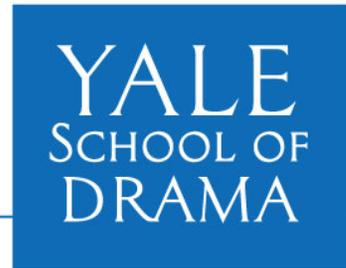


Theater Management Knowledge Base



Interview

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ROCHE SCHULFER

Conducted by Edward A. Martenson

December 6, 2012

Additional comments and questions by Mary Beth Fisher and theater management students

Roche Edward Schulfer is in his 33rd season as executive director of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago.

MARTENSON Roche, you have one of the longest records of sustained success in one institution that I can think of.

SCHULFER Really? When I started at the Goodman out of college in 1973, the theater was part of the Art Institute. It was alive, but barely, even though it had been around since 1925. It was anything but a solid institution. Over the course of fifteen or sixteen years from the mid-1970s to 1990, between Gregory Mosher's artistic direction and my leadership and then Bob Falls coming in as Artistic Director, we were able to turn the place into a going concern. We were able to build a new building ultimately.

MARTENSON In the Goodman's current strategic plan, much is made of the value of

community and diversity: is that window dressing or are those things really essential to the Goodman's success?

SCHULFER No, the short answer is that diversity and community are real factors in our success. When Gregory Mosher became Artistic Director, he and I were working together at a very immature age. The one thing that we did realize was that we were operating in Chicago. Chicago was a big, diverse community, and the work of artists of color wasn't being represented on stages. You know, I can paint us as being wonderful, liberal, visionary, but really we were just looking to create a way to identify the Goodman as a unique institution. We were developing our brand, as the marketing people would say, and from a more practical

This interview was prepared by Professor (Adjunct) and Chair of Theater Management Edward A. Martenson and Managing Editor of the Theater Management Knowledge Base Michael Bateman, as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described.

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standpoint there were a lot of good plays and good artists that weren't being produced.

So Greg's first production at the Goodman was *Native Son*, by Richard Wright. It was the first time that a work by an African-American had been on stage at the Goodman, so it really set the tone for what his artistic direction was going to feature. Shortly thereafter, we began to implement color-blind casting in major productions and it was a very intense transformative experience. Back in those days—well I actually shouldn't say back in those days, because I just heard from Kwame [Kwei-Armah] in Baltimore that when he did *Enemy of the People* with a multi-racial cast he had people saying, "Were there black people back then?" That's the question we got in 1981. We don't get it in Chicago anymore, but it's still out there in our society. In any event, during Greg's time there, diversity onstage became a key aspect of the Goodman's artistic direction.

MARTENSON What about "community"?

SCHULFER Somewhere along the line we realized the conflict that we were experiencing: are we an artistic institution? Are we a community institution? What is our identity? We were brought up on this model of strong artistic leaders coming in and producing work—whether it was Zelda Fichandler or Tyrone Guthrie or Bill Ball. You know, really leading communities—bringing culture to the unwashed masses of San Francisco and things like that.

We decided that we were a community institution. That's the nature of the system that we have in this country. We said, "If we're going to be successful, we're going to have to involve a lot of people in this community, i.e. a wide range of trustees and civic people, and

they're going to have opinions, and we're going to have to listen to their opinions. Now, we're not going to create the theater in their image and likeness but we're not going to ignore what they have to say either. We're going to try and find a way to synthesize this community involvement with our artistic direction."

Now I know that sounds very vague, but one specific example I can give you is that early on when we started working with August Wilson—thanks to Yale and Ben Mordecai – we did a couple of August Wilson's plays and they went very well. We did *Fences*, we did *Piano Lesson*, and there was talk that somebody else in Chicago was going to do *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Bob and I were like,

"Oh that's cool—great play, great playwright, that's terrific." Then we started getting feedback, "You're not going to let that happen, are you?" You're the August Wilson theater." We said, "Oh really? We are?" Bob and I said, "I think we're the August Wilson

theater, and I think that is what the community expects us to be, because we can produce on a level that hopefully will bring a good level of quality to it." So we made that decision, and from that point on every August Wilson play that was done premiered in Chicago. Now, that didn't take a lot of brain power to make that decision, but it hopefully illustrates that there's a dialogue that exists.

MARTENSON I also think of the artistic leadership structure as being an important feature of the Goodman.

SCHULFER When Bob became Artistic Director, he implemented what I think is probably the single most innovative artistic leadership model that I know of in the American theater today. I don't really know of

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anything else like it. Bob developed what we now know as the Artistic Collective. I can't say enough about what that has meant to the Goodman, because it empowered artists in our community to be part of the theater. It was no longer just the single ego model of an artistic director saying, "This is my aesthetic, this is what I care about, this is what we're going to do." Bob was saying, "I want to get a bunch of artists around me who are culturally different, aesthetically different, and who I admire, and give them the opportunity to do the work that they want to do." Mary Zimmerman came to him and said, "I'd like to dramatize the notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci. I don't know how I'm going to do it, I don't have a script, I won't do a workshop, but I'm really confident that I can be successful at this." And Bob said, "I have no idea what you're talking about, but we'll back it." Mary has said to many people over the years that that's the difference at the Goodman, it's that kind of openness. I think that makes Bob the best artistic director in the country, plus the fact that he's a wonderful director himself.

MARTENSON So how do you think the Goodman stands today?

SCHULFER I think those three things- diversity, community, and artistic collective- have caused the Goodman now to be embedded in the community in a way that actually buys us the opportunity to take more risks, to do more new work. In the 2010-2011 season, of the eight plays that we produced, five of them were world premieres. Four of those world premieres were by artists of color; the fifth one was by a woman. And it was our most successful season to date. I do think that we're on to something in terms of this industry and its evolution, because the not-for-profit theater is still a very young industry in this country. It's only 50 or 60 years old. The old notion of theater's being about art rather than being about commerce is still embryonic really. I think we're realizing that it's not just about Bob

Falls, the visionary star director, and the people who he passionately endorses aesthetically, it's about a whole bunch of things, a whole bunch of voices in the community that transcend both the artists and the community leaders.

MARTENSON What you hear a lot is that we can't be more adventurous than we are because the audience holds us back. And the implication is that the audience is more culturally or artistically conservative than we are. There's a certain amount of condescension in that framing, and the message I've come away with is that people don't like their audience. The message I hear when you and Bob talk is that you like your audience just fine.

SCHULFER Chicago is a great city, and we have developed a tremendous theater-going audience, and there are times when those of us in Chicago think we're in some kind of bubble. So we're very sympathetic to the problems and issues people face around our country. However, we have worked with our audience really, really hard over the years. Bob has been great with this—constantly talking about why we're doing work and how we're doing it. There are artistic directors around the country who feel like the work should stand on its own, and if you explain too much to the audience you're undermining the experience. I just think that's baloney. I think that both with the audience and your board, you've got to tell them everything, and explain why everything is important, and do it over and over and over again.

One of the advantages of the artistic collective is that we have a lot of artists. One thing Bob said early on was, "If it's just about me—if the board is only hearing from me, if the audience is only hearing from me—they're going to get bored." You're not that interesting after a long period of time. But we have five, six, or seven artists who are part of the Goodman on a regular basis. They understand the overall context of the theater and they're able to talk

about the work that they're doing from their own perspective. We have been able to maintain a very solid audience base over the years.

I think there's another whole discussion about technology and e-commerce—social media, all that stuff. Thanks to technology, our ability to connect with our audiences both current and future and to really establish a dialogue with them—to really communicate with them—is so fantastic. It's changing everything for the better. We have seen single ticket business increase, not just because the shows have been good—because even shows that haven't been that good have had good single ticket business. And it's because there's access to the work, access to the theater. But I think you put your finger on it. I think there's still this vague hostility towards audiences, sort of like, "If it wasn't for the audiences, we could have a good time."

MARY BETH FISHER You might want to talk about *Spinning into Butter* and *Mary* last year—those were very challenging for the audience.

SCHULFER That's a good point. The simple answer is, whenever we do something that is really going to be out there, we build into the whole experience post-show discussions. And I don't just mean some staff member coming out and leading a conversation. Dael Orlandersmith was doing a play called *Black and Blue Boys* which was about abuse—not just sexual abuse, but abusive men, [abuse] by women, by parents, etc. We had faculty from the Adler School of Professional Psychology who participated in discussions each night. We had people in the audience who would get up and say, "I've never talked about this before, but this happened to me when I was a child, and you've changed my life, and now I can confront this and begin to get on with my life." That's an extreme example, but it takes extra work to do that. I'm fortunate in the sense that we have a group of artists who, when a work is

produced onstage, if it's not working their default assumption isn't that the audience doesn't get it. Their default assumption is that they didn't do something right. These are all people who want to connect with audiences—they're not going to pander to audiences but they will look to themselves and say, "What might I have done better to make this experience better for the audience," as opposed to, "Hey this is great and they just don't get it."

MARTENSON This seems to me such an important point about the condition of the field. Everybody is talking about declining audiences as if that was something like the weather, when the alternate explanation is we're not serving people's needs well.

SCHULFER One thing we realized a few years ago was that in the obsessive quest for new audiences we were ignoring the people who had been coming year in and year out. We suddenly said, "Wait a minute, we've got this backwards, we should be focused on the true believers—the people who have been subscribing for five, ten, fifteen years. Instead of assuming these are the people who are going to bring us down because their tastes are lowbrow, and are going to force us to go the conventional route, why don't we work with them? Why don't we make sure that they really understand what we're doing? Because they have a built-in loyalty—they've been buying the package, so there's something they care about. Why don't we assume the best in their intentions instead of the worst, and see if that can be liberating?"

And it really has worked, and now with technology we can become more focused on the hardcore subscription base, the renewal rate, rather than hustling for new subscriptions. We've decided that with technology we can sell single tickets more economically than we could before. Instead of killing ourselves trying to get those 2,000 or

3,000 new subscribers who subscribe just to see a shiny work, make sure that the base is strong. Subscriptions are never going to go away. It's a psychological condition. Some people want to organize their lives in that way—dozens of focus groups over the years have proven that. There are a lot of people that say, "I like to subscribe because on those five nights I know what I'm doing, and I can assure I have a social life."

MARTENSON One of the impressive things about the Goodman and your leadership of it is that it's been steady progress over the decades, without the alternating cycles of excitement and struggle that afflict so many institutions. Is there a short explanation for how you've been able to do that, and can you connect that up with how and why your partnership with Bob has been so successful and of such long standing?

SCHULFER I do think the artistic collective leadership model is the reason we've been able to sustain the success over the years. It's because, again, it's not just one voice, it's many voices. When Bob started the artistic collective he brought in Frank Galati and Michael Maggio, who were two very, very mature, experienced directors. Other artistic directors might view them as threats to his job if he wasn't successful and they were. And then with Chuck Smith, Henry Godinez, Mary Zimmerman—a mix of young and seasoned artists in the community. So our audiences and trustees were always hearing a wide range of voices, and the work onstage reflected that. When we did focus groups, people said, "Steppenwolf is about in-your-face theater, Chicago Shakespeare is about Shakespeare, Victory Gardens is about new plays by Chicago playwrights, the Goodman? Well they did Eugene O'Neill, but then they did August Wilson, and then they did this new play by Rebecca Gilman, but it's all good and really interesting stuff." And that's the brand.

So, to the extent that I have an answer for that question of how we've sustained the success, I think Bob has made the artistic leadership so seamless with key voices in the community that when there are rough patches there's always something. We're always on to something new that involves people in the community and gets people excited, or at least a certain segment of the community excited. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We have trustees who come on board because they really support Chuck Smith's work—they have nothing against Bob but they want to be there for Chuck, or they want to be there for Mary Zimmerman. There is nothing else like it in the country. In the years when Bob's work has slumped, as everyone's work will slump from time to time, someone else is there.

We're not just filling slots. There's a great level of passion behind everything that we do. We wanted to eliminate the projects that we're not really passionate about ourselves. We've had seasons that have been all oriented to classic work, we've had seasons that have been oriented all to new work. The diversity of the artistic collective leads to work that we're really passionate about doing which leads to a consistent level of quality that transcends the ups and downs of individual seasons.

MARTENSON More so than anybody else I know, you and Bob together have patience. You're not in such a rush to get to the next big thing. You let it unfold in time, and I mean that as a compliment. I think maybe people being in a rush might have something to do with the cycles of success and struggle I was talking about.

SCHULFER Well it's certainly true, though these days there's the demand for instant success when boards hire a new team or a new artistic leader. There's a lot of pressure to succeed right away. When Bob was hired he made it very clear to the board. He said, "This is going to take a few years to establish, and if

you're looking for instant results, you're not going to get them." I think building an organization or changing the culture of an organization takes time.

I mean, we're looking at a major Chicago theater right now, which has gone through a transition from a semi-founding artistic director, someone who'd been there for 30 years, to a completely new artistic voice. While still maintaining the core direction of new play production, it has broadened it culturally and aesthetically, turned it almost 180 degrees from what it was before. We're hoping that that board gives them the time to remake that organization and remake that audience, because they're going to go through some tough times. It's going to be a radical departure from what that audience is used to. There are other artists and producers who realize that it takes time to accomplish something but they're not given a lot of time by trustees who are saying, "The theater's been on the rocks, we need you to turn it around right away."

STUDENT The Goodman strategic plan talks about seeking partnership with some visual art institutions. I'm curious what that actually means in practice.

SCHULFER It has been successful from a marketing standpoint. As they said in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, "it's all about the leads", and so the more quality leads you can get the better off you are. With the Art Institute, that was just something that fell through the cracks over the years. When we were part of the Art Institute the Art Institute membership list was the prime source of new subscribers. People who had made the commitment to become a member

at the Art Institute—we would get their names and we would offer them a discount to participate in the Goodman. That's where we got the new subscribers each year. So we went back to the Art Institute and said, "Hey, we'd like to resurrect that," and they were willing to do it. I think we've generated a couple thousand new subscribers in the last couple of years through the Art Institute efforts.

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Last year when we had Nathan Lane and Brian Dennehy doing *The Ice Man Cometh*, you could just walk down the street and sell subscriptions. When it became time to renew, those people said, "No thanks, you don't have Brian Dennehy and Nathan Lane this year." So the volatility is what we're seeing. In the old Danny Newman days you dropped the million brochures from the helicopter and you got a whatever-percent return and then prayed for good reviews. That was your core marketing campaign. It's more complicated than that now.

STUDENT I'm curious about whether it's mostly just about list sharing and marketing or if there's also a shared artistic product or other event that you're doing with the other organizations.

SCHULFER We're doing some events with the Art Institute, yes, and with the MCA as well. We're actually in the beginning stages of a new strategic plan with new objectives for the next few years, and one of the things we've talked about is embracing this notion of being a community organization. If you take the top 150 individuals or organizations in Chicago who were civic leaders and community leaders, we're going to make sure we're involved with all of them one way or another.

Now in some cases it may mean that we donate Christmas Carol tickets to a benefit and that's all that it is. In other cases it may be an education partnership.

I don't know if I talked about it in the strategic plan or not, but we've tried to create this mentality among our artists and staff that the whole division between community organization and artistic organization is a false division. People who work at the Goodman—95% of them live in Chicago. They live in the area; they have a vested interest in the quality of life. Your obligation as a citizen is to do what you can to improve the quality of life so if you work in a theater and you can think of ways to involve a broader section of the community or provide service, it's a moral imperative. Once you instill that as the mentality, then it becomes easy because everybody's sort of thinking that way.

When we did *Krapp's Last Tape*, our arts and education director created a writing program with senior citizens, because *Krapp's Last Tape* is about this old guy reviewing the tapes of his life. She started what's now called the GeNarrations project. Initially, she got them to come to the play, and then she did this program. That GeNarrations effort has now teamed up with the summer general theater studies program, where we have 80 kids from around the city come in. It's summer camp where you put a show on at the end. It's not necessarily that the participants are going to go into the theater, but it's to keep kids off the streets. And so now the kids work with the GeNarrations people. Two years ago, GeNarrations wrote about their first love or their first kiss, and then the kids would use that as material to stage it. And it wasn't a situation where we had a funder saying, "You should do programs for seniors," or it wasn't a situation where we necessarily had funding to do this. We just said, "You know, we can do this. It's really not that expensive to do, it provides a service." Now it's become a program that we

get funding for. So I guess it's looking at the community involvement as natural evolution rather than the funders saying, in their social engineering way, "This is what you should be doing." We beat them at their own game.

STUDENT Do you think that a theater of the Goodman's size and stature has a responsibility to contribute to national practice or best practices in the industry? And how?

SCHULFER I think the whole governance model has to be under review. I don't think the artistic director/managing director model is the model that it once was. Growing up in the theater, that was how your theater had to be organized. I don't think that's true anymore. I don't think boards should look at it that way, and I don't think funders should look at it that way.

In Chicago, at least, there's more openness to other types of organizational structures. You have to find what organizational structure is best for you to achieve your goals. For example, at Steppenwolf, Martha Lavey manages the Steppenwolf ensemble, and tries to satisfy the desires and impulses of all of those people. At the Lookingglass ensemble in Chicago, it's very much ensemble based. There's no artistic director and they literally still go away on a retreat each summer and argue for three days about what the next season will be. It's been very successful and it serves what they're trying to accomplish.

You know, back in the old days, there were producers and they were people who it was assumed had an artistic and financial sensibility. So why can't you have a producer run a theater? Having said that, I think there will always be an important position for an executive director, a managing director, a general manager—a strong administrative person to help define the culture of the place. I think larger theaters could be getting out of

the box more in terms of how they organize their companies.

STUDENT How do you reconcile the feeling of Chicagoans that the Goodman “belongs” to Chicago with the idea that the Goodman is expected to transfer productions to a national scale, to New York or to tour?

SCHULFER For a long time, being in Chicago, being the “second city,” there was a strong impetus to have our productions move beyond Chicago. There was only one time we chose a production because we knew it was going to move, and it turned out to be a catastrophe and didn’t move on. But we’ve always been aware of those opportunities and quick to take advantage of them. They’re usually a pain—sometimes you generate some revenue, but most of the time you don’t. But it created a visibility and it strengthened the identity of the Goodman as a nationally recognized theater. It was also all part of a Chicago neurosis, you know that thing that we’re not good enough by ourselves, we need to be endorsed by somebody else.

The fortunate thing is: that’s changing. There was a play that Mary Beth Fisher did five or six years ago, *The Clean House* by Sarah Ruhl. We produced it at the Goodman and it went very well, but I didn’t get the usual course of, “Well, is it going to New York?” Instead people were really happy with its success in Chicago, and that was enough. Last year we did *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *The Iceman Cometh*. Both got great reviews in *The New York Times*, and the national media was saying, “Yes, these productions should be moving on.” They haven’t, for a variety of reasons, but there hasn’t been any

fallout, saying, “Oh, we’re so disappointed you didn’t move those shows.” Instead there’s been this reverse thing with *Iceman*, where people said, “Hey, too bad if you didn’t come to Chicago during that time—you missed it. So maybe that’s what you should be doing: coming to Chicago instead of waiting for it to come to New York.” For smaller companies, it’s still a big deal. But for the Goodman, Steppenwolf—we’ve done that. We’ve earned our stripes as a nationally recognized theater.

Philosophically, I’ve always been for commercial-nonprofit collaborations. There’s an area where our interests and opportunities intersect, and why not take advantage of that? The kind of moralizing that goes on about that is counterintuitive. Nonprofits need to make better use of the commercial interest in things they create. That’s another whole revenue stream in the not-for-profit world. Furthermore, as I said at the beginning, trying to work with the economic structure that you have and make incremental changes during the course of your career has been a more interesting strategy for us than raging about what we aren’t and what we can’t do and what’s wrong.

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MARTENSON Roche, you’ve been a long-term champion of advocacy efforts at the national level with respect to government action, serving with American Arts Alliance and the Performing Arts Alliance over a period of decades. In effect, you’re championing the idea of collective action to solve a problem at the national level. There’s a pretty high level of apathy or failure to recognize the necessity for collective action at the field level. Do you think there’s a potential for more of that in the future?

SCHULFER I read history as a hobby because it cheers me up. I read about how bad things were in the past and think, well it's not so bad now. But you also become inspired by people who were working not because it was going to get tremendously better in their lifetime, but maybe somewhere down the road. They would keep something going so that later on something could happen. I guess that's how I feel about the National Endowment for the Arts and government support for the arts in general. This country's been around for 200 some years, and it's only in the last 50 years or so that we've started to grasp the notion of not-for-profit arts. Yes, symphonies and operas existed, but people didn't really know what that was. There were rich people who paid for it and that was it. They didn't think of it as professions, as careers, as community organizations, as assets to the civic life.

We finally created a National Endowment for the Arts, but it's not really an endowment, it's an agency that provides some annual funding. It's had a very up-and-down history. It was never grounded in smart political strategies to begin with, i.e. having a strong base in Congress. So when the culture wars came along it was almost destroyed because nobody in Congress cared. The people who were running the Endowment ran it like it was an endowment, like they had all this money and no one was going to take it away from them. Instead they found out that people could take it away from them.

I've done the work to keep that entity going because I do think if it's lost it's hard to get it back. And while its value in some sense could be symbolic, we can at least say there's a National Endowment for the Arts. And its value is more than symbolic in terms of the interaction with state agencies. If the NEA went away, the state arts agencies would go away, and there would be a lot of pressure locally. The National Endowment at least on some

level puts the arts on the national agenda at a time when there are so many forces conspiring to remove things. I think it's important to do everything possible to keep it alive.

I understand the apathy, although the other side of the coin is that just during the course of my career I've seen the growth in the American theater. The growth in the involvement in this country has been enormous, and we have a theater scene that is as big and complicated and contradictory as the country is. The United States of America is one hell of an experiment in the history of world governments and so everything about our theater reflects that complexity, diversity, contradictory impulses, etc. Over the last 30 or 40 years, there's been a tremendous growth in participation, involvement, and activity in communities across the country. We have yet to harness the political power of that, but people are trying to do that and there's a movement right now to expand the advocacy group that I've been working with for years—the American Arts Alliance—into a Performing Arts Alliance that would really embrace just about everybody in the country, every organization large and small, and try to create a message that is consistent and a political strategy for implementing that message. So I'm kind of optimistic that ten years from now we may see much more effective advocacy, much more enthusiasm, and most importantly greater results right across the board.

It's all part of how the country is changing demographically in general. The theater is a place where writers can hear their own voice onstage without other producers, like in film and television, diluting their message. And so you have a lot of young writers, particularly writers of color, writers from what would have been viewed as the fringes of society, who are drawn to the theater. What you end up with are great stories—sometimes provocative stories, but great stories. Slowly but surely you start to build support for that.

I was an economics major, I was a jock, I didn't act, direct, and even the organ lessons didn't take. But my parents took me to the theater and I said, "This is cool. It really affects me in a way nothing else does." So that's what I ended up doing. When I went into the theater it wasn't to be a starving artist, not to be part of the group of college kids that said, "Hey let's go start a theater and see if we become famous, or just have fun." I started working at a big institution. My generation came along and we weren't just going to struggle in a garage, it was going to grow and evolve and we were going to have lives in the theater and it was going to be great. A wide variety of circumstances have made that more difficult over the course of time. That's been part of the failure of the advocacy effort, to really communicate what the arts do mean to the fabric of our society and the respect and compensation that artists deserve. I'm concerned that as time goes by, people are giving up that fight, and we're going back to a model of "I'll work in a bank and do my theater at night, because that way I can do what I want to do, and if only a few people see it that's fine." That makes me sad.

My whole career has been about how you can create a large institution where people can have lives in the theater, people can have careers. One of my proudest achievements is that a production stage manager who started with us a year after I started at the Goodman will be turning 65 next year. He has worked at the Goodman for 36, 37 years. He's gotten married, had two kids, put them through college, and now he's going to retire. And I thought, "Well, I achieved something for somebody. Some person had a life in the theater." In my opinion the whole advocacy effort is pointed towards that. The arts are essential to the fabric of our society and the people who create that work, beginning with the artists who deserve the ability to have some kind of middle-class life based on their

work. The glass is half-empty or the glass is half-full depending on the day of the week, but that's the reason to do it.

STUDENT One of the things I've been hearing a lot lately is that the nonprofit model is somehow broken, that it's not something that is going to be sustainable for the long-term. There's been a lot of struggle over the last few years with various theaters closing or being restructured in a really drastic way, and I'm wondering if you think that those are troubles related to a longer systemic problem and if you do believe that we're going to have to fundamentally change our nonprofit model?

SCHULFER I don't know how we're going to change the nonprofit model in a way in which we can be successful. I think boards and people who want to be producers and artistic leaders have to change their thinking about how they approach the work and how they approach the communities. I look around the country, and I see encouraging examples. Regional theaters trying to up their game, hiring someone who seems to get it or is at a higher level of passion and interest. If I'm in Milwaukee or Dallas or wherever I'd better darn well figure out what Milwaukee and Dallas are like, and I better make sure that I'm responsive to the needs and expectations of this community.

On optimistic days I think it's just simple and I really don't think that means that you're just pandering to what people want and you're just playing it safe. Furthermore, I think you know it's a whole different world than it was 50, 60 years ago. There's always this sort of vague contempt for the most produced play in the American theater—"nobody has imagination, they're just producing *Red* over and over again" or whatever it is this year. And I'm going, "Well, wait a minute, there are no commercial tours of legitimate dramas anymore, so if these theaters don't do *Red* who's going to do *Red*? And what exactly is

wrong with *Red* as a play?" To me, the fact that we have a network of theaters where a new play of value can suddenly be seen in 60, 70, 80 communities around the country—that's good and that's one of the things the American theater is now. It is a distribution network for the best work. I'll ask you: what are they saying the nonprofit model should change into? Or how should we go about it differently?

STUDENT One of things you were talking about is organizations becoming smaller. For organizations that are small now or are starting up, they shouldn't necessarily aim to become a Goodman, they should just be content with being small and nimble. I'm wondering if that's just something for new organizations or if large powerhouse organizations are becoming a relic?

SCHULFER Let me clear: I was talking about having a life in the theater, a professional life in the theater, it wasn't about everybody becoming the Goodman—wouldn't that be boring? But there should be theaters of mid-size that specialize in particular types of work. *Lookingglass* is an example in Chicago. They're not huge. They operate in a 225-seat theater and they specialize in adapting works from other literary sources—novels and short stories—into plays. But they have a professional staff.

With most funders, you're either at the top or you get nothing. One of the interesting questions about diversity and community that came up in the last TCG Fall Forum on Governance is, what responsibility do individual companies have to their community? I think when you're talking about the bigger companies it's clearer than when you're with mid-size companies who specialize in particular aesthetics. It's been a debate in Chicago. *Steppenwolf* started out with an acting ensemble that was all white, and in part because of community expectations they've

diversified. That's a good thing, and it's worked out very well for them.

Should every theater, whatever its size, be as diverse as possible? Or should there be theaters that are able to specialize? The issue came up about an LGBT theater: by being that, are they de facto diverse enough? Or do you have to be more diverse on top of that? And these are the questions that are out there, and they're tough, they're challenging, but it's part of the American evolution and demographic.

MARTENSON There's all this talk that maybe the field is in decline, that the theater isn't really organized in a way that's suited for a changed environment. But it seems to me the alternate framing is that the field hasn't embraced the concept of actually serving people's needs in the way that you've embraced it on your local level.

Do you have thoughts about this? What's the nature of the problem? Is it like climate change, out of our control? Or is it that we've not been minding our brand carefully enough as a field?

SCHULFER I don't think it's like climate change, because I think that technology can be or is a very strong asset. I think consistent quality is probably the biggest problem that I would cite. In other words, it takes time to produce a play well. It takes rehearsal time. If it's a new play it takes development time. And I think financial pressures can lead to cutting back in those areas, whether it's the number of previews or the rehearsal weeks. I can only say that, based on experience of 300-400 productions over the years and what I've seen in other theaters, if you don't take the time to develop a work properly, then the amount of risk-taking that you can do, the amount of new, interesting storytelling as opposed to more conventional storytelling becomes more limited. New plays suffer the worst when there isn't the proper amount of development time.

I don't think we can try to turn theater into some kind of one-dimensional medium. I think we live or die based on what we do, and we have to do what we do better. I will say that another key point in our evolution at the Goodman was my ability to convince the board that our product is our works of art, and any business would want to invest as much as possible to ensure the quality of their product. Therefore we want to increase previews, we want to standardize a four-week rehearsal process instead of a three-week rehearsal process, and as a matter of fact, from time to time we'll rehearse five weeks or six weeks if the work demands it. And by doing that we will see an increase in the quality of the work and therefore an increase in the audience response to it and an increase in our business. And it worked. Mary Beth knows from working around the country and working around Chicago how many times you get two weeks to do a play, or two-and-a-half weeks to do a play, or three weeks to do a play, and then two previews, and then boom.

FISHER The Goodman produced a production of *The Seagull* that gave us eight weeks of rehearsal, and it was one of the most extraordinary events at the theater in the last several years. It was incredible.

SCHULFER It's become legendary. Because Bob had that time they were able to approach the play in an entirely different way.

In terms of innovation and younger audiences, we're starting an innovation council and we're going after the 30-somethings who are the technology people. We were able to assemble a group who were intrigued by the notion of going to the theater, of checking it out.

So we're doing *Sweet Bird of Youth*—Tennessee Williams—and Diana Lane's in it. Some people know who she is, some people don't. I met one of the guys who was coming to this innovation council before he came to see the show. Thirty-

something African American tech-whiz; had never been to the Goodman before. This was going to be his first experience—*Sweet Bird of Youth*. I went out thinking, "Well, if this works, then there's hope for everything."

So he goes to see it. A week later, we convene these people for a meeting and the first part of the meeting is Bob and I, the old theater guys, going on about how this is what the theater is, we tell stories, we do things, it's live and it's in a room. We don't reach millions of people but we believe that this art form has the power to change a person's life in two-and-a-half hours. And as I said that, the guy who had been at *Sweet Bird of Youth*, says, "Yes and I know that's true because it did it to me last week at *Sweet Bird of Youth*." He said it was one of those times when, for two-and-a-half hours, he didn't have the impulse to check his phone, to check his email. To actually go two-and-a-half hours without looking at his phone was amazing and really great. Then we talked about the play and how it ended and he totally got it. So I thought, "There's something to be said for this. If you tell these stories well you can perhaps reach a larger audience than you may think."

Back in the enlightened days of the NEA, they were investing in company development, but also in general providing capital for new initiatives. If you wanted to rehearse more, if you wanted to hire people for a season, you could do that. I think that's a big problem that people are facing right now: they're not just under-capitalized in terms of institutional stability; they're under-capitalized in terms of being able to devote more time. You just have to figure out a way to do it.

The other thing about American theater is that it's more meat and potatoes. We're not big on Euro-trash. We have this cliché that they do it better over there, and of course European artists are completely dismissive of the American theater. Nonsense! Bob took a six-month sabbatical and toured around and went

to every international festival that he could find. And he said, "There is really a lot of trash out there but there are some good things that are worth doing." We're just not into non-narrative theater forms and that's too bad because there is some good work out there.

STUDENT You talked about the discrepancy of quality. It sounds like a dilemma as to whether you have an artistic deficit or you have the financial deficit, and it seems for a lot of organizations it's easier to compromise the art side rather than the money side.

SCHULFER You can't cut your way out of a deficit. We should be stimulating the economy—that's how we're going to get out of this recession. The stimulus programs were far less than they should have been. The problem for a lot of organizations is they end up cutting, cutting, and then they're boxed into a corner.

I suppose we were lucky in that the two times the Goodman really made major investments in the work on stage were two occasions when the theater was on the brink of extinction. The response was, "We're going to go out of business anyway, so we might as well spend all this money trying to enhance the quality of what we're doing and see what happens." It worked in each case. When Bob Falls became Artistic Director at the Goodman, the Goodman was technically bankrupt. Bob came in and said, "You're going to have to spend half a million dollars more on the artistic program onstage next year, because we need more rehearsal time. We need a wider repertory, we need to hire more people, we need to pay people more." And the board said, "Well, we're out of business now, so let's spend the money and get the first show up and hope that it works."

In this country now, there's localized funding, but there are a lot of big national funders who got out of the arts business completely. And

certainly it would be good to give companies some place to go to say, "You know we're in this bind. We have a new artistic director, we really think we can do something, but we need to invest in the quality of the work onstage. We need to increase the rehearsal time; we need to pay people more. Loan us the money." Programs like that would be really helpful, because you can't borrow money as a theater. We all know that it's impossible. One of the things we did in Chicago for some of the smaller companies was to work with the MacArthur Foundation to create lines of credit for small companies, just so they could deal with cash-flow issues. We realized there were so many mid-size companies where all the producers know is cash-flow. They had no time to do anything other than meet payroll. Lack of basic access to capital is strangling the industry.