

Creating Connection in Play: How the Portland Playhouse is Learning, Growing, and Adapting to Connect with Public Values

When I first heard the Creating Connection research and recommendations, I was skeptical. As Artistic Director of Portland Playhouse, a theater dedicated to featuring professional artists, I questioned, “What would it mean for professional artists if, as a field, we began saying, ‘Everyone is an artist?’ Would that make us less special, less fundable, less valuable to society?” My immediate response was defensive, “We need to protect the little we have!”

But I remember when Eric Friedenwald-Fishman—founder and creative director of Metropolitan Group, one of the agencies leading Creating Connection—asked a room full of arts leaders, “If we could engage a larger audience by rethinking the way we talk about art, would we be willing to change?”

Rebuilding the Playhouse

And change we have. At Portland Playhouse, we have replaced “arts and culture” with “creative expression” as the primary label for what we do. We have removed the “us/them” binary from the way we think about our artists and audience. We are breaking down this distinction in our external communications, internal thinking, organizational culture, and our programming.

Along those lines, our annual season kick-off party is a fundraising event that typically offers our 120 guests a “sneak peek” of four scenes from our upcoming season, performed by professional actors. This year, we had a party guest join some of our actors for one of the readings and the performance was met with raucous enthusiasm. It was delightfully fun and funny, disarmingly charming to watch, and we quickly learned that as much as the audience loves seeing the highly crafted work of the professionals, they also revel in these opportunities to experience the creative expression of their fellow guests.

On a separate occasion, we arranged to have BRAVO youth orchestra, an organization that works “to improve the lives of underserved children through intensive orchestral instruction” perform as a pre-show to our production of *A Christmas Carol*. While this one-off event required flexibility on the part of our stage manager and union actors to change the pre-show experience that we had crafted for the full run of the show, we recognized the added value of highlighting the creativity of these students and offering our audience a broader view of all the expressive outlets in our community.

The Power of Coming Together

While these are only two of many examples I could share about how we are embracing Creating Connection, they serve to illustrate our newly-engrained belief that when we view “the arts” field as something that includes us, but is separate from the world at large, we are missing an opportunity. We are missing the opportunity to belong to a world where we are *all* creative and have a chance to express ourselves. And once we are all in this together, just think how easy will it be to pass legislation, build sustainable funding sources, and fill the seats of theaters, concert halls, stadiums, and living rooms, for the celebration of the creativity that bring us into connection with each other and ourselves.

Brian Weaver

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