The Application of the Matching Hypothesis to the Group Theater and the Steppenwolf Theatre Company

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The Application of the *Matching Hypothesis* to
the Group Theater and the Steppenwolf Theatre Company

by

Kaela M. Altman

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**ABSTRACT:**

Understanding the motivations behind volunteerism is a crucial part of building an arts organization. Engaging volunteers requires a particular management style in order to ensure the enlistment of the appropriate people to engage in activities best suited to their skill set. This approach is called the *matching hypothesis*, and it is defined as matching volunteers' responsibilities to their interests and motivations. Identifying the appropriate volunteers and matching them to their interests can help maintain engagement in the work required to build an organization. Using this approach, it is hypothesized that volunteers will be more likely to fulfill the tasks and responsibilities assigned to them. This paper will explore the *matching hypothesis* and its application within two theater companies: the Group Theater and the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Additionally, this paper will explore the impact volunteers had on the professional success, financial growth, and overall longevity of the contrasting performing arts companies.
INTRODUCTION:
The word “theatre” has been a part of the western vocabulary, dating back as far as Ancient Greece. The word, theâtron, or “seeing place” represented a place where the Greek community could go for entertainment and for passionate stories on the human existence. While the 21st century entertainment industry has evolved into a multi-billion dollar industry, theater performance still stems from dynamic non-profit theater companies from across the country. Between the time of Ancient Greece and the present, the theater has been heavily reliant on volunteer artists and administrators who have carried the task of bringing a show to life for an audience to explore. Jim O’Quinn argues in his article Going National: A Nutshell History of the Regional Theater Movement that the non-profit theater has become a crucial component to the American arts industry. Understanding the motivations behind volunteerism is a crucial part of building a arts organization whose “creative fires burn in hundreds of cities and communities and that energy flows from the regions to New York City, where the commercial sector has grown dependent upon its sprawling not-for-profit counterpart for virtually every aspect of its well-being (18).” Company managers must identify, train, motivate, and develop volunteers to ensure the company is financially and artistically sustainable and capable of not only surviving multiple production seasons, but actually enhancing programming that can lead to financial growth. Successful volunteers manage fundraising, develop and maintain marketing initiatives, facilitate financial management, and even produce the art itself. In order to ensure the enlistment of the appropriate people to engage in activities best suited to their skill set, arts managers of volunteer-based organizations must utilize a particular approach to managing unpaid staff. This approach is called the matching hypothesis. This hypothesis was originally presented by E. Gill Clary and Mary Snyder in their 1999 article, The Motivations to Volunteer: Theoretical and Practical Considerations which was printed in Current Directions in Psychological Science on behalf of
the Association of Psychological Science. The *matching hypothesis* is defined as matching volunteers’ responsibilities to their interests and motivations. Identifying the appropriate volunteers and matching them to their interests can help maintain engagement in the work required to build an organization. Volunteers will be more likely to fulfill the tasks and responsibilities assigned to them (157).

In 1931, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasburg founded the Group Theater committed to forming the first American acting company which sought to produce original works based on the Stanislavsky system of acting. The approach was very popular and successful in Eastern Europe. In 1974, the Steppenwolf Theater Company established itself in a church basement in Highland Park, Illinois. The mission statement of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company is to “engage audiences in an exchange of ideas that makes us think harder, laugh longer, feel more (Steppenwolf.org).” Both theater ensembles were established through the commitment of volunteers. Furthermore both theaters serve as organizational models on how one can ensure longevity in a rapidly changing and competitive climate.

Both companies are renowned for their substantial contribution to the arts community. Their artistic commentary regarding social circumstance is an example of how non-profit theater companies can successfully develop programming, fundraise, and maintain financial viability to foster growth within the organization. But the end result was very different. While the Steppenwolf Theatre was able to utilize grant programs and fundraising transition from volunteer-based organizations to an organizational model incorporating paid staff and fulltime resident artists, the Group Theater collapsed and disbanded ten years after its inception. Whether starting in the basements of churches, or in a barn in an open country field, social theater producers, such as the Group Theatre and the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, were able to
The study of arts management is a relatively new discipline in American academics and focusing on the impact volunteers play on a non-profit arts organization is essential to the advancement of this discipline. This paper will seek to explore the impact of volunteers in arts organizations, how they positively affected change, and led to the financial and artistic stability of these two contrasting organizations, which existed in two different times in American history.

This project will further apply the matching hypothesis to the lifecycle of the Group Theater and Steppenwolf Theater Company to identify the best practices associated with growing an arts organization into a self-sustaining non-profit. I will argue that as arts managers, we will need to be prepared with the knowledge and managerial tools necessary to successfully recruit, train, and manage teams of volunteers and champion their assistance in bringing an arts producer from volunteer-based into a fully paid-staff.
CHAPTER 1: VOLUNTEERISM - BY THE NUMBERS

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, 26.4% of the population (61.8 million people) volunteered their time to national and community service causes in 2008. It was the highest rate of volunteerism to date. The same study, updated in 2011 cited a five year high in volunteer service. One in four adults, or roughly 64 million people volunteered, with a combined total of 7.9 billion hours dedicated to volunteer service. Activities included fundraising, teaching, education, community outreach, general labor, and transportation (Corporation for National and Community Service). In 1994, the American Sociological Review published a study which outlined four regions of work: “the world labor markets, the informal sector, the household sector, and volunteer work” (Wilson & Musick 694). Wilson and Musick define volunteer work as “uncommodified”, unlike the labor market and the informal sector. Additionally volunteer work, unlike household work, is “freely undertaken”. Volunteerism is a special kind of category, because unlike paid employment which is sought out of necessity for survival or household work completed out of necessity, volunteerism is difficult to economically and financially categorize. In terms of national civic engagement in volunteer service, the Federal Agency for Service and Volunteering found that 28.6% of United States residents volunteer totaling 7.85 billion hours per year (Volunteering and Civic Life in America). In the 21st century it will become increasingly important for Volunteerism to be seen as a productive activity, and one that drives active query into the inputs needed to accomplish it, as opposed to relegating its qualities to simply the altruistic tendency to “help out.” The work of dedicated volunteers offers necessary contributions to a wide range of fields including literacy, social service, health care, and the arts.
The Social Sector is widely recognized as crucial to any working and stable economy. The Social Sector is based on a long time practice dating back to Native American communities in pre-colonial America. For a polity to survive, it was essential that the community was based on mutual support and collective labor. The religious beliefs of the early colonial settlers dictated that caring for the poor and the sick was a crucial component to supporting society and that out of mutual-helpfulness, the society would be able to progress collectively. “Out of these traditions, the United States has evolved a particular non-governmental, organizational, and egalitarian structure for providing aid and addressing social needs” (Heyman 10). Religious organizations were once the sole proprietors of delivering aid to those outside the family unit. As the principles of democracy evolved, churches and other religious affiliated organizations began to partner with secular groups to distribute benefits in order to foster support for the public good. In 1914, the Cleveland Foundation became the first community foundation, dedicated to offering funding support through grants to support the urban area around Cleveland, Ohio. This was the first time a foundation was established that was funding by multiple sources, including individual and corporate donations, in order to support a cause. Up until 1914, foundations were created and supported by private enterprise (Heyman 12).

One cannot dismiss the element of altruism. Volunteer service does not require a financial return on investment. The motivation behind volunteer service is then categorized by another pursuit, possibly professional gain or the desire to participate in a community activity. Volunteerism becomes defined as “…the contribution of services, goods, or money to help accomplish some desired end, without substantial coercion or direct remuneration” (Wilson & Musick 695). In its simplest form, volunteer service represents a donation of time to others. The exchange of goods or services for capital is motivated by ones desire for success, financial gain,
or social stature, while volunteerism, the exchange of time for no monetary gain, is motivated by something broader which can include (but is not limited to) social capital such as friendship or relationships, the creation of responsibility for those who don’t have it, and the desire to contribute to one’s community (Wilson & Musick 695).

The expansion of volunteerism has yielded successful outcomes for many non-profit and government organizations. As statistics are demonstrating, volunteer service has been increasing slowly for the past few years, however volunteerism is not a twentieth century achievement. The story of the American democracy is filled with stories of passionate and dedicated volunteers who sacrificed time, and sometimes even their lives in support for a cause. From the Mayflower (1620) up through the Civil Rights Movement (1960), to the contributions of volunteers in the aftermath of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and myriad other national disasters, social change has been deeply affected and driven by the attentiveness of volunteers (Lipp 4). “Volunteerism is a powerful means of engaging people in tackling development challenges, and it can transform the pace and nature of development. Volunteerism benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer by strengthening trust, solidarity, and reciprocity among citizens…” (Lipp 6). The act of working without promise of compensation has a tremendous impact on advancing social and political change, not only in the United States, but in Europe and abroad as well. Although these are considered primarily American concepts, volunteers around the world continue to willingly donate their time to advance literacy, religion, social awareness, and other civil and social advancements.

As many as 75% of non-profit organizations are staffed completely by volunteers; even larger organizations which function on paid staff such as hospitals rely on volunteers to offer extended services (Lipp 17). While this statistic does pertain to the non-profit industry as a
whole, including museums, crisis hotlines, after-school sports leagues, and religious-based community programs, the American arts sector is one industry that specifically relies on the demonstrated availability of skilled volunteers (17). Throughout the United States, volunteers work to construct sets, build costumes, usher events, lead tours through museums, curate exhibits, and finance the arts. According to the Culture Data Project, the state of Illinois is home to over 900 non-profit arts and culture organizations, 287 of which are solely dedicated to Theatre, Musical Theatre, and Opera. Statewide, these 900 organizations are staffed by 86,366 interns and volunteers (CultureDataProject.org). These organizations employ only 7,008 full-time employees. “Whether performing, creating or supporting the arts behind the scenes, volunteers play a critical role in entertaining and enlightening communities (Lipp 25).” Arts organizations would struggle to sustain themselves without access to volunteers who are willing to serve as staff. Elements from cleaning, filing, managing the financial accounts, and many other administrative tasks would not be fulfilled (25).

Arts funding is a competitive industry. With limited access to arts grants and a very select group of donors with a specific interest in the arts, the industry itself relies on volunteerism to maintain functional operations.

Wilson and Musick’s integrated theory of formal and informal volunteer services is defined by three basic foundations. Volunteer work is productive, in that it requires what they refer to as “human capital”. Volunteer work is based on “collective behavior” which requires “social capital” and an awareness of a need. Lastly, volunteer service requires “cultural capital”, and is virtuously guided by an altruistic need to keep that service or organization running (Wilson & Musick 694). This idea of “cultural capital” then becomes a difficult commodity to measure. Volunteering at a homeless shelter, for example, does offer a data-driven metric of
success. Volunteers at social outreach organizations are able to say their contribution impacted x
amount of people, or brought attention to a particular cause either through a media story or
another outlet. With the arts and culture sector one is motivated by a few factors such as a
mission statement, the aesthetic experience of the art, often treated as an attribute someone must
acquire in order to appreciate. Volunteers are more likely to maintain their roles when they
connect with the art being produced. Learned appreciation can make attracting and retaining
volunteers difficult. An example of learned appreciation would be the ability to appreciate a
symphony through the study of music theory. That one requires a conceptual understanding of
the arts fuels the perception that the arts are “elitist” or something appreciated only by those with
“taste” and is therefore difficult to market and promote to younger, working professionals, who
may not have the time or ability to invest in cultural education (Wilson & Musick 696). Arts
managers in the 21st century can combat this stereotype by fostering programming opportunities
in order to make the arts more accessible. One example is the Metropolitan Opera in New York
City, which started The Met: Live in HD where live performances of their opera performances
are streamed in hi-definition in movie theaters across the country. This program was designed
“to reach existing audiences and to introduce new audiences to opera through new technology”
(FAQs Live in HD). In the history of the Metropolitan Opera, performances were often broadcast
live on the radio – Live in HD is an extension of that program and has made a world-renowned
opera company more accessible to those who either cannot afford to travel to New York.
Additionally this program is a vehicle for introducing new opera patrons to the discipline, and
provides an opportunity for new patrons to sample the Met Opera experience without the cost a
full price ticket. It is the responsibility of an arts manager to ensure the art produced is accessible
to their communities in order to engage and foster relationships with sponsors, subscribers, and
donors. The challenge is maintaining a volunteer staff in an arts organization comes because arts managers are required to inform and educate their constituency on the accessibility of the arts. Maintaining that the arts are a social commodity, and a necessary attribute of our culture then, becomes an important component of recruiting, training, and managing arts volunteers.

According to Gil E. Clary and Mark Snyder in their article *The Motivations to Volunteer: Theoretical and Practical Considerations*, arts managers must explore what prompts individual volunteers to donate their time to arts and culture organizations, encouraging involvement and stewardship in the arts and culture sectors, as well as assess the motivations of volunteer. Arts managers must identify tactics to sustain that motivation over an extended period of time. This approach is called *the matching hypothesis*. This hypothesis, “…suggests that persuasive messages can motive people to initiate volunteer service to the extent that the messages are tailored to the specific motivations important to individual recipients of the messages* (Clary & Snyder 158). This functional approach has four steps in assessing the motivation behind a volunteer’s service:

1. Inquiry: Before one on-boards, trains, or assigns a role to a volunteer, the manager must first ask the volunteer what personal and social motivations they might have for their service. This will help the manager appropriate resources to sustain that motivation. Because volunteers are, by definition, unpaid staff, the arts manager must nurture and support that which drives the volunteer. If one joins a performance art company in order to feel “artistic”, the lack of performance opportunities may deter them from a long-term commitment.
2. Same Action, Different Motivation: The manager should understand that while multiple volunteers may be working on the same project, their motivations are still different, and should be treated as such.

3. Matching: Sustaining an activity over a long period of time requires attention to the ongoing motivational concerns of the individual, and also understand that those motivations are subject to change over time.

4. Themes: By gaining a psychological understanding on the motives behind volunteerism, the manager is able to satisfy the personal processes of the individual volunteer, and offer feedback and reward based on those themes (158-159).

This hypothesis then lends itself to the importance of quality arts marketing to engage, recruit, and maintain a volunteer service team (Kaiser 139). With myriad arts organizations in which one can participate, it is important that the arts manager create programming exciting to patrons, and then begin marketing aggressively. This tactic will not only engage new audiences, but it will also serve as an approach to board stewardship, and volunteer acquisition. (Kaiser 111). Michael Kaiser, President of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., contends that “good art, well marketed” is the secret to a successful arts organization (111). Creating and sustaining a healthy arts organization is heavily reliant on engagement, and aggressive marketing and strategic programming is the best way to ensure a volunteer team is excited about the artistic work being produced, and is therefore more likely to support it through the donation of time and talent (132). It is important to note that arts and culture volunteers are different from others, based on myriad factors pertaining to their service. Arts and culture volunteers do more than stuff envelopes or work as ushers during performances. Arts and culture
volunteers are also responsible for producing the art itself, from operating gift shops, to sewing costumes, donating lumber, and wiring an electric grid for lighting (Wymer and Brudney 42).

It’s also worth highlighting Wymer and Brudney’s observation from their article, *Marketing Management in Arts Organizations: Differentiating Arts and Culture Volunteers from Other Volunteers*, which states that volunteers are more likely to lend their time and talents if asked by a friend to join an organization (43). In fact, those surveyed were five times more likely to volunteer if asked by a close friend or colleague. Volunteers also tend to place higher attention to activities with pro-social values than non-volunteers, and often exude a higher level of empathy. In general, volunteers have a broader sense of social responsibility than non-volunteers. According to the Federal Agency for Service and Volunteering, 49.1% of active volunteers discuss politics a few times a month or more. Additionally, 65.1% answered that they frequently do favors for their neighbors. Lastly, 40.1% stated that they trust “most” of the people in their neighborhoods, lending the proof they are more engaged with their neighbors, and communities, as well as the social direction of their government (VolunteeringinAmerica.gov). Their commitment to volunteer service stems from a desire to expand their social or professional networks, and contribute to a cause in which they are passionate. For arts volunteers, specifically, there was a ranked belief that the arts are a type of natural resource, and that resource must be cultivated and protected: “people volunteer for the arts because they believe in the arts” (Wymer and Brudney 44). The societal commitment to maintaining the arts as a cultural asset then stems from a desire to keep the industry functional and operational so it can be easily accessed by the general public.

Through the analysis of these four steps, Clary and Snyder were able to offer six personal and social functions in which volunteers wish to serve. Figure 1-1 (below) measures the six
functions in which potential volunteers hope their service will oblige. The function Value, for example, may be seen primarily in volunteers who work with religious organizations, and hold the belief that it is important to help others in order to serve their community. Arts volunteers, however may primarily fall in the function Understanding; volunteering for the arts allows young professionals to gain professional experience in arts organizations to build skills through hands-on experience. This approach to understanding volunteer motivations allows volunteer managers organize their messaging, and use these motivations to on-board and sustain a team of volunteers. This chart seeks to compress the six functional motivations for volunteering, allowing managers to communicate to potential volunteers the benefits of joining that organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Conceptual definition</th>
<th>Sample VFI item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>The individual volunteers in order to express or act on important values like humanitarianism</td>
<td>I feel it is important to help others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>The volunteer is seeking to learn more about the world or exercise skills that are often unused.</td>
<td>Volunteering lets me learn through direct, hands-on experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancement</td>
<td>One can grow and develop psychologically through volunteer activities.</td>
<td>Volunteering makes me feel better about myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>The volunteer has the goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering.</td>
<td>Volunteering can help me to get my foot in the door at a place where I would like to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Volunteering allows an individual to strengthen his or her social relationships.</td>
<td>People I know share an interest in community service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective</td>
<td>The individual users volunteering to reduce negative feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems.</td>
<td>Volunteering is a good escape from my own troubles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Table 1. Clary, E. Gill and Mark Snyder. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (Oct., 1999) pp. 157

Through the functional approach to volunteerism, Clary and Snyder created the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) to explain the six functions in which volunteers wish to serve their
organizations. By surveying active volunteers who perform a wide-variety of duties, the researchers compared these motivations to those of non-volunteers, and concluded that volunteers contain all six of the factors listed in Figure 1-1 however where they rank in their personal intention will vary. The research concluded that Values, Understanding, and Enhancement ranked higher in volunteer functionality than Career, Social, or Protective. Because gaining experience, helping others, and enhancing one’s own view of their personal worth are the primary reasons why individuals volunteer for a non-profit organization, managers can use this information to craft marketing campaigns designed to target individuals with these motivations. Meanwhile, career advancement, socializing with friends, and having an opportunity to escape one’s personal obstacles ranked lower on the VFI and therefore it would be harder to use these motivations as a recruitment tool (157).

Clary and Snyder argue that managers can use the VFI to assess volunteer motivations, and rank the volunteer priorities to match volunteers to projects and roles that will suit their skillset while supporting the motivating factor. In this research study, approximately 2/3 of respondents confirmed they had two or more motivating factors in their volunteer service. This study was able to conclude that volunteerism is not purely altruistic, nor is it driven by a desire to belong to a community, or a desire to perform a service. Volunteerism is varied, and managers should recruit and train volunteers based on the multi-faceted functional roles, and use these functional roles to satisfy the volunteers’ experience. As previously addressed, the motivations behind volunteering should not be limited to altruism, nor should it be limited to ego. In regards to altruism vs. ego, the debate fosters two opposing arguments: that volunteers and their desire to be helpful is driven purely by “…a selfish desire to benefit oneself” and that all volunteer service is based, “…on a selfless concern for the other (157).”
In terms of recruiting, the matching hypothesis was tested by randomly assigning each participant an element which was either functionally matched, or functionally mismatched to their questionnaire. The test group was then shown a series of video advertisements, each of which offered a different function-based message. As the researchers predicted, those participants who viewed a video message that matched their VFI found the message more persuasive, and stated they were more likely to volunteer for that cause, than those who were functionally mismatched to their messaging. This hypothesis supports the research that managers will have greater success recruiting volunteers if they are able to craft a message that speaks to an individual’s motivating factor (158).

But the importance of this hypothesis is not selective to recruitment; the application of the matching hypothesis can be instrumental in growing and sustaining an organization through the help of volunteers. As a volunteer continues with an organization, their motivations can be sustained thus achieving greater satisfaction from their role, if the manager can successfully match a project to the VFI element. If a functional element is not fulfilled, the volunteer motivation can decline, and result in the volunteer or group of volunteers terminating their service to the organization. In essence, the volunteer staff is only as strong as its leader; enhanced leadership training in volunteer engagement is another crucial component in arts management. Managers can also utilize the VFI to create “functional benefits”, meaning ways of rewarding the volunteer for successful completion of a project or responsibility. Matching the project as well as the reward to the volunteers individual VFI can be a beneficial way to maintain a volunteer team. As previously mentioned, it’s important for managers to match individual reward with individual volunteers and offer a tailored message or reward to each person. Just because a team of volunteers are working on the same project does not entail their VFI is the
same; managers who are quick to learn this can garner a higher retention of volunteers in their organization (158).

THE APPLICATION OF THE MATCHING HYPOTHESIS

The application of the matching hypothesis is a crucial component to managing an arts organization. The more arts managers understand their volunteers, the more they will be able to develop effective strategies to recruit new volunteers, retain current volunteers, and return former volunteers to service. Structuring effective messaging to truly “speak” to a potential volunteer is the first step of engagement and is an important component to bringing the correct skills to the art organization. As volunteerism continues to grow and expand in the United States, understanding how to speak to, and manage volunteers will become a crucial skill in the strategic development and growth of a non-profit theater.

In the last century, theater in the United States expanded through the development and creation of the non-profit theater model. In the 1950s, actors were subject to the “hit or flop” economics of the industry. Actors either worked occasionally in a long-running show, or found themselves rehearsing parts for productions that closed quickly. Many also were subject to traveling by bus or car to stock companies. These companies were few and far between and by no means meant the industry was thriving. These “little theatres” were designed to help actors attain professional status in the industry (Lowry 9). Since the 1950s, the American theater has evolved to include hundreds of non-profit theater companies who have established themselves as arts producers. Very few have survived as long-standing production houses as a result of financial mismanagement, absence of leadership, and a lack of audience cultivation. Many formed through the commitment and passion of volunteers, often actors, directors, and producers.
committed to the creation of live theater. During the Great Depression, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasburg, came together to form the Group Theatre with the vision to create a European model theater, based heavily on the Moscow Art Theater model. The purpose of the Group Theater was “to become the recognized and honored first theatre of America” with a company of artists, directors, dramaturges, and designers committed to producing theater that was spoke truthfully to the humanity of America (Clurman 165). Fifty years later, the Steppenwolf Theater Company, founded by Gary Sinise and Jeff Perry, established itself in Chicago as an ensemble-based company committed to artistry and production of innovative work advocated for social change. These two ensembles were built with the help of volunteer artists, and have since become a model for how other organizations can ensure longevity in a rapidly changing and competitive climate.

The Group Theater began despite the absence of funding, plays, and access to a viable company. But the collective knowledge and passion of the three founding members made the possibility of establishing the first American theater company possible. Establishing a new arts organization during the height of the Great Depression would prove to be an almost impossible feat. In the absence of leadership, the Group Theater would be unable to advance its mission, acquire funding, and continue to produce live theater. The Steppenwolf was formed by a group of high-school students from the Chicago suburb of Highland Park and produced their first production of Paul Zindel's *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little* in the basement of a local church. Through an overhauls of the Steppenwolf Board of Directors, the theater company endured to become a fundraising giant, and one of the most recognized producers of non-profit theater. Through comparative analysis, the matching hypothesis will be placed in conversation with the Group Theater and the Steppenwolf Theater companies to better understand their various
successes and failures, and how their practical use of volunteerism assisted in their growth and development.
CHAPTER 2: THE GROUP THEATER

Long before the matching hypothesis and long before the administration of establishing a non-profit organization became a subject of textbooks in academic institutions across the United States, three young theater artists came together to form an ensemble of actors: The Group Theater. Their commitment to developing the first American acting company came from a desire to affect change within the commercial theater of the 1920s. Commercial theater was comprised of large scale musicals with big casts, and popular dramatic plays with small casts. Professional actors were limited in their ability to build a career (Lowry 9). The Group Theater was designed to give professional actors an artistic home where they could perform in new plays, cultivate their craft through concentrated study, and produce theater that challenged the convention of commercial theater. The principles which the Group founders utilized to engage their company through financial difficulty continue to be reflected in the matching hypothesis in a contemporary time. The persuasive message of their mission, which motivated their ensemble members to commit their time and creative capital to the cause, secured The Group Theater as “the bravest and single most significant experiment in the history of American theater… (About The Group Theater)”. Contrary to the historical portrait of the temporary existence of the Group Theater, is the famed Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago, which utilized a brilliant combination of both artistic ingenuity and brilliant theater management to create a lasting company. This section will devote a focus on the history of these two companies in effort to later understand how artistic promise may coincide with proper management through the usage of volunteerism and the matching hypothesis.
“We were drawn together by our common dissatisfactions, our still unshaped ideals.”

— Harold Clurman

The Group Theater was founded by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasburg in 1931. The founding principle of the Group aimed to create the first American Theater Company as an organization dedicated to the implementation and instruction of The Method, an acting process that emerged from the Moscow Art Theater in Russia. Through fashioning together a group of 28 actors, the three idealistic artists wanted to create an acting ensemble that sought to produce original plays that demonstrated the humanity of American life. Clurman’s theater went against the common practices of the American Theater up until that time. The Broadway practice was competitive in nature, wasted a lot of money on commercial works that sought to purely entertain, rather than inspire its audiences to action, or service. Fully realized, the Group was founded “…on the true principles of art, methodically developed and organically growing, no subject to the whims of buyer and backers… (Clurman 29)”. The Group existed for ten years; in that time they produced twenty productions such as Clifford Odets Waiting for Lefty and Awake and Sing! which put both the Group and Odets on the map as American masterpieces. However, although possessing a creative and idealistic vision for art and the theater, The Group lacked long term goals and the necessary administration to not merely succeed, but survive.
Many theater scholars consider the 1920’s as a decade of climax in the American Theatre. This perception is due to the high volume of plays which were produced on Broadway, as well as the achievements and historical placement they received (Clurman 3). In 1928 Harold Clurman first approached Lee Strasburg about assembling an American acting company. Strasburg spoke mostly to the need for a higher commitment to acting, as an art form itself and not merely with sole purpose of entertaining masses, but for an attempt to reach for a higher echelon. Clurman, however, found himself rebelling against the plays being produced in the 1920s. “... [T] heir thinness, lack of depth, eloquence, substantial theme.” (Clurman 11). Their criticism of the American Theater as it stood was divided between a focus on the artistic approach to acting versus a commitment to literature. Strasburg argued that theater shouldn’t be defined by the actual plays being produced, but also the types of people employed in the theater, including the producers, administrators, and directors. The theater of the twenties was representational of an artistic shift in the industry as well. The caricatures, the heroes and the
villains, began to be perceived for their humanity, and as the science of Psychology emerged, men and women became “a mixture of contradictory traits” rather than an archetype that had previously existed. With no television, and limited access to “talkies”, patrons went to the theater for amusement, and for pleasure. Clurman argued that a play was different from a movie, or a radio broadcast, in that a play pretended to affect one’s heart, and awaken a social conscious. “The theater was not a bar…but a famous temple” (Clurman 12). One of the early founding principles of the Group Theater was to create a theatrical production capable of inspiring its audience, and make attendees feel “truly alive”. Added to this contestation was a yearning for a national identity through theater. Robert Rusie in his article *Talking Broadway: The American Theater in the 1920’s and 30’s* explains that “[U]nlike European governments, the United States lacked any national theater” (Rusie 2). Amidst the backdrop of the times, especially in New York, Rusie adds that money barons created large-scale theaters with grand performances of operettas. Simultaneous to this was the power of vaudeville and the enormous popularity the species of performances had in their followings. Thus, it is interesting to see that the Clurman and Strasburg saw the potential for a theater to reach deeper into the heart of “real” theater and create a company that could compete with new media’s such as movies and radio entertainment as well as emerging theaters that held large budgets to support them.

As the conversation progressed, Clurman found the ear of “…a sturdy girl from Akron, Ohio” whose name was Cheryl Crawford (Clurman 14). At the time Clurman was working as an assistant-stage manager. They exchanged their feelings in regards to the need for a higher emotional commitment to the plays they were currently producing at the Theater Guild in New York City (15). Theater shouldn’t be produced for pure entertainment, but rather created for the purpose of creating an aesthetic experience for the audience, as well as the actors. In order to
fully produce a live performance, the actors needed to emotionally unite with the emotional arch of their characters, and not just act a part, but play through the action, and fully experience the reality of their given circumstances. Clurman, Strasburg, and Crawford began to assemble their fellow actors in meetings after-hours. Through the assembly of early ensemble members, recognized a need for a playhouse capable of training their actors while they were rehearsing.

Commercial managers operated on the assumption that their casts came ready to perform, which inevitably made the progress of the work suffer. Clurman diagnosed two reasons for this:

- Theater managers were operating as business managers and expressed concern for the actual product, the marketing efforts behind selling it to audiences, and ensuring a profit was made for commercial investors and
- Theater managers didn’t realize they were making this organizational mistake in not artistically preparing their actors for a national stage. Actors in the United States were not necessarily trained in their craft, because at the time a National theater institution did not exist to provide education. As new techniques and new advancements were made in Europe and Russia, the United States continued to employ orators to lead the productions being produced in commercial theater (15).

The early Group Theater meetings planned to create a company of theater artists, dedicated to concentrated instruction for the actors during the rehearsal period, from which the actor could emotionally and physically connect to the playwright’s purpose and artistic intention (23). In order for a play to be regarded as successful, it was a necessity that the actor fully unite with the playwrights’ intention or the play would always be played monotonous and automated. By affording the early members of the Group Theater to immerse themselves in a theatrical
environment, they were affording the actors the opportunity to focus on their training, and technique, as opposed to the finished product.

The early meetings of Harold Clurman and their Group Theatre were never recorded, however in a small selected writing called “The Impulse to Act”, Clurman shared his beliefs, and the foundations on which the Group Theatre came to be built. The 28 artists who sat before him were unified by a common goal: the desire to perform as actors in a world with very few sustainable opportunities to do so. The state of the American Theatre forced the theater artist to question why one would enter into a profession of poverty so willingly. In the early talks, Clurman shared his emphasis that “…the Group Theatre is the first theatre in America which has emphasized in its work the fact that theatre can have meaning” (452). Because of its artistic focus on realism, the Group Theatre championed honest theatre because it represented a strong form of expression, in which every audience member could relate. The audience was a community, and the aesthetic experience that came as a direct result of watching an honest performance united the actors as well as the audience in a common goal, an emotional catharsis, and advanced a unified vision of their collective values. The focus on relationships, economic stature, emotional challenges, and political unrest could all be reflected in a single play on stage, and allow an audience to feel an emotional catharsis and a sense of close relation to the story (453).

Throughout these meetings, Clurman also contributed to the New York Times in which he would publicly make the case for the Group Theater. In one statement, Clurman stated:

“In the end, however, the development of playwrights, actors, repertory and the rest are important only as they lead to the creation of a tradition of common values, an active consciousness of a common way of looking at and dealing with life. A theater in our
country today should aim to create an Audience. When the audience feels that it is really at one with a theater; when audience and theatre-people can feel that they are both the answer to one another, and that both may act as leaders to one another, there we the Theatre in its truest form. To create such a Theatre is our real purpose” (Clurman 72).

It can be understood that the Group Theater was not created for performance opportunities, rather created to unite the actors with their audience into a shared artistic conversation. The Group Theater could not rely on their art to sustain their operating budget and the question with regards to where the sources of funding could be found was a constant concern among the Group Theater.

Unlike many other theater organizations at the time, the Group Theater desired financial support, rather than financial backing. Their initial arbitrary goal of raising $10,000 was realized within the first few seasons, however that sum was not raised at once, but rather trickled in slowly forcing the Group to live hand-to-mouth for the duration of their existence. The stock market crash of 1929 dramatically affected individual relationships with money and Clurman was frequently tasked with substantiating his business model before any donors would offer their support. This reciprocal problem continued to plague the Group. Without enough money to produce quality work, the organization would be constantly sacrificing key elements which hindered the value of the overall production. This affected reviews, which in turn would affect how a production sold, and therefore eliminated any opportunity to make a profit for the Group to use for sustainability (Clurman 64). One strength of the Group Theatre, which is emulated by the contemporary arts manager and educator, Michael Kaiser, was their ability to appear as if they were more successful than they actually were. As Kaiser attests, “Good art, well marketed”
is the backbone of any arts organization, and the Group Theater, who received a fair response to their productions, promoted themselves as a sensational and refreshing theater producer, and were able to return the original investment to their backers after they closed their inaugural production of *The House Of Connelly*.

In order to build a theater ensemble, it was necessary that the Group Theater work to develop actors alongside their playwrights, production designers, as well as their directors. As with the Moscow Art Theater, the Group Theater explored the possibility of creating an audience as committed as the on-stage artists, and would follow the complete program of a season, rather than selective shows within the season. Financial survival was rooted in the need for private donors. After *The House of Connelly*, the Group “organized a campaign for an audience” (77). The Group perceived subscription programs as more of an artistic hindrance than a sustainable program because they wanted to avoid selecting a program that spoke to a target demographic. The concept of membership sought to further unite the audience with the actors, and bring them into the community. Knowing a member could rely on seeing the same individual actors every season, and the same directors, scenic artists, and costumers, would make the member feel like they were a part of the artistic conversation. In 1931, membership to the Group Theater cost $2.00, and extended a 20% reduction on box office services to patrons, complimentary access to one member-based production per year, and attendance at “Group Theater Meetings”, similar to the ones that started the organization in which the company would engage the members in a dialogue about the play, the training, and how it support their mission to create the first National theater (78).

The collective of the Group ensemble members inhabited a 10-room flat located on West Fifty-Seventh Street in Manhattan. The living conditions were deplorable. The converted
brownstone cost $50 per month and the house was chronically damp with insufficient heat. The ensemble shared the cost of food by putting money into a “common fund”, while two girls in the house were tasked with weekly grocery shopping. Chores, including cooking, were done by five male Group members who “had a knack for it” (103).

The Group Theater was the first “non-profit” theater in the United States. In the first production season in 1931, the Group Theater identified patrons capable of donating generous sums of money in order to sustain each production. Franchot Tone and Dorothy Patten financed the final production of the Group’s debut season Night Over Taos; each contributed $1,000. Additionally, Maxwell Anderson’s contribution of $2,500 was enough to secure a design team, as well as compensate their acting ensemble (80). The lackluster response from audience and critics put the production in danger of closing. However, the cast championed continuing the run despite the fact the Group was running low on financial resources. “Actors never close a play when there is the slightest possibility of keeping it running.” On closing night, the company received ten dollars each, however those who could refuse it, contributed their meager salary back to the Group Theater. Clurman believed that early arts managers were tasked with fighting for the “right of a theatre” in order to produce work in which dedicated artists could perform (452). The function of an actor in the Group Theatre was to help preserve the place in which he was going to live, act, design, or direct. The theatre represented the actor’s home, and the actor had a right to fight to protect the integrity and survival of their home (452).

This is one of the first examples of the matching hypothesis in the Group Theater’s tenure. The visible Functions in this display of commitment include:
- Values: the members of the Group Theatre felt their work was valued, because it was support be an organizational mission committed to a quality artistic product. The Group Theatre afforded the actors, and company members to fulfill their artistic intentions, and share their passion for performing.

- Understanding: The Group Theatre was not just a performance outlet; the Group Theatre afforded their company of actors to train on the prestigious Method of Acting, which had historically only been taught at the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia. The Method was a highly revered style of acting; however in the 1920s and 1930s, without access to telecommunications technology, actors in the United States had no access to this training.

- Enhancement: The Group Theatre was not just a training camp, and further, it was more than a performance company. The Group Theatre was a community of theater artists, who lived together, trained together, and worked together. The shared interest of producing quality realism advanced their mission, and inherently gave this group of misfits a place to belong, and for a few brief years, a home in which they could go to create. (Clary & Snyder 157).

The founders had successfully identified a company of volunteers who were committed to refining the way theater as produced in the United States. Through the emotional highs of the first production season, coupled with the ideals of the founding members, the Group Theater was able to continue to produce a second season.

In an interview with Group Theater playwright, Clifford Odets, upon being asked what the atmosphere was like in the organization he answered:

“[Cheryl Crawford] the least talkative of the three, was present all the time and would make short manifesto statements: ‘we will do so and so and so. We
understood that she was the organizer and business head. To us in the company
Cheryl Crawford was the most important person…”

Odets goes onto to describe the origins of the Group Theater and what each
leader represented. What I notice is the combination of both artistic leadership, even if
it was overtly idealistic, from Clurman and Strasburg, intermixing with the business
know-how of Crawford. The combination of the two was necessary for the success of
the theater organization as a whole.

However, even with visionary leadership, the question with regards to
maintaining a successful theater organization rests with how the leadership is able to
acquire interest, not merely from financial donors, but also from able bodies willing
and wanting to be a part of the company. Odets continues:

People joined the Group Theatre with mixed feelings. Some had doubts about
its value. But I was not that sophisticated. I was not that advanced in the
theater. I was not that advanced in my sense of life, although I remember
expressing doubts during that first summer when every day one actor or actress
wrote a page in the daily diary they were keeping. The members hesitated
about putting themselves completely in the hands of these three directors who
were telling us time and again that we had to put ourselves in their hands. They
were almost like revivalists who say, “Just put yourself in my hands. Give me
your soul. I will make it. I will mold it. I will show you God. I will connect
you.” They had that quality. We commenced to feel religious fervor. It was
more than dedication. Dedication simply is doing a job well (Clurman 105).
Even still, the Group theater yearned to progress and Odets describes that is a wonderful feeling to be apart and accepted as a member of the company, or as he called it, “an artistic family.” Strasburg and Clurman held a rigorous discipline in line by always analyzing the performance of each company member. “They cared about what you could bring to the totality of this theatre. So this was good. This was buoying. This lifted you.”

By 1934, The Group Theater was hard-pressed for a financial support. While they had existed on donations between $1,000 - $3,000, by the fall of 1934, they were nearly bankrupt. Half of ensemble members inhabited a ten-room flat on West 57th Street. The heat was ineffective; the house itself had been neglected. The rent was fifty dollars a month. The ensemble had started a group collection for meals, and the cooking was managed by a few select members of the tenement who had a talent for meal preparation. Poverty stricken, and starving, the Group Theater was held together by the engagement and commitment of its ensemble, and the mission on which it was founded.

In that same year, however, the Group Theater was offered a sum of $50,000 from a “Mrs. Eitingon, who was friends with Sandy Meisner”, a Group Theater ensemble member:

“Meisner imparted this information to Strasberg, who acted as if he were mildly interested. Strasberg no longer believed stories about people who wanted to give us money. He never called Mrs. Eitingon. Finally the poor lady called Strasberg herself. The reception she met with led her to conclude either that we had all the money we need or that Strasberg was so contemptuous of moneyed people that he could hardly bear to talk
to her. Mrs. Eitingon consequently took her money to Frank Merlin, who produced one play with it and bought another” (105)

The Group Theater sought to build a theater *community*, not just a production house, which required an emphasis on nurturing personal relationships with the community. In a contemporary time, non-profit mission statements continue to resonate with this guiding principle, making bold mentions of their desire to “influence, education, inspire or entertain specific audiences.” (Kaiser) The refusal to cultivate the relationship with Mrs. Etinton speaks to the major managerial flaw in the Group’s organizational model: in short, they didn’t understand the importance of fundraising as a niche to survive. Not wanting to be beholden to investors, the Group failed to identify a potential arts supporter, and continued to struggle. By 1933, two years after the Group’s inception, the spirit of New York City began to wane. Official reports tallied unemployment in the United States at over 12 million, and the golden haze that circled Broadway near Times Square was now greyed with breadlines. (Clurman 113) For the Group Theater to turn down such a generous gift could have been a managerial decision that ruined the company.

1935 became the artistic tipping point of the Group Theater with their production of Clifford Odets’ play *Awake and Sing!* The set was austere and didn’t demand a large sum of money to produce. However, Odets, coupled with Clurman was unable to secure the money to build the production. Franchot Tone once again became the Group’s benefactor, contributing $5,000.00 towards the cost of production. An additional $1,500 was raised by Cheryl Crawford to cover any unforeseen expenses.
Awake and Sing opened on February 19, 1935 and received favorable reviews. The play was created out of “the distress of the 1932 depression...(149)”. The play wasn’t necessarily hailed for its artistic acclaim, but rather for its bombastic response to the plight of the lower class during the economic depression. Awake and Sing! is a comedy-drama about a Jewish family struggling to survive in Depression-era America. It realistically detailed the atrocious living conditions of America’s poor, and advanced Odets belief that art could advance social change.

Just prior to the opening performance, Odets other work, Waiting For Lefty began to make its impact among labor groups. Lefty was inspired by the taxi strike of 1934, and is told over a series of vignettes which demonstrate the societal inequalities that plagued the early 30s. The Group, having been invited to the Civic Repertory Theatre on 14th Street to preview Lefty had not been two minutes into its performance before the audience erupted with response. As Clurman recalls, “Strike! was Lefty’s lyric message, not alone for a few extra pennies of wages or for shorter hours of work, strike for greater dignity, strike for a bolder humanity, strike for the full stature of man” (148). It was in that performance that the Group Theater had finally come to realize its mission: the actors were no longer performing, but rather united with Odets original vision to produce an honest communication between playwright and audience. Lefty resonated among its audiences because, like Awake and Sing! it resonated among its audiences. The unification between the audience and performers occurred because the play spoke honestly to the needs of the working class, who had become the Group’s audience. The success of Lefty combined with the immediately release of Awake and Sing! hailed Odets as a “working party member” and claimed the Group had awakened a social movement through its plays.

The success of Lefty was enough for the Group Theatre to continue for four more years into the early 1940s. It wasn’t until after Odets next successful play, Golden Boy, in 1937, that
the Group Theatre’s emotional infrastructure began to dissolve. Clurman, Strasburg, and Crawford faced continuous debates over the integrity of *The Method*, and its significance as a touchstone of the Group Theatre: participation in these workshops and classes were what prevented the acting company members of the Group from seeking sustainable employment but the workshops also represented a lifeline to attaining their unified goal. Living in poverty and often sharing rooms with 3-4 other ensemble members, the emotional toll of serving as a full-time artist wore away at the morale of the company. Additionally, the frequent financial problems made it increasingly difficult for the Group to stably operate, and by 1939, Crawford and Strasburg resigned as Directors of the Group Theatre.

By the end of the 1930s, on the opening of their production of *Night Music*, Clurman declared that he would be the solitary director of the Group Theatre and gave himself permission to seek the council of anyone internal or external to the organization in which he saw as an asset. “If the theatre is truly my theatre, you will find that it is yours as well” (268) As one can imagine, this statement was not well received among the company as it had been built on the concept of an artistic community, and a bubble of rebellion began to brew against the lone founding member. The company members began to host meetings in which Clurman was not welcomed. At one meeting in particular, a company member read aloud a formal letter of resignation, declaring that the Group Theatre was no longer an ensemble-based company, but rather a theatre being run by one single voice. This makeshift committee crafted the Group Constitution, and declared they Group Theatre would move “…to conform to their collective vision of the theatre they wished to have.” The new wave of inspiration inspired Elia Kazan to commit to the raising of funds in hopes of stabilizing the Group Theatre for another decade of production. However, the “lady with connections” with whom Kazan collaborated had requested
a stipend for her fundraising efforts. The company was unable to extend that financial benefit to her, and she decided to cancel her commitment to the Group (269).

In the absence of funding, and concrete leadership, the company began to demand that the Group fight to offer the devoted actors some sense of stability. After 10 years of producing theater without a budget, and living in poverty-stricken conditions, the Group felt it was owed something by its lone director, Harold Clurman. Upon reflection, Clurman accepted that the Group Theatre no longer represented the ideals on which it was founded.

“For ten years I had been an idealist. Despite my knowledge of the facts, I had been impelled by the feeling that if one’s will is strong enough, if one’s desire is sufficiently hot, these along can mold events. When will and desire, however, no longer correspond to facts, when facts do not provide them a sufficiently substantial basis, when will and desire become isolated forces, the induce a kind of madness, cause pain without grace. My will and the collective will of my fellow workers were not sufficient to establish a Group Theatre that might endure despite the jungle life, the drought and famine, of the Broadway theatre in the early forties (Clurman 274).”

Clurman’s sentiments relate back to the question of how an artistic community may endure not merely within the chaos of the Great Depression, but through any circumstance. Since the Group’s inception in 1931, the talk of dissolution had been constant, and unwavering. From season to season, the company struggled to fashion enough money to survive. Perhaps it seemed fitting that as the curtain came down on the final performance of the Group Theatre, the ensemble disbanded, “…not with a bang but a whimper” (Clurman 279).
CHAPTER 3: THE STEPPENWOLF THEATER COMPANY

For almost 35 years, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company has grown from a volunteer-based ensemble in Highland Park, Illinois, to a marketing and fundraising giant allowing the organization to artistically expand without ever running the risk of losing its artistic integrity. The contribution to the Chicago theatre community is immeasurable: the Steppenwolf employees 75 full-time theatre professionals as well as dozens of free-lance artists to service over 25,000 subscribers and 200,000 individual ticket buyers every year. In 2006, the Steppenwolf premiered 12 new plays. This was a massive achievement for any arts organization, as the 2006-2007-production season marked the beginning of an economic recession that crippled arts organizations across the country. The story of the Steppenwolf is a case study in arts management; on how to successfully market and promote successful programs that enlist their audiences to engage and remain involved with the organization (Ravanas 64).

The Steppenwolf Theatre Company was the product of three teenagers: Terry Kinney, Jeff Perry, and would-be Hollywood heavyweight, Gary Sinise. They rehearsed in the basement of a church in Highland Park, Illinois, a northern suburb of Chicago, which Sinise had acquired through family friends (Elliott 70). Founding member Jeff Perry attested that they needed to “tribe up” and while the suburban basement wasn’t the best place to be seen it gave the early ensemble a place to rehearse and build a strong ensemble foundation on which to build their organization (Christiansen 219). The name “Steppenwolf” was lifted from a Hermann Hesse novel, “...a book none of them had read” (Ravanas 65). The book had been a cultural sensation in 1960 when Hesse challenged his readers to live a life of exploration of the inner self. Without a life of exploration and curiosity we risk living a life of emptiness (Cox). In 1975, the group of theatre youths incorporated for non-profit, 501(c )3 status, and soon grew to a group of nine
actors which were recruited from local college friends of the founding members. The early ensemble included: Laurie Metcalf, Moira Harris, Alan Wilder, John Malkovich, Nancy Evans, and H.E. Baccus, who became the first Artistic Director of the Steppenwolf Theater (Christiansen 221).

Like the Group Theatre, the Steppenwolf was founded with the objective to form an innovative artistic theatrical ensemble. For founding member, Gary Sinise, he described the goal of the Steppenwolf Theatre as a way “to put people together over a period of time in a collective way, without the sense that the lead character in the play is the star and the smaller roles are not important. The actors listen to each other and learn from each other and develop as actors together” (Ravans 65). The relationships between the founding members both on and off the stage unified the Steppenwolf members, and gave the budding arts organization a foundation. Mirroring the Group Theatre in mission, the Steppenwolf sought to produce the art, rather than
the product, and through the formation of their non-profit arts producer, they worked to secure financial support to advance their mission, empowering fundraisers and offering financial control of the business-end to board of trustees and not in the hands of the artists and directors themselves. The style of Steppenwolf plays was “abrasive”, almost a rock n’ roll style of theater – it was powerful, forceful, and had the same kind of energy that one would experience at a live rock concert (Ravanas 65). Their company was “a unit, a cooperative, a team, a family…” and despite its growing pains in the early years, the Steppenwolf would eventually become an example to storefront theater companies across Chicago (Christiansen 233).

The Steppenwolf became known in Chicago for the “gonzo style of the Steppenwolf”. Just as Mamet’s style of offensive language and harsh pacing dialogue, the Steppenwolf became recognized for raw energy displayed by ensemble members during a performance. Richard Christianson recalls:

“On the night of each performance, they ran around the outside of the theater screaming and carrying on in order to fire up their energy. Then, on a signal from the stage manager, they raced down from the top of the hill, roared into the backstage area, and rocketed onto the stage, where, laughing maniacally, they confronted the hapless [E.H.] Baccus. It was so convincingly terrifying I was sure that, when they had finished messing with him, they were going to come after me and the rest of the audience (233).”

The emergence of the Steppenwolf marked the dawn of a new revolution in the American theater. “It involved a move away from emphasizing emotional truth and seeking out raw behavioral truth” (Ravanas 65). Audiences were inspired and motivated by it, and the Steppenwolf made this new style of theater accessible to audiences across the city. As the
company’s popularity grew, they soon moved into a 134-seat theatre in downtown Chicago, and by 1982, they had moved again, this time into a 211-seat theater which had previously been a garage. That same year, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company produced Sam Shepard’s play *True West* starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich. This marked the first major transition for the Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

Sinise worked to acquire the rights to *True West* after a botched Broadway opening. The small cast of four people was the perfect size for the early Steppenwolf production as it was cheap to produce. Sinise believed that in order to take the Steppenwolf to a new home, they needed to upgrade their brand visibility which would in turn impact their ability to fundraise and sustain themselves. A New York presence was essential, and after Jeff Perry quit the cast in order to stay in Chicago, Sinise worked with Malkovich to move the show to Cherry Lane in New York (Christiansen 229). Concurrently the Steppenwolf was working towards a few major initiatives, one of which was the move to the Saint Nicholas Theater. Resources for the budding theater company were being allocated to overhaul the space, and give it a full facelift. It was about the time Sinise negotiated the chance to move *True West* to Broadway. Sinise recalled, “The company was very divided about the artistic director and one of the main actors leaving as we were opening this brand new theater (Elliott 72).” The ensemble as well as the board feared the level of instability this could potentially bring to the organization during such an important transition. However, Sinise wouldn’t relent and moved the production to New York, despite the dissention from the company and the board. The board requested that Sinise resign from his position of Artistic Director, and named Jeff Kinney as his successor (Elliott 72).

*True West* was a game changer, much like *Waiting for Lefty* changed the Group. When it opened in October, 1982, it received outstanding reviews and launched the Steppenwolf’s
popularity and brand reputation. Sinise and Malkovich were widely noticed, hosting interviews with major publications which afforded them the opportunity to talk about the Steppenwolf and advance the production brand of their Chicago storefront organization. *True West* ran for 6 months in New York where it received multiple Obies, including Best Actor for John Malkovich (72).

Immediately following the success of *True West*, Malkovich left the Steppenwolf for Hollywood where he set out to start his career in film. Sinise returned to Chicago, where he received accolades and even apologies from the Steppenwolf board for questioning his judgment and his leadership. He was reinstated as Artistic Director, and continued to move Steppenwolf hits to Manhattan, including: *And a Nightingale Sang* (1983), *Balm in Gilead* (1984), *Orphans* (1985), and *Grapes of Wrath* (1990).

![True West poster](https://CherryLaneTheatre.org/History)

Fig. 4. True West poster, CherryLaneTheatre.org/History.

The loss of founding members can often lead to an organizational collapse. Without the people who represent the original vision and founding principles, fundraising, marketing, and
maintaining a brand can be difficult to uphold. The Steppenwolf utilized the newfound fame of their founding members to turn it into one of the largest fundraising powerhouses in Chicago. Because of the incredible success and popularity, the company was able to receive significant financial assistance as well as many artists, business types and volunteers who longed to be a part of the organization. The company spread its influence in the productions that followed and *True West* continued to be moved from the non-profit, 200 seat house to New York, Washington, and elsewhere.

This is one of the first examples of the *matching hypothesis* in the Steppenwolf Theatre’s tenure. The visible Functions in this display of commitment, much like the Group Theatre, include:

- **Values**: the early ensemble of the Steppenwolf Theatre valued a particular caliber of work, be it a play by Tennessee Williams, or Sam Shepherd. As Sinise stated, his artistic priority was always on the story. “If the story doesn’t work, why should I do the character. That’s the ensemble approach – I am naturally drawn to the whole first (Elliott 73; Clary & Snyder).” The early ensemble members shared this Value, and understood their place within the growing ensemble.

- **Understanding**: The Steppenwolf Theatre Company was an incubator in their early years. As Artistic Director, Sinise was committed to finding work for his actors. At the point at which the ensemble members were beginning to leave the Steppenwolf to pursue bigger roles at bigger production companies, the Board of Directors realized they needed to make a commitment to growing the organization in Chicago so they could *retain* their actors and continue to champion the organization (Elliott 73; Clary & Snyder).
Enhancement: In 1995, the three founders created the Executive Artistic Board, which was responsible for identifying, cultivating, training, and implementing the future Artistic leadership. This model still exists today; the current Artistic Director, Martha Levy, was a product of this training. The Steppenwolf instituted a model of success by providing training and leadership to the incoming Artistic Director, which ensures the mission and vision of the early days of the Steppenwolf will continue in the future. (Clary & Snyder 157).

With the growing success of the ensemble members coupled with the Steppenwolf’s status, the board of trustees moved to invest in a new space in order to ensure they retained and grew their audience. The board also favored the talented ensemble, and understood that an investment in a new space, a bigger space, would help them retain their talented members enabling the organization to continue to produce high-quality theater. The board’s risk resulted in a $9million first-class facility. “When you create a home, you’re no longer gypsies. The institution is real (Ravanas 66).” The investment allowed the Steppenwolf to become a living and permanent body within the Chicago arts community. But the company lacked the financial means for such a large move. Unlike its European counterparts, there was no consistent funding to pursue, and the organization had no fundraising experience. This same year, in 1985, the Steppenwolf was awarded the Antoinette Perry Award (Tony) for Regional Theatre Company. The new facility would be a requirement if the organization was going to continue to thrive (Steppenwolf.org).

In order to achieve such a remarkable goal, the Steppenwolf overhauled their entire institution, starting with the board. “Whereas previously trustees were asked to contribute their kitchen table for use as a prop in a play, now they had to contribute financially.” The leadership swayed the board in their favor with the realization that a strong, financial contribution towards a
new state-of-the-art facility would further advance the Steppenwolf from a local arts producer to a national arts institution. Additionally, the national fame which the founding members were beginning to achieve served as an outstanding marketing outlet, and a way to promote the Steppenwolf as an incubator of young, fresh talent (Ravanas 66). John Malkovich, Laurie Metcalf, and Joan Allen were just a few of the early Steppenwolf members who had been launched into the national theater and film industry with the help of the Steppenwolf Theater Company.

The Steppenwolf Theater Company represented a group of teenagers, fragmented, and disjointed, who started with a mission to create an ensemble acting company, and later became some of the most highly acclaimed and most famous actors in the industry. The organizational launch into the national spotlight transformed the concept of what a storefront theater in Chicago could eventually become. They possessed commitment to the arts as Gary Sinise spoke of the original origins, “We were willing to postpone fame and fortune for what we got in exchange” (185). Unlike the Group Theater, however was an emphasis on innovative art coupled with their strong business model that didn’t merely live from script to script, but held onto long-term goals for survival and longevity. The Steppenwolf is an inspiration to many new theater companies, and for a few years in the early 90s, there were frequent critical predictions as to which new company would become “the next Steppenwolf” (Christiansen 235).

I have explored the history and characteristics of both the Group and Steppenwolf theaters in the hopes of illustrating the qualities necessary to sustain a successful theater organization. The Group Theater held tremendous flaws in respect to its overly idealistic mission and no long-term plan for sustainability or growth. By properly understanding the qualities held by the Steppenwolf in regard to their using their fame and notoriety in order to
gain volunteer support, I will implement my research towards volunteerism in an effort to properly diagnose the Group Theater's mistakes. Again I affirm that proper volunteerism and the implementation of the matching hypothesis is necessary towards the construct and sustainability of a successful theater arts organization and without them, a theater organization will be unable to survive and its financial dependency and thirst will, in effect, devour the entire company.
CHAPTER 4: NON-PROFIT ADMINISTRATION and THE MATCHING HYPOTHESIS

I argue that the fundamental difference between the successes of the Steppenwolf and the Group theaters is a direct result of the intelligent implementation of arts administration practice. This practice was not conceptually available for the Group Theatre which is part of the reason why the Group remains an inspirational case study for contemporary academics. By the 1980s, non-profit management practices were becoming an academic discipline. Organizations, particularly arts organizations, who apply the foundational practice of fundraising, marketing, and programming, are able to deliver a consistent product to their audience.

We must further explore the difference in organizational structure of the Group Theatre and the Steppenwolf Theatre, and how the structures impacted not only the engagement of their volunteer staff, but the sustainability of the organizations. In this instance in examination of the two theaters, it is quite clear: The Steppenwolf possessed the necessary structure and management, while the Group Theater was completely lacking. I argue that there are three structural pillars that can dramatically affect the VFI of volunteers: strategy, leadership, and marketing. While the Steppenwolf implemented a cohesive strategic plan that advanced their board growth and marketing efforts, the Group Theater lacked a stabilizing strategy. The leadership of the Group were in constant disagreement regarding the direction of the organization, and their program received notoriety at the hand of political unrest rather than artistic clout. The two organizations were governed very differently and the end result was substantial.

STRATEGIC PLANNING:
The strategic plan is a crucial component of any non-profit organization. A strong strategic plan provides a objective-oriented plan for where the organization should be within the next few years. Strategic plans provide long-term and short-term goals- the definitions and metrics by which the organization can measure its success- identify key leaders and committee members, and lastly provides an action plan for success. The strategic plan is also an important component to recruiting new leadership (board and staff), cultivating a sponsor or a donor, and recruiting and maintaining volunteers. As we have examined earlier in this paper the engagement of a volunteer is heavily reliant on their engagement and personal connection to the art. Therefore an organization must be able to explain the value of their organization to others so they can shape their audience base, expand their donor pool, and continue to produce the art that supports the mission of the organization (Volz 93).

The Group Theater’s ability to engage their volunteers was compromised by the absence of strategy. The Group strived to create art that fostered a relationship between the audience and the actor, and an opportunity to portray a truthful story through artistic process. While this mission was noble and important to the industry in the 1930s, Strasburg, Clurman, and Crawford did not share anything other than this common purpose when it came to planning for the future.

The Group founders did not have a strategy. Decisions were made on a show-by-show basis, rather than a through long-term strategic planning. In Clurman’s book, *The Fervent Years*, he speaks to myriad examples whereby the founders fundamentally disagreed on a way forward. While disagreement and a certain level of discourse among leadership is to be expected in any non-profit organization, the Group Theater did not have strong guiding principles and goals by which they could use to navigate forward. Frequently forgoing their own salaries to pay the actors, the Group Theater founders did not have on strong institution on which to grow. Thus,
decisions with regards to fundraising, production selection, and even geographical location could not be made with transparency (Clurman 97). The element of long-term strategy was off-putting to Clurman who identified these qualities as “commercial” which was a quality the Group hoped to move away from. Clurman feared becoming a company that yielded to certain commercial qualities such as:

- Selecting scripts because they would sell rather than provide an artistic experience for their audience;
- Selecting actors based on their “type” for example, hair color, weight, height, ethnicity, and other physical attributes;
- Limiting oneself to a four-week rehearsal period, which restricts the artistic process of the actor (Clurman 111).

What Clurman, Crawford, and Strasburg did not realize was that a strong strategic plan could have ensured that the Group planned for the successful implementation of its values and mission and overcame these challenges which were common in the industry. The absence of strategic planning did have an impact on the unity of Group members. As the Group continued to produce theater throughout the economic depression of the 30s, the biggest VFI factor that was impacted was Career. Recall that the Career level of VFI pertains to the desire of a volunteer to gain career-specific experience through their volunteerism (Clary & Snyder 157). As the Group continued to struggle with both financial stability and access to quality scripts, the Group members saw their performance opportunities and ability to build professional clout diminish. A strategic plan in any capacity could have helped the Group leaders address the concerns of the actors, and redefine the direction of the Group so it was communicated and tailored to meet the growing needs of the Group.
The Steppenwolf Theater Company changed organizational directions after the success of *True West*. As previously stated, the Board of Directors went from a group of volunteers who donated props and set pieces to each production to an active Board who annually donated money and worked within their networks to cultivate new donors and volunteers. The first step to making this organizational change was the development of a new strategic plan. As a tactic for developing this plan, the Steppenwolf Theater Company utilized the resource, *Good to Great: And the Social Sector*, a monograph dedicated to applying the principles of the original *Good to Great* by Jim Collins and applying it to the social sector. As Megan Smith, Director of Corporate Partnerships at the Steppenwolf said, when a new staff member is introduced to the Marketing, Development, Board Development, or Strategic Giving departments, their first assignment is to read *Good the Great: And the Social Sector* to understand the basis for the Steppenwolf’s approach to success\(^1\). The importance of the Steppenwolf’s approach to strategic planning is centered around the ven diagram that enables the theater company to focus its energies and its efforts on the three things it does best, and where those things overlap.

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Collins refers to this diagram as “The Hedgehog Concept”:

![Hedgehog Concept diagram](image)

Fig. 5. Hedgehog Concept diagram. Collins, Jim. 2005.

**Circle 1: PASSION** – Understanding what your organization stands for (its core values) and why it exists (its mission and core purpose).

**Circle 2: BEST AT** – Understanding what your organization can uniquely contribute to the people it touches, better than any other organization on the planet.

**Circle 3: RESOURCE ENGINE** – Understanding what best drives your resource engine, broken into three parts: time, money, and brand (Collins 283).

The Steppenwolf realized that as a non-profit its primary motivation could not be money and profit; it’s primary objective was to create theater. Using the Hedgehog Diagram, the Steppenwolf was able to refocus its energies on its PASSION for creating collaborative theater, identify that it was BEST AT producing energetic and innovative theater, and using those two
qualities defined its primary RESOURCE as the caliber of talent within the organization, and how that supports the brand of the Steppenwolf Theater Company.  

This approach to strategic planning serves the Steppenwolf VFI because it clearly defines the values, mission, and priorities of the Steppenwolf Theater Company and makes it significantly easier to identify engagement opportunities. Revisiting Clary and Snyder, a well-defined strategic plan using the Hedgehog Concept supports all six VFI functions because one can link each function to a particular Circle of the plan. Values, Understanding, Enhancement, Career, Social, and Protective all funnel through the Hedgehog Concept and clearly define the priorities of the organization. If a potential volunteer does not value a commitment to theater that is collaborative and of a high quality, then that volunteer could be ruled out as a potential candidate for a board position, committee member, or volunteer. By defining their strategic direction for staff, board, and volunteers, the Steppenwolf Theater Company is able to attract and retain members of the Chicago theater community and ensure they are aligned with the culture and strategic direction of the theater (Clary & Snyder 157).

LEADERSHIP:

Board development and leadership are an important component to running and governing a non-profit theater company. The Board of Directors works alongside the artistic and executive staff to execute the mission statement and ensure the organizational priorities as established by the strategic plan are executed. The Board of Directors is historically responsible for hiring the artistic director and the managing director, and work alongside of them to execute the strategic plan (Roche 129). A tenuous Board of Directors can be the end of an organization, while a Board

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that operates with integrity and conviction can be the touch point for maintaining stability and fostering growth (Roche 129).

As established, the Group Theater is an anomaly because of its position as the first non-profit theater company. Without a formal Board of Directors, the role of leadership fell to the founding members and a select group of actors from the ensemble. As the organization faced crippling funding problems and a lack of cohesive leadership, the Group Theater was unable to sustain its mission and continue to produce theater in New York City (Clurman 193). In reexamining the impact this had on the VFI of the Group Theater, we speculate that had the founding members invested in a formal Board, or even a group of trusted advisors to assist them with strategic planning and fundraising development, the Group Theater could have sustained itself for a longer period of time as an arts producer.

Nancy Roche states in her article, *Board Development* that the first step to board development is the formation of a committee (129). In 1937, after a period of severe disenchantment with the Group directors, the acting ensemble of the Group Theater formed an Actors Committee to represent the proper needs of the ensemble. The committee drafted a document which was presented to Clurman, Strasburg, and Crawford that asserted that the Group model had changed and the organization needed to be steered in a different direction as a result of that change. What had started as three directors driving the vision of the organization had now turned into an ensemble of 30 individuals who formed “The Group”. The ensemble had sacrificed their personal comfort, salaries, and professional clout to be a part of the Group and they now demanded a vote at the table when it came to the organizational direction of the company (Clurman 193).
The Actors Committee motioned to institute the following changes to the Group:

- Ensure a regular and sustainable income for all Group actors’
- Ensure access to “sufficient artistic exercise” and guarantee a certain number of roles to ensemble members each year;
- Institutionalize the Group Theater to provide forty weeks of “active and full production” and ensure performance opportunities for all members (Clurman 195).

The formation of an Actors Committee sparked the dissolution of the original leadership team of the Group. The founding members were unable to ensure the needs of the Group would be met without a dramatic shift in artistic direction. That the original founders were unable to steward this committee is an important lesson in leadership. As stated by Barbara E. Taylor, Richard P. Chait, and Thomas P. Holland in their joint article, The New Work of the Nonprofit Board, an effective Board of Directors will “…[harness] the collective efforts of accomplished individuals to advance their institution’s mission and long-term welfare (149).” Without the ability to navigate complicated situations, a non-profit organization cannot sustain during periods of transition.

The impact of poor leadership on the VFI is critical. If the organization is not healthy, and if opportunities and challenges cannot be openly discussed, volunteers cannot possibly feel engaged. The Function of reward no longer remains a priority, and the membership of your volunteer teams begins to decrease. In the case of the Group Theater, the formation of the Actors Committee and its challenge to the leadership was part of the breakdown that eventually led to the Group Theaters demise (Clurman 197). As the ensemble continued to see little reward for their efforts, certain members such as Clifford Odets and Elia Kazan began to pursue other
opportunities in Hollywood where they could make a living wage pursuing their art (Clurman 198)

The Steppenwolf Theater, however, was gifted with a strong leadership team who were able to take risks and ensure success by leveraging and building their brand. The Board recognized that the actors were becoming successful, and while they were moving onto other projects with bigger houses, their loyalty and devotion to the Steppenwolf as founding members would continue to be an asset. But only if it was leveraged correctly. Like the Group Theater, the Steppenwolf “...was operating from hand to mouth, barely breaking even every season...it had virtually no fundraising experience and...no significant fundraising on which to rely (Ravanas 66).” The Board of Directors committed to institutionalizing itself, much like the Actors Committee of the Group requested. The Board of Directors for the Steppenwolf Theater forged strategic partnerships within the community, and leveraged the fame and notoriety of its founding ensemble to speak to the significance of the Steppenwolf brand (Ravanas 67).

It was during this time that the Steppenwolf trustees made a firm commitment to board recruitment, and channeled its energies and its networks to identifying the appropriate candidates to join the leadership team. Bruce Sagan, former Chairman of the Board attested, “We were very careful to recruit people who liked the work, because Steppenwolf was not for everybody – it still isn’t. They had to like the work (Ravanas 67).” Understanding that the power of the Steppenwolf’s brand was fueled by its early ensemble, the board took pride in leveraging relationships with staff, ensuring that strategic goals were met and the management of the company evolved into a more defined educational structure. The key to strong board development is a solid and stable partnership between the board and staff; it is the touchstone of healthy board culture (Roche 131).
The VFI is applicable not only to volunteer staff, but also to board members. For example, during this transition, it was important that the Steppenwolf trustees were successfully matching new board recruits with projects that would not only benefit them as individuals, but motivate them to help with the success of the organization. The functions of Values, Enhancement, and Career were crucial motivators for the Steppenwolf’s recruits because they were able to ensure their new trustees would be faithful to their new strategic direction (Clary & Snyder 157). Through successful matching, the Steppenwolf was able to guide the staff and ensemble through the transition of turning the company from a storefront theater to a nationally recognized brand for production.

The most quintessential difference between The Steppenwolf and the Group circulates around leadership. While the Group Theatre lacked the ability and talent to focus on concrete fundraising efforts, the Steppenwolf has become a model of success for non-profit regional theatres around the world. The Steppenwolf’s fundraising and marketing departments are perhaps the two most crucial departments within the organization. The Steppenwolf Theatre Company receives substantial support from both individual and corporate sponsors, and stewardship for these relationships is coordinated down to the tiniest detail, including the type of font used to address an envelope. Individual giving begins at $75/year and includes a backstage tour and a preview of the season. For donations higher than $1,500/year, the benefits only expand and include anything from VIP ticket service, to private receptions with the cast and board of trustees (Ravanas 71).
MARKETING:

The success of an arts organization relies heavily on programming, and strong marketing. By combining exceptional programming with strong verbiage to communicate the validity and importance of that programming to the community it serves, an arts organization must be able to attract and retain members, volunteers, and donors. The proper combination of these factors is what sustains a theater’s sustainability. As noted in Michael Kaiser’s book, *Leading Roles*, working together with an engaged board of directors, an arts organization is able to increase revenue (inclusive of *earned* and *contributed* income) to grow a healthy organization (Kaiser 1).

For the Group Theatre, the ensemble was not governed by a board of directors, but rather by three idealistic artists who sought to advance their mission of creating the first national theater. While romantic in vision, for maintaining a business as well as an artistic organization, it doesn’t yield survival.

In applying the *matching hypothesis* to the Group Theatre, the lack of an objective governing body proves problematic. As explored in Chapter 2, the Group Theatre ensemble members struggled to survive, cohabitating with up to three other Group members, and often going hungry or cold as a result. The *matching hypothesis* is reliant on identifying the motivations behind a volunteer, and then rewarding that motivation with a benefit. Chronic conditions of poverty were a primary component to the dissolution of the Group Theatre in 1941 because the artists could no longer sustain themselves within the current structure. In the absence of concentrated fundraising and without a strong leadership team to move the Group from a small ensemble to a self-sustaining organization, the company wasn’t afforded the opportunity to grow or expand their programming to survive in the 1940s.
Michael Kaiser notes, “Great artists all have failures: the trick is to budget and plan for some failure each season… (1)”. The Group Theatre did not have concrete planning or finance management in place to properly govern the future of the organization. Clurman believed the art would speak for itself, and despite his best efforts at creating “art”, he, as well as Strasburg and Crawford failed to nurture the business. In the years leading up to the founding of the Group Theatre, Harold Clurman attested that the Group sought to etch its legacy into history, but it was, nonetheless doomed to fail as a result of its lack of concrete and cohesive management tactics (Blau 3). Kaiser further states, “Too often, a creative leader does not have the executive staff needed to develop the cadre of audience members and donors required to support the work (Kaiser 1).” This is symptomatic of the Group Theatre because Clurman, especially in the latter years of the Group, never focused his efforts on establishing a marketing or fundraising “engine” that could have helped sustain the organization of the Group. Evidence of this was supported in Chapter 2, when we explored the offering when the Group Theatre was offered a gift of $50,000 to help sustain their operations and production cycle. However, the inability to cultivate that relationship and engage that donor resulted in losing the gift, and any chance of financial viability. A theater must find the medium between cultivating an audience as well as maintaining important donors. In relation to Kaiser’s statement, the question arises as to how a creative leader is able to perform the necessary work for a theater without the proper personnel. The problem is simple: funding. It is something Kaiser reflects on over and over again, but with the use of volunteers a leader and the theater he represents is able to fill the gaps without sacrificing cherished capital.

The touchstone of the matching hypothesis is the element of persuasive messaging, the outward approach involved with motivating and engaging volunteers to fulfill particular roles. In
order for a potential or current volunteer to see an opportunity for emotional or professional growth, it is the responsibility of the organization to communicate that message out to their volunteer teams (Clary & Snyder 158). The Group Theatre excelled at communicating its message to their constituents as evidence from their meetings which not only helped create the company, but worked to engage their ensemble members throughout its existence. The key motivating factor behind the Group was the chance for an impressionable group of actors to achieve a place in history (Blau 2). While one may debate whether the Group was successful or a failure as a company, one must concede that they accomplished the goal of at least instilling a sense of optimism that was able to attract many to their organization. The motivation behind achieving theatrical immorality was achieved for the Group members because each individual worker believed they were a crucial part in the biggest theatrical experiment of their age.

While the success of the ensemble members within the Group is a success story and launched careers for many who were a part of the company, it is necessary to question how the impact of the theater company would have expanded had they been able to retain and eventually compensate their ensemble members through better organizational management. Unlike the Group, the Steppenwolf was able to achieve this goal: they grew from a volunteer based theater company in the suburbs of Chicago, with just as much artistic idealism in the midst of a pivotal time in America, and into one of the largest arts organizations in the country. And while they have continued to foster new talent who eventually move to Broadway and Hollywood, the Steppenwolf has been able to continue to feature their founding ensemble members in various roles many of which result of their organizational management efforts.

Unlike the Group Theatre, the Steppenwolf came into existence under strong leadership, with a passion to create theater, but then later transitioned into a self-sustaining fundraising
powerhouse. While the Group Theatre went through a tumultuous leadership transition after Strasburg and Crawford left the organization, the Steppenwolf Theatre works to on-board their new artistic and executive leadership, cultivating incoming leaders under the guidance of an Executive Artistic Board which trains and advises the incoming director. The current Artistic Director, Martha Lavey, is one of the many successes of this program. As a Steppenwolf ensemble member, she was a talented actress, and earned her fame on the stage of the Steppenwolf Theatre. She also holds a strong business mind and thus is able to discover that medium of proper management and artistic purpose. As a result of this program, the transition of leadership from Sinise to Lavey was seamless, and allowed for a fluid shift in artistic leadership that didn’t disturb the organizational fabric of the company (Ravanas 66). The implementation of new artistic leaders is representative of the application of the matching hypothesis, in that the company members and volunteers are not only rewarded for their time as a Steppenwolf Ensemble member, but they are also given the training and the access to previous Artistic Directors who can advise them on leading the organization. Rather than risk losing an ensemble member, the Steppenwolf rewards their company members by satisfying their desire to lead, and play a role in shaping the organizational direction (Clary & Snyder 158).

The Board of the Steppenwolf realized that a large part of their early clout should be credited to the star-power of their ensemble members, including Gary Sinise, John Malkovich, Joan Allen, Laurie Metcalf, and John Maroney. Representing another deviation from the Group Theatre, the Steppenwolf Board realized that in order to retain their early ensemble members, and thereby enjoy the benefits of having these stars as Steppenwolf alum, the Board worked to secure enough cash to raze a $9m facility located today on North Halstead Street, Chicago. The fundraising prowess of the Steppenwolf team is perhaps one of the most remarkable assets of the
organization. The backbone of their fundraising comes from the continued engagement of their early ensemble members. For example, the two largest sources of revenue of the Steppenwolf are revenues generated through special events and benefits, and individual donations. The national fame of their ensemble members helps champion their special events. “The company organizes regular galas and sells extraordinary lots at auction: golf with Gary Sinise in Los Angeles, lunch with John Malkovich in the south of France… (Ravanas, 70)” The continued engagement of their famous alum allow the Steppenwolf to promote themselves as an incubator of young talent, a very attractive possibility to new actors, as well as donors who wish to meet and mingle with these stars. Cultivating and retaining early ensemble actors is an extension of the institutional marketing which Kaiser refers to – and advances the organizations mission within the community and helps keep it current.

Regarding attracting volunteers and thereby succeeding in their methods of volunteerism, the fame of the Steppenwolf theater draws many able bodied workers who simply want to be a part of the company and the production process. Volunteers will see an opportunity with the theater as optimum for developing a resume and networking connections and thus, if they are able to support themselves, they will be eager to work, even in a volunteer format. According to their own volunteer web-page, they ask volunteers to commit at least four hours a week to productions and in compensation, offer complimentary tickets to productions.

From the corporate level, the Steppenwolf works to secure matching grants from private foundations such as the Ford Foundation. The grant, totaling $1.75 million was contingent on matching the grant two to one. Matching grants were particularly successful for the Steppenwolf because they were able to leverage existing donors and board members who were inspired to
give so that the Steppenwolf could meet its goal. Ravanas writes, “If they give $1,000 it will transform into $2,000 for the organization…” (71).

As mentioned, corporate sponsors are also a crucial component to the Steppenwolf’s fundraising success. For example, the Steppenwolf is sponsored by the Sara Lee Corporation, which is headquartered in Chicago. The partnership between Sara Lee and the Steppenwolf came as a result of a market research study, which identified Sara Lee’s target consumer demographic as “females from 45-55 [years old]”. Likewise, the Steppenwolf’s marketing data supported that females of the same age demographic are the primary decision makers when it came to supporting the arts in Chicago. Since both organizations were trying to leverage a relationship with the same demographic, it was the perfect partnership for two Chicago companies (Ravanas 71). By partnering with corporations with national and international brand recognition, the Steppenwolf is able to market and advance their brand throughout the United States.

While Development and Marketing staff at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company receive compensation and benefits for their time, it is important to note that the non-profit board of trustees remains unpaid (by nature of serving on a non-profit board). However, they are rewarded and engaged through various benefits including access to the higher level Steppenwolf alum, access to behind-the-scenes programming, and other elite benefits that come with championing the mission of the Steppenwolf. Examples, such as the matching grant scenario, support the matching hypothesis in that the following VFI’s are met:

- Values: The individual leaders that make up the Steppenwolf Board of Trustees feel it is important to help the organization survive. Therefore they perform stewardship, and offer
individual donations of varying sums of money to help the Steppenwolf meet their annual fundraising goals.

- **Social**: The board of trustee and individual donors, are rewarded with exceptional social benefits which include networking with Hollywood elite and high powered donors and corporate sponsors. They are also able to work closely with other powerful and well known theater companies throughout the world.

- **Career**: the Volunteers and board members of the Steppenwolf are able to enhance their professional clout through the Social reward. Networking and developing new relationships with other Steppenwolf Donors is a great way to make new business connections and identify potential partners for a business or personal initiative (Clary & Snyder 158).

The Group Theatre truly was the first non-profit theater company in the United States, however, “nonprofit” as a practical conceptual application was not in definitive existence until the late 1920s, and even then, the role of a non-profit was limited to philanthropic charities, and churches (Heyman 724). Private foundations grew from 203 in 1929 to 2,058 by 1959. When considering the success of the Group Theatre, when compared to the Steppenwolf, access to non-profit foundational support, as well as access to managers trained in non-profit administration, is an important factor to consider.

That the Steppenwolf was able to establish itself, and survive these tumultuous years is no small feat. For non-profit arts organizations, earned income is a huge component to defining organizational success. About the time Sinise worked to move *True West* to Manhattan’s Cherry Lane Theatre, the Steppenwolf Theatre also proposed the development and build-out of a new,
$9 million facility on N. Halstead Street in Chicago. The success is thanks to Bruce Sagan, who served as the Steppenwolf’s President, and was the former chairman of the Illinois Arts Council. Sagan believed that the creation of a new space would help the company retain the talented artists who built the theater from the ground up, and turn the acting ensemble into an institution within Chicago’s city limits. Through fostering strategic partnerships with the community, including CitiBank, the Steppenwolf Theater built a 500-seat theater, complete with a Broadway-sized stage, an upstairs studio space for smaller productions, 13-stall bathroom, and an additional flexible theater space for more dynamic performances that required architectural flexibility (Christiansen 232). To date, ensemble members including John Mahoney, John Malkovich, Gary Sinise, Jeff Perry, and Laurie Metcalf will frequently return to the Steppenwolf to act, direct, or produce live theater within the theatrical community in which they fostered (233).
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Two theater companies – both historic, both famous – but only one survived multiple decades without disbanding in frustration. Both the Steppenwolf Theatre Company and the Group Theatre were formed out of a passionate dedication to producing a particular and innovative theater experience. Both companies derived from a desire to serve and create a community with their respective audiences. However managing an arts organization cannot solely be about producing art – one has to manage an arts organization with a level of non-profit expertise in order to steward donors, implement intriguing programming, and engage volunteers who serve as both staff and leadership in order to survive. The Group Theatre may have failed, but they are perhaps one of the most famous theater experiments in the history of the modern theater. And while their company only lasted about 10 years, their legacy for creating the first national theater continues to survive and inspire new theater producers across the country.

The Steppenwolf is a symbol in the Chicago Theater community, with many new and emerging storefront theaters looking to become “the next Steppenwolf”. Very few accomplish this goal; most actually disband, suffering the fate of the Group theatre, with ensemble members parting ways and moving onto other projects.

In exploring the matching hypothesis and its proper application is not only important when building an emerging arts organization on the backs of volunteer staff; once the organization has renovated into a self-sustaining organization with paid staff, the matching hypothesis must still be applied to the organizations board of directors, who are, by nature of the non-profit, unpaid. Understanding what attracted a potential board member to serve and then tailoring your messaging and programming to heightening their engagement is crucial to the
long-term success of the organization. Added to that, one cannot stress enough the importance of volunteers for a theater. Attracting volunteers creates a connection with the community a theater inhabits and also creates numerous opportunities for those endeavoring to become a part of a company. The matching hypothesis in conjunction to volunteerism illustrates how any organization may survive as it attempts to break ground and launch itself. Survivability depends on management and vision as well as what Kaiser deemed the most necessary: The discipline to follow the rules. (Kaiser 14).
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