

Getting Out of the House

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30th Hackley Distinguished Lecturer

May 16, 2011

I called my talk tonight GETTING OUT OF THE HOUSE because after I got an e-mail from Angie Maloy asking me to do this I thought a lot about my memories from being a child and teenager in Muskegon and how they related to my career in theater and the arts, and I realized that what we are all trying to do, to get people to come out and share our common experiences as represented in the arts, is what was done somewhat against my will when I was a kid here. We are all trying to get people out of the house to attend the arts. And when I was a kid in Muskegon I was forcefully DRAGGED out of the house to attend numerous cultural events. So getting out of the house was key to my experiences here growing up, and it's key to what we have to do in the arts to get people to participate. So tonight I am going to share with you my experience in trying to get people out of the house, specifically how I ended up using the arts as part of a downtown renewal effort in upstate NY, what I have learned from that, and just how much of the necessary infrastructure that I had to spend the better part of 10 years banging my head against the wall trying to create, and persuade people the value of, was already here when I was growing up 30-35 years ago.

First I want to side track for moment and explain what I do now, and what I did for 15 years in upstate New York. As Marilyn said I have been working for a Broadway General Manager and Producer for the last three years and I have been lucky enough to catch him at a moment where we seem to be doing a lot of shows that are working, that are capturing people's

imaginations, and I have been very lucky for the last three years. Right now I am the General Manager of a Broadway Musical called *The Book of Mormon*, which, knock on wood, seems to be well on its way, much to all of our surprise, to becoming a major Broadway blockbuster in the vein of *The Producers* or *Jersey Boys*. So that has been an exciting ride and I also have a wonderful play called *Jerusalem*, which is not about the middle east, but instead is about the loss of a rural tradition in England and features, besides a wonderful cast of 14 from England, an airstream trailer, a set of sod and bushes that need to be replaced every week, 4 chickens, a turtle, and a goldfish. Then my office is also very pleased to have a play we did on Broadway two seasons ago, *God of Carnage*, featuring James Gandolfini and Michigan's own Jeff Daniels, currently playing an 8 week engagement at the Ahmanson Theater in Los Angeles, so it's been a busy season. Our office has 27 **Tony** nominations between all of our shows and we are all looking forward to getting June 12th behind us which is when the Tony Awards are broadcast.

So that is what I do now in the commercial Broadway theater, but I am going to talk mostly about my experience in non-profit institutional theater tonight because that is really the way most of us tend to experience the arts on a day-to-day basis.

So yes, I was dragged out of the house. Symphony concerns at the Muskegon High School Auditorium and Grand Rapids Civic Theater are the highlights, --- or from the perspective a kid who just wanted to be at the beach, play in the backyard, or hang out with his friends, in all honesty, --- they were the lowlights.

But there are some specific moments within that context which really stand out in my memory. Among the hundreds of classical LP albums that my father had were two that made a lasting

impression, and even though I didn't even know what it meant at that time, its remarkable to look back and realize they were Original Broadway Cast Albums: the music of *Hair*, the groundbreaking musical that debuted off Broadway at the Public Theater in 1968, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the original London concept album featuring the lead singer of *Deep Purple*. These albums spoke to me in a way that nothing else I heard from my parents music collection did because the music I was hearing on these albums was not entirely dissimilar to what I was hearing on WTRU at that time: what I call the great American Geography bands on the mid-70s: Chicago, Kansas, Boston, and their more varied counterparts on pop radio. So in looking back, I have learned that ONCE IN A WHILE, there was a connection between what I was being dragged out of the house to see, and what I really wanted to be doing: stay at home and, among other things, listen to music.

And then finally, as I approached my teenage years, two events occurred that brought together these disparate elements of my life, the music I was growing more impassioned about as I graduated from the Geography bands to Bruce Springsteen and the punk and new wave of the late 70s, and the cultural events my parents were always dragging me to. One was a touring production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* which came to the Michigan Theater. I probably saw dozens of movies and performances at the Michigan Theater, but this is the only one that stands out in my mind. I remember the actors who played Judas and Jesus, who had beards and long hair, singing at me with handheld microphones, with cables attached. Huge parts of the staging were about the choreography of these microphone cables that trailed behind everyone. But I loved it. A few years later, the film version of *Hair* directed by Milos Forman and choreographed by Twyla Tharp, came out. My brothers, who were by that time at

boarding school in Toronto, saw it and told us how fantastic it was. Having listened to the album for years by that point – the movie came out almost 11 years after the show debuted on Broadway – I was dying to see it. So my parents and I waited for the movie to come to Muskegon. And waited. And waited. Finally, it came, but not as we had expected. It was the second movie in a double feature at the Getty Drive In. So off my parents and I went, we sat through the first feature which I'm pretty sure was *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and then we watched this movie musical, which had some of my favorite music in it, hearing that wonderful score through probably the single worst device ever fabricated for hearing music: the drive in speaker hanging from the window. It was the first and last time I ever went to the drive in with my parents, but not the last time I heard the score of *Hair*, which I later produced at the University of Michigan when I was in college.

I share all of this with you to tell you that we never know where the connections are going to come from when we expose our families to the arts – when we get them out of the house. I don't want to sugarcoat it here: I HATED going to the Grand Rapids Civic Theater and the Overbrook Theater at MCC. And now I make my career in the theater. So you just never know, but the one thing we DO know is that we need to have these opportunities. And when I called my talk tonight GETTING OUT OF THE HOUSE, I did so because the forces that pulled me into staying at the house Moulton Avenue 25-30 years ago pull SO MUCH harder today to keep us in front of the screen, plugged in, AT HOME. Back then it was basically my train set in the basement, my collection of a dozen or so albums and books that made me want to stay home on Sunday afternoons instead of go to the Michigan Theater with my parents. When you compare that with what is available to kids and teenagers today, at their fingertips, it makes the

inertia that we are fighting to get out of the house and attend cultural events so much stronger, and so much harder to overcome.

But, when we do overcome the pull of Facebook, MySpace, and iTunes, it is my belief that those of us who work in the arts have something which is incredibly important, unique, and special to share with audiences: A live experience. Not a screen, not headphones, not virtual reality. But reality. And that brings to me to what I subtitled my talk about tonight – making the arts central to our communities. We have incredible ways and opportunities to do this today – way more than existed even when I was a kid. It's our challenge to harness those same media that we are trying to pull people away from to attend the arts, and use that media to PUSH them out of the house, to discover something in the arts that speaks directly to them. So Facebook, MySpace and iTunes MUST be our friends. We can never compete with their power – we can't pull people away from them, but we can harness forces to PUSH people to discover the magic and the power of live performance.

I want to diverge for a moment to show an example of how the fragmenting of society can help those of us in the arts, particularly in my field of theater. We hear a lot about how the online world has fragmented us. Instead of all of you sitting down together at 8pm on Tuesdays to watch *All in the Family* or *Happy Days*, whether or not we had any interest in a family in Queens dealing with a changing world or the nostalgia of the 1950s, now we can choose to watch a show about motorcycle enthusiasts, top chefs, or whispering to our pets, and for the people who choose to watch those, I think they are seeing something that is so much more important to them, more accurately reflects their interests or their perspectives, than the broad based content that was needed to get 50 million people to sit down at the same time every week to

watch a show. I think fragmentation and serving niches instead of the mass market are the way for the arts to be relevant. Take for example the TV show *Glee*, which uses music and performance every week, and basically provides an outlet for the theater and band geeks, who were on the margins when I was a kid, to be cool and take the central role in a TV show. And those of us who need to market to those theater or band geeks, or their grownup counterparts, now know where we can find them, and we don't need to waste our resources marketing to the other 80% of the population who are unlikely to ever attend the arts. So when I talk about getting out of the house, I'm not talking about technology and fragmentations being the enemy. It's a tool that offers us so many more opportunities to make the arts central to our community.

So I have shared with you some of my experiences of being dragged out of the house, discussed maybe that there are some more subtle tools available to us now to actually identify the people who might be able to be PUSHED out of the house, and now I'm going to come back to some of my experiences with bringing the arts to our communities and making them an integral part.

In my mid-20s I did something that many, many people who work in ANY field do – I set out to do something entrepreneurial on my own, but because theater is a collaborative art form, we usually start theater companies with a group of people, and through a variety of circumstances which are too long to go into except that involves my girlfriend at that time, who is now my wife, I ended up starting a summer theater company in upstate NY in the vicinity of Lake George. We were crazy to do it, but again to make a long story short, people actually came to see the shows the first year of the Adirondack Theatre Festival in 1995, and probably more importantly, although we didn't realize it at the time, was that we were invited to a meeting

that the Chamber of Commerce in nearby Glen Falls, NY was having about building an arts center in their downtown, which at that time was reaching a low point as a former mill town in upstate NY. What we learned is that there had been various people trying to build an arts center there for at least 20 years, spearheaded mostly by a summer opera festival which had been in Lake George. There had been various locations proposed, the inevitable former movie house from the 1920 (a la the Michigan Theater) to various vacant factories and mills. We thought “wow this is kind of cool” but we also knew that a 1500 seat Opera House was not what we needed for contemporary plays and musicals. However, I recognized a few things in Glen Falls that reminded me of a certain town I had grown up in: there was a great art museum, a good place to get cheap Greek-style hot dogs, and a minor league hockey team that seemed to come and go every few years in a different league but persevered through good times and bad offering decent hockey for less than \$10 a ticket.

Sometime during the winter after the Adirondack Theatre Festival’s first summer season my girlfriend’s mother sent us a clipping that a group of local business leaders had purchased the vacant Woolworths store on the main street of Glens Falls. At the same time we were looking for an alternate location to stage our plays in the summer, and when we peered in the windows of the vacant Woolworths we saw an empty storefront that had high enough ceilings and columns spread far enough apart that we could convert it into a theater that held 150 or 200 people. That summer we put on an Edward Albee play in the vacant Woolworths. It got a great review in the Albany paper, and all of the sudden the one restaurant on the main block of downtown was full for 2 weeks, and they had to figure out how to get all of the diners out the door by 8 pm.

This began a ten-year project that took over my life for most of my 30s. While the local business leaders tried to figure out what to do with this large building they had bought from the Woolworth Corporation, we came back and did another show the following summer, again bringing crowds to downtown for the last two weeks of June, before we moved to a different theater 8 miles up the road, which actually had air conditioning for the hotter weeks in July. After two years the mayor asked what it would take for us to do our entire season at the vacant Woolworths, and we told him “air conditioning”. So someone who had serviced the old Woolworths a/c was found and came in and got it all working for around \$3,000. In the end, we did seven seasons in the otherwise vacant building, coming in every spring to sweep out dead birds and get the toilets and a/c working for another 6 weeks.

And during this time the business leaders who owned the building slowly, methodically, and smartly did their research, saw the crowds coming to our shows every summer, and committed to renovating the vacant Woolworths into a 300-seat theater. Money was raised, architects were brought in, and, as always needs to happen after architects and buildings get involved, MORE MONEY needed to be raised, and to make a very long story short, the theater opened in June 2004. Today it has performances over 150 nights per year and is active with rehearsals and meetings another 100 nights. The main block of downtown which had one restaurant in 1996 now has six, along with two book stores and NO vacant storefronts. New condos have been built in one of the vacant mills, and the downtown is a rare success story in upstate New York.

So what can we learn from this experience? One thing, for those of us who work in the arts, is to stop talking about how vital the arts are to a successful downtown as if we are bringing

tablets down from a mountaintop to educate the business and political leaders who we work with. They all know that. When I was invited to that discussion about a downtown arts center in 1995 by the Chamber of Commerce, I heard other people in the arts talk endlessly about how THEIR art museum, THEIR opera company was going to help the downtown like it was some big new discovery. Clearly the Chamber of Commerce knew that, or they wouldn't have invited us there to talk about it. I was reminded of everything I had grown up with in Muskegon – Muskegon had enough sense to save their historic theater, add on to it, and support an arts museum and a library in downtown at least 20 years before I was sitting in these meetings. Clearly this was not some new lightning bolt of information. Any successful downtown MUST have an arts component. It's Successful Downtown 101. It will never be the ONLY component, but it is a vital one. But reminding business and political leaders of this fact like a broken record is not enough of a contribution by arts leaders to downtown renewal efforts.

Another thing I learned, again from Muskegon's example, was the power of professional leadership in community development. The group of business and political leaders who I worked with were initially called Partners for Progress. They consisted of a bank president, the manager of the downtown hotel, the regional power utility manager and a few other well-meaning volunteers. They met monthly for 3-4 years as this idea was gestating, until one of them said they needed to have someone working on this full time or they might as well call themselves "Partners for Breakfast". So they pulled together a year's worth of salary and asked me to work full time on the theater project. I say that I learned from Muskegon's example on this because at around the same time I was researching funding opportunities for this theater project and looking at a community foundation that existed there, which after being founded in

the 1940s with a \$1 million gift, had a value in the 1990s of, are you ready for this, \$6-7 million. I couldn't believe it. When I found out there was a community foundation there, I got all excited because I knew what community foundations could accomplish based on my knowledge of what Muskegon had. But \$6 million in growth in 50 odd years? It turned out its Board was 4 or 5 old guys, and it had ALWAYS been run by 4-5 old guys, who met once a year and gave out a couple hundred thousand dollars in grants. It was shameful. To this day when I see my colleagues who I worked with in those early days of the theater project I ask them if they can get that darn foundation to hire a professional leader, but I think the 4-5 old guys are still meeting every December.

So that's two things I learned from my theater-building project: Those of us who lead in the arts need to say and do more than trumpet how good we are for downtowns, and our friends in the business and political communities need to look for professional leadership from people who have experience in the arts and fundraising. Too often the arts are treated as something extra-curricular that can be run by volunteers or people with little or no experience. Arts leadership is a field with professionals like any other, and good people in the field need to be identified, empowered, and given the tools to lead like in any profession.

So how does this idea of getting out of the house and my experience in upstate New York relate to what Muskegon is trying to do with its downtown?

I don't pretend to know anything about the specifics of this community right now. I come every summer and spend time with my 6 year old at the beach, maybe go on a dune ride, and if I'm really lucky, get a few hours on Roger and Marilyn Andersen's sailboat... But what I do know

after my experience in upstate NY is that so many people here already knew some of the things that I had to talk about over and over at meetings with leaders there. Muskegon didn't tear down the last theater in your downtown, your community foundation has had incredible professional leadership for 30 or 40 years, clearly you know how important a component of your downtown the arts have been and will be in the future.

Something else I learned as I spent 5 or 10 years persuading a town I did NOT grow up in that they should build a theater in their downtown, is that while I thought people really wanted a theater in their downtown, to a certain degree they also wanted ME in their downtown. I was much more energetic and much less gray in the hair then, and people there were choosing to invest in ME along with my idea. Since we started performing in the vacant Woolworths in 1995 after spending 5 or 10 thousand dollars to get the toilets and electricity working again, we have seen the story repeated again and again in Glens Falls. The local guy who started a brewpub across the street after our first summer to this day says that our work was the single most important factor in getting his business established. The young couple who moved up from New York, bought a building downtown, and opened a bookstore. The local guy who moved back from Boston and opened a marketing/advertising firm in the vacant 2nd floor of a downtown building. I believe strongly that these are the kind of investments that our downtown economic offices should be supporting. Sometimes there is too much focus on short-term goals – how many jobs is that new business going to provide? Let's be realistic – businesses that are going to provide SIGNIFICANT, long term job growth, such as a manufacturing place, aren't going to come anywhere close to our downtowns. But the people who will make the decision about locating their plant will certainly want to see all of the

resources that a healthy downtown can offer, and that is why we need to support the entrepreneurs who might open a book store or pre-school. Some of them might not last, some might decide they need to move back to Chicago or Boston, but when they show up, and they always do when there are vacant buildings in a downtown, we need to welcome them, help them and invest in them. When I think of the successful downtown that I was part of in upstate NY, I can count on two hands the number of entrepreneurs and young couples who have made a crucial difference by bringing life back to a vacant block. Eight people. Ten people. They can make all the difference.

Finally, there is one more thing I learned during my time in the upstate town that reminded me so much about Muskegon. When we first started we thought that people were really digging the play and musicals we were putting on in the vacant Woolworths store, and while they were, there was something much deeper and fundamental being fulfilled in the audiences who were coming downtown and filling the one restaurant that was downtown. They were getting out of the house. They were coming back to a downtown that they had given up on. Older people were coming into the old five and dime and pointing over on one side and nod saying “that’s where the lunch counter was” or “that’s where the 45s and LPs were”. For us, this transformation was a perfect crystallization of what downtowns once were, and what they can be now. The Woolworths Five and Dime, the penultimate symbol of American know-how and economic strength in the middle of the 20th century, was turned into a performing arts facility which now offers a diverse slate of offering, from Community Theater where you can see your neighbors performing, to cutting edge performances from the big city. The strength of one era’s downtown became the centerpiece of a new era’s downtown and that was the ultimate

lesson that I learned from that experience and it's what made people get out of the house. I

thank you all for getting out of the house tonight, and I guess I will open this up for questions....