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Connectivity is calling us

In approaches to socially distributed
and embodied cognition through theatre
inspired by Woolly Mammoth Theatre

Abstract

This article intends to serve as a case study and inspiration in the field of audience engagement and community experience and invites international exchange & discussions on best practices and experimental praxes. It briefly examines the cultural history and context that preceded Connectivity. Then sets out to illustrate with examples how the aim of the Connectivity department is to forge dynamic and multifaceted bilateral relationship between the theatre—Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company specifically—and her community in Washington, D.C. Each play programmed has a constellation of curated experiences designed to engage, explore and educate: from open first reads, to interactive lobby displays, to post show events, the theatre seeks relentlessly how to best facilitate the encounters that strengthen and enrich lives in and with the arts. By bringing the concept of Connectivity to a continental readership, the article invites us to examine the function and potentiality of our institutions in the civic and cultural landscape they serve and thereby extend our notions of cultural leadership by offering a variety of approaches to invite, engage and sustain audience participation beyond spectatorship.

Keywords: audience design, community engagement, point of entry, institutional change, cultural leadership, theatre management

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Theatre is uniquely suited as a laboratory for ever new ways of community building, engagement, and social learning. The present paper is an introduction to innovative audience-relations from Washington, D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. In 2009, a new department was created called Connectivity to vitalize and reimagine audience engagement and community building. Investigating this innovation allows us to reflect on the role theatres occupy in the life of the city and in the life of the people they serve. Sharing best practices internationally—now that the project has been running successfully for over a decade—may offer a new framework for exploring audience relations, community partnerships and opportunities for programming beyond the repertoire. Further study of theatre in cognitive sciences could illuminate and activate uncharted landscapes of socially distributed cognition and learning and is presented below.

As Dr Miranda Anderson points out, the perception of cognition and subjectivity as extended across brain, body, and world, in itself, supports the argument that crossing the disciplinary divisions between the neurobiological and the socio-cultural, between sciences and the humanities, will benefit the understanding of all since all are necessary to encompass the nature of being human (Anderson 2015). Connectivity Director Kristen Jackson defines her mission as the aspiration to be more than a theatre; through these efforts this multifaceted, multidimensional, longitudinal relationship with the people has become the very core of the mission.

These efforts in the macro context of the city also prompt us to consider theatre in the constellation of other institutions playing a part in the eudemonic wellbeing of the citizens that they serve, by promoting autonomy, competence, interest in learning and social engagement. Washington, D.C. is an especially potent landscape to study given its powerful position and the wealth of cultural institutions that are housed in the district—and their connections and united efforts in serving and affecting local as well as visiting populations. These efforts could also be investigated in relation to humanities/higher education collaborations, noting the trend of pointing outwards; and reach beyond the well-established circles of high-art and academia seeking, honoring, and serving the typically or historically unengaged, to work towards collective liberation and a better future for all.

As Sarah Bloomfield, director of the Holocaust Museum in D.C. pointed out, humanities are incredibly important if we want to create an engaged and responsible citizenry (Bloomfeld 2018). Projects "Humanities are for All" (to us Hungarians this sounds like a Kodaly-paraphrase of course) documents efforts across the

United States' humanities' faculties and students who are extending the benefits of the humanities beyond the classroom by engaging diverse communities in their work. Tapping into the tendency to radically include audiences in a deeper and sustained relationship, Woolly seems to be conjuring and manifesting the art management Zeitgeist, which is expanding the very function of theatre.

Connectivity is an innovation which might not seem immediately relevant to our theatre ecology in Hungary for two key reasons:

First is whether the theatre is much more prominent in the cultural and everyday Umwelt of the citizens here than in D.C. Language itself is a clue to that. The Hungarian "közönségszervezés" (audience-organizing) connotes that there is already an audience, and the task is only to lure them towards a specific theatre/performance. Community building/outreach implies that the community needs to be created out of individuals or found in extra theatrical groups and actively ushered into to the given institution.

Second, in western cultures certain institutions often formulate a specific mission, target a well-defined artistic goal, or cater primarily to a specific audience. In London, the Young Vic is dedicated to giving early-career directors opportunities, the Royal Court champions contemporary writing and the Gate Theatre prides itself on international collaborations. In D.C., Theatre J produces and invites performances that have Jewish identity at heart and the Shakespeare Theatre presents a season of the bard mixed with classics. Contrary to that in Budapest, the palette of institutions appears homogenic; what separates them often is a certain type of aesthetic or taste, the institutional identity is hardly driven by a mission statement. The plays in the repertoire are predominantly classics and they typically do not prompt the questions that drive Connectivity.

However, the rapid pace of the digital change, the post-pandemic era, and the forever present quest to win and keep our youngest audiences call on us to familiarize ourselves with international best practices to imagine, adopt and implement ways of communicating and communing with our colleges, patrons and visitors. A rich and robust theatrical ecosystem might avert our attention from areas of potential growth or innovation. Yet cross-cultural analysis provides opportunities to illuminate our systems of operation both for their strengths, uniqueness, dimensions of potential improvement, growth, and even innovation. Re-thinking and reframing the event of going to the theatre also invites scholars to explore what impact and benefit these new ways could mean for individuals and societies alike.

To quote Howard Shalwitz, Founder and First Artistic Director Emeritus, “More than anything the Innovation Lab provided a kind of values exercise, understanding what is meaningful to us about the work that we do. What our hopes and dreams are and how our work is going to affect the world around us. It has made us look more harshly at other aspects of our organization and say where we are not living up to those values.”¹

Innovation usually comes when change makes it inevitable. In 2005, Woolly Mammoth moved into their current purpose-build, award winning space: a 265-seater theatre. Founding Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz and his team decided that the education program that was inspired by the 52nd Street Theatre legacy had to give way to something new. Woolly’s bold risk-taking programming was often at odds with classroom agendas and the new geographical distance made the education system less sustainable (Gamble 2014).

Woolly has for decades been at the forefront of championing contemporary American plays and providing playwrights world-premiers that went on to be widely produced nationally. Yet over time the niche became the norm and new voices bringing new plays found the gates increasingly open, making the time ripe for a shift in vision towards a new goal. This was further enabled by the impending departure of the founding Artistic Director of 36 years. The inevitable shift in leadership allowed for moving his legacy in a new direction and consider what the next chapter should bring for the theatre.

It is also important to note that historically Washington, D.C. is a city where social innovation through music, arts and theatre had strong and vital traditions. An example of the local cultural earth from which Connectivity blossomed is Arena Theatre’s Living Stage.

From its inception in 1966, Living Stage was one of the first community outreach programs by US regional theatres. Living Stage’s commitment to working with the “forgotten,” led them to engage an unprecedented range of community partners. Through the course of their history, they engaged students with disabilities, students in the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods in D.C., inmates at Lorton Penitentiary and D.C. Jail, senior citizens, deaf students at Gallaudet, social workers, teachers, parents, and teen mothers, among others (Crowley 2019).

The parallel is valid because of the range of their partners, and because of their groundbreaking, improvisational and participatory methodology. Yet, while Living

¹ For more information about EmcArts Innovation Lab see Gamble 2014.

Stage is centered on creating theatre, Connectivity is centered on community conversation and is curated around the art. The Connectivity event is not performative, as a praxis it is typically extra-theatrical in all its beautiful diverse Methods. It aims to affect discourse, aid learning, and enrich the experience. Connectivity is also a “calling in” effort (vs an outreach program). It stays in the theatre building, it pulls the community in, and the invitation is sustained and radically inclusive. Calling in is also a Woolly terminology used in-house to encourage and support difficult conversations vs calling out. Their culture is clear: it is ok to disagree, it is not ok to disengage.

This open-mindedness is essential when we consider the exempla virtutis tendencies of the enterprise but unlike the Neoclassical artists who are depicted in ancient history as uplifting moral messages for the art-viewing public, Connectivity takes on the mission of setting high moral standards and collective expectations. It is not about artistic representation; it is an ongoing presentation of a shape-shifting platform. The performances remain bold, provocative, and risk-taking—the art is not the tool, but the messenger—Connectivity is there to deliver, deconstruct or elevate the messages for those who are willing to enter. It is not a practice of virtue-signaling, quite the contrary it is about virtue building, strengthening the ability to explore, discover and grow. As their updated mission statement declares:

“Woolly Mammoth produces courageous and invigorating new work to radically redefine theatre as a catalyst for an equitable, creative, and engaged society.”²

In his speech shared as part of the Citizenship and the Arts Talk series at the *National Innovation Summit for Arts & Culture* on October 22, 2013, Howard Shalwitz explains his ever-present desire to fuse the aesthetic with the civic—and looks to accomplish that initially within the plays (Shalwitz 2013). Then in 1990, they thought outside the stage and knocked on all their neighbors’ doors on 14th street in D.C. and asked them how “a bunch of theatre makers might be helpful”. From these conversations grew education programs and community partnerships. These started feeling misaligned after the 2005 move and in the 30st season in 2009, it was decided that they needed something new, so they organized a one-day workshop for affiliated artists, audience members and industry representatives entitled, *Who is in your circle? Theatre, Democracy*

² See <https://humanitiesforall.org/essays/goals-of-the-publicly-engaged-humanities>.

and Engagement. From this workshop, the notion of Connectivity emerged, and it was developed deeper and further through EmcArts's Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts

It is worth noting that in both instances the whole community participated in shaping the plans. Extended minds of the theatre's board, departments, supporters, and guests were thinking together. The innovative potential in both cases was expanded by using a conference room like a rehearsal hall and employing methodology in a devised process. Theatrical thinking and learning inseminated organizational orientation. These sessions—in the naïve, casual, knock-on doors near my stage and the transparent, democratic, thought-leader of an invitation—both point to higher forms of learning also, and contour practices and methods that can serve us well in arts management, internal communication, creative processes, and audience engagement alike. 'Who should be in the room for this?' is a humble powerhouse of a question that has enriched the culture of Woolly in many ways.

According to Howard Shalwitz, the most innovative decision was not to position Connectivity as a subset of marketing but as its own senior level department that is tasked to draw all other departments into a deeper conversation about the work that happens in the theatre. With time, as the process unfolded, the Connectivity Director accumulated the Associate Artistic Director role—blending the civic with the aesthetic making the founders dream come true and affirming connectivity as the essence of the theatre. Let us explore the concepts three main pillars; audience design, point of entry, and total audience experience.

'Audience design' implies that curating who comes to the theatre to see the show is as important as designing the stage or costumes. Who should see this play? Who should be heard in this conversation? Months before opening night the Connectivity Director will reach out to the stakeholders in the community, tell them about the play, and invite them to the theatre. In 2014, a year before *Cherokee* by Pulitzer Prize finalist and interdisciplinary artist Lisa D'Amour opened, Woolly held an in-house workshop (they also organize workshop retreats for intense development of world premieres) and Connectivity organized a 45-minute teaser presentation at 5 pm on their stage (they also have a rehearsal room, and many Connectivity events live in the lobby) where all departmental staff and ticketholders of the day as well invited as audiences could hear a scene by the actors and have an insight into how they prepare and their initial impressions about the world and the characters.

This helped collectively envision what sorts of events and collaborations might be possible as well. There was an embodied memory of seeing the event and this enriched conversations with the artistic team, colleges and ambassadors to see where they see the center of the play and the performance and who do they want to invite to the show. From these conversations, a plan for activities emerges. This is especially helpful in an ensuite system where the theatre will stage 30 consecutive performances. It is a challenge to land a rich understanding and language of the world. These efforts also create time for ideas from the box office staff to the marketing director to surface, discussions to occur and to build momentum early on.

Connectivity always organizes an open first read at the start of the typically four-week rehearsal period. Board members, underwriters and community partners will gather in the rehearsal hall (imagine this as a basement room with a capacity to hold 120 which used to have all glass walls on one side to signify transparency and openness even through its very architecture). Here stakeholders really get a sense for what this play will become on Woolly's stage: hearing the whole play voiced by the cast is typically preceded by introductions from the Artistic Director, Director or Dramaturg and the seeing design presentations from stage and costume designers. It feels bold and vulnerable at the same time, peeking behind the scenes but ahead of the crowds. The excitement is tangible in the room as the production takes its first breath and it is very satisfying to be given all the components in this deconstructed fashion and be able to build your own expectation out of these pieces of information.

In 2014, when *Marie Antoinette* by David Adjmi had its first read, one had a sense for the power of the play that had arrived in D.C. through the voice of the actors seated around the long, white, plastic table; many of them beloved local company members. But there was no foretelling where director Yuri Urnov was about to take production. The gift of Connectivity here again is time: come see a sapling and return a mere month later to witness in its full majestic, theatrical, technicolor bloom.

What Connectivity calls a Point of Entry, is also easier to discover and define in the light of these events and subsequent conversations. Even though all great plays offer multiple opportunities to engage, the goal is to find where the Woolly production's beating heart is, and the most burning topic that is important to the people. The 2011 production of *Oedipus el Rey* by Luis Alfaro served as a pilot project for Connectivity where the embedded conversation it uncovered

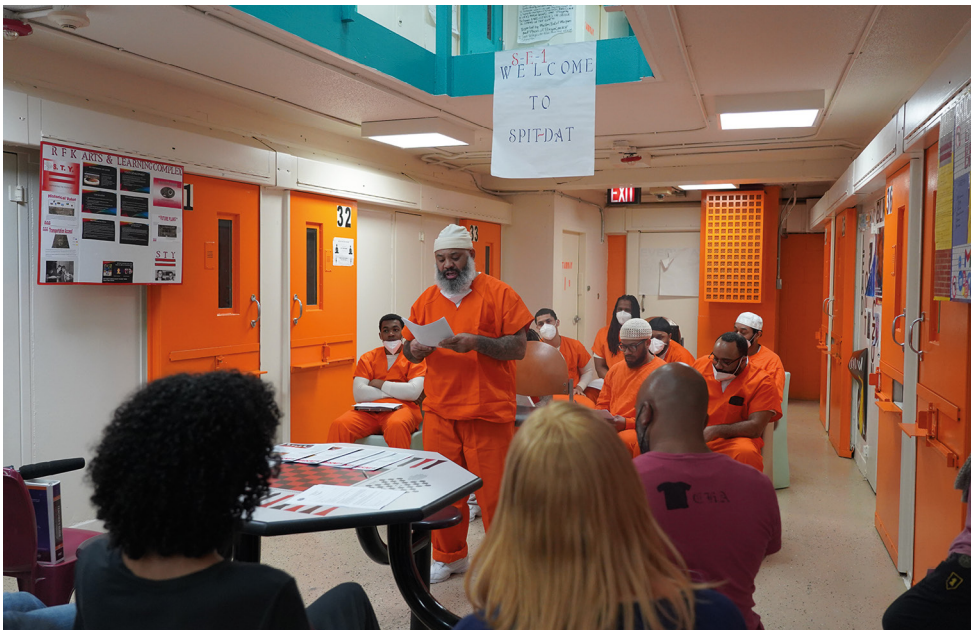


Picture 1. Woolly Mammoth, lobby activation (Photo: Kristen Jackson)

was recidivism. The play allowed space for this nationally important debate to be reframed by art. The conversation in *Oedipus el Rey* was centered on self-determination versus destiny, thus the entry point: “Can we break the cycles that drive our fate?”. Connectivity reached out to former inmates from local prisons, scholars of mythology, tattoo historians, and a transitions program at the YWCA. These perspectives were the catalyst for post-show conversations that focused on themes of the military, mental health, suicide, and family relationships, rather than the usual technical and production-focused conversations. The Connectivity prototype of *Oedipus el Rey* generated valuable lessons and reinforced the value of experimentation (Gamble 2014).

Total audience experience is thinking deeply about how people feel from the moment they get their first email, see their first poster, engage in social media, and enjoy the space before the performance as well as post show. The lobby is the centerpiece of this work—it will change with each performance, so the experience is immersive, so the curated journey begins before the lights go down.

In 2017, Woolly presented *Pike St.*, a one-woman show from writer-director Nilaja Sun. One of the characters in the play was a disabled daughter whose



Picture 2. Spit Dat (Photo: Kristen Jackson)

mother tried to keep her safe during New York hurricane. Connectivity chose to curate an exhibition in the lobby by local artists who were differently abled. Audiences could see not only the works but also photographs of the creators. It gave the community agency and access to worlds they might not enter and see. Considering the intersectionality of art and disability, this allows us to reflect on theatre as a space that can fuse civic and cultural function.

Nilaja Sun also held a workshop for Howard University's theatre students (she is an alumna). For those hours, she was both an artist activist and an artist teacher. The lobby was a school where young talent could see their trajectory from classroom to big stage all on their own and engage in embodied learning in the craft of building a one-person show. As "Drama in Education" practitioner-theorist Gavin Bolton asserts, theatre when used as pedagogy often aims for a "a change in 'felt value'...—in respect of me in the objective world." In training you obtain skills and competencies, and in so doing you have affective experiences that alter your perception of yourself in relation to the world. This theory of change is not deferred, no future action is necessary, as the change that happens is immediate, affective, and perceptual (Crowley 2020).

Core program are curated partnerships that share the space and the brand with smaller scale cultural enterprises. Spit Dat is the longest-running open mic in the American nation's capital and now is a resident at Woolly. All their events are free and open to the public. Investing in these relationships is mutually beneficial and lets theatre function as an interdisciplinary, intracultural hub. This type of programming also strengthens the whole city's cultural ecology not only by sharing resources with the most inventive and nimble enterprises but also facilitating new encounters, dialogue and creative cross semination between artists, audiences, ideas, and experiences.

Connectivity also positions the theatre as the house of life-long learning. A constellation of events and a variety of curated experiences cultivates the culture of inclusive pedagogy and invites us to consider theatre's status, role and potential in education. The eclectic mix of opportunities to engage allows for audiences who are given agency as community members, allies, and ambassadors to experience Woolly in unusual ways yet journey towards the same connected conversations and communal experiences around the art. The writing of the present article is also a manifestation of my status as an ambassador. Woolly inspires a group of people to build a network of D.C. area community members with connections to other arts and culture organizations, frontline service nonprofits, academic institutions, and policy think tanks, who care deeply about Woolly and growing our shared community. Ambassadors are asked to give their insights on plays, are given special discount codes to share with their networks, are invited to meet and feed-back potential new hires in management positions, are called upon to volunteer when the theatre needs an extra hand and find their own ways of connecting.

In conclusion, Howard Shalwitz remarked, "The long-term impact of Connectivity has been far greater than I anticipated. In the beginning, it was primarily a strategy for connecting more deeply with our community in order to motivate new groups of people to attend our shows and energize our audience. Over time, we learned that to do this with integrity, we needed to create a more authentic and trusting relationship between the theatre and our community. This meant reaching out more widely, listening to what community members had to say, creating genuine two-way relationships with community groups, and exploring new directions for the work on our stage. Connectivity evolved

from being an add-on activity to being the very heart of Woolly Mammoth's identity."³

The vision encompassed three key components: women, people of color and Connectivity were to become the beating heart and the driving force for Woolly's future. With the appointment of artistic director Maria Gonzales, under the leadership of Kirsten Jackson who now holds a dual role as Connectivity and Associate Artistic Director, the theatre seems to fully embrace, continually forge and live out an institutional identity that is true to the legacy of the institution, as well as the history of the place, where it stands in fierce and soulful conversation with the people of the day.

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³ Howard Shalwitz's personal communication.