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Keeping the Flame Sarah Bellamy

March 11, 2013

March finds the artistic and administrative team at [Penumbra Theatre Company](#) in St. Paul, Minnesota focusing on two objectives: one is celebrating the power of art to sustain and uplift culture, the other is a concerted investment in cultural preservation and cultural authenticity.

Penumbra represents the convergence of many voices originating with the advent of the first Africans in America. These early storytellers found myriad ways to keep what was most precious close, even when so much was stripped away. They strategized covert ways to preserve a sense of self, a sense of community, of cultural connectivity, all while holding out enough hope to cultivate a new and blended sense of home-space in a foreign and foreboding land. In private moments, in moments of celebration and in mourning, black people told one another their stories of origin, of survival, with humor and with hope, and with a very frank recognition that with every word passed from tongue to ear, we were stronger for it, equipped with something no one and nothing could render from us.

These early storytellers inoculated their children and grandchildren with history and held them responsible for its care. And so the stories have been handed down, each generation adding, reinventing, restoring, and remembering the ancestral body from which we've all come. It is from this very specific, dynamic wellspring that our art comes;

Penumbra is a single convergence of many voices, etching out a slice of time deep within the continuum of black expression. We want to use this time well.

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Over the company's thirty-six year history, Penumbra's artists have worked to ensure that these stories maintain their cultural authenticity and their cultural value. We stage them because they continue to reveal deep insight about the human condition through the prism of the black American experience. In that time, Penumbra has also experienced several life-threatening financial crises. Each crisis had

its own unique set of circumstances. Each time Penumbra found a way to beat the odds and to survive, to learn from the experience, and to forge a more effective infrastructure.

Penumbra is not alone in facing fiscal challenges. However, with the most recent cash flow crisis, the country faced losing one of its largest and oldest African American theater companies. The reasons why this happened are multiple and in some ways bound to time and context, however they may offer preventative insight.

Penumbra's cash flow crisis in the fall of 2012 occurred due to three primary reasons:

1. Lack of strong fiscal management. We were transitioning administrative management and finance staff and did not ask key questions.
2. Distraction over numerous opportunities to build our national brand and by the testing of new revenue streams. In calendar year 2012, Penumbra presented seven plays in eight venues locally and nationally which resulted in a 40% increase in ticket sales compared to 2011; introduced two new educational programs; and put fourteen new plays through our play development program. These opportunities challenged an already lean staff to meet additional demands.
3. Reduction of core funding from corporations and foundations. Starting in 2011, a number of corporate donors reduced general operating support and sponsorships. This series of a hundred small cuts over eighteen months resulted in a deficit and cash flow crisis by August 2012. As indicated in the audit (which is available upon request) Penumbra saw a decrease in its net assets of \$1,153,506 during the year ended June 30, 2012. If the in-kind revenue and expense of \$599,240 had not straddled the years ended June 30, 2011 and 2012, each year would have shown a loss in excess of \$500,000.

Within a month of identifying the cash flow crisis, the board and management decided that Penumbra would:

1. Not incur any new debt;
2. Suspend fall programming;
3. Reduce its budget by \$800,000 including staff cuts;
4. Raise \$340,000 of the projected year-end deficit by December 31, 2012 which would allow the resumption of programming in the spring of 2013;
5. Complete a comprehensive business plan for fiscal year 2014 through 2020.

By December 31, 2012, Penumbra had raised over \$582,000 which included exceeding the second quarter budgeted goal of \$165,000 *and* exceeding its deficit reduction campaign goal of \$340,000. Support came from over 1,400 individuals, corporations, and foundations locally and nationally. Penumbra announced its spring season on January 7, 2013. It also remains current on all payables including its long-term debt obligations and has strong conservative cash flow projections through fiscal year 2013. Penumbra has implemented permanent changes in the finance area which include accurate and reliable cash management practices, expense control measures, strengthening of the overall accounting infrastructure, and meaningful reporting for board and management.

Penumbra has overcome a major hurdle but it is not out of the woods, yet. The fall campaign got us back to ground zero. We still need to meet our budget goals for the balance of the fiscal year to end the year in the black. We are on track to do so but there are always many variables that can impact the situation. The budgets for the next three years will be limited as we are committed to paying off our long-term debt as scheduled and to building cash reserves.

The new business plan for FY14 through FY20 will be completed by June 30, 2013. The plan will identify the most effective structural and financial models to ensure sustainability while incorporating artistic and administrative succession. 3M is providing members from their Business Development and their Lean Six Sigma groups to help lead the project and to provide analysis on the viability of the key revenue streams. The 2020 vision remains true to Penumbra's mission and legacy and will not change what we do, but it will change how we activate our mission. It is a vision for a sustainable and vibrant culturally specific theater that uses technology to connect people to the art, and, that supports itself through profit generating business units.

Penumbra has strong internal systems in place to complete implementation of the business model changes. With continued commitment from staff and board leadership, support from key stakeholders and supporters, and a shared vision, Penumbra can rebound from this serious setback and build an institution for the future.

Creating a healthy financial infrastructure is essential to preserving the art for generations to come. For over three decades Penumbra Theatre has been a place where audiences and artists alike have been able to convene and witness the triumphs and tragedies of history. Under the founding artistic leadership of Lou Bellamy, some of the country's most accomplished and innovative artists have met one another on our stage, revisiting the stories passed down, devising new ways of telling them, and with nodding heads realizing all over again how much they still matter—and how far we still have to go.

Well-appointed and deeply contextualized black institutions give black artists the opportunity to reflect on the kind of artists they want to be, how they might use the instruments of their talent to benefit not just the field, but the communities in which our theaters exist. The artists who come to Penumbra describe it as a place where they can do the kind of work they are so rarely permitted elsewhere—work that encourages them to take inventory of what's inside them, to explore the breadth and depth of what's available inside the African American experience—as August Wilson wrote, “the contents of my mother's cabinet are worthy of the highest art.” Black theaters give black artists the

opportunity to do this work, supported by other artists who can surround their artistic journey with opportunities for engagement, professional development, and growth. This is what Penumbra Theatre has meant for so many artists who grew up here and never once had to separate their artistic training from their culture. Instead they found that their cultural experience only enhanced the development of their talent, and through their artistic practice they found affirmation, voice, respect. That is what black theater can be for an artist, for a community, for a culture, for a nation.

As we enter into a new era of black theater, I am excited to find that there are several young artists determined to juxtapose authentic representations of our lives and culture with stereotypical representations that are startlingly in vogue today. I am heartened to see that so many of us understand what is at stake, and why it is so very important that black people be the authors of our own stories, that black artists be entrusted to authentically represent these stories for audiences, and that the value ascribed to these stories is measured by the people they depict.

Still, in 2013, as we enter into the second term of our nation's first black president, in American literature and on American stages, black culture remains at risk. Very frequently when I find myself surprised at this fact, I revisit the prophetic and profound poem Langston Hughes wrote in 1940, “Note on Commercial Theater.” In it, he outlines issues that remain unresolved today:

You've taken my blues and gone—

*You sing 'em on Broadway
 And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
 And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
 And you fixed 'em
 So they don't sound like me.
 Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.
 You also took my spirituals and gone
 You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
 All kinds of Swing Mikados
 And in everything but what's about me—
 But someday somebody'll
 Stand up and talk about me—
 Black and beautiful—
 And sing about me,
 And put on plays about me!
 I reckon it'll be
 Me myself!
 Yes, it'll be me.*

I was asked to reflect in this piece on the importance of black theaters as institutions, and in my own way, I've tried to do just that. But as many of us know, you cannot talk about theater without talking about the people who give it life, and you can't talk about that life without talking about the breath that supports it, and you can't talk about that breath without going back to the heart of it all—the drum that beats ceaselessly and urgently, setting our lives to a purposeful rhythm; the drum that calls us

home.

black theater bright spots

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