



**MAKING ART SMART:
A Preliminary Analysis of the Obstacles Facing
Independent Performing Artists and Ensembles**

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Collective Hole Productions, NYC*

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Introduction

For the past three years Collective Hole Productions (CHP), an independent, New York City-based theatre company, has endeavored to develop original works of theatre on its own terms while building a community of cultural partners and arts advocates. Throughout the course of Collective Hole's artistic and community development, the company has become increasingly interested in addressing the road blocks and challenges involved in making independent art in 21st Century New York. This interest has been fueled by conversations pertaining to leadership, sustainability and strategic planning that have been inspired by institutions including The Field, the New York Innovative Theatre Awards and the National Performing Arts Convention as well as CHP's own inquiry into the industry, and the research and professional interests of its co-founders.

In an effort to distill its findings and instill a dialogue amongst its colleagues and community members, CHP has developed this essay to reflect upon its experiences and illustrate its thinking. While many events and conversations that have occurred over the last 12 months have guided CHP's research, a June 23, 2008 "town hall" meeting hosted by The Field, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing support services for New York City performing artists and ensembles, was pivotal in helping CHP synthesize its ideas.¹

Entitled "Survive vs. Thrive," the purpose of The Field's town hall session was to present a new program called ERPA (Economic Revitalization of Performing Artists) and discuss "the systemic challenges that stand in the way of the financial health and stability of New York performing artists" (The Field, 2008) amongst its sponsored artists and ensembles. Following this discussion Edward P. Clapp (CHP co-founder and resident playwright) and Rebecca V. Nellis (CHP co-

¹ The Field serves as the fiscal sponsor for Collective Hole Productions. For more information pertaining to The Field's programs and services, as well as information about the June 23, 2008 Survive vs. Thrive town hall meeting, please visit: <<http://www.thefield.org>>.

founder and resident-director) crafted a letter to Jennifer Wright Cook, The Field's executive director. The crux of this letter was to voice CHP's responses to the topics and issues raised at the town hall session, and then to shed light on CHP's thoughts concerning matters of sustainability and strategic planning in the independent performing arts.

What follows is the content of CHP's letter to Jennifer Wright Cook, translated from epistle to essay form and expanded upon to be more fully inclusive of CHP's concerns for the domain of the independent performing arts.

Identifying Preliminary Obstacles to the Success of the Independent Performing Arts

Rather than make conclusive statements, the purpose of this essay is to outline a set of seven key issues concerning the practice of the independent performing arts that CHP has targeted for future debate and further research. The focal points addressed below include:

1. Developing a Conversation Amongst Domain Practitioners;
2. Spirituality, Passion and Beauty vs. Strategic Planning and Business Acumen;
3. Instilling a Sense of Domain-Oriented Thinking
4. Communing with Industry, Society and Culture;
5. Proving, Rather than Assuming the Quality of One's Programming;
6. Accessing Research to Make a Case for the Arts;
7. Success vs. Credibility: Shifting From Art Making to Capacity Building.

Developing a Conversation Amongst Domain Practitioners

CHP began by looking at the goals and logistic organization of The Field's town hall meeting. In doing so it aims to highlight one of the many issues facing the independent art world, the systemic ineffectiveness exhibited by the arts, particularly at the independent level, when assembling as a group of practitioners for the purpose of strategizing for institutional and industry-wide change.

As a concept, a town hall meeting suggests a gathering of a community wherein members of that community are given the opportunity to voice their general concerns and bring their personal experiences to the attention of the larger group. The purpose of such a convening, from CHP's

perspective, is to take the temperature of a community and identify key issues for further exploration. In this sense, The Field's town hall meeting was rather successful, as issues of relevance, arts education, alternative funding sources and developing new audiences surfaced.

However, one of the articulated goals of The Field's town hall meeting was to provide an actionable series of next steps. An action oriented discussion, while an excellent idea, is rather difficult amongst such a large group.² In order to drill down and truly dissect particular issues, and then develop action steps to address those issues, smaller groups of focused individuals would be much more effective. One possible way to encourage forward movement is to develop diverse cadres of artists and ensembles, each discussing on their own, and in great depth, topics such as those raised at The Field's town hall meeting. The findings from these smaller groups can then be synthesized and shared with the larger independent performing arts community.

As a point of reference, it is interesting to look at the work that was done at the recent 2008 National Performing Arts Convention (NPAC) as a model.³ NPAC's 3,500 participants met each morning in small "caucuses" of no more than nine to ten people, each led by a trained facilitator, to engage in focused discussions on specific issues. Each night the findings from these caucus groups were synthesized and then presented the next morning for more in depth exploration.⁴ These sessions proved very effective at arriving at the top three challenges and opportunities facing the field, as identified by a diverse representation of practitioners from across the country.⁵

Whereas the National Performing Arts Convention may be considered a gathering of performing artists, ensembles and institutions at the "establishment" level, The Field's town hall meeting is an example of the same industry affiliates gathering at the independent level.⁶

² For the specific number of individuals present at The Field's town hall meeting, please refer to their website: <www.thefield.org>.

³ Held in Denver, CO June 10-14, 2008: <<http://www.performingartsconvention.org>>.

⁴ CHP Co-Founder and Resident Playwright Edward P. Clapp served as a table facilitator for these caucus discussions and as a presenter (along with Ann Gregg of Carnegie Hall) for two workshop sessions focused on addressing the impending generation gap in leadership in the field of the performing arts (for more information on these sessions, please visit the Commonfield Approach to Arts Leadership Facebook Group Page: <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=21066018382&ref=share>>.

⁵ Those challenges and opportunities included 1.) establishing relevance; 2.) arts education, and; 3.) diversity. Proving the relevance of the performing arts and arts education were also raised as opportunities and challenges faced by the practitioners present at The Field town hall meeting.

⁶ Our use of the word "establishment" here is not meant to suggest that independent artists and ensembles are not established in their practice, but rather meant to differentiate between the upper echelons of the industry (characterized by institutions with long standing histories, multiple and consistent funding sources, developed

Though acting with the best intentions, The Field's goals were somewhat incompatible with the event making the outcome of the town hall meeting a common illustration of the independent arts' inherent non-business approach to discussing, dissecting and acting on a problem. Lively as the discussion was, The Field's town hall meeting would have benefited from having a clearer agenda that was articulated in advance, identifying specific goals and establishing a structured discussion that was focused and consistently on task.

Spirituality, Passion and Beauty vs. Strategic Planning and Business Acumen

Some of the subject matter raised at The Field town hall meeting as well as at other functions, included the notions of "spirituality," "passion," and "beauty." While CHP understands that the arts, for some, are inherently spiritual, passionate and beautiful, such spirituality, passion and beauty do not play an effective role in developing efficacious business models. Both of CHP's co-founders have extensive experience in the not-for-profit sector. Whereas notions of spirituality, aesthetic passion, beauty, altruism, social justice and cultural change may be important elements to an organization's mission (CHP included), such notions need to be balanced with both practical and ground-breaking approaches to how an organization runs its business.

Collective Hole Productions isn't only an artistically and socially passionate arts organization; it is also a small business. Passion, aestheticism—and perhaps even spirituality—have never been in short supply. What CHP needs (as do many independent arts organizations) are radically new and innovative business skills, revenue generating ideas, marketing plans and public relations strategies.

It is both disconcerting and frustrating to be engaged in conversations geared towards addressing "the systemic challenges that stand in the way of the financial health and stability" of arts organizations only to be bogged down with talk of spirituality, passion and beauty. While CHP is not advocating for a divorce of such principles from the work of any given independent arts organization, it feels that such notions can be augmented by a more pragmatic approach to the realities of making art in the contemporary world.

infrastructures and full-time employees with traditional titles and job descriptions) and those individuals and organizations, who may be new to the field, operating on slim budgets and reliant on the work of volunteers to execute their programming and reach their organizational goals.

Instilling a Sense of Domain-Oriented Thinking

Research with young arts professionals has shown that many emerging arts leaders are frustrated with their feelings of isolation in their arts practice. These individuals want to feel as though they are part of a greater common purpose.⁷ Rather than focus on the success of the company or ensemble one belongs to, these individuals recognize the importance of advocating for the greater domain in which their company or ensemble plays a role.

This thinking harkens back to George Lakoff's notion of agreeing to disagree, as discussed in his 2004 book *Don't Think of an Elephant*. Lakoff, a linguist from UC Berkeley, makes the case that the success of the Republican Party is due to its ability to agree to disagree. Whereas the Liberal agenda gets bogged down in so many micro issues, the Conservative agenda has been able to put aside such specificities to push forward broader, wide-sweeping issues. Translated to the performing arts, this amounts to not advocating solely for one's company or ensemble, but instead joining forces to advocate for the progress of the performing arts more broadly.⁸ This cognitive shift in thinking can be understood as domain-oriented thinking.

In his research on the implications of systems on the study of creativity, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1999) places the locus of creativity at the intersection of the individual, domain and the field. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the individual is a practitioner operating within a particular discipline (the domain) that is overseen by a collection of gatekeepers (the field) "who make decisions as to what should or should not be included" in that discipline (p. 315). Throughout this essay we use the word "domain" to refer to the larger community of independent artists and ensembles. The "field" in this respect, are the gatekeepers who oversee the domain.⁹ In the case of the independent performing arts, the gatekeepers of the domain may include reviewers from the press, fringe festival adjudicators, administrators of performance spaces, representatives from foundations and other granting bodies, and established institutions acting at the upper levels of the industry.

Just as Lakoff points out that the success of the Republican Party is based on its ability to agree to disagree, a shift to domain-oriented, as opposed to individual artist and ensemble level,

⁷ Young leaders' desire to "be a part of a greater common purpose" is one of five key findings from Edward P. Clapp and Ann Gregg's (n.d.) research on generational shifts in arts leadership.

⁸ There are, of course examples of that within specific arts disciplines already (independent film festivals, the annual Fall Into Dance festival, the Fringe Festivals and the East Fourth Street Arts Block, are all working in this way) but CHP believes this could have a much more sweeping impact.

⁹ Not to be confused, of course, with "The Field," the not for-profit organization.

thinking can build the capacity of the domain of the independent performing arts, which, in turn, will build the capacity of the individual artists and ensembles acting within that domain. In this sense, instilling a sense of domain-oriented thinking amounts to advocating for the domain of the independent performing arts. Once that umbrella agenda is advanced, the variegated agendas (in the form of individual artists and ensembles) beneath it have a greater chance of progressing.

Communing with Industry, Society and Culture

An additional observation CHP made at The Field's town hall meeting was the struggle the group had understanding where they fit, as performing artists, in the broader framework of contemporary society and culture. Only rarely did the conversation drift into addressing how the independent artists and ensembles participated in any sort of dialogue with the communities they sought to appeal to. Rather, many of the practitioners assembled on June 23 spoke of the challenges they had presenting their work and bringing in an audience. As a purveyor of culture, CHP places a priority not on selling its wares to society, but on being in communion—and responsive to—the broader communities within which it works.

Professionally CHP's co-founders focus on how the arts, and the not-for-profit sector writ-large, interact, partner with and affect other industries. An important notion for artists to keep in mind is that the arts are not solely unique in their struggles. Many other not-for-profit and corporate entities are in the throes of re-evaluating how they do business in a quickly changing world of limited resources and global breadth.

To this end, CHP is always looking to other industries, not only for solutions that it can steal, but more so for dialogue that it can engage in and larger communities it can become an integral part of. CHP believes that in order for artists to play an essential role in society's evolving cultural and economic landscape it is critical for these individuals to be in conversation with the larger communities they are a part of.

Proving, Rather than Assuming, the Quality of One's Programming

Another notion that was expressed at The Field's town hall meeting (and at NPAC) was the principle of quality. While many independent performing artists and ensembles believe they do

good work, CHP is curious as to how these individuals and ensembles know this is, indeed, the case.

When the notion of quality surfaces, some important questions arise as well: what does a quality performing arts program look like? What does it sound like? Quality from whose perspective? What profile of attributes or symptoms of excellence must a performance, or any other given arts program, have in order for it to be considered one of higher (or lesser) quality?¹⁰

Anyone who has spent time working in the program department of a not-for-profit organization understands the importance of evaluating one's programs. In this regard, CHP is interested in what evaluative instruments and/or metric systems (if any) independent performing artists and ensembles have employed to objectively gauge the quality of their work. Such an evaluation of programs/performances would be useful to independent artists and ensembles on two levels. First, it would generate data that speaks to the quality of a given artist or ensemble's work. This data can be used to develop a portfolio of one's work that may (a) be used to prove one's validity when applying for future opportunities at larger venues; (b) be utilized to likewise make a case for the quality of one's work when applying for grants and other funding opportunities, and; (c) play a key role in final reports and/or acknowledgement letters to donors and other funders—alerting them of the value of their investment. Second, a system of evaluation would serve as constructive criticism, letting an artist or ensemble know what they do well, and what they can improve upon. Both of which help to establish an artist or ensemble's credibility, which leads to leverage and influence within the industry—and beyond.

Aside from the undocumented responses CHP receives from its audience members and artistic partners, the work of CHP has never been formally evaluated. CHP is not unique in this sense. One potential solution to this problem could be to establish a system of peer review amongst independent artists and ensembles. Such a system would be advantageous, not only to individual artists and ensembles, but also to the larger domain.¹¹

¹⁰ Because arts events and performances are so diverse, we fully understand that there can never be one specific set of attributes that any given performing arts event must have that certifies that it is an occurrence of high quality. However, there may be a "profile" of attributes or set of "symptoms" that a performance or program may have that make it of high quality. For more on the notion of "profile" see psychologist Howard Gardner's work on intelligence (1983, 1998) and for more on the notion of "symptoms" see philosopher Nelson Goodman's work on the "symptoms of the aesthetic" (1976).

¹¹ The New York Innovative Theatre Awards has just such a system of peer review built into its program. However, in order to be eligible to participate, artists and ensembles must have a minimum run of eight performances on eight

Accessing Research to Make a Case for the Arts

During The Field's town hall meeting, an opera singer complained that scientists "get all the funding." While CHP agrees that the sciences and the arts should be on equal turf if we, as a culture, are to holistically move forward, CHP recognizes that something the sciences do very well that the arts (especially at the independent level) haven't figured out yet, is access research.

Arts practitioners often point towards qualitative measures as validating data legitimizing and affirming their work. Whereas qualitative data is immensely relevant in grounding the impact of the arts in the personal, quantitative data is not to be dismissed.

While there isn't a wealth of quantitative data available on the independent performing arts, numbers can be found if one knows where to look for them. A primary source for such information is the emerging leaders section of the Americans for the Arts website. Additionally, the New York Innovative Theatre Awards has recently engaged in research on the domain of independent theatre (as noted in a recent *New York Times* article: "Examining the Economics of Off Off Broadway" April 12, 2008).

While quantitative data from credible sources may prove valuable to an independent artist or ensemble, building a research element into one's practice can prove to be infinitely more beneficial to an independent artist or ensemble acting within a domain, as well as the domain itself. The findings from such inquiry can then be shared with the domain, contributing much needed data to a broad array of practitioners as well as helping the domain to reflect upon itself, by looking at individual practitioners as case studies.

Ultimately, regardless of how, where, by whom and to what ends research is undertaken or accessed, CHP feels that a marriage of quantitative and qualitative data yields the most amount of information necessary to state the case of an individual artist or ensemble, as well as the broader domain.

separate days within a 30 day period—something that many independent performing arts organizations (including CHP) do not qualify for due to short runs (less than one week) that are a result of limited resources.

Success vs. Credibility: Shifting From Art Making to Capacity Building

While on the topic of the *Times* article referenced above, the shift in focus from ““Hey let’s put on a show”” to “fighting for concrete gains” is an important one to address, investigate and support. When asked, “what is success?” some of the initial responses at The Field’s town hall meeting defined success as “making art.” Making art should always be at the core of an independent performing arts company’s focus, but without paying equal attention to developing a sustainable, progressive business model, the privilege of making art becomes a short lived endeavor as opposed to an ongoing venture.

The difference between short term art making and long term, sustainable arts practice can be accomplished by making the cognitive shift from *success* to *credibility* approaches to practice.¹²

It is easier to apply the subjective and somewhat malleable notion of success to a particular performance or production rather than to the entity engaged in creating that production. One can be successful at more or less anything. For success is little more than attaining one’s goals. If an individual’s goal is to tie her shoes, then once she has tied her shoes, she has succeeded. The same applies to mounting a performance. If an independent artist or ensemble’s goal is to mount a play, then so long as that play is written, cast, rehearsed and ultimately produced—that artist or ensemble (just like the woman tying her shoes) has succeeded. Success, however, has little to do with quality. An artist or ensemble may succeed in mounting a play—but that doesn’t automatically mean that the play that was mounted was any good.

Different from success, the more concrete notion of credibility is inherently linked to measures of quality, trustworthiness and validity. It is arguable that credibility, once earned, gives an artist or ensemble leverage in a more longstanding way. While individual successes play a role in developing credibility, if the goal of an organization is merely to be successful, how can such an organization identify and work towards capacity building on a scale that is greater than simply mounting its next show?

Perhaps, instead of having posed the question “how do you define success?” The Field should have asked the artists and ensembles assembled at its town hall meeting: “how do you

¹² Rather than simply be successful, CHP strives to be credible. For more information on the company’s inquiry into the differences that lie between success and credibility, please visit the interactive discussion of success vs. credibility on CHP’s Facebook Group Page: <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=10014286916>>.

define credibility?” To take the conversation one step further, The Field may have pressed its members by asking “how are you credible?” and “to whom?”

Collective Hole’s Approach to the Business of Arts Practice and Research

Collective Hole is not passive in its approach to these discussions. In October of 2007 CHP brought together its core artistic community and asked them the basic question, “Why is this so hard: what are the obstacles to creating independent theatre in New York?”¹³ In addition to the direct inquiry CHP has engaged in, the company has likewise made a practice of looking at itself as a case study. The results of this reflective research have revealed that one of the largest obstacles to independent theatre in New York City *is* independent theatre in New York City. Whereas, again, there is no lack of passion and artistic vigor amongst New York’s independent theatres, CHP has found that there is a dearth of business acumen and strategic planning skills that independent arts practitioners aren’t receiving as part of their training—be that academic or through years and years of practice.

Through its continuous inquiry, research and self-critique, CHP endeavors to become a more sustainable—and credible—organization committed not only to its growth as an independent company, but to the larger growth of the domain of the independent performing arts.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Follow-Up

Only by being critical about its practice will CHP find ways to be smarter about its work. Rather than come to solid conclusions pertaining to any of the aforementioned topics, the goal in writing this essay has been to take a first stab at illustrating CHP’s thinking and articulating its most top of mind ideas. CHP hopes that these first thoughts strike a chord throughout a broad audience including—but hopefully not limited to—artists and ensembles practicing within New York City, as well as the communities they celebrate, serve and support.

CHP encourages dialogue and looks forward to any and all discussion that may ensue as a result of this preliminary analysis of the obstacles the company has identified through its work,

¹³ Please see CHP’s website: <<http://www.collectivehole.org/Dialogue.html>> for more information on its series of summit meetings.

research and reflective thinking as an independent, New York City-based performing arts organization.

That being said, CHP would like to close by enumerating the four suggestions it made to The Field as follow-up steps to their town hall meeting. These suggestions, while directed towards The Field initially, could well be action steps for the domain of the independent performing arts most broadly speaking:

- 1.) Develop small cohorts of performing artists and ensembles to have in depth, action-step oriented discussions based on a small collection of issues and topics such as those that surfaced in The Field's town hall meeting, at the 2008 National Performing Arts Convention and as a result of CHP's research and reflective practice.
- 2.) Find a means to access and support research on the practice of the independent performing arts. "We've been dying for numbers," reads the *New York Times* article on Off, Off Broadway. What are these numbers and how can the independent performing arts, as a community, engage in research that will bring about this data? Perhaps more importantly, how can independent artists and ensembles use this data to build their capacity as individual artists and ensembles—and as a domain? In any industry being able to identify the value of one's work is a necessary evil, what is the business case for the value of the independent arts in contemporary society and culture?
- 3.) Establish a system of peer-review amongst artists and ensembles. This would a.) avail artists and ensembles the opportunity to receive objective feedback pertaining to their artistic work; b.) encourage artists and ensembles to see the work of their colleagues; c.) generate data pertaining to the work of artists and ensembles throughout the domain; d.) foster an increased sense of community amongst all of the diverse artists and ensembles acting within the domain, and; e.) shift the focus of determining quality and credibility from the gatekeepers of the domain to the practitioners acting within the domain.
- 4.) Foster a sense of community and ongoing conversation. The ability for an entire domain to continue a discussion is invaluable. To this end, CHP has found online social

networking sites such as Facebook to be a great resource. Please visit Collective Hole's Facebook Group Page as an example.¹⁴

¹⁴ See "References" for direct links.

About the Authors

Edward P. Clapp: Co-Founder, Resident Playwright

Edward has written and co-produced two Off, Off Broadway plays (*Run the Maze*, *Burn the Maze* and *Tucker in a Box*) in the past two years. As a spoken word artist, Edward has performed throughout the US and Europe at venues such as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Edinburgh, Scotland), Shakespeare and Company (Paris, France), The Bowery Poetry Club (NYC) and as a featured author at the Guild Hall Summer Writer's Series (East Hampton, NY). His poems have appeared in literary journals including *The Dudley Review*, *Quarterlife*, *Avocado*, *Confluence* and *Nerve* (UK). Edward's fiction has been published in *Word Jig—an Anthology of New Scottish Fiction* (Hanging Loose Press, 2003) and *Philly Fiction* (Don Ron Press, 2006). Edward received his BFA from Rhode Island School of Design, his Masters of Letters from the University of Glasgow and his Ed. M. in Arts Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In the fall of 2008 Edward will be returning to Harvard to continue his doctoral studies.

Rebecca V. Nellis: Co-Founder, Resident Director

Rebecca directed and co-produced Collective Hole's first two plays (*Run the Maze*, *Burn the Maze* and *Tucker in a Box*) both presented by The Tank at Collective:Unconscious in New York. Also in New York, Rebecca has worked as a director and stage/rehearsal manager with Falling Plaster, Common Ground Stage and Film Company, The Flock Theatre Company, Nevermore, Inc. and The Theatre for the New City. Rebecca worked in the casting departments of the Paper Mill Playhouse and the television show *Lateline*. Additionally, she was a teaching artist at the City Lights Youth Theatre. Before moving to New York, Rebecca studied theatre at the Chicago Academy for the Arts and the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. She is a graduate of New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing. Outside of the theatre, Rebecca is the Director of Programs for the CEW Foundation's Cancer and Careers initiative.

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