Could a Coalition Help Your Community?

Atlanta Theatres Join Hands to Find Performers and Speak as One

By David S. Thompson

One of the first lessons theatre students learn is the value of collaboration. Without teamwork and creative give and take among artists, theatre simply could not happen. Learning to work together, and by doing so growing personally and professionally, is the hallmark of many training programs.

For many, the transition from student to professional means a collision with a far less ideal world, where competition rather than collaboration is the byword as theatres vie for the hearts and dollars of subscribers. In short, theatre becomes just another part of a dog-eat-dog world.

However, a new paradigm is emerging. Realizing that the same core audience base feeds all of a community’s theatres, companies are now seeking ways to work with one another. In cities throughout the country, theatre companies have formed service organizations to promote their common goals. And they have found strength in numbers.

The largest of these in the Southeast is the Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts (ACPA), which has grown along with the metropolitan area it serves to become one of North America’s most active and dynamic associations. ACPA’s growth from a humble collective to a substantial force in a rapidly expanding region provides a lesson to all artists who wish to maximize impact in their own communities.

The Concept: All for One, One for All

Founded in 1983 as the Atlanta Coalition of Theatres, the organization began as a loose collective designed “to foster a cooperative spirit among the 30 founding Atlanta organizations, and to raise awareness of … performing arts in our community.”

Today, with 143 partner and associate members, 366 individual members, a paid staff of four full-time and three part-time employees and an operating budget of $240,000, the ACPA embraces all of the performing arts and has a broader mission: “implementing and sustaining programs and services which provide a nurturing environment for growth of greater Atlanta’s performing arts and the role they play in the fabric of society.”

It strives to accomplish that mission through a variety of services for members and the community in four main areas: marketing and audience development, community and governmental relations, information and communication, and special projects and initiatives.

Specific services range from a half-price ticket booth to Unified Auditions and from advocacy work to a joint Web site that publicizes all member organizations helpful in reaching a regional audience. Above, Katherine Walczak, Mark Kincaid, Brian Rooney and Mitchell Lyons (left to right) are shown in a recent production of To Kill a Mockingbird.
Publicize Shows, Sell Tickets, One Voice on Advocacy Issues

and their shows to the general public.

“The best programs are those that reach our members as well as the community,” says Executive Director Kim Patrick Bitz.

To reach the community, ACPA first had to build its own identity – and Bitz notes that not everyone in the arts community immediately saw the value of the coalition’s “all for one, one for all” concept.

“When we first started promoting the image of ACPA and branding it as a recognizable concept, some of our members were confused,” he notes. “They would ask ‘Why are you trying to promote yourself and not us?’ Now they realize that ACPA provides a means for promoting everyone’s best interests.”

All members have access to the same services and all members receive equal benefits – whether that benefit is a ticket booth sign, a play or company description, or the type size used for the theatre name on the coalition Web site – but some theatres use the coalition’s services more consistently. Through frequent meetings with members, the board of directors and staff try to anticipate needs and then initiate programs and services that will meet them.

AtlanTIX: Cheap Tickets and More

One of the most popular programs with members and the community alike is AtlanTIX, which opened as the Southeast’s first day-of-show, half-price ticket booth in October 1998 and is modeled after the Theatre Development Fund’s tremendously popular TKTS in New York. Located at the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau’s center in the well-known Underground Atlanta shopping and entertainment area, the booth provides a way to promote the entirety of Atlanta’s theatre scene to tourists and residents alike.

In a marvel of coordination, member performance companies approve specific allotments of discounted tickets for each production, depending upon individual needs. Member organizations receive the ticket proceeds while ACPA receives a small handling fee (ranging from $1 to $5, depending on the original ticket price) that is added to the price of each ticket.

In addition to reduced prices for same-day tickets, patrons also can get a wealth of information at the AtlanTIX booth, including descriptions of theatres, word of mouth about plays or productions, and driving directions (a must in Atlanta).

AtlanTIX has sold more than 50,000 tickets and returned more than $650,000 in ticket revenue to member organizations.

Mark Gowan, manager of AtlanTIX, notes that the system benefits all performing arts companies, from the smallest theatres to the biggest regional organizations.

“We have the same size magnet for all,” says Gowan, referring to the magnetic signs posted to tell patrons which theatre companies are offering discounted tickets on a given day.

The half-price ticket booth is cited by many of the member companies as a valuable service that helps them reach audiences they might otherwise miss. For theatres located outside the downtown area, the exposure can be especially important in building audiences.

“Operating outside the Perimeter [I-285, the interstate route that rings Atlanta and provides an unofficial urban/suburban marker] it is important for us to reach that in-town audience,” notes Anita Farley, managing director of Georgia Ensemble Theatre. “We have seen growth in this area each year.”
You Can Do It, Too!
How to Form Your Own Coalition
by Kim Patrick Bitz

So you want to start a service organization? Since people who are connected to theatre or the other disciplines of the performing arts are reading this, there is no need to convince you that the arts are important to our communities and our lives. So let’s set the purpose of the arts in society aside for the moment and look at the business side of things. Arts organizations are businesses in an industry. They may have tax-exempt status, their purpose may be more noble than companies listed on the stock exchange, but the fact remains that they are businesses in an industry. Nearly all industries have trade associations or some other organized means of speaking and acting on behalf of the industry as a whole — whether locally or nationally.

A service organization can be that voice, a strong advocate for the arts not only for legislative concerns, but also for media and community issues/concerns. A service organization can help build relationships and forge new partnerships within the public and private sectors. Strength in numbers is not just another cliché. The ability to effect positive change is far greater when united as one voice. If you add to that the work that can be accomplished in fostering a sense of community among the organizations — dispelling the myth of competition — you have (in my humble opinion) the two most important reasons to form a service organization for a city or region.

From there, it’s up to the organizers to decide how much more they want their service organization to do, not just for their arts community, but also for the community at large. Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts believes that a strong focus on marketing and audience development will support and enhance the operations of the membership. It also serves the citizens of metro Atlanta by helping to reinforce that the performing arts are a viable entertainment option (that business perspective again) that is accessible to all and exclusive to none.

So how do you get started?

There are many programs and services that you can establish without reinventing the wheel. The Association of Performing Arts Service Organizations (APASO) is a great place to begin. This group meets annually (Atlanta was the host in March 2003) to network and share best practices from the service organization field. Information on the 2004 conference in Seattle can be found at www.AmericaPerforms.com/apaso. (You’ll need to use that full Web address as there is no public link to the conference from the main Web site.) You also can visit the ACPA Web site for information on the services we offer, and you will find links there to many other collectives located throughout the country (http://www.atlantaperforms.com/we_provide/links.asp).

Purposefully, there is no national APASO office (a service organization for service organizations, yikes!). However, in addition to the annual conference, APASO has an ongoing e-mail group dialogue. If you would like to join this e-mail group for performing arts service organizations, e-mail Info@atlantaperforms.com and your request will be forwarded to the list moderator.

Kim Patrick Bitz is executive director of the Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts.
which can be promoted on ACPA’s Web site – but rather should supplement them, providing an opportunity to see the wide variety of talent offered by performers in the region.

The Unified Auditions are one of ACPA’s most helpful services, says Farley of Georgia Ensemble Theatre, who calls them “a great way to meet new talent and let someone else do all the work.”

Tom Key, producing artistic director of Theatrical Outfit, is even stronger in his praise, describing the auditions as ACPA’s “single greatest achievement.”

“Because of their professional organization and planning, they galvanize our talent pool and give all producers in the region a first-rate look at the artists who are best equipped to help us all succeed,” Key says.

Advocacy: Lobbying for the Arts

In today’s difficult funding times, arts organizations have found they need to join hands and have advocates who can speak for them collectively – and eloquently. ACPA has taken on that role, bringing together a vast array of arts organizations to work together as one. Jon Goldstein, program manager of ART Station and the past president of ACPA’s board of directors, credits ACPA with helping to “galvanize an arts community that benefits from a greater sense of cooperation, instead of competition that used to exist.”

This year, ACPA led local groups in an effort to stop arts cuts – including a proposal that would have slashed the local arts council’s budget by about a third. The staff of ACPA kept members apprised of the latest developments. When local government held open forums for public comment, ACPA made sure that its members knew about them – and encouraged members to attend the meetings.

“Without the organization of advocacy efforts by the ACPA, a million dollars could have been cut from the Fulton County Arts Council budget this year,” says Key of Theatrical Outfit.

One important ACPA service that keeps members connected and able to move as a group is a weekly newsletter, typically containing five or six news
When Synchronicity was formed in 1997, there were very few small companies on the scene in Atlanta. Not only did that mean there were few models for us to follow, but it also meant that our access to information was limited by lack of staff and money.

When we joined ACPA, this changed. The benefits we have received include:

- Credibility.
  Membership in ACPA lent us credibility that we were a “real” company on the Atlanta scene.

- Information.
  Weekly updates from the coalition assist with information gathering about local and national news.

- Advocacy.
  Gentle (and sometimes not-so-gentle) nudges from Kim Bitz and the rest of the staff help inspire us to respond to essential advocacy activities and assist with providing information to disseminate to our board, artists and other interested Synchronicity family.

- Publicity and marketing.
  Being a part of the ACPA Web site serves us because Atlanta visitors and locals look to atlantaperforms.com as a portal into the arts community in our city. We also have a bigger marketing reach as ACPA sings the praises of the Atlanta performing arts community to the world, and as we participate with ACPA to hand out materials at local festivals and events.

- Online ticket sales. Through ACPA, we sell approximately 10% of our tickets online – and that percentage grows with every show.

- Unified Auditions. We don’t have the resources to run far-reaching general auditions every year. At ACPA’s Unified Auditions, we see hundreds of auditionees within just a couple of days.

- Finally, our connection to ACPA is about community. Our membership in ACPA solidifies our connection with our performing arts colleagues here in Atlanta.

- Rachel May, Co-Producing Artistic Director, Synchronicity Performance Group

Synchronicity’s founders say ACPA’s festival booths are helpful in publicizing events and marketing to the public.

Synchronicity: How One Company Grew with ACPA

items, which is sent via e-mail or fax. This keeps members “informed of important news in our community as well as keeping me up on critical deadlines and crucial advocacy efforts,” says Dunstan.

ACPA also has put the arts on the front burner in local political races by organizing and cosponsoring debates for candidates running for mayor and City Council president in Atlanta.

In short, ACPA works to unite Atlanta’s arts community, advocate for it and spotlight the importance of the performing arts for the region as a whole.

“Ultimately, it provides an invaluable service by providing a voice for the arts,” says Waverly T. Lucas II, cofounder of Ballethnic Dance Company, Inc.
Future: More Services in the Wings

The list of services provided by ACPA covered three single-spaced pages of a recent grant application—and they’re constantly evolving to meet new needs. Programs run from obvious ideas like the sale of gift certificates (called “Play Money”) to more unusual ideas, such as the Stephen Petty Memorial “Petty Cash” Fund, an emergency assistance fund established in 2000 to meet the needs of performing artists suffering from unexpected financial hardship due to illness or injury.

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons that ACPA can offer other organizations is that change is important and inevitable if an organization wishes to continue serving member needs.

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From ACT to ACPA: 20 Years of History and Growth

The Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts was founded in 1983 as the Atlanta Coalition of Theatres (ACT). A modest organization in comparison to today’s ACPA, it nevertheless was the launching platform for substantial goals, ideas and programs that ultimately captured the imagination of Atlanta’s theatres and theatregoers.

Atlanta, of course, was a much smaller place 20 years ago, and ACT began with only 30 member companies. In those days, the social function of meetings, where members networked extensively, seemed as important as any lofty goals. However, at least two important concepts that shaped the coalition had their beginnings in these intimate gatherings.

First, ACT provided a way for member companies to share resources without significant financial outlay or threat to individual budgets. The social tone of the meetings provided important interaction, and theatre artists began to know one another through direct contact. They also began to learn about each other’s successes, failures, frustrations, plans and strategies. As they opened lines of communication, a network of collaborators developed.

Second, through ACT, members formed a single voice for united advocacy efforts. They began collaborating on major tasks such as developing public relations efforts and expressing opinions on government decisions. However, they also worked on simpler advocacy efforts, such as generating publicity about plays, companies and artists networked extensively, two important concepts that ACT began with.

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hiring them as consultants had a symbolic impact, positioning ACT as a serious force. If ACT was willing to bring in experts, the reasoning went, then it must be legitimate. The practical impact was even more far-reaching. In 1996, largely as a result of the recommendations of ARTS Action Research, ACT’s board of directors created a new strategic plan that stressed increased staff, operational structure and services, both for members and for the public. The goal was to transform the loose-knit cooperative into a more structured group functioning on the same high level as respected service organizations in other major cities.

Perhaps the most profound impact upon ACT came from the decision to add and upgrade staff positions. In 1997, the board of directors moved the organization’s only employee—the executive director—from part-time to full-time status and then began adding additional staff positions. The result was a more consistent presence to handle the needs of the membership. New programs and services were initiated. ACT became a more visible and more effective part of the arts scene and of metro Atlanta as a whole.

In 2000, the organization made the decision to expand its mission and embrace not just theatre, but all disciplines of the performing arts. With the move came a new name, the Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts, and more growth. Today, the staff includes four full-time employees and three part-time workers. As of October 2003, ACPA serves 143 member organizations, including partner members (producing and presenting organizations) and associate members (agencies, institutions, businesses and other organizations), along with nearly 400 individual members.

- David S. Thompson
The Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts (ACPA) has a total budget of about $525,000. More than half of that amount — about $285,000 — comes from AtlanTIX ticket sales income and is returned to member organizations.

The remaining $240,000 is used for operations and includes funding from a number of sources:

- A substantial amount comes from governmental agencies and foundations that work closely with local governments and community groups. ACPA receives cash or in-kind contributions of $5,000 or more from the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, The City of Atlanta's Bureau of Cultural Affairs, the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, the Metropolitan Atlanta Arts Fund, the Fulton County Arts Council, the DeKalb [County] Council for the Arts, and the Georgia Council for the Arts (within the Office of the Governor of Georgia). Similar support also is provided by BellSouth, which has its corporate headquarters in Atlanta.

- Earned income provides a second source of funding. Annual membership dues and service charges on sales at the AtlanTIX half-price ticket booth are staples in this category.

- Special fundraising comprises a third category of support. ACPA is always looking for grant support and other nontraditional income sources. To that end, ACPA stages its own fundraising events, frequently tied to high-profile cultural events and performances in Atlanta. Recent examples include a silent auction held as a part of the “Chefs w/out Hats” tour hosted by Wine Brats, Food & Wine Magazine and Wine.com, and a raffle featuring a top prize of a night on the town for four topped by a stage appearance in A Night With Dame Edna.

-David S. Thompson