

Legal Name

The Flea Theater

Project Title

To host director Ed Sylvanus Iskandar at The Flea Theater to explore new approaches to demand building for live theater that focus on the social experience-- personalizing and extending outreach and engagement before, during and after a performance

DDCF Grant Number

2013233

Project Progress and Successes

The Flea is very proud of the successes achieved under the aegis of this grant. We were able to support and deepen our relationship with an important emerging theater director, Ed Iskandar, and work together to expand our thinking around a mutual goal: developing demand for live theater amongst "Millennials".

Our project's exploratory activities revolved around a highly unusual immersive theater project that Ed was directing at The Flea, called THE MYSTERIES. Based on stories from the Bible, it was a six-hour extravaganza that told "the story of man" through episodic interpretations by 48 playwrights. The production involved 54 actors, 14 designers, six associate directors and fifteen support staff members (not including the Flea's staff of eight). Because of its long-form and immersive nature, which included the serving of dinner and dessert during the performance, we felt THE MYSTERIES would provide the perfect opportunity to explore our hypothesis that Millennial audiences would be more open to the theatrical experience if it were made more social and more personally engaging.

Our discussions primarily focused on two ways of doing this. The first was: how far can we extend the experience before and after the actual performance? Ed was especially curious to expand on his inquiry into the notion of intimacy in a theatrical environment, creating a sense of the play as a party in which the artist acts as "host" and the audience member as "guest". Together we discussed how literal that metaphor could become, and how we could deploy our institutional structure to extend their experience and deepen our relationship.

To that end we defined six potential points of engagement, with examples of strategies for each. They are:

- Point of Purchase: a personal email from an artist involved in the show, welcoming the patron as a guest rather than thanking them for their purchase.
- Arrival: mingling between artists and audiences in the lobby and theater, with live music or other warming and welcoming elements.
- The Show: where appropriate, direct engagement with the audience. This could range from eye-contact and direct address during monologues to musical interludes or "events" at intermission.

- Post-Show (Immediate): aside from the usual talkback or onsite reception, an open invitation for audiences to meet up with the cast at a local bar for unstructured conversation about the show.
- Post-Show (Follow-Up): an email from The Flea's audience development manager and/or an artist from the production, asking for feedback and response.
- Post-Show (Long-term): a personal, hand-written thank you letter a few weeks later, from someone either working at The Flea or involved in the production they saw.

The second prong of our inquiry was: how can we use social media in ways that are more authentic and true to its original intention, which was to connect rather than to promote? To this end, we devised a "meme" for the show that could be expressed over multiple simultaneous online and social media platforms: #Gospel48, in reference to the 48 playwrights of THE MYSTERIES. We developed this meme in multiple ways that were organically integrated across our Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook groups. Cast members sent online video diary entries every ten days during the rehearsal period, we used extensive candid photography, we published blogs and essays by the playwrights, and engaged participants in discussion around the themes and aesthetic style of each episode. These were real, ongoing conversations that first abounded on our Facebook page and then continued onsite at the theater. At no point did we make any reference to fundraising/donations or marketing/sales -- it was purely authentic, solely intended as a way to develop community and engage socially around the production. Ultimately, THE MYSTERIES played to 93.3% capacity.

During the grant period Ed was onsite for a total of 35 days that were dedicated to exploration of these ideas. His activities included leading and attending meetings, working one-on-one with our marketing and audience development team, acting as host prior to performances and leading post-show discussions. He also wrote periodic reports sharing his perspective of the progress made around the points of engagement and social media initiatives.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

The biggest challenge we faced was that we underestimated the amount of time and energy that would be required of our staff. We had anticipated a more discrete and contained project, but due to its socially immersive nature it required a boundary-melding approach that pulled in many more people than those directly involved in the production and its marketing. While much of the project's success lay precisely in the fact that everyone at the theater ended up participating, it took significantly more out of us than we initially accounted for.

Along those lines, it took unexpected time and resources to support an artist past opening night and to deal with him simultaneously as an artist and as a "marketing consultant". For Ed, he found it challenging to negotiate the simultaneous status of being an insider and an outsider at the theater. While rewarding, he found himself split between being artistically driven and focused, but also thinking in larger terms of the institution.

Lastly, we found it a little difficult to stay focused on planning rather than implementation - as a small theater we tend to be quick off the mark. The extensive time allotted for planning was a real luxury for us - we found ourselves consistently reminding each other to stay focused on exploration over implementation.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

We found the rubric of "points of engagement" to be very useful. While our particular strategies might not work for everyone, the notion of consciously conceiving specific moments for interaction might be useful.

We also learned that, even outside of production budgets, we really should budget at least 10% more time, resources and money to execute a project than we initially think it will take.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

Gospel 48 social engagement meme:
thefleatheaternyc.tumblr.com/gospel48

THE MYSTERIES trailer:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORprabdQank

audience reactions at THE MYSTERIES:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=t68tjVol4OE

sample video diaries from THE MYSTERIES:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVJaIS7shjs>

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Y

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