

ART/NY Local Heroes Award Ceremony
September 16, 2013
Kate Levin Keynote Address

Good evening.

Congratulations to Ginny and her team for another wonderful event, and to all of the recipients of Local Hero Awards. Many thanks, as always, to Councilmember Van Bramer for his leadership, and to my terrific colleague Commissioner Rob Walsh.

I'm particularly delighted to recognize Rob's wonderful work, because he's done so much to include cultural organizations as members of the small business sector. Curtain Call is so special because it highlights the partnerships between the commercial and non-profit parts of this sector. I'm here to talk about another set of relationships with the same goal – the partnership between the public and private sectors.

Now, I've had the great pleasure of attending a number of Curtain Calls over the years, and have been dazzled and enlightened by previous keynote speakers. Hearing some of the greatest artists working in theater today deliver expressions of extraordinary creative intelligence is a transformative experience.

This is not going to be that kind of experience.

Remember, I'm from the government. And, while I'm here to help, I'll be lucky if this comes off as a Ballad of Civic and Cultural Interdependency. (All you *Three Penny Opera* fans will know just how much fun you're missing...)

Under Mayor Bloomberg's leadership, my agency is currently the largest single arts funder in the U.S., I want to be sure you know how that came about, what you and your colleagues look like through the lens of local government, and maybe even a few things that might help or inform what you do on a daily basis in my theater.

Let me start with some history about the relationship of the City to non-profit culture – a relationship that for two centuries and counting has negotiated among competing and complementary dynamics of creativity, economics, and civic prestige.

The oldest extant cultural institution in the City, the New-York Historical Society, was founded in 1804 out of concern that Boston was claiming too much credit for the American Revolution. In essence, it was created as a civic middle finger to New England, and an assertion of New York City's importance and aspirations.

Later in that century, New York began importing culture as a way of affirming its growing economic preeminence. In 1869, a group of citizens came to the government with a deeply innovative deal: they would create a collection for public display if the City would build a building to house it.

That compact gave birth to the American Museum of Natural History, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art followed a year later. The land and buildings belong to the City of New

York; the programming and governance are the responsibility of private non-profit corporations.

Another major moment in the City's relationship to culture was the groundbreaking for Lincoln Center in 1959. The idea of a cultural campus has since been replicated around the world. The major *local* significance of Lincoln Center was to assert the value of the arts as a tool for urban renewal.

This forward-looking development was counterpoised with a growing impulse towards historic preservation, which brought a number of pre-existing organizations into the City's portfolio. In 1952, the Brooklyn Academy of Music was purchased by the City. Eight years later, Carnegie Hall was bought by the City at the last minute to save it from demolition. Snug Harbor on Staten Island was on the first-ever docket of buildings designated by the City's new Landmarks Commission in 1965, and repurposed as a cultural center.

Meanwhile, a new generation of artists with an evolving sense of the relationship between culture and society led to the creation of new theaters Off Broadway and Off Off Broadway, including La Mama and Roundabout.

These events dovetailed with another emerging trend. By the late 1960s, in an effort to address civic unrest and provide viable alternatives to violence, government dollars were directed to summer programs. The most successful of these were often community-based arts activities. The market for culture, in the context of social justice and education, was shifting in powerful, if not always coherent ways.

In 1974, the direct relationship of the arts and economics was asserted when the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey published the first-ever assessment of the economic impact of culture in the tri-state area, which it pegged at \$4 billion. What seems obvious to us now was major news at the time. The City's cultural funding function, which had been housed in the Parks Department for over a decade, was increasingly looking to go beyond arts programming taking place on parkland – and now there was a strong economic rationale for government support for culture.

So in 1976, the Department of Cultural Affairs was created as an independent City agency. You might say that it rose – Aphrodite-like – on the foam of economic analysis. But as I've tried to suggest, much of the buoyancy derived from a long linkage between many powerful civic forces.

The most important of these is that non-profit cultural organizations provide meaningful public service to our City.

Accordingly, we are responsible for stewarding public dollars for programming and capital improvements at cultural nonprofits across the five boroughs. This occurs through several funding streams and programs.

First, our Cultural Development Fund gives public service grants for programming at not-for-profit organizations in all arts disciplines. The City has an estimated 1200 nonprofit arts organizations; we get applications from about 1,100 groups, of which we fund around 80%,

or 900 organizations, on an annual basis. This, as many of you know, is among the highest rates of any funder in the field.

But enough about us. Let's talk about you.

It's no coincidence that New York is known as a theater town: theater is the single largest discipline category in our applicant pool. Almost one quarter of our applicants (23%) are theaters, and a similar proportion of our funded organizations (24%) are theaters. And that doesn't even include funded organizations that do theater and other performing arts programming—places like HERE Arts Center and St. Ann's Warehouse, the Irondale Center and Thalia Spanish Theater.

Of the 246 theater applicants last year, including 160 ART/NY members, one third – 82 groups— have budgets under \$100,000, and just more than half – 52%— have budgets under \$250,000. Our average CDF award size for theater groups was \$29,000.

Annually, another 100 emerging arts organizations and 260 individual artists receive regrant support through funds we provide to local arts councils in all five boroughs.

In addition to this programming support, our Institutions Unit manages City funding for operations and energy at 33 City-owned organizations, of which two are theaters and 6 others regularly produce and present theater.

Our third funding pool, our Capital Unit, supports renovations, equipment purchases, and new construction for arts organizations. We will spend \$685 million over the next 4 years on 427 projects at 198 organizations, from building new buildings to fixing old boilers. Yes, I am the Queen of Cultural Plumbing. Theater projects in the pipeline include a new home for Theater for A New Audience and expanded theater facilities for BRIC that will open next month in the Downtown Brooklyn Cultural District; renovation of office and artist studio space at Pregones Theater; and purchasing lighting systems for Playwrights' Horizons and Abingdon Theater.

We are convening tonight in a recently completed City funded project, which increased Signature Theater's footprint from one to three theaters, designed by a world-class architect. The Pershing Square Signature Center has become a vibrant hub on Manhattan's far West Side where audiences can see great art at affordable prices. The public can also come during the day to get a snack from the concession stand or use the bathrooms. (As Queen of cultural plumbing I am ever watchful over my realm.) And theater companies can rent space. Tonight's program is a great example of some of the purposes for which our investment was intended.

DCA also manages several city-wide programs. These include the City's permanent public art commissioning program, Percent for Art, which uses one percent of the budgets for eligible city capital projects for public art. For example, visitors to the renovated Public Theater are now greeted by Ben Rubin's *Shakespeare Machine*, a kinetic chandelier installation suspended above the lobby bar.

And we run what I – modestly – think of as one of the coolest programs in the City called Materials for the Arts. Founded in 1978, MFTA is the City’s largest reuse program, providing softly used goods and art supplies donated by individuals and businesses to nonprofit arts groups and the Public School system, free of charge. Many of your companies have gotten set pieces or office supplies from MFTA. If anyone is mounting a marine or disco-themed production, there are currently several hundred plastic lobsters and roller skates in the warehouse donated by the Broadway production of *The Little Mermaid*, so be sure to sign up for shopping days on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Looking beyond the lobsters, though, the sheer diversity of the City’s non-profit cultural community can pose a major challenge in creating a consensus around public funding.

Remember that a key role of government is to provide standardized services. I want my garbage picked up as frequently as yours. But almost by definition, culture is valuable to the degree that it is unique and un-standard.

In addition, unlike policing and paving the streets, the benefits of culture are not always tangible. We never really know for sure – and certainly not in advance – what we’re getting in return for the taxpayers’ investment. By comparison, for X number of dollars, the Health Department can immunize Y number of children.

Even City agencies whose impacts are more diffuse can measure efficiency. For example, the Parks Department looks at how clean their public bathrooms are as a measure of effective service delivery.

But art is, of course, different. At its best, it creates ineffable experiences. It’s illogical, it’s beautiful, it’s transforming. How do you measure imagination? How do you decide how much is enough?

The simple answer is: you can’t. But there other ways to make the case for public support for the arts.

For example, 40% of the arts organizations we fund offer cultural activities that are essentially human services – in areas like health, workforce development and education, serving senior citizens, immigrant communities and people with disabilities.

Culture is a central reason people come to New York and stay here to live, to work, to go to school, to play. They certainly didn’t come here for the traffic....(Which, by the way, is something we measure the hell out of – and I encourage you to check out the “daily pothole” on the City’s website for repair updates).

Last year, almost half of the City’s record-breaking 52 million visitors came explicitly for cultural activities – including taking in a Broadway, Off-Broadway or Off Off Broadway production. Indeed, tourism is New York City’s second largest industry – following the financial industry – and non-profit culture is the backbone of tourism, helping to create over 320,000 hospitality jobs.

Broadway contributes \$11B to the economy and last year attracted 11.75 million attendees. Off Broadway contributes \$96M to the economy and attracted an estimated 2.6 million audiences last season.

Of course, the relationship between nonprofit and for profit culture is notoriously porous: last year, 16 out of the 26 Tony-nominated productions originated at nonprofit theaters.

And beyond tourism--and Tony's--nonprofit theater has other important benefits for the City's bottom line.

We know a lot about these benefits from the latest statistics in the Cultural Data Project (CDP), a powerful tool allowing arts groups to monitor their fiscal health and also serves as a resource for advocacy and research.

According to CDP, nonprofit theaters citywide employ more than 13,000 full time and part time workers.

Theaters spend approximately \$650M each year. Which includes:

Nearly \$250M in total salaries with fringe, and \$28M on advertising and marketing

You spend more on postage and shipping (\$1.7M) than you do on catering and hospitality (\$1.3M)

And more on printing (\$2.5M) than on your phone bills (\$2.1M)
You spend \$31M on rent and \$16M on utilities.

You create myriad jobs and support a variety of local businesses in the City. As I'm sure our Local Heroes can attest.

We encourage all of you to utilize the CDP, because these types of data sets are important examples of how the arts impact communities, and help us to promote and support you.

In fact, we are always seeking ways to vouch for your value.

DCA is one of the most progressive arts funders considering the range of applications we receive and our high funding rate. To keep it that way, we have to be able to demonstrate the impact of public investment in your services.

Economic arguments will always be the low-hanging fruit in this area because they include dollars and cents. But we all know that these numbers don't touch on much of what is profoundly valuable about the arts. And, remember, the City's rationale for funding non-profit culture is because this sector provides "public service." So I urge you to keep thinking, individually and collectively, about how to make the case for the value of the service you provide.

I know this kind of request can raise hackles. Making art, and making your organizations function, are enormous challenges. On top of that, being asked to justify – and specifically, to quantify – your existence can seem overwhelming; even insulting. But when we're all on

the side of the angels, the size of the pin's head and the optimal number for dancing on it become legitimate – even worthwhile – questions in a world of limited resources.

Here's a suggestion. Start at home. Start with your mission statement. Believe me, I know how bureaucratic that sounds. And I can assure you that all of us at DCA get that in fact most cultural organizations are acts of passion. But once you institutionalize, you can't expect your stakeholders to relive your creation myth in real time every time a decision gets made about whether or how to support you. You need to frame your offerings and identity as specific and distinct.

Super-smart, evolved, enlightened people often ask me – politely – whether this field is too bloated. Whether it should be pruned, rationalized, restructured, downsized. At the core of these questions is a stark fact: non-profit theater as a discipline still isn't widely perceived as being internally differentiated. Your role as an incubator of talent and ideas in sporadic relation to the marketplace isn't sufficiently understood.

I'm not suggesting you promote yourselves as analogous to the R+D sector in science. No productions get thrown out for failure to titrate; you are not *drosophila* who haven't mutated as expected.

But you *are* professional storytellers – some of the greatest in the world. That's why I implore you to evaluate your missions, your services, your audiences. Write and rewrite your elevator speeches. Learn how to tell your story so that you can stand out to your artists, funders, and patrons. And in turn help us to make the case for you – individually, and collectively.

ART/NY is an invaluable ally in this effort. We look to Ginny and her team all the time for guidance about the issues that affect you, and the ways government can respond productively.

For example, space is more difficult to come by in New York City now than it was in the 1960s. Fifty years ago there were more opportunities to take over under-used and abandoned buildings in marginal neighborhoods and convert them into theaters. That's why we've partnered with ART/New York on several projects to create rehearsal studios for theater groups and spaces to support day to day operations.

In 2000 we supported the **South Oxford Space** which boasts 20 offices and 3 rehearsal studios in the Downtown Brooklyn Cultural District.

We also funded ART/NY's **Spaces at 520**, which has 22 offices and 5 shared studios at 520 Eighth Avenue.

And we are currently funding the construction of “**A.R.T./New York Theatres**” in the Archstone Clinton residential high rise on 10th Avenue. The Toshiko Mori-designed project will create two flexible theatre spaces to be, made available at subsidized rental rates. The building also includes spaces for the 52nd Street Project and soon MCC Theater.

In addition to numerous projects that include rehearsal space, we have also worked with private partners to create Spaceworks in 2011. This is an independent nonprofit real estate company dedicated to expanding the supply of long-term, affordable rehearsal and studio space for artists in New York City. Just last month I joined Mayor Bloomberg to cut the ribbon on the pilot site for performing artists in Long Island City which houses three large rehearsal spaces for theater and dance and one music practice studio. Spaceworks is also piloting a site for visual artists in Gowanus, Brooklyn, which includes two visual art studios. Information about how to sign up for rehearsal and studio space can be found by visiting [spaceworksnyc \(dot\) org](http://spaceworksnyc.org).

These public private partnerships, and all of our other investments, were the product of successful advocacy and an understanding on the part of a variety of stakeholders about the value of artists, and organizations that bring them together with audiences.

Economics isn't the only benchmark to understand your value, but you have to keep pushing to define what success looks like for you and for the theater community.

In the meantime, you continue to excite, engage, gratify, amuse, and astound me, my colleagues, and New Yorkers with the work you do. I can only offer two things in exchange for all you provide. First, my profound admiration and thanks. And second, when you go out to the reception tonight, I beseech you to check out the bathrooms...

Have a wonderful evening.