SPARK – "Alternative Spaces & Funding"
Philadelphia Ethical Society
Monday, April 27, 2009
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I. Welcome remarks - Karen DiLossi, Director of Programs & Services, Theatre Alliance

- Thank you to our Spark Committee members Doug Greene and Aaron Oster for organizing tonight's event.

A. Aaron Oster, moderator – Independent Director and Sound Designer
B. John Frisbee – Managing Director, Pig Iron Theatre Company
   - Pig Iron is known for using nontraditional spaces, which present great opportunities for actors to explore architecture.
   - Pig Iron creates all of its own work in nontraditional spaces, but it is not easy for venue managers to give over space for three months.
   - Philadelphia's poverty of spaces has presented opportunities (i.e. the Latvian Society was choice #13 for Pig Iron's production of *Checkov Lizardbrain*).
C. Nick Anselmo – Mandell Professional in Residence Project (MPiRP).
   - This project brings professional (dance and theatre) companies to work with students at Drexel. Their mission is to take 18,000 students and make them the theatergoers of tomorrow.
   - Currently, EgoPo Productions, Orchestra 2001, and Drexel students are currently collaborating on *Bluebird*. Azuka Theatre will be in residence next years, and two years from now 11th Hour Theatre Company.
D. John Emory – Fringe Coordinator, Philadelphia Live Arts Festival & Philly Fringe
   - The LiveArts/Fringe is once a year for 16 days, September 4 – 19, 2009.
   - The Philly Fringe is self-producers festival, an opportunity to take a step into theatre or dance world. You are responsible for space, actors, print material, etc.
   - John is a hand-holder and wrangler of fringe artists, offering guidance throughout the Fringe process.

II. Moderated Discussion

A. Tips from Pig Iron's experience
   - Get a real sense of what the space offers and lacks (lighting system, infrastructure)
   - There may be a lack of privacy. People at the nontraditional performance spaces can be unaware of the needs of theatre and rehearsals.

- Ask for: consistent bathroom access, total privacy during set rehearsal times, place to store props/costumes, ability to lock performance room, access to kitchen, heat and/or air conditioning.
- Be careful and be patient.

B. What makes a successful collaboration?
- It is really a coproduction between MPiRP and the collaborating company. Mandell provides stipend, infrastructure, and technical direction for companies.
- Their collaboration with New Paradise Laboratories, lasted over 2 years, to create *PROM*.
- Because there is no theatre major at Drexel, students participate because they want to.
- How can small companies become visible to the Mandell program?
- Bring a project, and be prepared to look into the future, as there are residencies lined up for the next three years.
- The project should be appropriate for size of Mandell Theatre (425-seats, proscenium stage).
- A company that already has a somewhat established audience base is a plus.
- The project does maintain relationships with collaborating company members (ex. Whit MacLaughlin taught, and Lee Ann Etzold directed show).

C. What resources does the Fringe Festival provide?
- Anyone can be involved, as long as you can follow the timeline and pay the minimal fees.
- It gives someone a chance to get in the scene in an exciting festival atmosphere
- You have to produce your own work, but the Fringe provides a complete support network.
- This is the 13th year of the Fringe, and in that time they have amassed a lot of knowledge. Visit their "How to participate in the Fringe" section of livearts-fringe.org. (http://livearts-fringe.org/how-to-participate.cfm)
- Come and check out some 2009 Fringe shows to see how other people are doing it.

D. What are the challenges of self-producing?
- There is a lack of traditional venue to perform. "Alternative Space" – a place that is not necessarily a theatre space (ex. yoga studios).
- Negotiating with venues/spaces, esp. permits for outdoor spaces.
- Fringe outlined the process in a manual, Also, Managing Director, Carolyn Schlecker, is good at working through the system.

E. Advice for alternative funding
- Do your research! Look beyond the normal funders.
- Looked at themes of the pieces and research organizations in those themes. For example, Pig Iron raised $15k for *Sweet By And By* (a production based on the life of a Swede) through researching organized labor and Swedish foundations.

- As projects come up that have a specific angle, development and managing directors should brainstorm possible spins.
- There is a possibility for lots of grant money by linking it to a nationality. Almost every European country has cultural consulate in NYC as well as representation in Philadelphia.

F. Why aren't alternative spaces used more outside the Fringe in Philly?
- People are scared to take a leap if they don't have to. Sheer volume of shows is going to push people to do what they haven't before.
- Philly has weird zoning laws, and there is a lot of footwork necessary to get these places.
- Maybe your venue should tailor to your show and not vice versa.
- At big institutions, everything takes a longer time. Find a down time when a university is on break. Drexel is empty during the Fringe festival,
- Now is a fertile time to seek nontraditional spaces. There are a lot of spaces that are not being sold or rented now.
- Make contacts in real estate development. What do people have lying around? South Street Arts Initiative.

III. Audience Q & A

A. When looking for spaces, where do you even start?
- You can either do a general search or focus on what is appropriate for a specific piece.
- One thing leads to another. For instance, Pig Iron discovered the Latvian Society while looking at the German Society. They are next door to one another.

B. Will using untraditional space lose audience-by-association? Or, is there a novelty to presenting in nontraditional space?
- There will be changeover with audience from traditional to alternative venues.
- Older crowd more hesitant to come to new space. Assure your audience they will be okay
- In particular neighborhoods, an earlier start time (while it is still light outside) will help your audience feel safe.
- The younger audiences want new spaces, new experiences. They want to see these spaces, go urban exploring.
- Students love nontraditional theatre – expectations change, interactive.
- Rather than neutralize the nontraditional place, use the architecture. Engage with what the space does (or doesn't) have to offer.
- Each person that uses a nontraditional space opens the door for the next company. Don't pile it on. If you are using a nontraditional space, keep other details traditional.

C. To Nick at MPiRP - How do you recruit students to join collaboration? What are you looking for in a project?
- Many students who participate did theatre in high school and wanted to continue involvement in theatre. Students have professional standards and expectations.

- Drexel also does other shows throughout year outside of the residency projects.
- Nick looks for work that is appealing to young audiences, and that brings something new and unique (ex. viewpoints, bunraku puppetry).

D. How do you recommend contacting venues? Call? Email?
- If you can't get anyone by phone or email, go to the venue and knock on their door. Ask to speak to someone in person
- There are many large organizations that don't have a space (Pig Iron, 1812 Productions) that may have more cache than an unknown.
- Plan in advance. Large organizations are freaked out by short timelines and close deadlines.

E. How do you ease concerns to a person/organization renting an alternative space to performers for the first time?
- Recognize that the spaces are under-utilized. The venue manager will recognize that theatre will be bringing in some money.
- Sometimes spaces are own org/mission/agenda – you can work together to be sensitive to their ongoing needs
- Help the venue manager establish what their vision is about how to use the space, and explain how your piece/company works with that.
- Come fully prepared to the meeting, with an agenda. You have to sell yourself to them, so look as professional as possible (bring mission on letterhead, cite other work, give examples of what you are doing).
- Look at history of the space and how the spaces are used from calendar perspective. You might be able cut a different deal during down times, even at larger organizations.
- The venue manager will work his/her contacts to find out about you. Provide references that the venue manager might know

F. Arts on South Street Initiative:
- There are a lot of vacancies on almost every block of South Street. Spaces are being turned into art galleries and theatre spaces in hopes to generate revenue.
- Realtors are not able to rent these spaces, so they are donating some space for free if renter pays utilities. These are mostly on a month-to-month basis now, with the hope that artists will keep on renting.

G. Is a 501c3 necessary?
- Most foundations require nonprofit status to receive grants.
- Another option is having a fiscal sponsorship through an established nonprofit organization, but make sure you have a good personal relationship with this organization.
- Recommended resources:
    - Fractured Atlas: a non-profit organization that provides services and support to artists and arts organizations, www.fracturedatlas.org/
    - Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (PVLA): provides pro-bono and low cost legal assistance, educational programs and business counseling to artists and arts and cultural organizations, www.artsandbusinessphila.org/pvla/.

- The IRS website takes you through the 501c3 application process step by step, www.irs.gov/.

Venues mentioned throughout course of event:

- Latvian Society
- The Rotunda
- Arts Bank
- Prince Music Theatre – Independence Black Box
- Walnut
- Plays and Players
- Drexel – the Armory
- Society Hill Playhouse – red room, mainstage (longer running shows)
- Independence Park
- American philosophical society
- Fergie's pub
- L2 (2nd floor space with restaurant downstairs at 22nd & South)
- German Society
- Ethical Society
- Whole Foods on South St. (2nd level parking lot)