

Turning a Setback into an Opportunity

By Katrina Ploof

As theatre leaders, we have all “hit the wall,” slamming into an emergency or a crisis so hard that we think to ourselves, “It’s impossible –my theatre will never come back from this.” Certainly COVID-19 was an experience of uncertainty common to all of us as we worked through that astonishing time together.

However, what happens when we are alone in our challenges, when our theatre is tested in ways both public and private, where we have feared for its very survival? It is in those moments that we ask ourselves how we can transform that fear into action. How do we turn the challenges into another part of our journey, embrace the changes, and grow this experience into something filled with new possibilities? Ultimately, can we not just survive. but thrive?



In every setback lies an opportunity; look for the lesson and rise stronger.

AACT member theatres continue to prove that the answer to that last question is a resounding “Yes!”

Trial by Fire

That’s even the case when a theatre has to start over, when all that has been accomplished is wiped out in a day. Case in point: In 2007, South Carolina’s Rock Hill Little Theatre (now the Rock Hill Theatre) lost its venue and all of its historical archive in a fire. Since then, this beloved community theatre, which was founded in 1954 as the Piedmont Players, has occupied close to 10 different venues. While struggling to find a permanent home amid financial and other pressures, it has continued to produce, as well as launching an appeal to replace its archives. With a reach that has extended far beyond Rock Hill, 15 years later the theatre continues to receive playbills, posters, and photos from far and wide that document more than 70 years of productions.

Besides the reclaiming of precious items once thought lost, the outreach has reconnected Rock Hill Theatre with friends from all over the nation who remember their experiences in that theatre community with great affection.

Often a potential disaster can turn into an unexpected blessing. On a February morning in 2013, a team of volunteers arrived early at their theatre to complete the preparations for what they all assumed would be an exciting tech week for the much-anticipated production of *Les Misérables*. They were looking forward to putting the finishing touches on the complicated scenic design, but instead were greeted by a mostly empty stage, barely completed scenery, and a cryptic note left on the technical director's desk, reading, "I quit." With less than 24 hours before the final rehearsals that would set the play on course to open as scheduled, all seemed hopeless. Then, the theatre's executive director made a few phone calls, and within three hours the building was filled with more help than the company could have possibly dreamed of. At one point, volunteers included two other executive directors, three artistic directors, four professional scenic designers, and an army of painters and carpenters, all working on the stage.

The play opened as scheduled, but there was a benefit even bigger than the successful run. The relationships established during the crisis lasted well into the next 10 years, and beyond, bringing new friends, new fans, and people that could be counted on. In the end, said the theatre's executive director, "It was the best thing that could have happened to us."

Overcoming a Funding Shortage

Another story of community (and having the right people in the right place at the right time), comes from the Wetumpka Depot Players, in Wetumpka Alabama. This hard-working group had been homeless for too many years when they were finally able to purchase its current home in 2000. It wasn't exactly a glamorous spot: the dilapidated remains of an old grocery store and butcher shop in the heart of the city's historical district. It wasn't all bad—the building had some charm, lots of square footage and parking. But it smelled. Bad. Too many decades of storing raw meat had, it seemed, made its way into the walls of the place. But weeks of hard work by the board and volunteers, and gallons of Clorox later, the new home was finally close to opening.

But we all know how these things go, so cue the gloomy music here, because the theatre ran out of funds close to the opening of its first show. Knowing it had to sacrifice something to get into operation, the theatre decided to forego the elevated seating that had been planned from the outset. Everyone was just going to have to sit at floor level for a year or so. And then, after a successful opening, the theatre got an unexpected gift from several business leaders who had decided that floor-level seating wasn't going to do. Within two months, between the first and second show in their new venue, the Players had their elevated seating, courtesy of a supportive and determined community. The space was turned into a real theatre. And it smelled great, too.

A Tragic Loss

It's no secret that an unexpected loss of funds, internal strife, or acts of God can bring a small, community-driven organization to its knees. But how does one lead a theatres through profound loss and grief? That was the challenge when, in July of 2009, the small but mighty Bay Street Players in Eustis, Florida, faced the sudden tragic loss of a beloved young volunteer, Julia

Vatter. A theatre kid from a young age, Julia had grown up on the Bay Street stage, and was stage managing a production at the time of her passing. It was a deeply personal loss for a grief-stricken family and their theatre community. But as Julia's dad, Bernie, put in in his 2018 Ted Talk, "We learned the meaning of community."

In her memory, Julia's friends put a memorial chair backstage for the remainder of the run. Then they did it again, and this time, decorated it. Other theatres around the country (over 75 in the first year) jumped in, including chairs for Julia in Broadway theatres and national tours of *Wicked*, *Next to Normal*, *Rent*, and *Mamma Mia*. Today, the number of Julia's chairs is in the hundreds. A small gesture from a deeply wounded group became a nationwide movement and cast light into the darkness that continues to shine 15 years later.

Final Thoughts

Leadership through crisis is never easy and there is no single response. Transforming the bad times into something positive uses every muscle we have—it requires super-human strength and a commitment to honoring growth and new possibilities. We're all wise enough to know that spinning sh*t into gold doesn't always happen.

But we also know that the very action of trying, the *doing* of it, is in itself a way to the future—the new normal for our theatre and our people.

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