

## DAVID ROBERTS

*Conducted by Edward A. Martenson  
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*David Roberts is the Managing Director of The Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH). Prior to CTH, he served as Managing Director of The Pearl Theatre Company. Past producing and management credits include Associate Producer for SITI Company, Associate Managing Director and Company Manager at Yale Repertory Theatre; Line Producer for Sonia Flew at Summer Play Festival 2006; The Foundry Theatre's inaugural Producer's Chair Award recipient – a mentorship program, for his work as producer on Tarell McCraney's The Brothers Size, first presented at the Public Theater's 2007 Under the Radar Festival. Mr. Roberts holds a BFA in Acting from the Conservatory of Theatre Arts at Webster University and an MFA in Theater Management from Yale School of Drama.*

**EDWARD A. MARTENSON:** David started out with SITI Company with Anne Bogart, spent time at the Pearl in transition, and now he's with the Classical Theater of Harlem. I'd like to spend a few minutes on each from the point of view of: What have you learned? So, what did you learn at SITI Company? What was it like to be at an organization with a genius?

**DAVID ROBERTS:** Anne really is a genius, but she is also very humble and approachable. Her status as a theater legend didn't really enter into the room.

In my time there, there was a lot of conversation about producing versus management; and what is the difference; and what is the relationship to the art. I always said to myself that it's the marriage between the art and the business. But that's just the nutshell; there's no specificity in that.

I think one of my biggest lessons from that experience actually came during my interview at SITI. They were filling two positions and there was a very unconventional hiring and interview process. They ran it like they ran their rehearsal room or their teaching—for those of you who don't know, SITI Company is famous for the Suzuki method of actor training and the Viewpoints method of actor training. There was a room of maybe 25 people in a circle and we had to do these exercises together. It was fascinating. We just dug in. I thought, you know, "I have a 1-in-25 chance, we'll see what happens. What can happen? You can just be yourself." Anne told a story about how she is in the room with actors. There was an instance when an actor told her, "What do you want me to do?" She said, "It's really not my job to tell you what you do. It's not about what I want. Your role as the actor is to direct

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your role, flesh it out. My job as a director is to direct the play.”

For me, that was an aha moment about producing. That’s what my role as a producer is: to direct a healthy experience for the artist and the actors involved in the room—to make a good environment. The experience of the staff: to support the artist. The experience of the audience: to really be able to receive the artist’s work. To me, that articulated how all parties could be focused on the art.

We often talk about: “We serve artists.” I shy away from that. I can serve art. If we’re all in the room together serving the art, then we all have a role that we’re responsible for directing. Service to the same idea: that was one of the biggest lessons I learned. Then once I got the position—my role there was associate producer for general management and programs—I got to really help them develop some of their master class series, which was outside of their normal training programs. I got to co-curate that with Anne.

I really learned the value of company. Really, the centrality of the art was such a part of the DNA of that company. They ate it, breathed it, slept it. They had been together at that point for nearly 20 years. They had aged together; they traveled together; they created work together. It was very collaborative—capital “C” Collaborative. It’s a word that we sort of throw around a lot these days, but they actually build work from the ground up together. That’s because they have this shared dialogue; they have a shared history; and they have a shared vocabulary for creating work, so they can make work faster.

On the flip side of that—because it was such a tight family that I was entering into—it became difficult to gain trust. I also recognized the fact that the art was important, so I took it upon myself to take the training. I wanted to be in the room, and understand, and be able to articulate to the outside world or to the funders what is it that we are doing in the room. That connection with the art became key; it became a thing that they really respected. My training before grad school was as an actor and director. Then I spent some time in the nonprofit universe and philanthropy and development before

deciding to come to grad school. This idea that the art is married to the business was formative.

**SITI Company. You were there during the time when they worked on the grant from Doris Duke. So, there was a big change in the air about moving from itinerant existence to a home. How did that work out? How did that idea hatch?**

That idea hatched. It was in momentum when I arrived, so the grant had already been won. I think it came out of the company aging, and saying, “Well, who is our audience?” It’s very difficult to maintain a body of supporters for a dialogue across time when you’re an international and national touring company. Also, Anne is a single leader, and she’s a charismatic leader, and everybody recognized Anne Bogart, but nobody really recognized SITI Company and what it meant to be SITI Company. So core to that idea of expansion was to set down roots, to attract an audience in New York, and to attract a wider base of support amongst New York donors. It played itself out in hiring more staff, so that was my hire. There was a whole marketing element to it. There was an expansion of the training programs. SITI Company does a sit down in Saratoga Springs, New York, every summer and that has been part and parcel of their existence for the last 20 to 25 years. In fact, the name Saratoga International Theatre Institute is what SITI stands for. That was always a core piece of the program that brought the entire company together. The company members don’t just belong to the company: they’re out on Broadway, they’re out doing other not-for-profit, Off-Broadway shows; they’re doing regional shows. But the summer was the one time they could come together as a company, train together or train students, and work on the development of a new show. This idea of the Doris Duke Grant was to create a New York season and to create that visibility. So, part of my job was to really forge that relationship with—it’s New York Live Arts now, but it was—Dance Theater Workshop. We did—I want to say—two seasons there. It was a mixture of creating new work that the company had been working on. One of the great things about being a company and having that shorthand with each other was being able to bring things out of repertory, to revisit shows from the past. We don’t have Leon and Akiko, but we have Bondo, so let’s do Bondo’s one-man show

and revisit that. So, we did a mixture of things there at Dance Theater Workshop.

**For a while there was a proposition for Columbia and that didn't work.**

There was, there was. We proposed a partnership to Columbia. They have a theater there that is used off and on, sometimes with student work, sometimes with rented work. Anne has a long-standing relationship with Columbia. She's the Head of directing at their graduate program there. It seemed like a good match, but like any University there are layers of politics and of access, you know. What is the space to be used for? What does this partnership mean? What does this partnership mean to the mission of the Miller? What does this partnership mean to the mission of the school overall? All of those things came into play.

The undercurrents of all of this was—as a company, is Anne the only one who is the creative source of work? Those were some early conversations about this shared leadership model; and not a shared leadership model in terms of artistic director, executive director. The executive director that I worked under was Megan Wanlass, who's now at Cornerstone. She had been with the company as a stage manager, had worked her way through, and had become the managing director, and they actually changed her title to executive director. That was a great relationship and they had a shorthand.

The shared leadership model that they were considering was shared co-artistic directorship, internal to the company. There was much wringing of hands and consideration about what that meant: what that meant to the output of work, what that meant to the division of duties. This was the undercurrent: if we go to Columbia, and it's all about Anne, does that strengthen the idea? Does it tie us only to work that is generated through Anne, or does it give us more leeway? Anne was not a paid artistic director, so we could only have her when she was available: when we were doing shows, or maybe once a week, or once every two weeks. The idea—which has now come to fruition, by the way—was that there would be co-artistic directors from the company. Those co-artistic directors are now Anne and Leon Ingulsrud and Ellen Lauren. All of them or

both of them have been longtime company members

**What's the status of the whole idea?**

I don't know, but I will let you know because they've asked me back to their strategic planning committee. I'm very pleased to have been asked back. I did some initial strategic planning work, which they still reference. This goes back to what I was saying about gaining the trust of a particular organizational culture. Just from the three years that I was there, they felt like: you're in this for the long haul, and you're interested in what we do, and you're engaged in the mission and the work. I remained engaged in the mission and the work even when I chose to move on and I think that bears itself out from the fact that they've asked me to engage with them.

**My interest in the Pearl, to shift subjects, is that you engineered yourself out of a job. I think that would be a useful start.**

So, there is what is said on paper, right? The mission as stated and the mission in practice, right? It was an organization in transition. When I joined, the organization had made a commitment to move the theater to far West 42nd Street. The finances, at a glance, looked decent. Unbeknownst to me, they had not done a strategic, long-term plan around this move. It's my first leadership position. I'm like, "I'm all in, let's do it." It seemed very exciting to transition to a theater on 42nd Street—it was the Signature's old space—for their 30th anniversary season.

But there was no long-term plan for the viability of staying in that space, in my opinion. The rent alone was \$20,000 a month. For a \$1.5 million dollar organization, it seemed viable: "We have a plan. We have supporters." The artistic director, Jim Sullivan, was the first artistic director after a founder-led organization. The audience was pretty homogenous. The audience was also aging. These were all the uphill challenges that we had to face in taking the space to far west 42nd St. In terms of hardcore cost-cutting, we had to shrink our office space, get rid of our rehearsal space, make pay cuts. While at the same time, we had to ramp up staff for the actual theater, because when we were renting the City

Center, there was no need for a house staff or a ticketing system. It was all handled internally. In some ways, we were ramping up and in some ways we were ramping down. It was a crash course in leadership.

**So, how did you get yourself out of the job?**

How did I get myself out of a job? So, let's go back to the mission in practice versus mission on paper. They said it was shared leadership, but it simply wasn't. I reported to the artistic director and the board.

Jim resigned six months before I did. The board raised the longtime dramaturg up to interim artistic director, without any clear timeline as to when they would be filling the position of artistic director, and they did not want to try out a shared leadership model. I said, "That is within your purview as a board and I respect that. But let me tell you about my experience here, at the Pearl, and let me make some suggestions. I think that, given the cost cutting measures that you need to make, and given the culture of the place, you really want a producing artistic director—a single head. That's what you have money for. You don't want a managing director who is a co-leader of this organization, who is reporting to you; you want a general manager who's going to be doing the day-to-day business of executing those decisions made by the producing artistic director. With that, I'm willing to step down. I'm willing to help you find a general manager, whom you could get at a fraction of the cost that you're paying me. You can work directly with the interim or whoever you hire as producing artistic director." I encouraged them to do that before I left. I feel it's always important for leadership to not leave a place high and dry. I had adequate conversations with the board, with the staff members, with other partners, in terms of laying the ground and making all the information available; when I left, it was as stable as it had been.

**So, I'm just trying to keep track. In roughly five years after graduating, you had done at least one strategic plan, probably three. And you had done partnerships. You had done real estate deals, you had launched a conservatory. You hired people, you fired people. You raised their salaries, you lowered their salaries. You did a lot of stuff.**

Yeah, I'm exhausted.

(laughter)

**Well, the point is obvious. That brings us to Classical Theater of Harlem.**

Sure. Let me close out the Pearl piece. What I learned there was that it really has to be about match.

I was familiar with the work of Classical Theater of Harlem. I was familiar with, but didn't know personally, the artistic director. I knew its impact on the community. I had seen their productions years and years ago. I had lived in Harlem for a year. So, in many ways, it was a known quantity to me. As I got to learn more about where the company was, and as I got to know Ty Jones, the artistic director, I was more and more convinced that not only do I have the skills, but I can really connect to how they're trying to impact their community. That was key for me.

The diversity on their board was key for me, though we still need to work on gender diversity. But cultural diversity on the board is really solid. It's that thing that Joe Papp said about the Public Theater: that it should look like the New York City subway. That's what the stage looks like there and, not only that, we're working on the board and the staff.

People think, "Oh, it's the Classical Theater of Harlem, so it's a black theater." While primarily our lens is through the African and African American diaspora, that's not what it is exclusively. If we're the Classical Theater of Harlem, we have to be all three of those things: we have to be classical, we have to be theater—not film or dance—and we have to be in Harlem. Harlem has a cultural richness and history. With what is happening socially and culturally in Harlem and in many historically Black neighborhoods around the country today, especially with gentrification, to put down a cultural marker like the Classical Theater of Harlem says something. It's not just: how much are we paying artists, or how many jobs are we creating in the neighborhood, but also, how many kids get to see themselves reflected on stage, in a cultural context that makes sense to them, and have a chance to connect to Henry V or

Amiri Baraka? Redefining what a classic is—expanding what it means—is very important to us. We do all of the Western canon: we do the Greeks, we do Shakespeare. But we assert that there are modern classics and they are coming straight out of the African and African American tradition. We recently did a co-production with the National Black Theater for the 50th anniversary of *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka and it was fantastic. It was fantastic to be in that historic space. It was fantastic to do that play a few short months after Baraka passed away. It was expertly executed. We did not sell a lot of tickets, even though it was critically acclaimed. It's a hard piece; it's a dark piece.

We're also in a growth period. It was founded in '99. It was led by its founders until 2009. At that point the economic downturn really uncovered the financial weaknesses and financial mismanagement. It came to the point where the board and the founders parted ways. That is when Ty took over the company, both as artistic director and chair of the company. He built the company back up from the ground up. In some ways, working with him is like working with a founder-led organization because he essentially had to rebuild this brand. Ty built the brand back up by creating a free reading series to make sure that folks in the industry as well as the public knew that the brand was still alive and still producing. It was all about producing within capacity. He also launched an education program called Project Classics, where he and teaching artists went into low-income housing developments in Harlem and offered free theater-based training to students in those developments. We have since expanded that into after-school programs, and this past year we got our first New York City in-school program.

Three years ago, he instituted a Shakespeare in the Park Uptown or Uptown Shakespeare in the Park, which is that Marcus Garvey Park—there is a 1,200 seat amphitheater, the Richard Rodgers Amphitheater. This was the first time there was a sit-down company for a three-week run, free and unticketed. The Parks Department said, "Well, we don't think it's going to be successful, but why not? We'll give you a chance." Of course, the neighborhoods all came out because the quality of the work was so good. There was also a hunger to not have to travel downtown. 10,000 people came that first summer,

for 21 shows. 10,000 the next summer. This season we did *The Tempest*. The Public was also doing *The Tempest*. We had 12,000 people—our biggest success to date, and we were favorably reviewed. Ty said, "We're here to complement the summer season, we're not here to compete." We could never compete with The Public. We have great friends there, and we've partnered with The Public in the past. But when you see what kind of funding they get as a large institution, and you see what kind of funding we get as a small institution that's diverse—primarily run by and featuring people of color—you have to ask yourself some questions. When our production cost \$250,000 and theirs cost \$2.5 million, you have to ask yourself some questions about what the funding environment is willing to support, and for whom, and why. Those things have to be addressed. Our job, Ty's job and my job, is to maintain quality. We have to keep art at the center of what we're doing. When we can demonstrate quality and impact, then that just strengthens what we can do in the future.

**Let's open it up.**

**STUDENT: You talked a little bit about funding for The Public versus Classical Theater. I think there is a big conversation about how funding flows for predominantly white organizations and organizations of color. Can you talk a little bit more about what you see as Classical Theater's funding priorities or how to shift those priorities for funders?**

Diversity is on the tips of everybody's tongues, and rightfully so. Who's on stage, who's on staff, who's in the boardroom, who are the stakeholders? I think that diversity should be reflected in our institutions, and there should be a voice at the table. We're having diversity initiatives at some of the mainstream organizations, where there are more opportunities, and barriers are being broken. But I also think there's a need for culturally-specific organizations. It's a question of: what is our niche, and what is our competitive advantage in terms of being a culturally-specific organization?

In the arena of funding, though, there are a lot of diversity dollars going around. "We want to expand our audience, we want to reach out and include more students." But it's difficult for an organization

such as National Black Theater or MaYi or Classical Theater of Harlem to go after those dollars, because my audience is already 55% Black and 35% White and 2% Asian and 10-12% Latin American. I've already achieved the goal of the grant, so I'm no longer competitive in that pool of money. Moreover, I'm going to continue doing those shows whether or not I get funding from that pool, so that's a hard question that folks in the funding community really have to address.

**STUDENT: I'm wondering, too, how might partnerships between predominantly white organizations and culturally-specific organizations help shift those dollars? Because they're going toward predominantly white organizations.**

I don't know that it's the responsibility of those organizations. I lay it at the feet of funders and philanthropy. I think that there's room for a dialogue between organizations and certainly for service organizations like ART/New York or TCG to really shed some light on that, but for the individual theaters, I'm not sure.

**STUDENT: Where has your focus on development been? Individual donors? Or have you seen growth since you've been at the company?**

There has been growth since I've been at the company. You all may know that the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York City is the single largest funder of the arts in the U.S. It's bigger than the NEA. We lean on that, but those fortunes rise and fall depending on where the markets are, who's your program officer, and whether the funding focus of any particular foundation has changed. My director of development and I recognized growth opportunity in the areas of corporate support, individuals, and earned income, but that's not development. Without a marketing person, a lot of the development is tied to the marketing. Ty is a great fundraiser. He's the best salesman and the best advocate for our brand. An artistic director who not only likes but is good at fundraising is your best friend because they can really talk about the art.

The short answer to the question is: yes, we increased contributed income. Because we are in a more working-class section of New York, and unapologetically of our neighborhood, the

philanthropy is different. You have to work at the philanthropy across all levels. You have to engage with folks who want to volunteer, you have to move them up the ladder of participation. You have to develop a real sense of ownership of the work.

**STUDENT: You talked a little bit about this already, but I think that there's a belief that individual funding is always a challenge for culturally-specific organizations. I think you were talking a bit about how to expand that.**

I think it is difficult, but it's difficult for every organization. Have you all read *An Invitation to the Party*? That is the biggest thing: people need to know that they're invited in, that they're a part of this community, that there's some ownership over the work that is being created or presented. People want to be sure that you're not just an interloper, that you're not just there for a quick donation. Having been there for 15 years, but also having been a presence in a very visible way over three summers, where we served 35,000 people and impacted foot traffic, I think people are getting the message, and they appreciate it. We also forged relationships with local businesses. So while we haven't been able to get traction with corporate donors yet, we decided to pilot small local businesses in the Harlem community, so those small local businesses act as amplifiers to our message. In turn, we let our audience of 12,000 know about your business. That starts to build a network of stakeholders.

We do have elected officials on our side. We have Harlem Development Corporation on our side. There are a lot of people who are rooting for us.

There was this one kid over the summer who would come by on his bike. He would say, "Can I watch the show?" I would say, "It's free. You don't have to ask." He said that people were donating, but he didn't have any money. I said, "It's free, it's all right, you don't have to donate." The next night, he came back. He had found two pennies somewhere and was so proud that he was able to participate. It was sort of breathtaking. Not only that, but he was watching Shakespeare three days in a row, which was great.

**STUDENT: You don't have a marketing person, right? What are some of the things you do to attract the community to that play?**

Ty likes to say that we're a 21st century theater company. We lean heavily on social media, e-blasts, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We also rely on the company of artists to be ambassadors. We usually do posters and postcards, and by building that network of local businesses, we now have them distribute all those materials. Word of mouth.

We recently partnered with the Apollo. That was the first time I've had the benefit of that much advertising and visibility. The brand recognition was amazing. That was a ticketed show, so there was earned income. The impact of that was amazing. It was a small house and we sold out the run. But the buzz about it—being able to see your company's name in the subway advertising—that was amazing. We were on radio spots. A lot of that was subsidized through our partnership with them.

**STUDENT: Logistically, what is it like to work in a smaller company with a smaller staff? What does your day look like?**

I've worked with three small organizations. It's challenging. Everybody wants more resources. The whole thing about wearing multiple hats is real. You have to build leadership at all levels of the organization, because you're too small not to. I don't have enough time or resources to train an intern for three weeks and then have him turn around and leave in three days. I also need folks who have some drive, so I try to empower them and encourage their ideas. Certainly, if they don't have to be managed at every moment of the day, then that expands what I can do.

It doesn't have to be crisis to crisis. Sometimes it is—but it doesn't have to be. You find a way to do it. Sometimes it means extra hours, sometimes it means leveraging those other resources you do have on hand. It means calling my colleagues in the field and getting recommendations, or being creative about what can be volunteer-run. It's about using social media to shout out to the folks who were in our shows for two, three, five seasons, but are now on Broadway. They'll help amplify our message

when we need it amplified. It's about expanding the family.