

Ghost Light Communications:

Supporting Societal Health and Wellbeing by Empowering Community Arts Organizations

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Expanded Disciplinary Grounding

COML 602 Communication and Leadership Capstone

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10/03/2024

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Arts Organizations

The arts, particularly the performing arts, stand as one of humanity's oldest and most enduring forms of storytelling, collaboration, and communication. These traditions, present in every culture and age, transcend entertainment, acting instead as mediums to inform, influence, and propagate societal values and cultural continuity (National Geographic Society, 2024).

From the upper echelons of Broadway stages to small, community-run production companies, live performance theaters are present in almost every town and city across the United States. And, like other non-profits, they are generally established within a community to fulfill an unmet need or deliver an unmet viewpoint (Kaiser & Egan, 2013). The impact of these institutions, often not-for-profit organizations, play a significant role in the health and well-being of citizens, communities, and local economies. The American Association of Community Theater (2022) estimates that there are over 6,000 community theaters throughout the U.S., each offering cultural enrichment, artistic expression and development spaces, community cohesion, economic drivers, and civic engagement. Not just entertainment, community theater is a “catalyst for social, cultural, and economic enrichment” the impact of which extends “far beyond the stage, shaping communities and fostering connections that endure long after the final curtain call” (Smith, 2024).

Applied Communication Theory

I will utilize Borden’s theory of Journalism as a practice (2010) based on MacIntyre’s theory of virtue to ground my capstone project – establish the “why” behind Ghost Light Communications – and apply the principles of “practice” to theatrical storytelling in order to outline the societal implications of unethical practices held by live performance-producing organizations in Utah.

In *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and the Press*, Borden (2010) applies MacIntyre's theory of virtue ethics to assert that professionals in journalism – as community communicators and narrative builders – are moral custodians of moral order. Borden continues to name artists as additional guardians who “perfect their talents primarily for the sake of their work's intrinsic value – not economic gain – within traditional frameworks that are themselves carefully guarded” (p. 8).

The occupations of journalism and theater are what Borden and MacIntyre consider occupations of practice – one that can only be realized and extended through practice and includes an institutional context, a predominant purpose, a community that is feasibly moral, and a collaborative organization – whose maintained purpose is to contribute to what is right and good for humankind. Theatrical productions and producers, like journalists, function as community interpreters who “contextualize current problems within the larger tradition handed down by previous generations” and as such have an obligation to demonstrate “*well* so that [others] can actually participate in (not just casually monitor) civic life,” and flourish (Borden, 2010, p. 51)

Borden further states that our personal narratives as individuals are intertwined with the narratives of others necessitating we be morally accountable to others. Additionally, “our social identities are not static or structurally determined, but contextually situated and interactionally emergent”; they are not defined by belonging or association with a certain organization but rather “strategically enacted, constructed, and maintained through discourse” (Borden, 2010, p. 88).

A 2018 study funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and co-conducted by researchers from the Departments of Theatre Arts and Psychological & Brain Sciences at the University of Louisville, centered on quantitatively measuring psychological benefits of engaging with live theater. The study confirmed the hypothesis that attending theater regularly promotes meaningful social interaction and flourishing, emotional optimism, and psychological stimulation. Likewise, the study asserts that theater

attendance fosters a collective sense of community, stating that “One microcosm of one theatre’s audience provokes suggestions to foster a more democratic audience and pluralistic culture that endeavors to cross rather than ignore the divides” (Vandenbroucke & Meeks, 2018, p. 374)

Arnette et al. (2018) discuss the importance of community narrative, stating that shared stories explain the meaning of human life, demonstrate what is good for us to do and b, clarify how the world works, and understand that people participate in the producing and interpreting of these stories. Theaters provide spaces that encourage citizens to be seen by each other, promoting “a peaceable life together” (p. 222), especially where differences exist in interests, values, and beliefs.

As arbiters of community narratives – as a form of communication ethics in action - it is not only important but imperative that companies that produce theater do so ethically and with great care and intention. The purpose of media is to cultivate individual and collective life by performing the necessary functions of circulating information relevant to a certain area as well as serving as a space where citizens may express themselves and their views. At its best, communal storytelling empowers citizens to conscientiously commit to the construction of a collective dwelling space that is comprised of differences, not simply aligned with their own views (Arnett et al., 2018).

Utah’s Theatrical Landscape and Ghost Light Communications

A small handful of theater-producing organizations, representing less than 1% of the arts-related nonprofit organizations in Utah, have come to monopolize public visibility and funding resources in Utah’s theatrical industry, and each pose threats to the greater communal good (Cause IQ, n.d.). Some pose accessibility issues by maintaining top-tier ticket pricing, some additionally pose proximity issues requiring travel and lodging accommodations that only the privileged can afford. Others engage in unethical practices that harm the artists they employ, the Utah communities they are meant to serve, and the community at large in the state.

Outside these few monopolizing top-tier organizations, smaller arts nonprofit organizations struggle to access funding, gain visibility among their communities, and expand their reach to potential new audiences. These challenges have forced them into less-than-ideal practices. Most do not compensate artists for their time or specialized talents, hiring on a volunteer basis, or worse organizations maintain a “pay-to-play” model. This model of performing or showcasing art “for exposure” still exists outside of the state but is far less common. The practice has been so deeply engrained into the systematic practices of arts-producing organizations in Utah, however, that some are no longer able to recognize it as an ethical wrongdoing. One such theater touts: “Being strictly not for profit, none of the actors are paid...This creates the opportunity for aspiring actors or even local housewives to perform and gain experience on a smaller stage. It also allows for cost effective ticket prices” (Draper Historic Theatre, n.d.).

Limitations to innovative, collaborative, and meaningful storytelling are also intemperate among these organizations. Fear has caused a survivalist approach, and an every-org-for-itself attitude has been adopted and staunchly adhered to. This dynamic has led to enforced barriers to communication, dialog, and collaboration among arts organizations of all sizes. Evidence of this is rampant copycat programming that happens season after season - taking their cue from the largest organizations, there were three productions of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (Menken, 1993) running this season. Kaiser and Egan (2013), authors of *The Cycle: A Practical Approach to Managing Arts Organizations*, consider shows like this to be low risk, “one simply as to announce the project, provide a phone number to call, and the dates of the performance, and the performances will sell easily” (p. 37). And while sure-thing programming is necessary to ensure financial stability in smaller performing arts organizations, each of these organizations failed to realize that in duplicating programming they are all competing for audiences; the likelihood being that ticket purchasers who desire to see *Beauty and the Beast* will only attend the show once and at a single theater. Had a dialogue been present, coordinating programming –

each theater choosing a different Disney musical - would have been a strategic and healthier way to audience share. Additional opportunities for cooping coordinating productions (rotating theaters for a short run in each) may also have boosted audience attendance and organizational visibility and engagement.

Another byproduct of restricted access to funding, unhealthy competition for audiences due to fear-informed programmatic strategies, and shorter audience reach is the opportunity to engage in innovative storytelling. Stories that are less known or understood are riskier to produce and likely to require extensive awareness campaigns so audiences become aware of the story's value and enthusiasm is sparked for attending (Kaiser & Egan, 2013). These are the programs that have the greatest potential of fulfilling organizational missions surrounding civic service, facilitating public discourse, curiosity for the experiences of others, and empathy for fellow humans.

These barriers to visibility and reach, and blockages to communication and collaboration are where Ghost Light Communications (GLC) intends to serve; by empowering and lifting the stories of the lowest-earning arts nonprofits of Utah – roughly 65% of arts-related nonprofits in the state - so they may garner greater community visibility and obtain broader access to the resources and funding they require to fulfill their organizational missions and ethically serve their communities.

GLC understands that these small nonprofit organizations have scarce resources to dedicate toward marketing and communications and so must allot funds strategically. One effective way of substantially reducing costs in this area is to embrace new technologies and cultivate collaborative relationships. Newer technologies how ever more accessible, also now demand better-trained personnel with greater developed skill and depth of knowledge (Kaiser & Egan, 2013). GLC will provide the technical skill required and do so at an affordable rate by collaborating in a fractional capacity – “a work arrangement in which a person...provides specialized skills or management services to multiple

organizations on a part-time or project basis” (Kelly, 2024). GLC services will include digital communication strategies (website and digital marketing content and copy), social media strategies and management, traditional marketing services, and grant writing and process consulting (Lee, 2011). Additionally, as a fractional professional working in small capacities for several organizations, I may position myself to facilitate dialogue with and between these various organizations, thus fulfilling our shared mission of serving the greater good of the community at large.

The Ghost Light Communications Business Plan (Artifact)

To fulfill the artifact for my capstone, I will draft and refine a business plan and strategy for Ghost Light Communications, with the intent to launch the business within the months following the completion of the capstone.

I will utilize the process outlined in *The Right-Brain Business Plan: A Creative, Visual Map for Success* (Lee, 2011). Lee’s approach to constructing a business plan is highly creative, recognizing that “as a right-brain entrepreneur... quality of being is as important as action...Just as the *how* is as important as the *what*, the *being* is as important as the *doing*” (Lee, 2011, p, 15). As a creative and artistically stimulated person, this approach resonates with me. Additionally, the organizations I will be serving through GLC are arts organizations, filled with fellow creatives. In creating a plan that is mission-driven and creatively centered, I will be developing a plan that speaks to and for those I will serve.

Following the *Right-Brain Business Plan* process I will complete each of the necessary components of a traditional business plan including drafting an executive summary (mission statement), completing vision and values statements, defining the market and audience landscape, developing a marketing plan and strategy, developing a financial plan, defining an organizational structure, creating an action plan, and developing an operational plan (Lee, 2011).

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