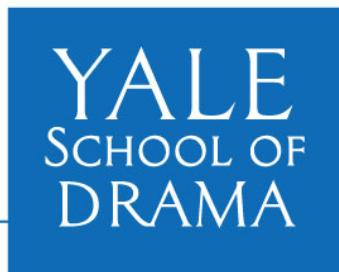


Theater Management Knowledge Base

Interview



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CLOSING MILWAUKEE SHAKESPEARE A CONVERSATION WITH CARRIE VAN HALLGREEN 2009

Carrie Van Deest-Van Hallgren (Theater Management '06) is the former managing director of Milwaukee Shakespeare. After some financial difficulties, Milwaukee Shakespeare closed in 2008. We thought the story of Milwaukee Shakespeare resonated as theaters struggle with new financial problems. We spoke to Carrie about her experience and the story of Milwaukee Shakespeare.

—Rebecca M. Rindler

How did Milwaukee Shakespeare begin?

The story of Milwaukee Shakespeare as an organization starts in 2000 when it was founded by a philanthropist named Chris Abele. Chris had been living in Milwaukee for some time, and while Milwaukee has a fantastic theater community, he was a Shakespeare devotee. There was no one company producing only Shakespeare. So he founded one.

A classmate of his at Lawrence University had graduated with an MFA in acting from University of Illinois, and together they formed Milwaukee Shakespeare. It became a 501(c)3 in 2001.

How many shows was the company producing, and what were its priorities at that time?

The company did three plays a year, casting mainly from the Milwaukee pool of actors. Chris really wanted to see the work improve quickly. He was

looking to attract more national talent. In 2003, Paula Suozzi came on as artistic director and she was given the directive to bring the quality of the productions to a national level. She started recruiting designers, directors, and actors from across the country. Chris increased his contribution so that the company could hire more Equity actors and higher profile directors. The art came first. What Chris wanted to see was really great work so at that time there was little focus on marketing or development.

How did you join the company? What were some of the key challenges you faced when you started?

After the company's previous managing director announced that he was leaving in 2004, the board invited me to apply. I had served on the board for a brief time when the company was in its infancy. I joined the company in the summer of 2006 after graduating from YSD. When I took the job, my

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immediate objective was to ramp up marketing and development and start to wean the company from Chris Abele's support. At the time, he was providing over 90 percent of the operating budget.

We faced a number of other obstacles. Milwaukee Shakespeare didn't own a performing space. We were working in a small studio theater when I arrived in 2006. We rented it along with several other theater companies in town. Because we came into the rental agreement later than the others, we always ended up with the least desirable performance dates. We only could do two of our three plays there, so we found another theater space in the suburbs to do our third production. When I came in, these spaces were all new so we were trying to educate our audiences about where we were going, all the while changing the way we were produced to fit these spaces. So we worked hard to create an identity in the arts marketplace and raise more money.

Were you able to make progress on these priorities?

We started to ramp up ticket sales and fundraising. When I arrived in 2006, we had a board of nine. When the company closed, we had a board of 18. We doubled, then tripled our outside foundation support, doubled our income from individual donations. We increased our ticket sales – single tickets and subscriptions.

By 2008, Chris Abele was providing 74% of the company's operating funds through his family's foundation, the Argosy Foundation. It was a constant struggle to make that number lower because the perception in the community was "this is Chris Abele's company and he'll continue to fund it no matter what. So we'll support other companies because they need our money more than Milwaukee Shakespeare." Chris stepped down as board president in 2007, but he remained on the board and involved. I think many board members settled in by believing that Chris would continue to support the company at high levels.

Our budget was approved for the 2008-2009

season. We went forward. We started the season. Our reputation on the local and national level was excellent, and we had a nice operating cash reserve because our past two seasons had ended in surplus. We had just been admitted as a member of the United Performing Arts Fund, Milwaukee's "United Way" for arts groups. For the first time, we were receiving funds from the state of Wisconsin. We had been awarded our third consecutive grant from the NEA. Our first production opened to great acclaim and sold out in its final weeks.

How did the crisis develop?

About the time we would expect the first installment of the check from the Argosy Foundation, Chris called Paula to say that with the condition of the stock market, the money that Argosy had available to grant this year was substantially decreased and they were not going to fund Milwaukee Shakespeare in any way.

That must have been quite a shock.

It was. It was definitely a shock, but I won't say that it wasn't something I had always feared. It was always in the back of my mind and in Paula's mind. We were in a race against time to diversify our operating support. We knew that if something happened to the Argosy funding or if Chris changed his priorities, we would be in trouble.

But we had never expected it to happen mid-season. If it were to happen, I had assumed that we would get some warning from the Argosy Foundation or from Chris. Then all of us, staff and board, would be forced to plan, to see if we could continue without the funds, or to reorganize the company in a way that would allow us to survive without them.

Chris called Paula with this news on a Friday. She immediately called me and our board chair. At that time, I was working part time. I had already resigned from the company in the spring, so not only were we mid-season, the board was actually in the middle of a search for a new managing director with an executive search firm.

What were the initial reactions?

Paula sat down with the board chair who had already talked with Chris. Everybody's instinct was on that day was, "All right, we're done." It was a \$950,000 grant that we were expecting. How could we possibly raise that in this financial climate?

The board chair told us to run numbers and see how long we could continue paying people. His priority was to pay the full time staff until they could find new jobs. On Monday morning, we called an emergency meeting of the staff. The board chair was there and delivered the news to the staff. The message was "We are going to close the company. We can pay you through December. We'd like you to work essentially part time to help us close the company down, but know that you can take whatever time that you need out of your day to do interviews, work on your resume."

Next, we got on a conference call with the board and the chair delivered the news. A lot of the board members were in shock. Chris, though still on the board, was not on that call. Chris, I suspect, was stunned himself about what had happened. There were other organizations getting similar news that day, so Chris was dealing with all of that as well.

A couple of members of the board said, "Why don't we get together and talk about this? We should not vote to dissolve the company on a conference call." So the board convened at 6:00 that evening. Staff was invited.

What happened at that meeting?

That night at the meeting, Paula read a letter from Stephen Fried ('05 DRA), who was to direct *Henry V* in two months. It was a plea for the board to save the company. He talked about how important Milwaukee Shakespeare was to the field, to classical theatre. The board chair wanted to hear what the staff was thinking and then the room was cleared and the board continued to deliberate. After about 30 minutes, they called us back in to the room and said they had decided unanimously to dissolve the company.

How did you proceed?

We went away to start closing things down as best we could. Because of our budget surplus, we had enough money that we could pay off our creditors. Then we went through the process of calling all the actors who'd been cast for the next two plays and saying, "Sorry, we are closing." I realized at that point how far-reaching the effects would be.

What were the effects?

We had twenty-some actors who hadn't taken other offers because they were committed to doing our work. We had probably five or six Equity actors who were going to lose their health insurance coverage because they no longer had enough employment weeks. Stitchers, painters and craftsmen were not going to have work. We were pulling out of two rental contracts which we had with two nonprofit organizations who would have to make their budgets balance without that income.

Not to mention the seven full time staff people who were now trying to find jobs. The landlords for our office space were suddenly without tenants. We had most of our student matinees booked for *Henry V* and *Othello*, so a lot of students now had these in their curriculum, but no play to see.

How do you view the decision in retrospect?

That we lost the funding was a shock, it was sad, and it was hard, but the Argosy Foundation is a foundation that has its own priorities. They were hit hard like a lot of foundations this fall. But as I look back, the most regrettable part of the experience was the very quick decision to close the organization down.

I don't blame our board of directors for making the decision that they did. It's a risky time and they were liable for everything that was left, for bills that were left unpaid, for payroll taxes left unpaid. I just think, looking back, instead of deciding on reflex to close the company, we should have taken a step back, looked at the company's financial position, made some phone calls, explored some options, and then made the choice.

If you were to give any advice to someone else who might be in a similar position, what would that be? Would it pertain mostly to the board and relations with the board?

One thing would be to do absolutely everything in the most ethical, above board way as an executive. When your company is dissolving, that's when the books are open. That's when people ask the questions they never thought to ask before. Keep everything as clean and as ethical and as honest and up front and straightforward as you can.

If I ever consider a managing director job again, I will certainly get to know the board before I take it. I will talk with board members candidly to really get a sense of the board's vibe, their commitment to and their understanding of the organization.

I don't believe that every company should live forever and sometimes the circumstances are such that dissolution is the most responsible thing to do. But you want a group of people making that decision who are really, really committed and have a stake in the company. I think because of our situation with a primary funder and founder always at the table, it was easy for the board to sit back—everything seemed to be working fine. There was plenty of money.

What was the response from members of the artistic community? The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* suggested that some valuable artists might leave that state - do you think that's true?

I think that is true. The impact on the artists – there was a lot of anger and a lot of sorrow. For the first week after the announcement, it seemed like we were a counseling center. Actors and designers were calling us and grieving about not only about the loss of a paycheck, but of the loss of Milwaukee Shakespeare. The company filled a very specific niche in Milwaukee doing terrific classical theater, but it also took a lot more production risks than other theaters in town.

During my time with the company a lot of artisans would say things like, "I am so excited about painting this set. This is the neatest designer I have

ever worked with. Thanks for bringing him in," or "I'm honored to work with this director." Artistically, the theatre community was mourning these lost opportunities to learn and grow.

There's obviously no replacement for the exact kind of work that you were doing. In terms of education, do you think another theater will be able to fill that gap?

There is a huge loss for the students of Milwaukee Public Schools who were coming to our shows on fully subsidized tickets, thanks to the NEA grant. Thousands of students were being exposed to Shakespeare in the classroom and in the theater.

Every season we produced three Shakespeare plays that students could come and see. It may now be that every other year there will be one Shakespeare play produced in the community because Shakespeare is just plain expensive to produce.

What was the response from the general community, audiences, donors?

I think there was a lot of sadness and a lot of surprise. Milwaukee's funding community knew our financial situation so they were probably a little shaken by the market's impact on one foundation. But I think our general average audience member did not have any idea how we were funded. I think they were just kind of shocked and confused. They had two plays left on their subscriptions. Why were we calling it quits?

We had a wake for the company. A lot of people came up to me at the wake and said, "Can you explain to me why Argosy couldn't even give you a little money?" Some people believed that the coverage in the paper made it look like we had done something wrong, so people kept asking that question too. I don't believe that Argosy's decision was intended as a punitive gesture. I have every reason to believe that their assets decreased and theaters receiving their support would take the first round of bullets. Argosy also supports human service organizations around the world.

Do you think this could happen anywhere or do you think it's specific to any type of theater or any theater in certain circumstances?

Well, I think that certainly any theater with a reliance on one major funder is at risk. Anyone who works in that kind of theater company is aware of that. That's the thing that keeps those executives up at night.

I do think that classical companies are always going to be at risk because the plays are so big and expensive to produce. Personnel was our single biggest expense. Good actors are expensive and you need a lot of them when you do Shakespeare.