

*Philip Arnoult and Carol Baish*

*The authors describe the collaborative affiliation of the 23-year-old Baltimore Theatre Project, a small, nonprofit theatre specializing in presenting the international avant garde, with the Department of Theatre at Towson State University. In three years, the two collaborators have launched a number of successful artistic and educational projects, and have learned a good deal about what it takes to make such an affiliation work. Arnoult and Baish provide an account of the climate and the connections that led to making the affiliation in the first place, and analyze its successes and failures to date.*

## **A Collaboration:** *The Artist's Perspective*

The marriage ceremony establishing a “collaborative affiliation” between the Theatre Department of Towson State University and The Baltimore Theatre Project took place on a Thursday afternoon, June 28, 1990, in Towson State’s main theater. The ceremony was duly attended by the partners in the marriage, the appropriate officials, many friends and relatives in the arts, education, and political realms. The press on the union was both accurate and enthusiastic.

Writing a report on the relationship from a vantage point of only a little more than three years following the ceremony, I feel that I might be placed in the category with various film celebrities who, with three whole years of marriage completed, feel uniquely qualified to give advice to others contemplating that supposedly blessed union.

Let me say at the outset that we are in the early stages of an experiment. If we are blessed in our union, it is because everyone involved in the partnership is clear that this is an open-ended experiment. At this point, some of the things that we are doing together are bearing fruit; other initiatives have failed -- well, we prefer to say that while there are certain problems that we have not solved, and goals that we have not met, we choose to believe that we will eventually solve the problems and meet the goals. This is a journey of exploration.

The idea for this collaboration between a small, non-profit theater specializing in the avant garde, and located in the center of the city of Baltimore, and the theater department of a metropolitan university located just outside the city limits, came about first because of the strong belief on my part as founder/director of the theater, and Dr. Maravene Loeschke’s part as department chair, that both missions, both sets of constituencies, would be well served by such an initiative. From that base, we quickly moved toward the specifics -- the “why’s” that keep our collaboration grounded. In this article -- a frankly anecdotal one -- I intend to explore the “why’s” and analyze what has worked and what has not worked for both of us. My hope is that these details might serve as guides to other institutions, similar and dissimilar, that may be looking toward collaborations.

## The Baltimore Theatre Project

Perhaps we should begin with our introductions: who are we? I founded The Baltimore Theatre Project in 1971 under the auspices of Antioch College. My charge, as associate professor of theater, was to make a theater that would be useful to its community -- assuming that community to be one made up of a mixture of professional artists (many of them our teachers), training artists, and, we all hoped, an increasingly educated, adventurous, and enthusiastic body of audiences for the various works we would produce and present.

Although incorporated on its own in 1976, Theatre Project dates its history from its first 1971/72 season, and since then, has presented more than 800 different performing companies from 27 states and 19 foreign countries.

We have staked our claim as a presenter, and as such, present theater and dance companies from around the globe in one, two, and three-week residencies. We have never housed a resident company in the traditional sense (as for example a regional theater), and we do not take on scripts and produce works from the ground up. We now have an enviable international reputation for our hospitality to visiting companies. Each season is a mix of national/international companies and those from Baltimore and its environs. In addition to a full season of such presenting, we also develop numerous special projects that focus on international exchange.

Our building, in a neighborhood that is home also to the University of Baltimore, the Maryland Institute College of Art, the Symphony Hall, and Lyric Opera House, was built to last in 1898 by the Improved Order of Heptasophs (a fraternal order). Renovated in 1984, it provides a 157-seat "flexible black box" theater. We own four adjacent townhouses that provide office space, a minimal technical shop, and an apartment for up to ten visiting artists at a time.

Well into our 23rd season at the time of this article, Theatre Project remains a founder/director institution. I founded this theater, and I remain its sole artistic director: the work that we present, and the projects that we undertake, reflect my particular artistic vision. The Board of Directors oversees fiscal and legal commitments, takes on fundraising initiatives, and advises in such areas as publicity and community outreach, but does not shape our presenting seasons or decide which artistic projects we will or will not initiate.

After nearly 18 years as both artistic director, and producer/manager of Theatre Project, I was able (with an ease that surprised nearly everyone) to turn over the day-to-day administration and fiscal management to an executive director. This structure has worked well for Theatre Project. It is unusual, however, to find such a structure in this country today. It is true that many of our regional theaters were founded (largely in the 1950s) by individual directors (as opposed to committees of arts-minded citizens). However, one would be hard-pressed to find more than a handful of such institutions still in existence. I cannot speak from authoritative research, but I believe that the reasons for this are a complicated mixture of economics, mobility, age, and -- a well-recognized occupational hazard in the non-profit arts -- burnout.

The founder/director institution has its up side and its down side. On the one hand, in such a theater, the vision is clear, decisions are made quickly, and artists, I believe, feel that their voices will be heard, their needs met as first priority. On the other hand, such an institution -- particularly if it is one whose founder/director has a vision that is focused on art that is unconventional, challenging, and outside the

mainstream -- may have a more difficult time than others in making its unique case to a community of arts supporters.

At Theatre Project, we continue to deal with these ups and downs. Our general finances, like those of our fellow theaters across this country, are precarious and difficult. We struggle daily with the seemingly ever-shrinking pies of both public and private dollars. We skimp on publicity in order to pay the gas and electric bills -- and so on. This is not a new story to anyone working in the non-profit arts, outside the mainstream forms. Despite these difficulties, however, we find ourselves saying no -- for sheer lack of time -- to four or five fine companies for every one we present. And major multi-year, multi-city special projects such as The U.S./Netherlands Touring & Exchange Project, which I designed, and which is coordinated out of Theatre Project, attract major dollars -- in this case, funds from The Pew Charitable Trusts and The Ministry of Culture of the Netherlands.

### **Towson State University's Department Of Theater**

Our partner in this relationship is the Department of Theater, Towson State University. It is a department that has had only three chairpersons in the years of Theatre Project's development: C. Richard Gillespie, who founded the program; Paul Berman; and Maravene Loeschke, who is the current chair, and who is guiding the department in its move toward developing an innovative graduate program in theater.

The Department of Theater is part of the College of Fine Arts and Communication at Towson State, offering degree programs in music, the visual arts, film and video, radio and television, public relations, theater, dance, advertising, and journalism.

The collaboration between Theatre Project and the Towson State University Department of Theater had its base in a natural respect and admiration between its chair, Maravene Loeschke, and me. She is a writer, director, and actress whose work in all of these areas I appreciate for its professionalism and strong artistic center. Although trained as actor and director, I have spent most of my professional career as a producer (although never in the commercial sense), finding ways for theater professionals and students to work together.

### **Background: A False Start And A True Connection**

By the mid-eighties, it should have been clear to everybody working in the non-profit arts world, that collaboration was a matter of survival, particularly to those of us who have chosen to work in the arts outside the mainstream. In the fall of 1989, I made a formal proposal to the Theatre Project's Board of Directors requesting that we begin explorations leading toward an affiliation with an educational institution. The board appointed one of its members to look into the issue and to follow up on the logistics and legalities.

Over the winter/spring of 1989/90, we made what turned out to be a false start. We began negotiations with a university that has a very strong arts faculty, and a resident theater company that I believe is second to none. At first, this one seemed to be the right collaboration for us, and negotiations began on a current of optimism. But this one failed -- and here is the first in a series of cautionary notes that will appear throughout this article: I think that our negotiations failed because, after a hopeful first start between the artistic persons involved, the issue of our

merger quickly became an issue between one set of trustees and the other. It grew larger, it became bogged down in issues of property and capital development; it moved further and further away from its artistic center.

That is not to say that practical and logistical and economic issues are unimportant. But if these somehow seem to override artistic and personal connections -- then, my best advice would be to put the planned relationship on hold and explore other options.

In fact, that is what happened here. When it became clear that there were too many obstacles in the way of that first theater-to-university overture, I made another telephone call, to Maravene Loeschke at Towson State University's Theater Department. This time, the connection began between peers -- colleagues in the field -- and it has never wavered from that base.

We were able to form an agreement that met the needs of both institutions for collaboration and the opportunities for growth. We kept it free of financial or legal burdens. We called it a "collaborative affiliation," and we kept our separate identities, board of directors/trustees. In essence, we agreed to begin a journey together to see where it might lead.

I am reporting on where that journey has led in these three years, what we have learned so far, and where we think we are going in the future. There is a section on "what didn't work," but in my mind that translates to "what hasn't worked so far" -- in other words, we still think that these goals are potentially viable ones -- we simply have yet to find the ways to meet them.

### First, Why Collaborate ?

I will say at the outset that I think that the overriding WHY is in the commitment to experiment -- to see how we can work together, what this effort can bring to us and our students, teachers, artists. Without this curiosity, I think that a collaboration between a university and an arts organization is probably an intellectual exercise: its collaborators may learn something from the process, but the affiliation won't have any heart to it, and probably won't go on for the long haul.

In the process of forming the relationship, and developing it, I observe two themes. The first -- WHY do this -- is the most obvious, and my list of "why's" is fairly long. The second, which has to do with the time we commit to this effort, is a less obvious theme at the beginning, but takes on increasing importance as we go along.

We will begin, however, with the "why's" for developing this relationship. Most of them are mutually beneficial, and hard to separate in terms of "who gets what," so I have not attempted to do that kind of categorizing in the following list:

- We wanted to explore and try out some of the possible artistic collaborative projects that we could not launch separately.
- I felt that Theatre Project needed some "repositioning" in the public mind; we had long been identified with the international avant garde, despite the fact that we had consistently presented local artists as well each season. This relationship with a metropolitan Baltimore university might signal our commitment to local artists in a more public way than had been possible previously. I also felt that such repositioning might help with our fundraising campaigns, perhaps inspiring support from local foundations that tend to direct their funds toward local arts initiatives.
- For Towson State's Theater Department, there was also an element of

“repositioning” -- Theatre Project would serve almost as a downtown “pied a terre” for student and faculty works that needed to be moved and seen outside the university setting. The relationship would also signal for the Theater Department a clearly professional linkage with the national/international new theater scene.

- The two different institutions offer each other opportunities for the use of different facilities. Theatre Project’s theater space is small (157 seats) but comfortable and well-suited in its intimacy to smaller works. Towson State’s Theater Department uses two main stages: one, a large, state-of-the-art theater, the other, a studio space, similar in feeling to that of Theatre Project. One thing that is vastly different is the level and amount of equipment available. Theatre Project is well-equipped by the standards of similar theaters, but it has nowhere near the level of technical equipment that the university has (for example, it does not have a computerized light board). For students, performing, designing, or running lights and sound at Theatre Project puts them well outside their accustomed “comfort zone.” After they get over their initial shock, this jolt to their consciousness seems to be a healthy and realistic experience.
- Also in the educational area, we wanted to formalize, regularize, and develop a mutual relationship that was already in place to some extent: providing training opportunities for Towson’s theater students with Theatre Project’s visiting artists, and providing assistance to Theatre Project through semester-long student internships.
- Both Towson State and Theatre Project want -- and need -- to expand their audience bases; therefore, one of our “why’s” in making this relationship was the opportunity to cooperate in various marketing projects, and thereby reach more people and a wider range of audiences.
- The agreement between Towson State and Theatre Project keeps our finances completely separate, and was clear from the start that any fundraising -- particularly where we would be using University contacts -- would be targeted for joint projects. From the Theatre Project’s point of view, we expected that our repositioning through this association would bolster our own fundraising efforts. I am paid a stipend as adjunct faculty, and the relationship gives me access to the state health plan, a significant boon for Theatre Project and for me (as those working in small, non-profit organizations will realize).

### **Making and Committing Time**

My second theme is the matter of time: I think that this has to be part of the understood commitment between the two parties in this sort of collaboration.

In the Towson State/Theatre Project agreement, we were clear that this was to be an open-ended agreement. We see this relationship as a long-term experiment, and we choose not to place any artificial time constraints upon it.

Within the relationship, of course, are individual projects that have varying commitments of time, because of their nature: a two-week intensive workshop with one artist; a full-semester residency with a particular company. Specific projects have time constraints that are organic: they lead to a production, or they are based on a series of workshops that fulfill credit requirements. Overall, though, we are clear that this collaboration is a commitment that we hope will continue to grow with both

institutions.

There is another level to my discussion of time: This is a commitment that has very little to do with attending meetings, and almost everything to do with spending time in each other's theaters and rehearsal studios. And it is important here to be sure that we are talking about all of the department faculty, staff, and students, as well as the staff and visiting artists at Theatre Project. Without what I call "real" time spent seeing, responding, and sharing, the collaboration will not go very far. We are together to explore new territory, and that exploration can happen at its best in encounters that are within the artistic and education context -- but for the most part are relatively unstructured and open-ended.

There are numerous, often overwhelming, impediments to carving out this kind of time: the study and production schedules at the university, for both students and faculty; the production schedules of a small, understaffed theater.

I cannot say that we have found ways around these impediments with any consistency. At Theatre Project, we try to encourage the Towson students to spend more time here, by offering low ticket rates, encouraging them to work as ushers (for free tickets), and often providing free tickets for opening nights. We also make the effort to invite faculty members to attend opening nights, in the hope that their excitement about a particular work might then be conveyed to their students. The Towson Theater Department makes the same offers to Theatre Project artists, and staff. Still, progress in making and finding time for each other is slow.

### What Is Working So Far

Our collaboration's most impressive successes have been artistic ones, and have benefitted both institutions equally, I believe, although in different ways.

- In the spring and summer of 1991, Theatre Project undertook a large project funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts to bring a young Argentine company, Diablolmundo, to the United States for a major residency at Towson State University, and appearances at numerous family theater festivals in the East. That residency enabled the company to complete the development of a large work, new to their repertoire, and to present it in the large theater at Towson State as part of the University's annual Maryland Arts Festival. The production was designed with sweeping visual elements. The set was built in Argentina, then shipped to the University, where the company began to work with it for the first time. This was an eight-week residency, with full access to the theater for the time needed to realize Diablolmundo's new work. The expense to rent such a facility, and to hire the necessary technical support would have been prohibitive. The Diablolmundo residency is a major example of an artistic project that could not have taken place without our university/theater collaboration.
- In 1992, again in collaboration with Towson's Maryland Arts Festival, and this time also with The Henson Puppetry Festival, of New York, Theatre Project presented the puppeteer Eric Bass in a residency at Towson. This enabled him to put the finishing touches on his newest work, "The Village Child," and preview it before Maryland Arts Festival audiences for three weeks before taking it to New York to premiere at The Henson Festival.

Both projects provided special opportunities for students, some of whom worked directly with the companies, especially on the technical aspects of the productions, to get to know these artists well, and to see two quite unusual works of professional avant-garde theater through their final developmental stages.

Productions at Theatre Project by the Towson State Department of Theater have included:

- The presentation of a work developed by a Towson student company in a residency that prepared the company for a tour to Scotland to perform at The Edinburgh International Festival. The company was able to spend time polishing the work in our theater -- a space that is very similar in size and feeling to the one that they later found themselves playing in during the Edinburgh Festival. I was able to marshal my contacts in Edinburgh (a Festival which I have attended for many years, and in which I have produced and presented new theater works on four occasions) to help the company find good audiences at the start of the Edinburgh run. Despite the fierce competition in that Festival, where some 800 productions are packed into a three-week period, the students were well-received and played to full houses.
- In the 1992/93 season, Theatre Project provided the time and space for a second production of Maryland playwright Patricia Plante's "The Lioness of Berry," a solo work performed by Maravene Loeschke. The work, about the life and loves of George Sand, had been presented at Towson State, but both playwright and actress felt that the work could use further development -- and that it could reach other audiences.
- This season, Dr. Loeschke appeared again on-stage at Theatre Project, this time as playwright and director. Her new work, for five Baltimore-based professional actresses, premiered at Theatre Project in February. I was involved in the developmental process of this work from its first draft, and was able to bring a number of our visiting artists to readings of the work during these early stages.

I think that it is critical to note that all of these projects have involved at different stages and different levels, people -- teachers, students, staff, visiting performing artists -- from the whole range of our two institutions. I stress this because I deeply believe that without that range of involvement, the collaboration would not be worth the time and effort we all put into it.

### **What Needs More Work**

On one level, the "repositioning" that I described earlier in this article did work: The collaboration was hailed enthusiastically and genuinely by one and all, and the press coverage was excellent. However, the public attention and approval did not translate into the expanded fundraising opportunities that we had hoped for; nor did it result in a widening of our respective audience bases.

In the matter of fundraising, we were clear from the beginning that this area would be a delicate one. We began by looking at the possibilities of raising funds around very specific joint projects, such as providing stipends for the students during their internships at Theatre Project, or ticket subsidies for students. We began to pursue these efforts seriously when the Provost of the University joined the Theatre Project's Board, specifically to work with us on these kinds of funding projects. However, shortly after making a first step or two, he was tapped to head a major

capital campaign at the University, and that demand on his time and attention made it necessary for him to resign from our Board.

Also in the financial area, we were forced to conclude, after two summers, that our relationship as presenter in Towson State's Maryland Arts Festival was not working to the fiscal benefit of either institution. Despite their unquestioned artistic worth, the works we presented were in many ways somewhat outside the more traditional dramaturgy of the summer Festival, and our efforts to encourage our audiences to venture north to the campus to see these new works bore little fruit. While neither institution perceives of itself as "box office driven" in its mission to present theater, we are agreed that the relationship must not be a financial burden for either.

Overall, I believe that a new approach to marketing and publicity is needed if we are to see a transfer and an extension of our respective audiences. Indeed, it is likely that such an approach will need to focus less on the kind of advertising that mimics commercial theater, and more strongly and consistently on audience education. This is not likely to be accomplished in a season or two.

For both the audience development and fundraising efforts, concentrated, specific, and ongoing campaigns are needed. Each initiative requires, I believe, one passionate, detail-oriented person working full-time to spearhead the work and see it through. At this time, neither of us has the person-power to commit to these particular efforts, so although we have not abandoned these goals, they remain out of reach.

### The Effects of the Collaboration

As this article is written, we continue to work on finding ways for each Theatre Project visiting company to make connections with the students at Towson. I use the vague term "connections," because it is not always possible to schedule studio classes, given the already rigorous schedules that the students juggle daily. Therefore, sometimes, the meetings that take place are simply extensions of performances -- question-and-answer sessions following performances, or at classes the next day.

Theater students at Towson have benefitted tremendously by participating in workshops with Nava Zuckerman, director of TMU-NA Dance Theatre, of Tel Aviv; Paul Clark, a British actor living and working in Holland; The Adaptors, a New York multi-media company; Trina Collins, director of Danceteller, Philadelphia; and many others. Theatre Project's long connection with Dutch theater and dance artists, most recently through The U.S./Netherlands Touring & Exchange Project, has resulted in one Towson graduate's acceptance at the Theater School in Amsterdam. Last season, playwright Edward Albee participated in a seminar with students and faculty after his "American Dream" opened at Theatre Project -- a production mounted by a professional Baltimore company comprised of many Towson State alumni.

This brings me to another result of our collaboration: the formalizing of a season-within-a-season of local residencies at Theatre Project. Both Dr. Loeschke and I share the strong belief that it is crucial to take steps that help make it possible for our young artists to stay in Baltimore and work here as theater professionals.

While Theatre Project seasons have usually included several works by local acting companies, our emphasis in the public eye has always been on the international visiting artists. In the fall of 1991, we moved to formalize the "local residencies," committing one-third of each season to providing time and space for each of three young Baltimore companies to show new work. This means a great deal in a



city where studio space for these new productions is hard to come by, and theater rentals are expensive, and generally not available for the two and three-week residencies that will give a new work its best chance to meet new audiences. It is heartening to note that among these companies, at least 50 percent of the actors, directors, playwrights, designers, and technicians are graduates of Towson State's Department of Theater.

The collaboration brings me the opportunity to be back in touch with students. I am asked to lecture -- usually on the subjects of international theater and opportunities for training and exchange, and on the American avant garde -- to various regular classes taught by the full-time theater faculty. Last year, I taught a course entitled "A Career in the Theater," which I changed to "A Life in the Theater," covering such practical matters as resumes and income taxes, as well as deeper questions of motivation and life goals.

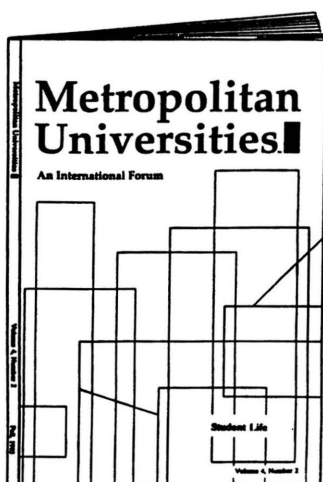
I have been privileged also to be part of the thinking that has gone into the plan for Towson's new graduate degree program in theater, a program that will focus on performance and ensemble training. This focus puts the program in a direct line with the work of the professional companies that Theatre Project presents, and, in the ongoing development of the program, my major responsibility will be to propose and develop special professional training residencies among my own national and international networks of theater artists.

In terms of advice for others contemplating such a collaboration, what my musings and my anecdotes of successes and failures come down to I think, are only a few maxims: be specific; stay focused on the "why's;" be realistic about the commitment of time; keep it simple and direct; keep the collaboration focused on the artistic goals of the projects, and the people involved in those projects.

I would add that it is important to recognize, understand, and accept the different structures and operational styles of the two collaborators. The Theatre Project is still a founder/director organization, and I make the decisions that have to do with artistic projects, what we present, and how we present it. Our style seems very casual compared to the many-layered structures of the University. From the Theatre Project side, we have had to learn how to find the people within the structure of the university to help us use its vast resources. In our large project with *Diablmundo*, for example, despite that residency's well-planned artistic and educational underpinnings, our Argentine visitors would simply have found themselves lost in Towson State's theater had I not already developed a direct relationship with its technical director.

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The differences between us are not barriers to be overcome, it seems to me, but opportunities for the kind of exploration that can make our collaborations stronger and more meaningful in the long run. In the case of Towson State's Department of Theater, surely a central part of the mission of the University is being met through a relationship that enriches theater students and faculty, and reinforces their real and potential connections with an international community of professional artists. As a theater director and producer in a form that often seems threatened with extinction, I am hopeful that our collaboration may prove to be one of the models for survival for noncommercial, untraditional arts organizations in this country.



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