgiven for being discouraged by the list of concerns described above. But the potential benefits of collaborating through a shared management arrangement are very substantial. There is a clear community of interest among the four theaters, and cooperation would expand their horizons far beyond the ability of any of them to generate alone.

If NET and the four theaters choose to move forward, the decision process could consist of the following steps to be taken over a period of four months:

1. Each of the theaters would designate four professional and volunteer representatives to serve on an exploratory committee, which also would include an NET representative, two unaffiliated but knowledgeable observers appointed by NET, and a disinterested facilitator.
2. The exploratory committee would meet to determine which, if any, of the three alternative forms of collaboration is most promising, then add sufficient details to the bare bones to permit a full proposal to be drafted and budgeted.
3. The exploratory committee would present the proposal to a plenary gathering of the boards, professional leaders, and other decision makers from all of the organizations.
4. Following the plenary session, the decision makers for each organization would meet separately to determine whether their organization will commit itself to participate or decline to do so.

Conclusion

Junebug, ArtSpot, Mondo Bizarro, and The NOLA Project all identify themselves as ensemble theaters, generating work as a group through a collaborative creative process. This same collective spirit – combined with the urgency of rebuilding New Orleans's civic life – could make these companies uniquely well suited to a collaborative endeavor: They are used to incorporating many voices in their work, have demonstrated the requisite patience and perseverance through their artistic work, and have experienced the satisfaction of pulling off healthy collaborations.

They also are united by common needs. Every one of them wants to grow, to expand their reach, and every one of them wants a more secure base. Every one of them needs to strengthen their own respective administrative infrastructures, and every one of them needs permanent space for rehearsals and production, and for education and community involvement.

In addition, their commonalities are balanced by their differences. The organizations attract different audiences, produce different plays, and are run by very different artists, making collaboration among them an opportunity for each to complement the others rather than to compete.

From a disinterested perspective, a shared management arrangement would make good sense as a foundation for the secure development and strengthened artistic vitality of these theaters.