

CHARLES DILLINGHAM

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Charles Dillingham was the managing director at Center Theatre Group from 1991 to 2011, where he supervised all development, marketing, administrative and financial aspects of Center Theatre Group. Prior to working at CTG, he was CEO of The Entertainment Corporation USA, presenting the Bolshoi Ballet, Bolshoi Opera, Kirov Ballet, Kirov Opera and Royal Ballet at the Metropolitan Opera House and on U.S. tours. He was executive director of American Ballet Theatre when Mikhail Baryshnikov was artistic director, managing director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music Theatre Company, general manager of the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, and general manager of the Westport Country Playhouse. He has served on the board of LA Stage Alliance and on theater advisory panels at the California Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts and on the Board of Arts for L.A.. He is a member of the Board of Councilors of the USC School of Theatre, and the Executive Committee of the League of Resident Theatres. He graduated from Yale School of Drama with an MFA in Theater Management in 1968, and graduated from Yale College in 1965.

How would you describe the relationship that you've had with artists and artistic directors over the course of your career?

CHARLES DILLINGHAM: Each one was very different. And they're also different because the job of being an artistic director has changed so much over time. It has been 40 years since I started working with Bill Ball and the whole industry of theater has changed remarkably. Even if Bill Ball and Michael Ritchie were the same kind of people, which of course they are very much not, the job has

changed so much that there would be a very different relationship.

The original concept of people like Bill and others who founded the regional non-profit theaters was, 'I'm going to take care of the art, and you deal with everything else—I don't really want to hear about it.' That didn't really work for a variety of reasons. As these organizations grew and became more institutionalized, more complex, and needed more money, the role of the artistic director grew and became more complex. They became more involved with fundraising and also became more involved with all the other aspects of the company.

This interview was prepared by Art Priromprintr, Managing Editor of the Theater Management Knowledge Base.

Artistic directors became much stronger partners, not only with the managing directors, but with the

partnership with their artistic directors over a variety of things, not just fundraising.



Photo: Craig Schwartz

Board of Directors and the staff in general. In the early days, artistic directors absolutely did not see any of their responsibilities as fundraising, and that's no longer true at all. Now that's only one example of how the job has changed, but it's certainly the easiest example to see.

Has your role as a manager changed as well?

I think that the partnership with the artistic director, in general, has grown to be a stronger partnership. I don't know whether it has grown in terms of the number of hours I spend with the artistic director, but the partnership has grown to be a stronger partnership. Artistic directors in the main—I'm generalizing now across a huge industry—are more trusting of their managing directors, are more interested in their managing directors' ideas about artistic choices, and managing directors are more supportive of artistic directors, and work in closer

You were at Yale School of Drama right at the beginning of Robert Brustein's time there, and his training for managers was to support and serve the artists that they were working for—that the manager's primary job was to create environments for the artists to do what they needed to do.

Absolutely. I think that's what the manager's job is in a non-profit theater: to create the best possible environment where the artists can do their best work. That does include finances, but it isn't only finances. My experience is that artists need enormous amounts of support. Artists are creating something that doesn't exist, and in many cases, they don't even know what they're creating. So the fact that many artists are anxiety ridden, nervous, and unsure of themselves is not very surprising. They need an environment that supports them, so that—at the same that they are trying to create

something that doesn't exist—they aren't having to be fighting a rear-guard action against management.

They need support from managers so that they know that management has their back. And that, in my opinion, is what a theater manager does.

What was the Theater Management program at Yale School of Drama like when you were there?

At the end of my first year, Robert Brustein was named the dean. My first year, there was no dean—there was an interim dean and it was a very difficult period. The following year, Brustein started a theater management program. I and a lot of people in other disciplines—a lot of technical design and production people, an actor or two, and some directors—took some of these classes. Very quickly in the first semester, a lot of us changed our concentration to management. We found that although we liked what we were doing in either directing, technical work, or acting, we had an aptitude for management and we wanted to go into it. So that's how I originally got into theater management.

Who was teaching the classes at the beginning of the department's time?

The head of the department was Herman Krawitz, who, interestingly enough had not worked in theater for a long, long time, and had not worked in New York in theater. He had worked in summer stock but in the olden days of summer stock, when it was a big business. Since the early '50s, he had been one of the number two people—an Assistant Manager—at the Metropolitan Opera. But he was a brilliant teacher. His outlook was to try and teach the principles of management, principles that he felt were applicable to all of the performing arts. The other major teacher was Harvey Sabinson, who was the leading and by far most active and successful press agent on Broadway. Among other clients, he was the press agent for all of David Merrick's shows every year. The two of them also brought in guest lecturers.

The other thing that happened when Brustein came was that they founded Yale Repertory Theatre. They had a managing director, but they didn't have

any management. So immediately, we were all running the Yale Rep without any real training at all! But that hands-on experience that is now such a big part of the program started right there in the first year.

They were basically preparing you to run theaters like Yale Rep then?

Yes, that was very much a strongly articulated goal of Robert Brustein's. He stood before the students many times and said in many ways, 'We are not training you to go to New York—to Broadway. We are training you to go out and work in the regional theaters.' There weren't the kind of non-profit theaters in New York that there are now, so all the non-profit theaters were the regional theaters. Several were being founded every year. It was a time when every city was starting a company, so it was a growing field, and he was very articulate—not just to the managers, but to the actors, the directors, the designers, and everyone else—that that was where they should plan to work. And all their training was geared to that, not to Broadway.

As students in the program, did you sense a need in the field for that kind of training and preparation?

I can't say we did—he pointed it out, and it was certainly in the news, but we were pretty busy. We didn't sit around and say, 'Oh my god, look they're starting a theater in Louisville, maybe we should work there!' It was only afterward that we really thought about our training in that way.

What did you feel like you were working towards while you were in the program?

I accepted that regional theater was the place to work. I never had any desire to work on Broadway. If there had been these other New York non-profits—it was only Lincoln Center Theatre at that time—I might have considered it. I had nothing against New York, I loved New York. But otherwise the kind of theater that I wanted to do was outside New York. The summer after I graduated, I worked at the Westport Country Playhouse as the managing director, which at the time was a summer theater. At the end of that summer I sent out about 20 letters—I sent a letter and my resume to any theater that I could get an address for. I only

got one reply, and that was from Lincoln Center.

Alan Mandel, who was the executive director or managing director there, interviewed me and seemed quite interested in my working there, but when he found out that I wasn't a member of ATPAM, which was the manager's union, he said that was a real problem. In those days, ATPAM was a very closed union. You had to take tests to get in, and you had to apprentice, you couldn't just get hired. It was very much against the labor laws, but they were doing it. There may have been other reasons that he didn't hire me, but there was that reason too, so I didn't get that job. What I did get through a different route, through the man who was the producer at Westport—James McKenzie—was a job as the general manager at the American Conservatory Theatre. So the first year-round job that I had out of Yale was the general manager at ACT.

Would you say that you had mentors or other figures who helped you at the beginning of your career?

Herman [Krawitz] was a brilliant teacher and a wonderful mentor, and Harvey Sabinson was the one who introduced me to [James] McKenzie and recommended me to McKenzie for Westport. So he was definitely a mentor. They were very open. I remember Harvey came up to teach at Yale on Saturdays, and we would almost always go out to lunch with him. The whole class, or as many people as could or wanted to, adjourned to a restaurant; we didn't continue the class, but certainly continued the discussion. And Herman kept regular office hours where anyone could come and talk to him. Occasionally, I would hitch a ride down to New York with one or the other of them, so I'd have two hours in the car with them also.

What was your relationship with Bill Ball like, at American Conservatory Theatre?

I had a very good relationship with him. Bill had been an enormously successful director in New York—off-Broadway, at the New York City Opera, and at Lincoln Center Theatre. He was the classic refugee from the New York theater. The regional theater was founded to some degree by people who had been successful in New York but didn't

want to work in New York, they wanted to find another way of working. A lot of the impetus in Bill's work was rebelling against what had been the accepted norm in the theater. Bill was an extraordinarily talented director, one of the most theatrical directors that probably ever worked in the American theater. If he had a vice, it was going over the top. McKenzie and I together replaced previous a administration that had not been successful and that Bill didn't trust. Jim and I were always extremely honest and extremely open with him. That was a new thing for him, and he responded very strongly to that. I had a very, very good relationship with him.

What were you honest and open about?

About finances, about the financial condition of the company, about budgets for shows, and about what we had the money to do and what we didn't. Prior to my coming there, the company had had a terrible financial crisis and had almost gone out of business. Bill had learned that he needed to pay more attention to his resources, that resources were not as unlimited as he had hoped. So my approach with Bill—and this has always been my approach with all of the other artistic directors—was to be very direct and very open and very honest about whatever the issue was at the time, and to give my advice but not expect it to always be taken. I never insist that my advice be taken; I just want to be heard before the decision is made.

You've worked in the theater and also in ballet. How is that artist-manager relationship different between the two?

In ballet, the relationship with the artistic director is a little bit different because ballet is such a very specific technique. You either know that technique intimately or you don't. If you don't, you're more of an outsider than you are if you aren't an actor or a director in the theater. But I found working at American Ballet Theatre to be very similar to the experience that I'd had with ACT, where we had a permanent company of actors, and also like when I was at the BAM Theatre Company, where we also had a permanent company of actors. In a ballet company, you have a permanent company of dancers. That's a huge artistic strength, but it's also a managerial challenge. People make a choice to

join the company, but once they're there, they kind of feel that they are locked in. There are some dynamics that grow up out of that, which have to be managed well. I found that the things that worked well with managing actors in those kinds of environments worked well with the dancers, too. I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it enormously.

I also enjoyed the touring—American Ballet Theatre tours all over the country—and it was a very successful time for the company in general. We had our problems, of course, but overall it was successful during that time. There was still something called the Dance Boom going on, which started in the '70s. Audiences were very responsive to ballet, so it was an exciting time to be there. Things are different now.

Many of the organizations that you have worked for were places where an artistic director was already established—certainly that was the case when you came to Center Theatre Group. But when Michael Ritchie became the artistic director of Center Theatre Group recently, you were the continuity for the organization. What was your role in managing the transition process?

A lot of my role was to explain to Michael what had gone before and what the situation was, trying to be very careful not to say to him, 'This is how we do it here.' He wanted to make his own decisions—and everyone wanted him to make his own decisions—but they needed to be made with the knowledge of what he was changing and what the consequences might be. A lot of my role was to be the informer of what the situation had been and how it had grown up this way. Often I agreed with him about what the problems were, and I almost always agreed with him about the decisions he made. But I wanted him to make those decisions with the full knowledge of what the background of each decision was.

As he took the reins and started to make his own decisions, how did you help the organization adapt?

There were times when people who had worked here, particularly people who had worked here a long time and had worked closely with Gordon, felt

that Michael's way of working was so different from Gordon's that they felt disconnected. So I would spend time with those people and try to sympathize with them on the one hand, but also help them get over that. Sometimes I would talk to Michael, and say, 'It would be a help if you'd sit down and talk to so-and-so, so-and-so is feeling isolated.'

A lot of it occurred during the period after Michael had been chosen and Gordon was still here and when Michael was here planning a new season and Gordon was here running an old season. And a lot of people would come to me and say, 'Well who am I going to go to for a decision?' And I said, 'Michael has nothing to do with this year, and Gordon really has nothing to do with next year.' That had to be repeated over and over again to a lot of people, one on one—even though I had said it in staff meetings. But they had to be reassured from me that if they went to Michael about next year, Gordon wouldn't come to them and say, 'Why didn't you tell me about that!' And Gordon was very good, he was very rigorous about respecting that. Gordon was terrific. And Michael never interfered with anything Gordon was doing during Gordon's last season. Once people realized that they weren't going to be whipsawed, everything ran very, very smoothly.

Would you say the institution that is Center Theatre Group is the same, or is it different now with another person in the artistic director role?

There are differences, but there would have been differences had Gordon stayed. I don't think there are any fundamental differences. For instance, Michael has made enormous changes in the way that we approach new play production and development, and also in education. But on the other hand, from the outside, we still have a major new play development and production program, and we still have an education program. So it depends on how you define changes. We're still producing theater in three theaters, but we're producing it in certain different ways. I would say in general, you could describe the organization as renewed and updated.

What were the challenges and some of the things that you have done with sustaining an organization as an institution?

A lot of my work in that regard has been with boards of directors: helping boards of directors strengthen themselves and grow in their capacity to support the organization. Obviously, support includes financial support, but that's not by any means the only kind of support that a good board can give. It has taken me a long time to learn how to do that, because when I started out at ACT, nobody had a clue how to deal with a board or grow a board. It was all trial and error. Now a good deal of attention is paid to board issues at places like TCG, but for many years, TCG paid no attention to boards. A lot of us had to figure this all out on our own, or by talking to each other.

So sustainability, then, stems from the board?

I think it's a key component. I don't know if there's any single key component, but it's one of the key components, and like other key components, if it's neglected, then the other components won't fall into place. A weak board, a poorly led board, will hold an institution back.

Advice in earned revenue, business advice, leadership in the community is a particularly important thing. Fundraising becomes increasingly important, but without leadership in the community, you can't raise any funds.

Were the board issues you worked on at the beginning of your career different from the board issues you deal with now?

Yes, partly because the people who come onto boards now have almost always had some experience on some other non-profit board. The people who came on to the ACT board, when I got there, didn't have any experience on non-profit boards, and they didn't have any experience on any board at all. A few of them had some experience on corporate boards, which was almost non-productive. Now, the kinds of people that are interested in spending their time, energy, and money on a board are usually people who have done this for other institutions. So you start out with a new member way ahead from where you did before. They know a great deal about the role of a good board member and what isn't the role of a good board member, whereas 40 years ago they

didn't. So in that sense it's easier. But on the other hand, it's not easier because the role of a board is more complex now: you expect more from them, you need more from them, etc. So you need to take them further.

So there's still plenty that you have to work with them and train them on.

Oh yes, it never ends. We have a board of 45, and every year we lose a few members for some reason or another. They may move away, retire, whatever, so every year we have to fill 4 or 5 slots—every year, 10% of the board! So it starts with finding the right people, and then orienting them to the company, and continuing to grow their interest in the company, finding out what committees they want to be on—it never ends, it never ends.

How would you describe the challenges that are facing arts organizations today? Have they been different at different times in your career?

I think the biggest challenge for the artists is to produce work that will resonate with audiences who have so many more claims on their attention. That isn't just all this plethora of entertainment, but just more claims on their attention than they had 40 years ago, starting with their Blackberries. Claims on their time *and* attention.

I think the biggest disappointment that I have is that the vision we all had 40 years ago for contributed income to come from a wide variety of sources, starting with the NEA, corporate, foundations, state and local governments, and individuals, has not materialized. We have gotten to the point where we are almost entirely dependent on wealthy individuals for our support. That's not healthy. I think that's the biggest challenge right now for a manager.

Why is that not healthy?

It's just that no one wants to have all of their eggs in one basket. Diversification, by its very nature, is healthy, and lack of diversification isn't—it's just riskier. We've just been through a terrible economic recession, and individual giving in the main—not just for us, but for other companies,

too—has remained remarkably strong. You could say it's not so unhealthy, it's a very stable thing.

I'm not suggesting that there's any inherent danger that they're all going to go away: I'm just saying that as a matter of principle, lack of diversification of income sources is not a good thing. In a commercial enterprise, any company that only has one source of income is completely dependent on that source of income, and if a competitor offers that one product at a cheaper price, the company will go out of business. So a company offers different product lines so that if one product line fails, they have others that will at least keep them in business.

As the range of sources has become smaller and, as you say, it's become a lot harder to diversify, where do organizations begin to look for more diversification? Is there diversification within these areas that organizations can consider as well?

Yes, there's certainly diversification of level. At Center Theatre Group, we have raised over \$1 million on the telephone—mostly from small to medium size givers, but once in awhile someone gives \$20,000 on the phone! So individual giving can be diverse in that way. But most of these donors are subscribers, and as it becomes harder to sell subscriptions, we start to worry that when somebody stops subscribing, they will stop giving as well. If you don't subscribe, you just don't end up going to the theater as regularly, so are they going to say, 'Well I don't go to the theater so much anymore, I think I'll give my money to the SPCA,' or some organization like that? It's a danger. We're not falling off a cliff yet, but it's a danger.

What is the burning challenge now, in your last year at Center Theatre Group?

We're doing a great deal of experimenting at the Kirk Douglas Theatre with audiences and ways of presenting art. I would say a lot of institutional focus is on that—it's challenging and it's also trying to meet the challenge. The work we're doing there with Douglas Plus is a big institutional focus, and we're right in the middle of it. It's a different way of interacting with our audiences and our artists, and

it's a big experiment for us. In terms of change, that is definitely the biggest focal point of change.

One of the reasons that two foundations are supporting this experiment is that they want to see if this will work out. If the experiment is a success, or to the extent that it's a success, they want to be able to disseminate that to the field. To the extent that it's not a success, they want to disseminate that too. We're innovating and we've had some successes and we've had some failures, now we're making some adjustments—we're moving forward. It'll take another, I think, three years to determine if what we're doing is going to have any real impact on the field or not. We hope it does, but it may not.

From your position now, what would you predict will be issues and challenges that will be faced in the field?

I think one issue is maintaining sufficient compensation for the artists who work with us. I don't think, in the main, artists who work in the regional theaters—and by artists I mean the actors, the directors, the designers in principal—are sufficiently well paid. I think if we're going to keep people working in this field, we're going to have to try to address that. I don't know how many people agree with me about that, but that's my view.

Are there things that you would like to have worked on, issues you wish you had seen to completion?

I wish the arts as a field had been much more successful at political advocacy—and I'm not blaming anybody for our lack of success. I think it's very important, but I personally never carved out enough time to be as active as I would have liked. By myself of course, I wouldn't have made much difference. I regret that the whole field of the arts, however big you want to define it, has not organized itself both organizationally and financially to be a player in the national debate about governmental priorities. I think we've been on the margins.

You mean advocating for funding?

Not only funding, but you get funding by placing yourself on the national agenda, which is a different thing from just getting funding. And that is a very long-term building process. I regret that we didn't undertake it when the opportunity was there in the '70s.

For example, the groups that rallied together to push through the Americans With Disabilities Act in the 1970s were successful at that because they made that issue a central part of the national agenda. The arts did not push themselves into the center of the national agenda the way they did, or to some extent even other groups did. The ADA eventually became one of the biggest pieces of social legislation in the history of the 20th century, but it didn't happen because Congress all of the sudden decided, 'Let's do something for people in wheelchairs.' It's now part of the fabric of life. You wouldn't think of opening a theater without all the accessibility features, leaving aside that it's the law—you just wouldn't do it anyway. But that wasn't true in the 70s!

When we came together in a national conference during the very early days of TCG, the agenda was to create or join with other organizations to create the American Arts Alliance, which was going to be a lobbying group in Washington. We were addressed by the folks who were starting to push for rights for disabilities groups, but we ultimately didn't do what they were doing. I'm not suggesting we're totally marginalized, but we're not as close to the center of the national agenda as we should be.