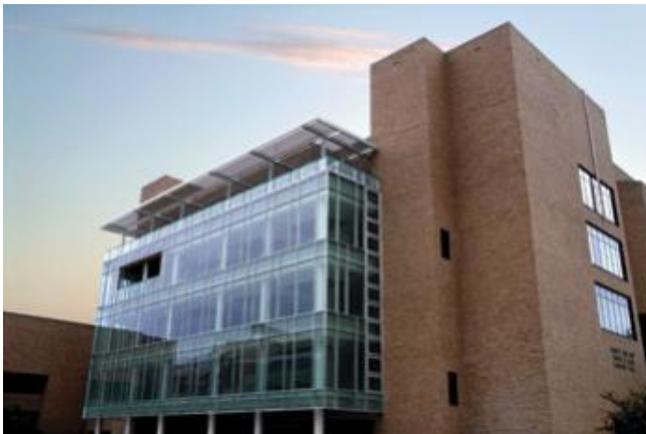


Key Ingredients for Successful Community Engagement

*Cynthia Patterson (Programming, Artist Services) and Judith Rhedin (Assistant Director, Campus and Community Engagement) of **Texas Performing Arts** share their thoughts on successful community engagement.*



Bass Concert Hall (photo: Mark Rutkowski)



Bates Recital Hall (photo: Maggie Bang)

Texas Performing Arts (TPA) is based on campus at the University of Texas, Austin and is one of the state's largest and most significant performing arts complexes. Comprising five venues - **Bass Concert Hall** (capacity 2,900), **Bates Recital Hall** (capacity 600), **McCullough Theatre** (capacity 400), **Payne Theatre** (capacity 500) and **Brocket Theatre** (capacity 244) TPA presents and produces both large and small scale theatre/music events for the benefit of students and Austin locals.

Each year, Texas Performing Arts offers a diverse season of music, theatre, dance, and conversation, and during the past 30 years has presented such world-class artists as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Mikhail Baryshnikov, The English National Opera, Pina Bausch, Jerry Seinfeld, Yo Yo Ma, Van Morrison, and National Theatre of Scotland . This vast array of events on offer (a mix of mainstream Broadway musicals, big name concerts, new writing theatre, classical and contemporary music) create the usual challenges for the small marketing and community engagement teams at TPA.

While (and as is common) large-scale mainstream productions and artists tend to sell relatively easily, newer work takes time and creativity in order to develop an audience – time that is not always readily available as marketing staff meet the needs of large scale promoters. This is where the work of the **Campus & Community Engagement** team is vital.

As a university-based arts centre TPA is committed to serving the academic mission of the College of Fine Arts by supporting the work of students, faculty and staff on its stages, in the classrooms, studios and production shops; and in the educational outreach programs they provide for the Austin community.

The Campus & Community Engagement team (consisting of just two members of staff) focuses on "connecting" visiting artists with faculty members, students and the community at-large. Before, during and after artists perform, they **create opportunities for artists to step off stage and into a different setting when they become teachers and coaches**, as well as engage in dialogue with all parts of the larger community not just in Austin, but also groups in communities up to two hours away.



The Campus & Community Engagement team work to engage all types of community groups and organisations citywide and social service groups that work with seniors and people with disabilities. They also work with students (ages 13 and up) including university students.

Community engagement work takes place in all types of venues, from libraries to studios, any place they can bring people together to foster exchanges /experiences.

Three overarching goals underpin the cornerstone of activities in order to increase the impact of the performing arts on campus and in the community.

- 1 Alignment with the University's academic mission
- 2 Student engagement
- 3 Cultural leadership

Campus & Community Engagement Activities

A wide range of regular year-round activities are offered as well as bespoke activities related to each event. Regular activities include the following:

- Lectures (pre/post performance talks)
- Artists in residence (master classes, informal talks, panel discussions)
- Open rehearsals (on campus or in the community)
- Brown bag lunches (bring a packed lunch along to a lunchtime talk)
- Community discussions
- Students experiencing arts with their teachers (SEAT)

SEAT TICKET SCHEME:

*Because of generous donations made to the **student ticket fund**, we are able offer hundreds of free tickets to grade 7-12 teachers to provide a special learning experience for students.*

Teachers of all subjects may take this opportunity to enhance classroom learning. They can attend a live performance with students and then make connections back in the classroom. The 2014 programme includes music and dance performances from various cultures with varied musical styles. Whether teaching writing or reading, geography or history, teachers can take this opportunity for related writing and critical thinking assignments.

- Youth performances - free daytime events designed for students in grades 7-12
- 'Step Into Dance' – high school and university students learn technique, process, and skills of professional dancers

Tickets for all students are \$10.

Four key ingredients are seen as being central to the success of the work of Campus & Community Engagement.

1. Ensuring community relationships are 2-way

One of the cornerstones of the work C&CE carries out is about "Relationship Building" and of course, many arts organisations will place an emphasis on building relationships in the wider community. The TPA Campus & Community Engagement team takes pride in ensuring that the relationship is not one-way.

They refer to the three-C's –

- Connect
- Cultivate
- Challenge

The C&CE team (although only 2 people) are always out meeting groups and attending events, in the community and on campus.

We want to be good community partners and not just about TPA events or contacting the faculties and local communities when TPA need something. (Judith Rhedin)

2. Working in collaboration with partners

Partners include a huge variety of community organisations and venues (and TPA work with them from both an audience generating and event planning perspective.

Community Partners work with us to create, build and host events, e.g. master classes, lectures, film screenings, and exhibits.

Sponsors donate cash, goods and services which support Campus & Community Engagement events.

3. Making relevant faculty 'connections'

Being a university-based arts organisation has its advantages, the main one being the access to contacts and resources across campus to add depth to the educational value of events e.g. via joint events across campus where relevant and access to speakers/research resources.

The university's faculty resources are therefore utilised wherever possible e.g. research on the themes/styles presented in a given production (particularly new writing/contemporary work) is carried out at relevant faculties (where relationships exist) to ensure that it is relevantly communicated to appropriate community audiences and partners. Potential university partners are therefore approached as and when necessary – and it's rarely the arts faculties that are approached first off (science and history are quite often an initial contact point when the content is relevant).

4. Advance planning (up to a year and beyond where possible)

Advance planning is crucial and this takes places over the space of a year or more (dependent on programming). If it is a piece of new writing then extensive research and preparation takes place and this of course takes time.

No two engagements are the same, and so many things happen organically and even by accident or good fortune or happenstance.

The main thing is that it boils down to the relationships you have built and are willing to build and maintain in an ongoing fashion.

I. What is the engagement?

What are its hard facts, e.g., amount of time artists are here, who the artists are, what is the program and content, what are the artists willing and capable of doing on campus and in community. This can range WILDLY – sometimes we know a lot; sometimes we know very little and have to trust our instincts, our partners, and get in motion!

II. Brainstorming – roughly, 4 factors:

- a. Topics and points of contact?
- b. Who are our existing campus and community partners who may be interested in the project?
- c. Who are new prospects for partnership?
- d. What are the possibilities, if any, to build audience and interest before and after the actual performance / residency? For example, exhibits which open and run for weeks and/or months before and after the show; classroom conversations, facilitated discussion groups.

III. Logistics – how are we going to execute this project?

- a. Allocate resources: time, space, PEOPLE !
- b. Advance communication and planning with artists / artist management
- c. Communication with marketing and public relations staff

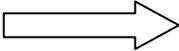
Community Engagement Case study: ‘Rappahannock County’

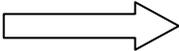


Photo – Rachel Greenberg

Rappahannock County was a music event staged at Texas Performing Arts in 2012 and was part of a series of events marking the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War. It was a new piece that had premiered in Virginia. Rappahannock is a river in Virginia – famous for being a key location for the American Civil War and as such is at the heart of the civil war story (although the name ‘Rappahannock’ is not so familiar outside of Virginia).

Although a challenging piece from the point of view of the work being un-known and only performed once before, the artistic team was very strong. The Libretto was by Mark Campbell, and the score by well-known composer, Ricky Ian Gordon.

Challenges  1) **New work**
2) Based on aspect **of the civil war that is not widely known.**
3) Not a full opera, but not an ‘operetta’ as such, a song cycle – **no overarching story-line** – a series of vignettes relating to the Civil War. Difficult to describe
4) **Very few marketing ‘tools’ were available** (e.g. photos / footage / audience response)

Advantages  1) Long planning opportunity (2 years)
2) Strong artistic team

Although the work itself was extremely powerful and moving, it was very difficult to get this across via traditional marketing methods given that little was available by way of marketing material and there was no legacy to fall back on.

It was therefore important that efforts were made to engage the community in the story of *Rappahannock County* via additional community engagement events.

Extensive research into the Rappahannock civil war story took place, and university relationships were built upon to help. Arts faculties were therefore not the first to be called upon as partners. It was recognised that **an understanding of the themes of the piece had to be prioritised** before any community engagement projects could be envisioned.

It was also apparent that on-campus collections (e.g. from a historical perspective) may provide interesting connections and thus offer joined up promotional opportunities. This again had to be carefully planned and considered and offered an opportunity for new relationships to be built.

We had been reading the text and so had known the story. We then just looked for ways to build on the themes. We started researching materials and mapping out some ideas 12-18 months before the performances. We have worked with the City of Austin Cultural Centers and Libraries for a number of years, which includes the Austin History Center. The same with University of Texas Humanities Institute, we have a long relationship. Reaching out to the two UT Centers on campus took a bit of extra time, because we wanted to visit with them about what was in their collections that might work.

Here is what came out of the brainstorming stage –

- a. **Topics and points of contact?** In the case of Rappahannock, we started, obviously, with the Civil War, the 150th anniversary of the war, the creation of the work – using letters, documents and images, tying these to a song cycle (something like *Spoon River Anthology*), and looking for ways to make this relevant to our audiences.
- b. **Who are our existing campus and community partners who may be interested in the project?**
 - i. On campus: History, Theatre, Music studies; Harry Ransom Center; Humanities Institute
 - ii. In the community: Austin Public Library, Carver Museum and Cultural Center; Round Rock Independent School District, Huston-Tillotson University (one of the Historically Black Colleges in the U.S., which is significant and of itself, another conversation).
- c. **Who are new prospects for partnership?**
 - iii. On campus: Briscoe Center for American History, Department of Radio Television Film, new history faculty Jackie Jones (nominated for a Pulitzer this year)

iv. In the community: Austin History Center, San Marcos Independent School District

Final Partners included:

- City of Austin Cultural Centres and Libraries
- Austin History Centre
- University of Texas Humanities Institute
- Briscoe Centre for American History (on campus)
- Harry Ransom Centre (on campus)
- UT Department of History
- UT Department of Theatre and Dance
- UT Butler School of Music
- Carver Museum and Cultural Center

Reaching out to the two University of Texas Centres on campus took a bit of extra time, because we wanted to visit with them about what was in their collections that might work. Both Briscoe Center for American History and Harry Ransom Center we keep in touch with by off and on communication.

There was also a **focus placed on working with youths and high schools** due to the educational significance of the event and this reaped good results.

We ended up with six events with approx. 655 people attending. Brown Bag Lunch/ Post-Performance Talkback/ Youth Performance had the best attendance.

What's in the pipeline?

We're looking forward to **BASETRACK LIVE** in September – a new and exciting engagement, we booked it almost a year ago and have been doing some light brainstorming ... and now beginning to work on it in earnest. We're using some of our existing old tricks of the trade, and coming up with new ideas and relationships. We're blessed to have this opportunity to present the work, and to build relationships with active duty military, veterans, and their families.

More information on the work of the Campus & Community Engagement team is available here - <http://texasperformingarts.org/engagement>