

Elizabeth Mendez Berry

How does a theater company that has spent decades bouncing from one Bronx space to another put down roots? Better yet, how does it transform a boarded up warehouse in the poorest congressional district in the country into one of New York's most vibrant arts spaces—despite the fact that more than a few naysayers didn't believe it could?

Slowly but surely. The leaders at Pregones Theater believed that the organization was ready to invest in a space, and began looking at how to make it happen. They fell in love with an old warehouse on Walton Avenue in the South Bronx. They then chipped away at stakeholders' qualms about their plan by engaging doubters every step of the way. They even brought funders to the warehouse space and gave them masks to wear because of all the dust.

Eventually, they wore them down, and won their support. Pregones raised more than three million dollars for the project, with impressive levels of individual donations. After the space had been inaugurated in 2005, capping the organization's 25th anniversary, then Bronx borough president Adolfo Carrión acknowledged that he wasn't sure they could make it happen—but they did.

The space, which hosts the resident theater company as well as a range of other performers, is impressive. It has digital scenery capabilities, as well as supertitle projections, so plays in Spanish can be simultaneously translated. It has what Pregones development officer Arnaldo J. López called "the dazzle factor." The space has pushed the theater company's work: "Having it has allowed the artistic directors' creativity to really thrive," he said.

The second of the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture's conversations focused on Latino arts and cultural organizations. It was held at New York's Desmond Tutu Center, and moderated by Rosalba Rolón, artistic director of Pregones. The convening dealt with strategies for organizational development and scaling up, like Pregones' purchase and renovation of the warehouse space. But it also highlighted the role these organizations play in communities, whether they own their

NALAC welcomes your comments on the concepts and topics explored in this essay; submit your ideas by writing to us at nalac_conversations@yahoo.com.

Note from the Editor:

This essay was commissioned by NALAC following a convening of artists, scholars, art administrators, and cultural activists in New York City in January 2010. It is one of three essays commissioned after three conversations. Although the content reflects solely the perceptions of the author, the essay also offers a snapshot of crucial themes, priorities, and ideas that are shaping the meaning and evolution of Latino arts and culture. NALAC is circulating these essays among cultural workers and thinkers as an invitation for further dialogue and to stimulate research on the opportunities and challenges that Latino arts and culture face in the 21st century.

About the Author:

Elizabeth Mendez Berry's work has appeared in the Washington Post, The Nation, Vibe, the Village Voice, Smithsonian, and Time, among many others. She is an adjunct professor at NYU's Clive Davis School of Recorded Music, where she teaches music journalism. She writes about the intersection of pop culture and politics, and is known for her bold hip hop feminism. She has also worked for non-profit organizations, including the Drug Policy Alliance, and was a founding board member of the League of Young Voters. She has won several awards for her work, including the top music journalism prize for "Love Hurts," an expose of domestic violence in the hip hop industry. Of Colombian and Irish Canadian descent and raised in Toronto, she now lives in Queens, NY. She has a masters in journalism from Columbia University. For more visit her website: www.mendezberry.com

own a space or not. To describe that function, Dr. Estevan Rael-Gálvez, Executive Director of the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, NM, invoked the metaphor of a warm, inviting place. “*La resolana* is the sunny side of the house, where people gathered to tell stories, where intergenerational dialogue happened,” he said. “Arts institutions are *resolanas*.”

Among those present were representatives from theater, dance, and the visual arts; from veteran arts organizations and new ones. The conversation began with NALAC board member Charles Rice-Gonzalez introducing some of the themes that had come up in NALAC’s leadership conversation in San Antonio; issues that are closely tied to questions about organizational development. Rice-Gonzalez emphasized the importance of cultivating an organizational culture that facilitates growth and transition, and one that offers staff a healthy lifestyle. “Who would work for this type of salary, other than a founder?” he asked. This question becomes particularly relevant when a founder leaves. “So few leaders develop the infrastructure to leave their organizations. They don’t develop cultures of secession, and when they leave, it’s often unplanned,” he said.

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“Hacer de Tripas, Corazones”

The goal of the New York meeting was to foster a dialogue among representatives from diverse arts organizations around the country about sustainability in individual organizations and within the field. To give context to the conversation, NALAC executive director Maria López de Leon outlined the state of Latino arts organizations in the United States; most operate with budgets of less than \$350,000 per year. “This is a highly structured, competitive field, and most Latino arts organizations are mid-sized or small,” said López de Leon. “A mid-sized organization in the broader context is a large organization in the Latino context.” While President Obama’s stimulus package allocated \$50 million to the cultural sector, just \$600,000 dollars went to Latino organizations. NALAC has spoken out on this lack of funding, and continues to advocate for Latino arts on Capitol Hill.

At the core of the success of the represented organizations were two things: artists, embedded deep in the decision-making process, and a living, breathing, energizing mission, which informed the work and was revisited regularly. Most of the organizations at the meeting were founded by artists, and remain artist-led, even if they also include “civilians” on their staff. “The artist has to be part of the conversation,” said Ballet Hispanico’s artistic director Eduardo Vilaro. “It’s not just about beautiful art; it’s about maintaining that core.” As organizations grow, some cultivate a more diverse skillset: at the Miracle Theater in Portland, Oregon, adding non-artist staff has freed up the

organization's artist founders so they can focus less on administration and more on creation. "They were liberated by having a strong support team so they could continue doing their work," said Olga Sanchez, artistic director of the Miracle Theater Mainstage.

Rudy Guglielmo, a non-artist, was hired by the Phoenix artist collective Movimiento Artístico del Rio Salado (MARS) in the late '80s, at a moment when the organization recognized the need to add management skills to its talent pool. The experience worked for Guglielmo, who had a business degree from Arizona State University—"I was a suburban ethnic, and it was an opportunity to learn about the Chicano movement," he said. "We didn't do *folklorico*, so the community-based organizations weren't interested in us; we were more accepted by alternative artists." Though MARS closed its doors in 2001, the experience lives on in Guglielmo—"once an arts administrator, always an arts administrator in some way," he said. He's now a program officer at the Bush Foundation in Minneapolis, one of a small number of Latinos working in philanthropy, but his allegiance to the arts remains. His advice to the organizations at the meeting: "articulate your mission in a way that's relevant to your audience." In the face of non-Latino art organizations' growing interest in "reaching out" to Latinos to diversify their audiences and justify funders' investments, Latino organizations have a unique capacity to connect at deeper levels and with greater efficacy to the Latino public that everyone else only knows at a distance. Partly, it's a matter of leveraging what Latino organizations do best; partly, it's a matter of fiscal survival.

But one of the greatest challenges these organizations face is the fact that their audiences are in flux; New York's Repertorio Español was founded in 1968. Since

then, New York's Latino community has morphed many times. "The foreign-born element thirty years ago versus the foreign-born element today is completely different," said artistic director Robert Weber Federico. Similar challenges exist nationwide. "It's about bridging the gap between a multigenerational Latino community and new immigrants," said Olga Sanchez. "10,000 people will attend a Norteño festival, but the local theater board struggles to recruit leaders. We need strategies to reach that transient population." Janet Rodriguez, former National Director for Arts & Culture at the JPMorgan Chase Global Philanthropy Group, argued that these demographic shifts can have serious implications for an organization's mission and its relevance to a community that may look very different than it did when the organization was founded.

We are all "art administrators" now

The nature of arts non-profit management has changed significantly since some of these organizations were founded. Arts administration programs have popped up at universities around the country, creating a generation of arts professionals who may never have emoted onstage or picked up a paintbrush. The conversationalists voiced a concern that this new landscape has sidelined the artists themselves. "When I was in the arts administration program at Columbia, you had to be an artist," said Janet Rodriguez. "It was about giving artists the tools they needed. That's no longer true. It's about turning out the future director of development, and then who's making the money—administrators or artists? How do you train people, and who do you train? As a funder, I could tell who really cared about the art form, and who was just going through the motions."

The group acknowledged that academic training and business acumen were both important ingredients to sustainability, but that they needed to be applied in service of artist-driven mission statements. "There are good writers who don't get the heart and soul of the organization," said Weber Federico. "They could just as easily be writing a grant for a hospital." At the same time, Repertorio Español has hired young people who studied art administration,

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like José Antonio Cruz, who was also present at the meeting. “I think that [José Antonio] values my history and experience with the company and I value that he’s bringing in new things,” said Weber Federico. Cruz was in the New York University arts administration program while he was working at Repertorio. He thinks that organizations like NALAC should build relationships with programs like the one he attended in order to bring a real-life dimension to the curriculum.

A program that offers a hybrid of real-life and cultural context, the NALAC Leadership Institute distinguishes its approach to arts management training by combining core instruction in budgeting, strategic planning, and board development –staples of the nonprofit administration curriculum—with extensive contextual and critical perspectives on how the Latino arts field functions within the existing American art ecosystem. “One of NALAC’s goals in bringing together emerging Latino leaders for training,” said Rosalba Rolón, who has taught at the summer Institute for ten years, “is not so much to produce ‘administrators’ as it is to energize and empower visionaries; the training per se on administrative protocols can be easy to obtain, but the application of ethics and savvy from a culturally-relevant position is truly what sets our approach apart.”

Dr. Estevan Rael-Gálvez, who left his post nine months ago as the State Historian for New Mexico to lead one of the largest Latino institutions in the country, has benefited from a partnership with a local university. . “They assigned four students to work with us to develop a business plan,” he said. “It’s not perfect, but it’s a draft of a business plan.”

Whether these non-profits embrace the academy or not, they aim to develop their staff’s capacity through formal professional development, like NALAC’s Leadership Institute, and informal mentoring. “When artists get integrated into our organization, they become professionalized,” said Rosalba Rolón. Still, while some structures lend themselves to artist development, others don’t. “Dance is very hierarchical. You do what the ballet master does,” said Ballet Hispanico’s Eduardo Vilaro. “There’s no time for professional development, and most of the dancers are extremely young. As a dancer for almost 10 years there was never a point when I felt like I was being developed.” In contrast, though MACLA doesn’t have heat or air-conditioning, building staff capacity is not negotiable. “We’re making sure they get professional development,” said MACLA’s executive director Anjee Helstrup-Alvarez. “I want all my staff members to see themselves as part of the organization’s future.”

A House of One's Own

For MACLA a key strategic question has been whether to trade its rickety \$1 a month rental for its own space. "We've seen spaces kill organizations," said Helstrup-Alvarez. "We don't want to work just for a building. We're being very careful." The National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque has an impressive 12 acre campus with four buildings, but like most of the organizations at the meeting, the vast majority of Latino arts organizations do not own their own space. For Repertorio Español, expansion would have involved compromising its mission. "We like popular stuff, but to get a bigger theater we would have to do a lot of popular works with stars," said Weber Federico.

Pregones's Bronx theater is the fruit of the unwavering vision of artistic director Rosalba Rolón and associate artistic directors Alvan Colón-Lespier and Jorge B. Merced, who stuck to their guns even when others didn't see what they saw in a threadbare building. It's also the result of a rigorous evaluation of whether their dreams could come true, and a groundbreaking capital campaign. Though the space has pushed Pregones and its work forward, development officer Arnaldo J. López emphasizes that owning isn't right for every organization.

"There's this fantasy that you don't have to worry about rent anymore," he said. "But you're your own landlord. The organization now has a concern that isn't artistic. You have to maintain the building, you need new technical staff." He cautioned organizations against "recklessly pursuing" a capital project. "Talk to stakeholders, talk to neighbors and funders," he said. "Some may be afraid, some may be reckless, but the feedback helps anticipate how people are going to respond later. It helps you figure out what you need to do in order to get their buy-in, which you will need eventually."

Like any other organizational upgrade, space costs money. Pregones's capital campaign was premised on the radical idea that Latinos would be willing to invest in a local arts center. "Funding from foundations, the government and corporations is cyclical," said López. "Arts organizations in communities of color don't have a history of getting funding from individuals. There's a perception that Latino philanthropy is limited to the church and health." On the eve of the theater's 2005 opening, the *New York Times* ran a story highlighting Pregones's strategy:

The organization entered uncharted territory a year and a half ago when its representatives began to solicit funds directly from individuals. The open-ended campaign has raised \$164,000 toward the \$3.3 million real estate project. The new 130-seat Pregones Theater on Walton Avenue is scheduled to open tomorrow in a renovated building near Yankee Stadium.

The group and its directors said they learned that successful solicitations required rehearsal -- just like producing a show, according to [associate art director Jorge B.] Merced. "We began to practice," he said. "We were training our board and staff to become ambassadors for our organization, and we began by practicing on ourselves."

Other organizations are also trying to engage individual donors. MACLA has a "Generation Next" program that targets twenty- and thirty-somethings who contribute five to ten dollars per month. "We need financial equity and access to capital," said MACLA's Helstrup-Alvarez.

Even though Pregones raised an unprecedented amount of money in the community, it still relied on the usual suspects: government and foundations. The fact remains that without substantial philanthropic support, the arts and culture sector would languish, or in some instances, simply disappear. “Artists will always do art, even in the most dire of circumstances, the impulse create will never cease; but art organizations are an ‘invention’ that we have come to rely on as a country. The nonprofit sector in which Latino art organizations exist, and which we play a part in perpetuating, is an infrastructure that we have inherited and that we have to master, like it or not,” said NALAC’s director Maria López de León.

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And today, the funding climate is not overly hospitable. Rosalba Rolón led the group in a free association session about the foundation world’s most beloved buzzwords. Among the offenders: “at risk” “disadvantaged” “innovation” “sustainability” “cutting edge” “value-added” “diversity” “out of the box.” “We have been functioning outside the box forever,” said Rolón. “I’d love to see what’s in the box!” “[Funding guidelines] are intentionally ambiguous,” said Rudy Guglielmo. “There needs to be more rigor regarding what underserved means so that resources get where they need to be.”

Guglielmo urged the arts organizations present to evaluate their work, and collect stories that demonstrate their impact on their communities. “They have to emphasize the uniqueness of who they are. Funders are looking for a clear definition of what the issue is—it’s a big challenge for smaller organizations that lack the capacity to do the evaluations needed,” he said. “There’s a strong outcome orientation. It’s about the funder’s goal, not necessarily building community.” Evaluations measured only in terms of target numbers, however, can paint a distorted picture of the value that an organization brings to a community. Again, striking the balance between quantitative standards and qualitative indicators has not always come easy to many Latino art centers. More recently, the emergence of a cadre of Latino scholars trained in qualitative research methods such as ethnographic writing, oral history, visual anthropology, and performance studies have contributed to expanding the range of evaluation options that organizations are employing.

The Tipping Point

Informing how funders and policymakers think about the field, and how they concoct their own goals, is one of the biggest challenges. “We have to be at the policy table,” said Rael-Gálvez. “We need to show organizations how to lobby and educate policy makers on the importance of arts and culture in our communities.” Director and scholar José Luis Valenzuela, who participated in the tail end of the discussion, concurred. “There are two problems. One is making people understand the arts,” he said. The other is showing the importance of art as a community event. Marketing-wise, we don’t always do as good a job as we should.” In meetings with policy makers in California, he’s heard the argument that non-profit arts organizations are unnecessary because [the entertainment industry] is making money without foundation support.

It's not just about convincing policy makers, however; Latino communities themselves need to value their own arts and culture. "We've got to get into education. "Students in the Bronx want to do *Grease!* Our future generations will be so Americanized that Latino culture will be exotic to them," said Weber Federico. "There has to be an earlier effort to balance the arts they're exposed to or we'll become superfluous."

Both Guglielmo and Rolón argued that arts organizations need to rekindle their relationship with other community groups. "So many of our organizations grew out of social movements," said Rolón. "But we spend our lives trying to justify our existence, as if making art is not enough." Guglielmo suggested that by partnering with community organizations, arts groups might be more accessible to people who wouldn't necessarily seek them out otherwise. "Integrating social services and art and culture would be a more holistic approach," he said. Embedding the art work in "essential" social services could also counter the argument that art is a luxury, he said.

On the other hand, the danger of Latino arts being devalued as something primarily "medicinal" in nature continues to chip away at the credibility and respect that artists seek—the space to create, period. Striking a balance between high aesthetic standards and community relevance has represented the largest challenge—and the greatest achievement—of Latino art organizations for the last 40 years. But developing the skills to achieve equilibrium between these two demands is not something one would necessarily pick up at a training workshop on arts administration. "We need to turn on our intuition, learn to read our landscapes, assess realistically, sometimes brutally, where we stand, and train our hearts to work in tandem with our minds. And vice versa,"

said Rolón.

This combination of strategy and on-the-ground implementation is particularly urgent given that Latinos are in demand, and if arts organizations don't leverage their expertise, someone else will take advantage. "As the demographic grows, the mainstream organizations want to get to us," said López de Leon. "Then they tell a funder, 'We're reaching this community.'"

Many of those present at the NALAC conversation were convinced that the Latino community is on the cusp of something big. "As Latinos, we're at the tipping point," said Olga Sanchez. "You can feel it, the stats show it. We're in such an amazing time in the perception of Latinos by the whole country, and by ourselves. We have to own that value, because we're at a point where you have to pay attention to us, and if you don't, you won't survive."

The goal of the conversation at the Desmond Tutu center was more than survival: it was about thriving in a new climate where Latinos are the (complicated, heterogeneous) community to chase. For Arnaldo J. López, success is about building capacity not just for his organization, but for the field and the community as a whole. "This feels like the beginning of a conversation where we understand our capital and our position," he said. "And we start to use it in a way that helps us wield some power."

Conversation

Participants:

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