

LEADING THE ACTORS THEATRE A CONVERSATION WITH MATTHEW WIENER

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Matthew Wiener is Producing Artistic Director of Actors Theatre of Phoenix, which he has led for the last eleven of the company's twenty-one years. It performs a six-play season at the Herberger Theater Center in downtown Phoenix, and aims to "present passionate, thought-provoking theatre designed to add to the social dialogue of the community." Actors Theatre is the leading alternative to the much larger Arizona Theatre Company. This conversation followed an earlier discussion of the Rand Corporation's 2001 study for the Pew Charitable Trusts,¹ which said mid-size arts organizations were experiencing much greater difficulties than larger and smaller ones and would continue to do so. We wanted to explore what that experience looks and feels like in a comparatively successful mid-size organization, and Wiener was extremely generous with his candor.

—Edward A. Martenson

Can you identify the moment when Actors Theatre shifted away from being a start-up and began to be concerned with building a solid organization? Was it a moment of decision or was it unintended?

It made that switch when the founders, my predecessors, made the decision to leave. I think there was a recognition at that point they had taken the company as far as they could, and that they were tired. And for the company to take the next step forward, it would need different leadership and a different kind of model and structure. Up to that point it was really was kind of a ma and pa operation. The budget was very small and the compensation was very low. The board and the outgoing leadership wanted the company

to grow and prosper, but I think they recognized they were at a plateau and the company needed a change. So when I was interviewed for the position it was with the clear expectation of growth. It was the transition of leadership when the company collectively decided to go from a small company to a mid-size company.

You characterized it a minute ago as small, but also low in compensation.

Before I took over the company, it had a traditional structure of an artistic director and a managing director. But when I was hired we collapsed those two jobs into one; combining those two salaries together barely made one reasonable salary. And everyone was getting paid very, very little at that

Edward A. Martenson prepared this interview as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described.

point, and there were no benefits of any sort. And so, yes, I mean, in that moment of changing the leadership, we started changing the compensation structure. We put in health benefits at that point, and standardized the entire human resources structure.

Is Actors Theatre big enough to run its own HR system?

The full-time people who work here don't really work for Actors Theater. Technically, they work for an employee leasing company. They handle our payroll, our taxes, and do all of our filings. Because the employee leasing company has thousands, or tens of thousands of employees, we qualify for much, much better insurance rates. Our primary benefits are still just health insurance, but employees can buy into benefits that we are not able to self-administer. They also provide some limited human resource advice; we gave them our handbook and they reviewed it and made some suggestions. Basically, the day-to-day management still lives inside the company.

I just want to make sure I understand what you were saying before, that the founders chose to leave at a point when they felt they were tired and couldn't take the company any further.

In fact, of the original group of founders all but two had already cycled off the Board and out of the company. Originally, the Board was a kind of insider board and part of the transition was to make a community-based board. Before the transition it was a Board primarily of theater lovers, and now we're trying to get more community leaders. It was a very peaceful transition, and my predecessors were very supportive.

Originally it was named the Actors Theatre because the founders included a number of actors. Does the name still have significance?

Yes. We still are an actor's theater more than a writer's theater or a director's theater. And there still is a desire to work primarily with the local acting community. When this company was founded you virtually had to live in a certain zip code to be able to work here as an actor, but they did employ directors from outside of the area. I

relaxed it a bit when I took over, but probably 80-90% of our casting still is from the local community.

Am I hearing between the lines that in the beginning the impetus for this had something to do with a reaction to the Arizona Theater Company, the major LORT company in town?

Yes, that's exactly right. I think there were people who recognized there was a talent base here that was not able to stay employed through the major company at the time. And that was definitely one of the impulses behind it.

Was the programming distinctive compared to Arizona Theater Company?

It was distinctive in that we primarily did small cast plays, and it always featured performers, rather than writing. They actually did have a small company of resident actors at one time, and a lot of the programming was designed to employ these actors in the course of the year. That was certainly gone long before I got here.

Has the nature of the programming changed over the years?

I would say that the work that was being done in the beginning was often sentimental, often romantic, often very interested in the psychology of the characters. In this respect, it was like Arizona Theater Company, only smaller. When I got here, we did try to create uniqueness and distinction by shifting into a more politically aware perspective, as opposed to the psychology of the characters. I mean, people have called our work edgy and provocative (at least for Phoenix). Previously, we did a lot of living room dramas, but we do very few of those now. We like to provoke dialogue about things that occupy the community's attention. For example, we commissioned a play called the *Arizona Project* that was basically about land development in the Southwest, the growth/no-growth dialogue that is certainly one of the most controversial issues in the Phoenix area. We've done plays about immigration, and we are only a couple of hours from the Mexican border. Generally, I think the work now is more community oriented – our community.

Are there other ways in which Actors Theatre is different from Arizona Theater Company?

I no longer feel like we are in reaction to them. We are now just another piece of the cultural puzzle. But we perform in a 300-seat theater, which creates a very different sort of intimacy from their much larger space.

Does that mean the audience is different?

We have developed an audience that is looking for work that is provocative and progressive. It allows us to do shows that are adult in nature. We have made a decision, which is contrary to a lot of common wisdom, I suppose, about getting into the education world. We do not do work that is appropriate for children. We do not do student shows anymore. We do an annual production of *A Christmas Carol*, which originally started out as kind of the cash cow, in a derogatory sense, but we rewrote it a couple of years ago to be a story about how it is possible to change our own lives, and in doing so change the lives of those around us. I mean, that's a very powerful political statement. But that is generally our only piece that is appropriate for children.

May we focus again on the changes you made to develop the organization?

I kind of like to say is that there was no "here" here. We bought the company's first fax machine in 1995. There was a computer that was as big as a desk and as old as my grandmother. So we made a lot of investments in technology with the idea being that to be small – and good – we had to be highly efficient. We designed our own custom database to handle all of our ticketing—all of our subscribers and donors. Though we wanted to remain small, we still had to increase staffing. When I first got here I think there were like two or three full-time people and three or four part-time people. And now, we have about 12 full-time people. We had some facility issues at the beginning. We were in donated office space and donated shop space, a situation that couldn't last forever. So we started to have to pay our way in the world. The late 90s were a go-go time here in Phoenix, and we were able to attract new funding sources. The budget went

from \$500,000 to \$800,000 to \$1 million in just three years.

So a lot was happening at once. How did you juggle all of that?

There was so much remedial work to do we tried attacking everything at once to just raise the general level of operations. Then we got into the stabilization program that National Arts Stabilization ran for mid-size organizations within about 18 months of my arrival here. Many of the changes were going to happen with or without the stabilization program, but the stabilization program gave us a framework, a structure, a timeline in which to approach different problems. It gave us some expertise to bounce issues off of that we would not have had otherwise. And the program was most effective in terms of helping to shape board policy and also guiding us in our first real strategic planning process. For the most part this company had grown by opportunity, not by plan. And that strategic planning process still has remnants in terms of how we think about the company and its place in the community. So that was a very profound impact.

The things you've described sound great, but they also are absorbers of time and money. What price have you paid for all of this progress?

Right. And I think that resources are the biggest challenge that we face. Our artistic ambitions and our community ambitions are not easy choices in terms of funding. Arizona is a conservative environment, and the business community here, especially since 2000, 2001 has been hollowed out in terms of leadership. There are virtually no corporate headquarters left. There were tax cuts happening left and right during the good times, and the state government is on the model of less-is-good. Arizona ranked 50th out of 50 for public spending on mental health. Our education system is embarrassing. There's just so much safety net that has been eroded away at the state level, and exacerbated, of course, at the federal level. We used to be able to say "Thank God for Mississippi." And now, we can't even say that anymore. So there are fewer and fewer services being provided by the government, and more and more social and human services needing to be picked up by the private

sector. That has scared the philanthropic community a little bit, support for community-building is not primarily going into the arts or culture; it goes to other areas, which are incredibly needy. And so, our ability to attract resources is extremely limited. So how does all of this impact Actors Theatre? It creates a kind of position of constant poverty, of ongoing unfulfilled needs.

Is that constant poverty manifested in smaller cast sizes or restrictions on programming choices? Or is it just taken out of your hide in no sleep and no family life? How does the poverty manifest itself?

We have been pretty good about not letting it impact the programming and the work onstage. But I think the administrative staff and the production staff work very hard here. I know people work hard everywhere, but we are way understaffed and we ask an awful lot of our employees. And, yes, I think it has a human toll. It's hard for us to attract good employees because the situation is extremely challenging. It's hard to offer someone a job and offer them a nice salary and say, and we think we'll be able to pay you the whole time. We are proud to say we've never missed a payroll and we've always paid our taxes and we've always paid our insurance. But it was a bit close at times--very, very close. And--but it takes its toll on everyone. It is a constant struggle. It's almost like struggle has become normalized.

Do you feel like you're moving forward at all? Or is the struggle to maintain?

Primarily the struggle is to maintain. We're able to move forward, but in very small steps, and in very isolated ways. The struggle takes its toll on a personal level. I think that in some ways a company of this size may be a young person's game. One of the values that this company has is economic dignity for the people who work here. So according to the TCG salary surveys, we're above average for companies of our size. It has proved to be more cost effective to pay people more and ask more of them than to try to increase the number of staff members. We try very hard not to have the artist and the arts workers here be the primary underwriters of our company.

Is burnout a threat? Is the turnover rate high?

For the past few years, the turnover rate has been high. And it is both burnout and frustration that leads to that.

And the frustration is . . . ?

Being asked to do too much, with too little, for too long.

So that leads back to your comment about it being a young person's game.

Right. And yet I feel very strongly that one should be able to have a dignified life in this field. One of the reasons we're financially stressed is that we have paid people more than we can afford to pay them. I think that is one of the changes that happened 11 years ago when we said, okay, you can work here and make a living, as opposed to work here and be a quasi-volunteer. It was that sense of professionalizing, of being able to pay people enough to ask them to make a life here.

What about the finances?

Through the '90's we were funded to a very large degree by local foundations, especially one particular foundation that had a strong focus on the arts. In one four year period we received close to \$800,000 from them. We were in this accelerated growth mode, at anywhere between 10 and 30% a year. We were selected to participate in the stabilization program for mid-size organizations run by National Arts Strategies. Our budget rose to \$1.4 million. We got current by the end of the '90's, and put aside a working capital reserve fund to cover cash flow needs. But that money wasn't supposed to be spent, and we weren't prepared for the setback when this one particular foundation and others shifted their focus away from the arts, towards education and biotechnology, for example. Since 2001 we've never received another dollar from this particular foundation. . We had been growing regularly on the strength of these large multi-year foundation grants, and then they just stopped and we didn't adjust fast enough. All you need is one 12-month period of continuing to grow while not getting the money and you've got a problem. So we borrowed to cover the shortfalls,

and by the time we cut back, we had already accumulated some debt. So looking at the last ten years, we were growing and in great shape for the first half and making deficits, accumulating debt, and cutting back in the last half.

Is the debt service a noticeable number?

The debt service is getting to be more and more of a burden. It's not just the money we pay out, but it feels like waste because we get no current value back from that money. I think it's also the psychological weight of the debt. It's kind of like, how are we ever going to pay that off? We can actually maintain the debt service. But how we're ever going to reduce the debt is a question that has been bouncing around for a couple of years between me and the Board. And we've tried several different things that didn't quite go the way we had hoped. It's hard to be aggressive from the position of so much scarcity. We had to drop the budget down to \$1.2 million to get our feet back underneath us, and last year we actually did end in the black, which was pretty remarkable. We had no Development Director and no Marketing Director.

You talked about the frustration as constantly trying to do too much with too little. Is it possible to identify some of the things that you would reasonably like to do that you cannot do?

I am still forced into very small cast shows. I would prefer to have more resources for sets and costumes, but it's really the number of bodies.

So what's an example of a play you can't do because of cast size? Or do you even allow yourself to think about it?

I don't usually think about it. I mean, that's part of it. It's become this kind of self-censorship that goes on. The limitations become the norm, and I negotiate with myself below the norm.

What other things come to mind?

One of the main things that Artistic Directors do is to curate, and like many companies I curate along the lines of artist and repertoire. I also curate along the lines of community issues and community ideas, trying to track along with the stories on the

front of the local newspapers. But we don't have appropriate staff to really engage the community in the themes and ideas of the plays beyond what's on stage. We would like to be doing a lot more community dialogue, to make the connection between the plays that we do and our lives on the streets. And I think that because we can't do that, we're really only able to take our mission partway. The halfway that we go, we are very good at. We are really good at putting work onstage. But in terms of talking with the community, that's a part of the infrastructure and development that we've been severely limited in.

If you had resources to fund the things you've described here properly, what would the budget be? Double?

No, not that much. Somewhere between \$2 and \$2.5 million.

At that level, do you imagine that you would have equilibrium of a sort?

There would be a better match of ambition and resources.

So in the mismatch between your resources and your ambitions, you're roughly \$1 million short. \$2.5 million doesn't seem like a lot of money compared to what you accomplish already, and it would still be a budget of relatively modest size. But it's a long way from where you are. How does that feel to you? How do you manage to keep spirits up, for you and everybody else?

I think your question is "the" question in a way. And I have to say the past few years were very depressing. When the economy stopped doing so well the resources were driven to the main organizations and the secondary level organizations got squeezed. The deep mismatch between ambitions and resources gets very old. I felt we were trafficking in scarcity. I was focusing so much on the deficits. I have a family now, and I had to make this work. It got to be about a job. There definitely were times when I would just as soon not have come to work, which is very unlike me and probably very unlike most theater artists, certainly artistic directors. I had gotten into a rut. I was aware of it, and recognized it as a problem.

What did you do about it?

I got some personal counseling and attended some professional development programs, and I was able to re-find the energy to jump once more into the fray. I decided that maybe there was a way things could change, that we could still make a difference if we found a new way to think about things. The Board leadership is engaged in a new way, which has given me a lot of hope. I was able to hire one or two new staff members who are wonderful and will be able to help this company move towards goodness. Now, I think I try to find abundance in many different places, perhaps not the checking account, and try to stay focused on the possibilities.

Don't the majority of resources go to the organizations that you call the "main" ones even in good times.

I think you're right. The perceived value often has less to do with a vision for a community's arts and culture ecology than it has to do with civic pride in the most prominent institutions. If the symphony or ballet or opera were to close that would make the city look really bad. And it would look worse for Phoenix if the Arizona Theater Company were to close than if the Actors Theatre went away.

One way of interpreting everything that you've said is that you're actually over-performing in relation to your resources.

I believe that is totally true. I often say that we work over our heads.

The spirit that motivates people to do that, more often than not, comes from one or two people.

Yes. I think that's true, but I also think that the staff, especially our production staff, have institutionalized the idea of doing more with less and take great pride in their ability to do it.

Hypothetically, suppose you found yourself reaching the same point your predecessors did of saying I can't take this another step forward and it's time for me to move on. How destabilizing would that be?

In this company? Today? Totally. I tried to address that a few years ago when we hired a managing director. But that didn't work out. And by then we were so far in debt that we couldn't hire another one. If I were to leave and someone else was to come in, it would take a very nimble act of transition for this company not to stumble. Over the past 11 years I have developed a skill set that allows me to operate in this environment, to know how to do the things that need to get done despite the limitations. We have evolved to a level of sophistication and complexity beyond what the resources should pay for, without creating the kind of infrastructure to really support it completely. I think it would be very hard for one person to come in and immediately be able to manage all of that. So I would say that a couple of positions would need to be created. I think our expenses would go up significantly.

In that same hypothetical spirit, what would be your logical next career step?

I wonder about what would happen to me if I leave. What could I do? I mean, I have invested now 20 years of my life in this field and 11 years in this company. I'm identified with it, and it's identified with me. I like living in this community and I'm raising a family here. I have strong ties in this community now. If Actors Theater was to go away, I don't know that I could stay here. But the path that my career has taken has led me away from the major art centers. I mean, industry people don't come and see work in Tucson and Phoenix like they do in many other cities. So my work as an artist hasn't been seen and is not very well known. And because of the demands of the job I have not traveled very much. I have not worked in many other theaters or many other cities. So I'm curious – not just for me – what happens to the people who are in the mid-size companies when they're done. I fear that not-for-profit theater at this level is a young person's game in terms of the energy it needs, that when we are at the height of our experience we may not be able to keep going, that there's no logical career step at that point.

The head of a relatively large organization told me the thing that made it so successful was that resources had grown in a way that made it comfortable for the best people to stay because

there were always new opportunities to offer them.

Well our field may be one that uses people up instead of cultivating them in that way, at least in this mid-size territory we're talking about. If your organization isn't properly funded how can it keep up with its people's needs for personal development, the development of their talents and skills and so forth. What new opportunities can be offered after 5 or 10 or 20 years, if the organization itself can't grow?

Taking us out of the hypothetical realm, how do you realistically see the future of the company? Do you see it continuing to exist in the constant struggle to maintain you've described, or is there light at the end of the tunnel?

I think there's some light at the end of the tunnel. There is a shift in our environment that has to do with the revitalization and growth of downtown Phoenix. We've just passed a \$900 million bond issue that will initiate an awful lot of planning and development in the downtown area. ASU is building a campus down here where they're going to have 20,000 students in the next few years. The University of Arizona is building a medical school here. There is a resurgence of residential development in a new way - I mean, people are building high rises for the first time. For 11 years I've been downtown shouting "where is everybody" and now they're coming. This new downtown population will energize the creative community. They are very much talking about people with higher learning. They are talking about young people who are going to want to consume arts and culture of the nature that we offer. I think there is a growing recognition now that arts and culture is an

important economic driver and an important quality of life component, and that Phoenix is trying to reinvent itself in terms of a 21st century city. I don't think that all of these highly educated people are going to want to go see "Bye Bye Birdie" very often. I think that the kind of work we offer will be interesting to them. And there is more and more dialogue now about creating some kind of ongoing public funding mechanism for the arts. I think the right population is coming, and maybe the money, too, but the question is can we hang on until it gets here.

As you said earlier, maybe this is *the* question: to what extent does the constant struggle to maintain imply a closed ended situation. So it's great that you see some light at the end of the tunnel. Your description of that is compelling, and I can see how that could keep you coming to work every day.

Yes. But I wonder if that is unique to our situation in some ways. Maybe not. Maybe every city starts to reinvent itself at some point in time, as Phoenix has begun to do. It is such a young community, a post-1960s city. So the opportunities we have are associated with being in a young community. It has the ability to change, but the downside, of course, is that there is no ingrained structure of leadership, no ongoing institutional giving. The small number of theater companies means that differentiation is not that hard, but there's no critical mass to constitute a real arts community that pushes itself creatively. So I see this all the time, our greatest asset is our greatest liability.

ⁱ McCarthy, Kevin F., Arthur C. Brooks, Julia Lowell, and Laura Zakaras: *The Performing Arts in a New Era*. (Chapter 6: Characteristics of Performing Arts Organizations). Rand 2001.