

Social Policy

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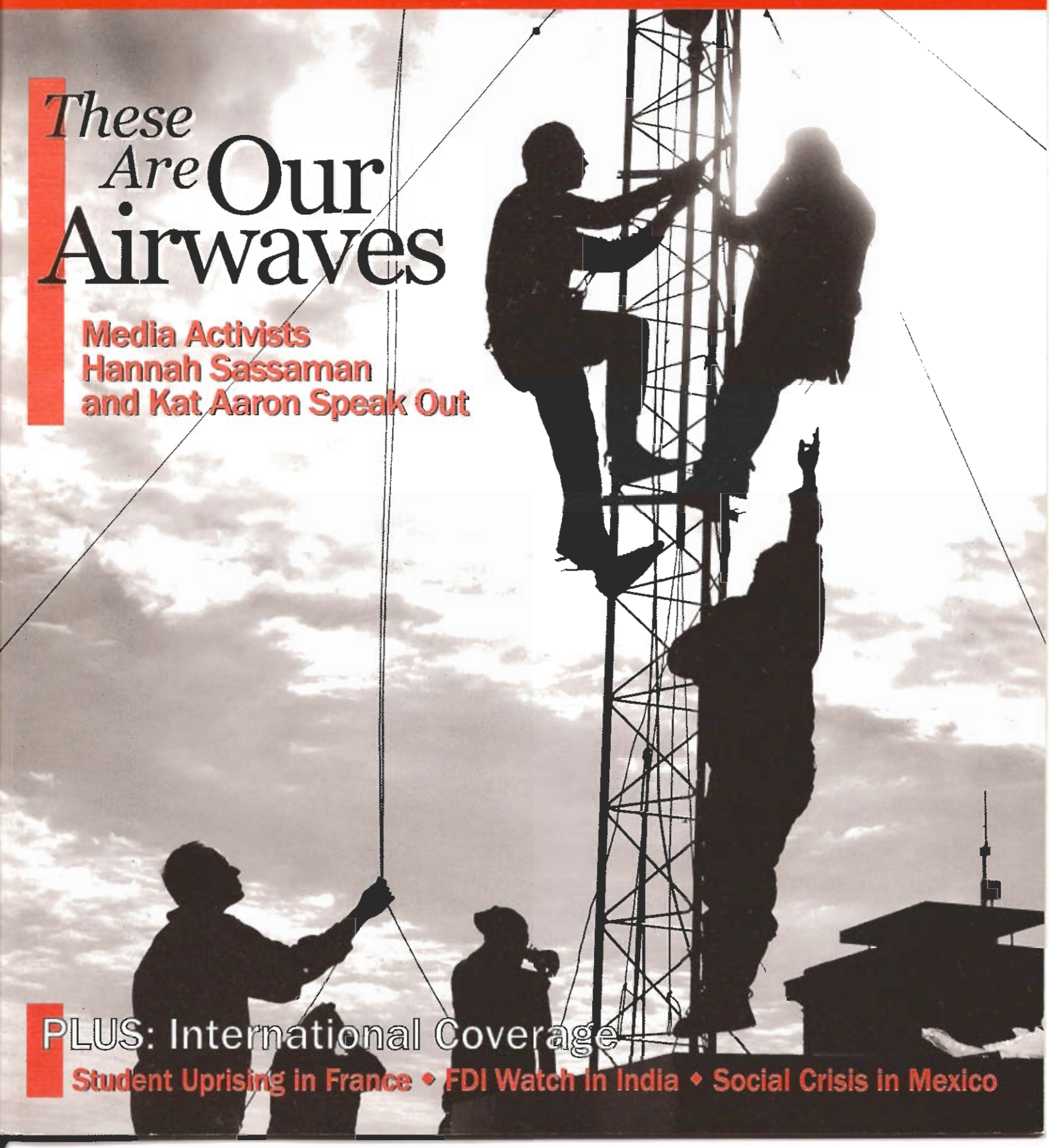
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The New Progressive Theater

By Daniel Ordower and Jeff Ordower

Deepest into 2006 and looking toward midterm elections, progressives know what's at stake, but with a wave of apathy and helplessness rolled over our great population, how can we liberate the American cultural conscience away from messages of intolerance, social injustice, and power-grabbing perpetuated by the Right? The road ahead of us is long, but not necessarily arduous. All revolutions have harnessed a cultural voice; a vibrant artistic voice can not only energize and excite, but communicate the ideas of the struggle as well. It is vital to our movement to renew America's sense of pride in and need for publicly-owned infrastructure, physical as well as cultural, and we must set out now to define what the cultural infrastructure will be.

What better medium to turn to for help and partnership than the inherently grassroots and democratic expression of live theater?

Let us turn for inspiration to 2005, when we eulogized two great artists and progressive minds. The passing of Ossie Davis and Arthur Miller left voids in the hearts and minds of theater artists and progressives around the country. These two men, for half a century or more, expressed the conscience of our nation through their writings and deeds – always questioning society's morals, ethics, and actions while striving for a better world. Mr. Miller and Mr. Davis provoked generations of artists and progressives alike through the synergy of their timeless works of drama and their profound activism. And, like all great men, they were eulogized extensively but briefly in the media, and then promptly forgotten. Let us as progressives and theater artists not forget these two great men, but rather reflect upon their lives as examples to help us come together, and look for strategies to grow a new progressive theater.

There exists a whole new generation of theater artists creating art that tells a good story and expresses a progressive message. These artists need a fresh source of funding independent of stifling government or corporate donations. At this divisive, intolerant time, the progressive movement should find the resources to come together with young theater practitioners to reinvigorate the theater as a vehicle of social and political change and use the power of arts education to encourage an active, well-informed, and critically minded youth. Together we can address both of our needs. We can give the Left the cultural voice it desperately needs while giving artists the progressive voice and funding that has diminished as of late. Through a well-

planned campaign that includes funding small theaters, encouraging theater education in and out of schools, and involving working-class communities in live performances, we can engage a generation of educated, analytical citizens who can affect change to society and ultimately popular mass media and culture to better reflect our ideology.

Progress and Public Spaces

In taking control of the cultural expression of America, the Right distorts the beneficial concept of “publicly owned” or “publicly funded,” into the oft heard “government owned” or “government funded.” Government in their eyes is not “by the people, for the people,” but is its own bloated entity existing solely for self-preservation. The first half of the 20th century, by contrast, saw a growth in the need for public works and culture. There was a collective belief that publicly owned infrastructure, both physical and intangible, was beneficial to the health and growth of the economy and the general population. Roads, subways, and electrical grids were built with government funds. Schools, museums, and theaters were built and financed by local and state governments. And the airwaves were designated as a public commodity to be licensed by the government – the public – to private broadcasters. Infrastructure is built and publicly maintained for the common good and this axiom has been accepted for decades, allowing developed societies to eradicate diseases, advance technology, and grow throughout the world. We recognize that government in its role as administrator of collective needs should provide for basic services, like sanitation, water, sewers, education that allow us to have a productive and growing society.

But, as we provide for the physical growth of our society do we not also have an obligation to provide for the continued mental and cultural growth as well? How can we remain competitive in the global economy without the ability to create and discover? And does this not require a commitment to educating our youth not just through schools, but through establishing the infrastructure to support creativity both artistically and scientifically through museums, theaters, and research that encourage the public ownership of art and ideas?

With the degradation of support for truly creative public works, television, and the privately owned companies that dominate most of the programming, has filled the gap. TV is the perfect method of maintaining a conservative

ideology among a populace. The Right tends to prefer voters who receive only the portion of the truth which supports their view, and they crave a population that is unable to critically analyze all possible angles to a given issue in an open and collective forum. Television is, by nature, a passive and anti-activist medium. People sit in small groups, generally defined by a homogenous family unit, to watch and absorb all the information that comes off the screen. (If you've ever seen a 3-year-old watch the TV, you'll understand just how passive a medium it can be). There is generally **very little** active discussion and there is no interaction required with other people during or after the program. We can turn off the TV and blindly accept whatever information has reached our eyes and ears; it is easy to believe what those good-looking anchors on FOX News are telling us.

That kind of passivity is exactly the response the Right requires to press its faith-based initiatives – not religious faith per se, but faith that the information being filtered via Fox News and the White House is true and **unerring**. Television is the perfect reflection of what the Right wants the power structure of America to look like – a small group of executives determining programming that will be seen by millions of people across the country without recourse to affect change.

Contrary to how the Conservative movement uses culture, the progressive movement values a free and open exchange of ideas, in-depth discussion of issues, and deep personal and community activism to communicate its beliefs. We require a fundamentally different medium to express our concerns and ideas, a medium that brings people together to discuss ideas and experience different viewpoints. As luck would have it, the grassroots, democratic, and creative values that progressives hold so dear are absolutely fundamental to the theater.

The progressive movement has the resources to encourage audience growth and the free expression of ideas through political and social statements within the theater community. Before real **change** can begin, progressives have to realize that the **rise** of television and the Right's championing of decreased funding of all forms of public cultural infrastructure **has** crippled the once solid bastion of left-wing activism in early 20th century theater. The slow erosion of the NEA and public funding for the arts has left the community more reliant on corporate and private donors, who are usually upper-middle class and white.

Feeling the Corporate Crunch

This year, Signature Theater in New York announced one of the largest sponsorships of a non-profit theater by a corporation. AOL Time Warner is underwriting the entire season in an effort by **Signature** to reduce ticket prices. The theater's effort to defray costs is admirable, but comes with an unfortunate side effect.

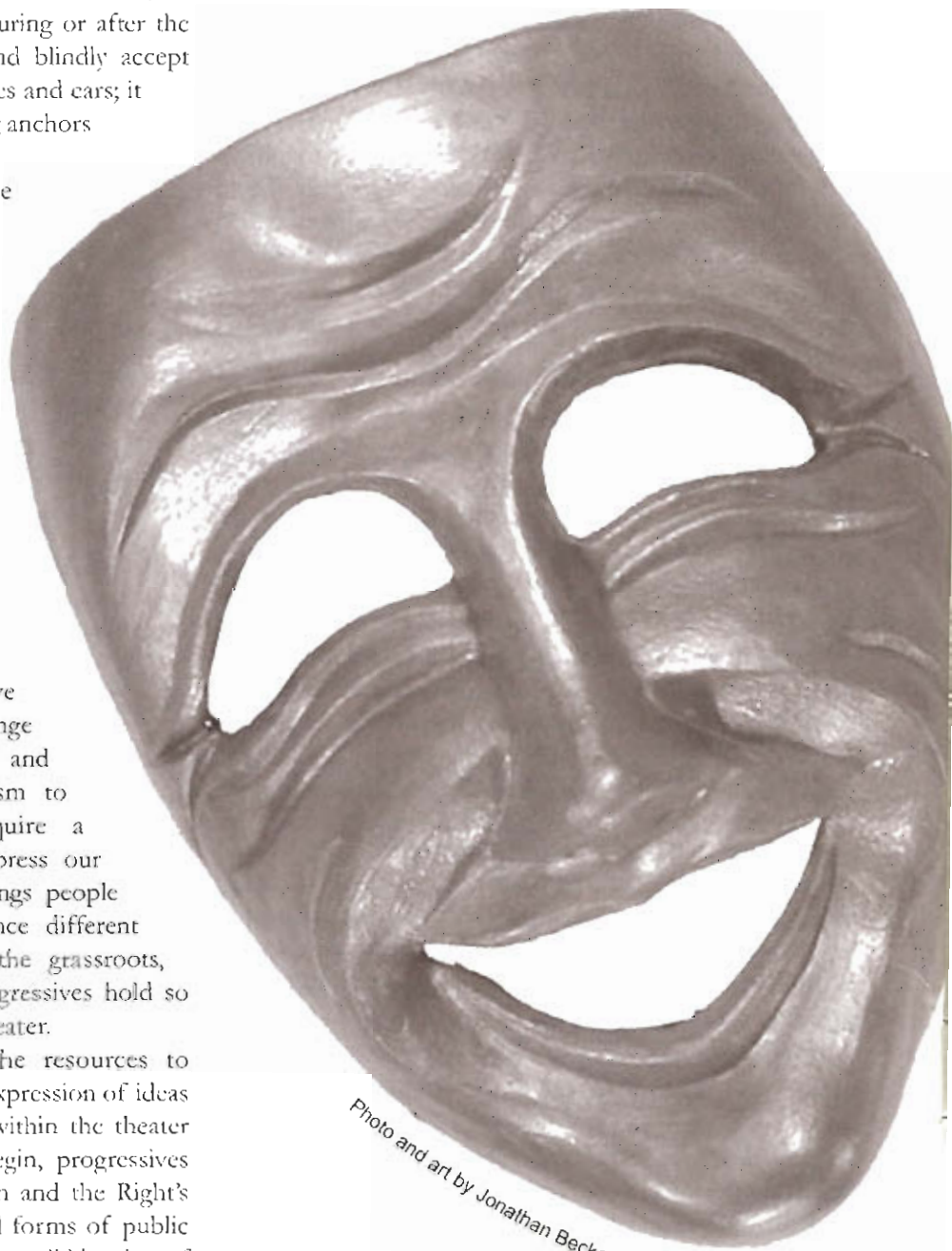


Photo and art by Jonathan Becker www-theater-masks.com

As our arts institutions become more indebted to these sources of funding, their programming slowly changes to reflect those corporate values upon which they now rely. The beauty of public arts funding in the '60s and '70s was that theaters and artists were guaranteed a large portion of their operating costs from year to year. They were essentially public entities owned by the very taxpayers who supported them. Artists were free to explore a multitude of different views without worrying that their work might be at odds with a particular agenda. Theater companies could, in effect, operate without concern for ticket revenues as 60%-70% of their funding came from public funds.

Now, with the elimination of most public funding, major arts institutions can no longer ignore ticket revenue and operate in the red with the safety net of public support.

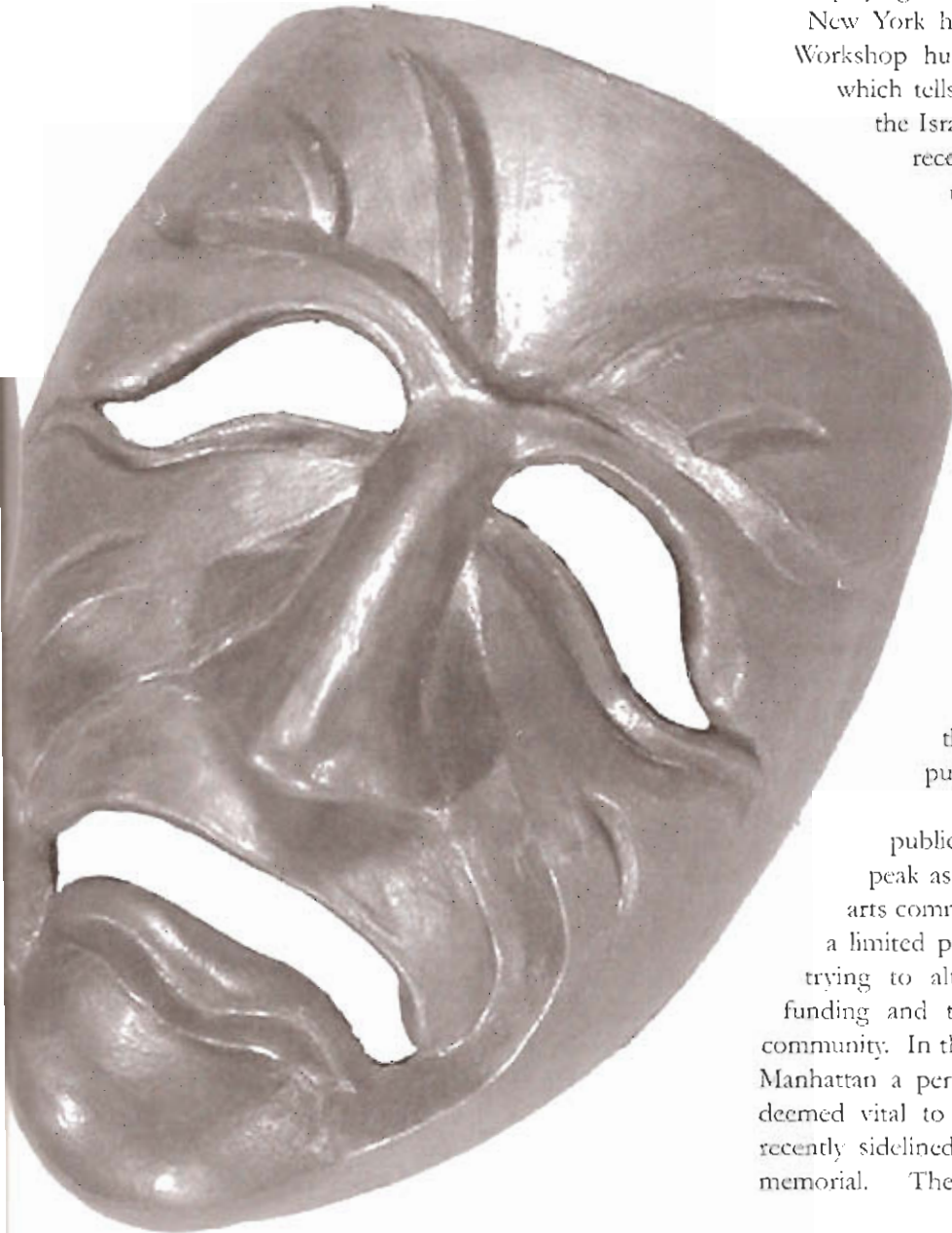
Even museums, those community gems, are feeling the pinch. The Metropolitan Museum of art recently raised its "suggested" entrance fee to \$20, making it very difficult for a middle class family of four to afford the \$80 required to see some of the most beautiful pieces of art ever created. Likewise, the only options theaters have for showing positive revenue streams to their corporate task masters is to sell tickets at exorbitant prices, or cut pay and benefits of the artists and staffs at the theaters.

In addition to seeking out corporate donations, theaters must seek larger private gifts. Unfortunately, the individual donors able to give the large sums of money a theater requires to operate are generally very wealthy and very white. What is most worrisome to progressives and artists is that with the shift to corporate and elite private funding for the arts, regional theaters, museums, public television and radio are moving to more conservative programming; artists playing it safe to avoid controversy and keep funding.

New York has recently seen the New York Theatre Workshop hullabaloo over *My Name is Rachel Corrie* which tells Rachel's story of working and dying in the Israeli occupied West Bank. The Workshop received many concerned phone calls from its

upper class and corporate donors and pulled the show: another casualty in the arts funding wars. In another example, Portland Center Stage three years ago made a bold choice to bring a socially controversial but well-presented production of *The Merchant of Venice* from a small theater in Hungary. Controversy ensued and the following year the theater's programming was much more staid, conservative, and above all risk-free. This is the trend towards a "market-based" programming that we must change to create in the long run a society that values its artistic voice and returns public money to the arts.

Since the real-dollar peak of NEA and public funding of the arts in 1992 (the actual peak as a percentage of GDP was in 1970), the arts community has been fighting over maintaining a limited piece of the shrinking money, instead of trying to alter public perception of government funding and the place of the arts within a stable community. In the plans for the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan a performing arts center had originally been deemed vital to the rebuilding. But those plans were recently sidelined in order to complete the over-budget memorial. The Right has so thoroughly removed any



community pride in the arts and so completely eviscerated public funding that we must begin by changing perceptions before we can expect to receive government funding again.

Now is the perfect time for the theater to turn away from the government and look to the broader progressive movement for guidance and partnership. Groups like ACORN and the large unions like 1199/SEIU, UNITE/HERE, and CWA have begun to bring the progressive movement back to a grassroots level. It's time for the arts community to look to that grassroots model by directing its resources away from fighting over limited government funding sources to foster new grassroots and alternate sources of income. Some groups are already experimenting with this type of funding on a limited scale. Equality Now and the National Immigration Forum have already commissioned pieces by monologist Sarah Jones of *Bridge and Tunnel*. A new alliance that combines member-run grassroots organizations and unions with the young, under-funded and still vibrant theater community can be mutually beneficial to all parties.

Why Theater?

Why are we talking about theater instead of all the other arts? Theater is the most grassroots, democratic, and community-based art form. It requires real people coming together face to face in small groups, some as collaborators to create and perform the art, and others as an audience to watch, respond, and critique the performance. Theater artists and producers constantly bemoan the death of theater. "It is just blue-hairs, no young people ever come to the shows, theater is dying." But theater has always existed and will continue to exist. From reciting oral histories and stories about the hunt around the campfire to the Greek tragedies and comedies to the Passion Plays in the town square to Shakespeare to the Fringe Festivals to the Spoken Word, theater has always allowed us to express ourselves to our family, friends, and neighbors. It is about our need to come together as a community and tell and re-tell our stories. It takes nothing more than a tale, a group of performers, and an audience to make theater happen. A nine-year-old telling a ghost story on a camping trip is just as much theater as the Broadway stage. And, theater is still vibrant all around the world. When restrictions were lifted after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, The National Theater was one of the first cultural institutions revived. The outpouring of theater, art, and culture at the recent World Social Forums in Brazil and Venezuela was inspiring. From anti-globalization movements to union organizing drives to grassroots community direct actions, guerrilla theater is the norm, rather than the exception.

Yet, despite this burgeoning activity, the perception is that in the United States the "theater is dying" complaint is

valid – we do not demand enough from our permanent, professional theater companies, so the work remains stale. Only old white people come to the "theatre." Both the theater community and the progressive movement can take responsibility for this sorry state of affairs. Instead of building and developing this latent art form that exists in a raw form in the streets, we've focused on maintaining an elite-funded tower of "Culture." Instead of opening up the doors of our great theaters to new and youthful work that the young can enjoy, we have allowed them to become engrossed in the most passive form of culture – television.

Theater is grassroots and community based. The message in a piece of theater can be targeted to exactly the

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audience you have. Unlike television, which must be programmed for millions of people at a time, a play can be told directly to a specific group or community. This is exactly what grassroots organizing campaigns are about, talking to individual people, making them feel necessary, and talking with them about the whole story.

Progressive and populist movements for social justice and political change are based on face-to-face interactions, harnessing anger and moving people to action. As any organizer knows, we can best affect a person when breathing the same air as her, when we let them affect us as

well. This is the core of the grassroots philosophy and it is exactly this visceral experience that drives the theater. This need for personal face-to-face interactions is precisely what keeps the Internet and left-wing talk shows from achieving a significant enough cultural contribution. It is difficult to read tone of voice in an email or on a blog. True, the blogosphere has exploded recently, and has become a powerful tool on both the Left and the Right, but blogs can only react to art and culture. They cannot create and they do not on their own have the power to get people out of their houses and active. Attending, producing, and performing in theater helps nurture and develop interpersonal, change-making skills, making it vital that progressive organizations commit to developing theater among the constituencies we are trying to reach. Theater is suffering in America right now because it is influenced by television and other mass media, and it is too expensive for the young and working class to attend. Our goal must be to bring the youth of America into the theaters. Because wherever youth is, popular culture follows.

As a practical matter, theater is a perfect medium for the progressive movement because it is cost-effective, local and can quickly respond to changing times. The development process is short and inexpensive compared to multi-million-dollar films and television programs. And, perhaps most importantly to our purposes, theater has the benefit of many small companies throughout the country that are not yet reliant on corporate America, many of which are not just made up of the usual homogenous starving artist types, but young, dynamic companies with a diverse range of races, ethnicities and even languages. These are the companies the progressive movement must actively court, fund, and ultimately thrust into mainstream consciousness.

A New Vision

Our approach to funding the New Progressive Theater is very simple. The progressive movement, through organizations such as SEIU and UNITE/HERE, member-based organizations like ACORN and grassroots structure like the Working Families Party should start funding small and energetic theater companies throughout the country. Collectively, these large organizations have the resources to reduce theater's reliance on corporate and wealthy private donors and create the cultural voice of the movement by rebuilding an infrastructure that encourages writers, directors, and producers to develop works about social justice. An amount as insignificant as \$1000 can start the development of a piece of political or social drama through a playwright's commission, which could include time spent with the union's or organization's membership to listen to their individual stories – perhaps incorporating those stories into the play.

As long as the theater companies remain independent of the underwriting organizations, the groups can continue to seek additional funding from private donors, especially left-leaning donors who would not have otherwise considered giving to a small theater company.

\$50,000 to \$100,000 can fund a small theater company in New York for an entire year to develop and produce that play, and half that amount can fund a small company in an even more important place like St. Louis or Wichita. The underwriting of a production would include the stipulation that the union's or organization's members could see the production with a free or deeply discounted ticket. In New York alone, 1199/SEIU's membership would allow for a sold-out run at a Broadway house for THIRTY weeks! This is a huge and untapped audience base for which any theater mall and widely traveled, works that are developed in one city can easily move to another city where funding is in place. We put forth a vision of a Progressive theater circuit for the twenty-first century. A body of work and a group of artists funded and encouraged by the Left, producing plays and musicals about social change and economic justice for an incredibly under-served audience.

In return for the funding, the theater troupes will give back to the organizations in a variety of ways. First, we must bring a new generation of artists into the community by sponsoring a dynamic theater education. The Guggenheim Foundation recently released a study that suggested that arts education improves literacy skills. Arts education is about creating a new generation that will have the skills for analytic, evaluative, and critical thinking – if American youth grow knowing how to interpret a play or a painting, they're better prepared to look critically at CIA Intelligence and White House spin.

With a theater program starting in elementary school, companies can encourage children to write and perform plays about subjects that interest them – not just skits by dead white men (no offense to Mr. Miller). Allowing hip-hop, rap, and urban and multi-lingual sensibilities to pervade the work that they do, kids will connect creativity to their own lives and experiences. The real value of a theater education lies in letting every child feel her voice is valid and deserves to be heard, an empowering feeling they'll carry with them into adulthood. If you go to see a performance at the 52nd Street Project in New York City you will see a group of kids who never thought much of themselves or their lives come alive with a sparkle and vitality when they get up in front of an audience. Yet, too many of these projects are struggling to keep their funding. By investing in these programs, we have the opportunity to shape a new generation of confident activists who speak for themselves and demand what they believe is right. Wouldn't it be nice to have a group of young adults engaged in programs that encourage tolerance, education, and economic justice instead of watching people eat live maggots for a million dollars?

Second, it's time to make a concerted effort to pick up and continue the work of Moe Foner and Ossie Davis, who, in collaboration with 1199/SEIU New York, Ruby Dee, Pete Seeger and Shari Lewis, led Saturday morning children's workshops and involved rank and file members in inspiring theatrical productions (see Foner's book, *Not For Bread Alone*). Funding can be set aside to bring theater companies into the union halls and build performing troupes within union membership. Two or three months a year, members and their children can gather on the weekends, and under the guidance of young theater professionals, write and produce their own stories. It's a fun and simple way to generate a sense of pride within the membership while building a sense of camaraderie in one's own community. Again, we're not talking about traditional staid theater here. Performances that incorporate spoken word, hip-hop, and multiple languages in many cases can (and should!) be part of the new standard here.

Third, community organizations and labor unions desperately need cultural life to invigorate their work. We need union halls and organizational offices not merely to be drab places of business, social service delivery, or, best case scenario, also offer up a beer or two. We want our union halls, community buildings and neighborhood centers to be dynamic places where people want to come; not just because they received three "turnout" calls, but because it is also a place where they can find their voice, learn some skills and have a great time. Most good leadership development or campaign ideas are not hatched in a formal setting, but because smart, dynamic people are gathered together. We need these gatherings more frequently and our offices

should overflow with creativity, verve, and vitality.

Finally, organizers should tap into the skills of the artists they fund. Most directors and actors have extensive training in public speaking, camera work, and writing. They are also amazing students of human behavior and socializing. Artists can help coach members and organizers on how to write and deliver a moving speech, how to speak into a camera or at a debate, and how to get people to stop and listen. Let the artists, rather than "communications professionals" or consultants, share communication skills with an often under-educated membership. It's a relationship that has never really been explored, but should be.

This proposal is by no means a short-term, quick results action. The theater community in America has been, in many ways, stripped of its sense of social worth. But the theater was once, and can, with the help and partnership of the progressive movement, be a medium of ideas and change. It will take some time to reinvigorate the community. It will take time for the spirit of youth and the heroism of the rank and file to seep into the theater in non-traditional forms. The progressive movement is in a position now to regroup and think long-range, and the artists are poised and ready to go.

All it requires is a little patience, a little money, and a lot of vision.

Daniel Ordover is a lighting designer based in New York and a member of United Scenic Artists Local 829 of LATSE. He can be reached at daniel@ordover.com. Jeff Ordover is the Midwest Regional Director for ACORN and can be reached at fieldrdm@acorn.org.