

The Power of Love in Performing Arts During Trying Economic Times

By Ronnee-Sue Helzner, Mountain Aire Folk Music

It is no secret that performing arts are struggling during the current economic crisis. Why do I believe in the power in each of us as human beings to help see the arts through to happier times? Because I've seen and felt the magic of love touch a community arts program.

A loving, caring attitude cannot replace the need for financial resources, facilities, or professional talent. But a genuine (never feigned) love and concern for others has the potential to affect ticket sales, community support, and community health. It has the power to help artists find work. It functions at the individual, group, and community levels.



Individual: Long ago, I visited a faraway place for the first time. It was called the Arts Northwest Booking Conference. I laugh now, to think of my crude portfolio and my naiveté. No one shunned me; all were welcoming, and my professional skills began a lifetime journey of growth, fertilized by the love of others for their craft and for those around them. In workshops by pros such as Eric Tingstad, I learned that for each of us to survive as artists, we must support each other. There is more room for us all when we do so. The mutually-supportive atmosphere of Arts Northwest encouraged everyone's participation.

Each artist brings a unique color and hue to the rainbow of performing arts – without each of us, the rainbow would be lacking in some way. As in so many other businesses, our diversity is our strength. Over the years, it has brought me great joy and strong friendships to have supported, housed, comforted, or otherwise embraced fellow loving artists. What bonds are created! How our lives are enhanced by support to other artists! We become a network for the world to model, with love energy to share with all. While performing at an international festival in Scotland, I saw how arrogant performers were considered by festival organizers. Those who tried to tell others their job or were disrespectful were not likely to be invited back. Loving, kind and appreciative artists were repeat performers.

Performing arts are empirically about connecting with human beings, and most humans prefer Love-based connections rather than those based on ego, status, or other selfish emotions. Love energy can be contagious -- to production organizers, patrons, and perhaps even financial backers. Caring about others counts. Through performing arts, we connect with other individuals. For example, patrons who visit with me after a performance give me a great gift – that I have created a connection across humanity.

Group: A group of people in a community exposed to a loving arts environment, become arts advocates. Consider, for example, my local community's production of "Fiddler on the Roof" which casts both theatrical veterans and novices. I hadn't auditioned for a theatrical production in about twenty years. I had heard good reports of the Director, so mustered my courage. The beautiful energy, kindness from the core, that radiated from the Director and Assistant Director were a gift to me; they looked for the good in me, not my flaws. They gave encouraging feedback of strengths, as if they had entirely missed the errors that were so blatant to me. It was sincere. And it set the tone for the rehearsal weeks.

How could anyone NOT enjoy coming to rehearsal, when you were enveloped by such beautiful and supportive people? And while this was magical at the individual level, the greatest wizardry occurred within the group. The love energy dissipated through each cast member, creating a loving, supportive, and cohesive group. Whether this was a first play or the hundredth, I felt all cast members treating each other with the same loving and caring attitude. We might not even know each others' real names, but we could share hearts and spirit. This was no accident. The Director (an Associate Professor at the local university) knows that in a volunteer community theatre, it is important to be supportive, encouraging and appreciative, while also moving the production on schedule toward opening night. She is cultivating community arts advocates. I find it amazing that the attitudes of the Director) and Music Director were not contrived – that would have been all too transparent. They both genuinely enjoy working with people of all experience levels. Hiring people with this type of attitude and commitment is a strong first step in community arts. In theatre train-

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ing and experience, I have certainly encountered the opposite.

Community: As a result, the community is gaining new arts supporters and fueling old ones, perhaps in new ways. These people will be happy to support future arts endeavors in some manner. And in doing so, they are contributing to their community's health and well-being. Our community of 10-13,000 people has small nonprofit organizations which helps fund local arts productions. Theatre Group New Mexico is devoted to community involvement and financial support for local theatre productions and has partnered with the local university to jointly produce the local spring musical. Friends of the Folk Series is a vehicle for donors to support the local Arts Council's special series of four to five professional touring folk music performances each season, held in a special venue.

Performing arts' connections with health have been long recognized through organizations such as Hospital Audiences, Inc. The connections to individual audience members and audiences as a group can provide emotional releases or validations, provide the spontaneity or uncertainty inherent in live performance – the energy and connections that electronic media cannot provide, yet which sap at potential audiences at every level. Can a film provide a program for schools or retirement communities? Can a computer break down walls to youth-at-risk? Can a patron visit with the artist, or can an artist inspire a patron?

Some people feel good about contributing to community health. This might be one a way for the arts to maintain a hold throughout these economic times. There is no denial that ticket sales and financial backers are essential. Sadly, I heard recently that one New Mexico town is canceling four Broadway-type visiting productions due to finances. Some kind of restructuring is needed, but there is a commitment to continue performing arts in the community. At every level of the arts – from Small town, USA to New York City, the arts are facing serious challenges.

Innovation accompanies financial hardship. While some solutions are based on business strategies and marketing, there is perhaps room for some solutions based on community health. Bringing people together to share an evening of joy, inspiration, laughter, sadness, or “E all of the above” might never appear as an advertising slogan, but might help find philanthropic opportunities. Inspiring people to help others in their community through the arts -- including teaching local people about the magic of performing arts through local theatre and music productions – is a long-term investment. Individuals, groups, and communities benefit from this investment and by interaction with loving, caring people as arts teachers, performers, and advocates.



Come to Boise and join us for the 29th Annual Booking Conference Oct 12-15, 2009! The Grove Hotel, Boise, Idaho, will be the host hotel.

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As a delegate to the Arts Northwest Booking Conference, you will enjoy the ideal blend of business, recreation and elegance with beautifully appointed guest rooms and suites, condos, restaurants and lounges. You will also appreciate the Grove Hotel's location in convenient proximity to the Centre on the Grove Convention Center, where most conference events take place, and to downtown Boise attractions. [Contact the Grove](#) and make your room reservations before Sept.11 for the discount rate of \$109 per night.