

Go like a dream

Van K Phillips, Jones & Phillips Associates, USA

People with the passion to try to turn their vision for a performing arts group into reality are often dismissed as dreamers. But by following in the footsteps of others who have secured permanent homes, these dreamers can be renamed visionaries

Over the past 50 years, the live performing arts world has thrived in an environment of expansion and maturation. Since 1946 there have been more new orchestras, theatre, dance, ballet and opera companies formed than ever before. This phenomenon has flown in the face of a common belief that the live performing arts would shrink in the face of both film and television, as they would all compete for the attention of the same audience.

It is true that all the live performing arts have been affected by film, television and the recording industry. Writers, producers, directors and designers have responded to film special effects when trying to surprise and astound their audiences. And, although it took the theatre a very long time to respond, playwrights and producers seem to have finally realized that the public's need for "little morality plays" has been replaced by the television sitcom. Likewise, the recording industry (despite its ever more life-like qualities) has not diminished the desire for live music experiences, but it has influenced the use of electro-acoustics in those performances.

The "doom sayers", not wanting to believe that they could have been wrong, still ignore the apparent realities. They prefer to point out that where Broadway once had over 100 active venues in the late 1800s, that number shrank to just 22 active theatres in the late 1980s.

Yet new live performance companies have been formed throughout the world, and many of them have flourished. Whether this growth has come from the increasing ease of travel and movement, a maturation of cultured taste and education, or the gains we have made in allowing ourselves more leisure time, the fact is that growth has happened. In the developed nations of the world, for every one of the Broadway venues that has gone dark, there have been dozens of new venues that have come to life.

Having a dream

Unlike 30 years ago, when a person who desired to see professional-level live performance had to travel to one of the major urban capitals of the world, today many cities of little more than 150,000 people play host to quality professional resident orchestras. Numerous professional theatre companies have made their homes in cities as small as 500,000. Several cities of just over a million boast professional opera and ballet companies, as well as other types of live performance organizations.

All of these new performance companies have been started by dedicated persons who have struggled and sacrificed to breathe life into their passion. Many of these parent individuals have been publicly demeaned and called "dreamers" and even "nuts". Once their performance companies mature and the communities in which they exist start to see the value they bring to the area's perceived quality and even economic growth, the same critics replace "dreamer" with "visionary". For those who have sacrificed so much it is a long overdue recognition. Then the next step in the recognition begins. "Now that you love me, will you underwrite my existence and build me a home?"

The reply is often, "Love is one thing. Marriage and support are something else altogether. OK, I will assist with your production expenses and even help with the rent. But you can't be serious that you want me to build you a home in the middle of our downtown. Can't you just to continue to work out of the college, the old vaudeville space, the YMCA or the local high school?"

Passion is not enough

Over the past 27 years Jones & Phillips Associates alone has played a part in developing over 250 new performing arts venues on three continents. In addition, the company has helped with the modernization of over 100 existing performing arts venues as they have grown to meet new professional standards for performances.

There is an amazing level of naivety among performance groups in how to acquire a new or newly renovated home

While Jones & Phillips is one of the larger theatre planning and performing arts consulting firms, it is by no means the only firm of its type. And at least half a dozen of its peers can boast these or even greater numbers of new and modernized performance spaces. But even with all this growth and work, there is an amazing level of naivety among performance groups in how to acquire a new or newly renovated home.

Artistic directors and even performing arts financial directors can talk for hours about



[Above] The addition to East Grand Rapids High School – both a high school and a community performing arts center

[Photo] URS Corporation; Frederick Gore, designer/Chuck Heiney Photography

[Left] Weeks from the wrecking ball, this Orpheum Theatre, then an RKO Movie Theater, was rescued to become The Adler Theatre in Davenport, Iowa

[Photo] Scholtz-Kuehn & Associates, PC

[Overleaf] Omaha, Nebraska had previously renovated a grand old vaudeville theatre into a home for several local performance groups. This venue needed the personality and technology required for modern professional productions

[Photo] LEO A DALY, Planning, Architecture, Engineering, Interiors/Paul J. Brokering Photography

[Last page] East Grand Rapids was a big hit with the local people, who refer to it as a “community jewel”

[Photo] URS Corporation; Frederick Gore, designer/Chuck Heiney Photography





what it will take to move to the next level of their professional development. They know what types of productions they need to expand professionally. They can list the types and even names of artists they need to attract. But, when it comes to creating a new permanent facility or even getting an appropriate renovated facility, most look like Bambi in the headlights.

Usually the last thing they say is, "And, of course we need better and more appropriate facilities." Then looking at the floor they continue: "But we can't seem to get past the immediate concerns of the productions and to get the city fathers to take us seriously." Often they follow this with: "Even our board president said the other day, 'Right! You want to build a US\$40m facility like so-and-so has. We are just trying to pay the bills!'"

As talented as the people who build all of these new production groups and companies are, suddenly they find themselves confronting the point where passion, dedication and talent are not enough.

Turning the dream into a vision

It is clear that many performing arts groups have found paths to obtaining new or newly renovated facilities. We can learn from these fortunate ones. What follows are some important points to consider if you, your group or community are feeling mature enough to pursue a permanent home and its status.

Recognize that this will be hard work. This will be every bit as hard as building the arts to a level of maturity that deserves a permanent home. Face it, if it were that easy you would have had your facility desires fulfilled long ago.

Your community is unique. Communities, like people, are one of a kind. They may share many things in common with other communities, but they are different with different individuals. Stop being a "method" actor. Really look at your community and its strengths/weaknesses, hopes/goals, history/perceived future, growth/shrinkage and passions/tastes. Like a show, if you can get into the public's mind, heart and soul you become one with your audience. If you cannot bring this detached spherical perspective about the community to the table, then find someone who can. Look around. There is, no doubt, someone (or even more than one person) in your community who gets major projects accomplished and to whose advice the community listens. If you can get that individual to embrace your dream and catch your vision, fantastic! Even if you can't get them to take up your vision, listen and take notes. They will probably give you the keys to finding others whom you can attract that can weld your dreams to public goals.

Be willing to recognize talent and use it. It is often hard for arts people to accept that other people have talent, or that there are talents other than their own. Get over that notion. There are people who have a talent for building alliances, making money or shaping public opinion. You will need all of these people and their many talents, plus you will

also need them in the correct order. Like a production, events and the characters need to enter at specific times.

Recognize that strong people are ones that often have opinions. If you know exactly what a facility should be, tell everyone else to go away. Then go make enough money to pay for the whole project from your own funds. If you are expecting help, look yourself in the eye and ask if you can accept the fact that involving others (at least the types that can really help) will mean letting their opinions influence the end product. No, you don't have to give non-artists control over the performances. But, you may well wind up with a different facility, in a different location, with different partners, than you envisioned. If you can't handle that, then you had better be rich.

It is easier to get partnership projects done. Frankly, it is easier to get public support if the perception is that the investment will go to serve multiple needs. Performance spaces are huge investments and the more they are utilized with an audience in place, the better they are perceived by both the public and officials.

Persons and corporations who are publicly connected to an arts organization can achieve a level of perceived sophistication

In looking for partnerships, be willing to think "outside the box". History's traditional partnerships are well known. The obvious example is opera and ballet company joint ventures. But most often performance groups bring the same strengths as well as weaknesses to the table. And, worse yet, performance groups often are tapping the same sources for their funding. Think about other elements in (or even outside of) your community where a partnership would be attractive.

Over the past 15 years the State of Michigan has built several dozen new performing arts centers connected to public high schools. After nearly two decades of almost no public school building, communities found support for school construction bond elections when one aspect of the facility was a performing arts center that would serve public arts programming as well as the schools. One example is East Grand Rapids High School. This addition to an existing school is far beyond a high school auditorium. In fact, their technical director is a senior stagehand for the professional theatres downtown. The community supported the building bond, and at

the theatre's opening in October 2002, the public cheered and referred to the space as a "community jewel".

Professional performers may scoff at the idea of making a home in a high school. Before they do, they should consider the facts. Until the last century, almost all artist training was done by apprenticeship and not a classroom approach. School corporations offer the following benefits: understanding of publicly supported ventures, land, public loyalty, a day-focused schedule, and staff that is resident. Like any marriage, there are problems in partnerships including: scheduling, "your-tool my-tool" and standards of performance.

Bring in expert advice early. Bring in someone with performing arts facility planning credentials very quickly. Make sure they feel their role is to provide options and to broker consensus building. If any expert tells you that he/she knows exactly what you need, run (don't walk) to find someone else. What a consultant brings to a project is breadth of experience, knowledge and especially alternatives. Even a facility you find that seems ideal may not be perfect for your budget, type of support staff or audience. The theatre planner will assist you in evaluating and selecting among choices. The more your group can clarify your vision, the easier it will be to explain to others. This clarity will help in fund-raising, architectural planning and budgeting, and future choice-making throughout the process.

Don't feel you have to know everything. It is amazing when people come to realize they have choices to make for facilities just like they do in productions. Often, experienced professionals say: "I didn't know it didn't have to be that way. I always assumed that was the way it was done." If you can state your goals, how you operate, and, strangely, what does not work, planning experts can offer you solutions and alternatives.

When should we involve an architect? An architect will contribute a great deal to the process and to the success of the project. However, too often architects are involved too early. When this happens they want to get into details before the goals and the partnerships have been clarified. This is not a criticism of architects. It is rare to find an architect who is also an experienced professional performance artist who understands the subtleties involved in the different performance arts. Once you are able to clarify both a vision and the requirements, it is time to bring in an architect.

Architects and cost consultants, not theatre planners and consultants, can provide you with real costs, site analysis and other non-performance budget options. Theatre planners/consultants and acoustical/audio consultants will support the architects and cost consultants with cost information specific to performance space issues. Even an issue as simple as seating needs expert information and pricing. If the architects and cost consultants call around for seat pricing, they get prices on a basic seat (often meant for a movie theater with a five-year life) without aisle lighting, lift arms and removable units for the handicapped, self-rising bottoms, and all the



other finish choices that make for a 30- to 50-year chair. Jones & Phillips just opened a new facility that was elegant in every way except for the seating. The very things the audience will use the most had an upholstered seat, but with plastic backs and hollow, noisy plastic bottoms with springs that will fail in a few short years. They got movie theater seats because the seating budget was under-funded.

The simple difference between “theatre” and “theater” may be known to you and the theatre planners, but it is your job to choose and then make that information available to the architects and cost consultants.

Get everything in the mix before you start fund-raising. If a project has a budget of US\$30m dollars, it is nearly as easy to raise US\$31m. However, once a stated budget is reached it is nearly impossible to start the process again for that last million. The saying in fund-raising circles is: “The first million is the hardest to get.” In this example, the 31st million becomes the second first million. Don’t announce a funding goal until you are sure of your bottom line.

Fund-raising is as much a specialty as ballet lighting. Would you hire your accountant or attorney to serve as your professional lighting designer or choreographer? With very rare exceptions, I’d bet not! So why is it so hard to realize that fund-raising for large projects is its own specialty? Most people in the arts have raised money, some even thousands of dollars, in support. Still, that is not really a qualification for raising the millions needed for a building. The sources of funds are often different. What attracts big donors can be different and what big donors want to see from you can be very different. The big donors and big corporations want independent financial review before they are willing to look at a project seriously. They have seen the “white elephants” built during the 1960s and 70s, and they don’t want their names and logos on buildings later considered as “public folly”.

Sometimes accountants or attorneys serve as lighting designers or choreographers – for

the local civic theatre. Look at your fund-raising in the same light. The fees you pay can be contingent on productivity, but paying a good fund-raiser can be the difference between success and failure. Consider one other reason to look beyond the normal fund-raising with which you are familiar. Even if you could turn one of your current sponsors into a US\$1m or US\$2m building donor, what are you going to do to retain their production subsidy? What good will it do to get a new building if you are

The difficulty is making other people care, and this is usually best done by changing the focus from your needs to the community’s needs

not there when it opens? Be very careful with the sponsors of your artistic program. If they are willing to support your ongoing program with limited interference, it may be better to have a fund raiser seek other donors as for the “bricks and mortar” support.

If you are considering the renovation of an existing facility, be very careful. On more than one occasion we have watched groups renovate the lobby, the audience chamber and the public facilities leaving the stage and the backstage support areas for later. The problem is that “later” never comes. Remember, your audience never sees (or understands) what lies behind the curtain. Once the spaces they see are renovated, the project, in their mind, is complete.

It’s a bad time and all the economic trends are down. The world economy, like the weather, is a changing thing. Average temperatures and economics are just that: an average of the highs and lows. In poor economic times our work has actually had its greatest growth, as the building trades are often hit hard. Private development lags and carpenters, plumbers and electricians are laid off. For all kinds of political reasons, elected officials want to see those laid-off workers go back to work. They can’t put public money into private development, but they can release “public” building projects. All of a sudden, performing arts centers, civic and convention centers, and arenas look very attractive. We see these projects funded when they have been lost on the shelf for years.

Consider the fact that during great economic times everyone is after potential donors for money. When the economy weakens, the same organizations are afraid to go after those donors, assuming they will get rebuffed. If you use the slow periods as your planning period, you will be ready as soon as the indicators turn upward. Things will rebound. And at the first moment of the rebound, yours can be one of the only voices speaking to donors.

Think about whose image would benefit from funding a cultural facility. Being rich or successful does not often imply maturity or being cultured. Persons and corporations who are connected to an arts or cultural organization in a public way can achieve a level of perceived sophistication that might be hard to achieve otherwise. Naming rights have become a big thing for sports facilities in the USA. Similar opportunities can be just as big for the arts. The employees of Texaco were probably no greater opera supporters than the rest of the nation’s population. However, in all the years that Texaco sponsored the *Saturday Live from the Met* broadcasts, the company gained by being considered a sophisticated, cultured corporation.

You are not alone! Finally, you must get over the notion that you are so unique as an artistic group that you are walking this path for the first time. Art and artistic expression may be unique but pursuing a permanent relationship and home within your community is not. Do your research and homework. The fact that there have been so many new facilities built over the past 50 years, should make it clear that there is someone out there with a solution to your problem.

The difficulty in contemplating a new arts facility is to form a bond with the community in which you live. It is easy to tell people about things you need but the difficulty is making other people care, and this is usually best done by changing the focus from your needs to the community’s needs.

When you consider the way people think of the great cities of the world, realize we know them for their cultural institutions as much as for their military and economic prowess.●

Van K Phillips is principal of Jones & Phillips Associates