



## The ORANGE COUNTY PERFORMING ARTS CENTER: On the Move with President Terry Dwyer

After serving as Managing Director of the La Jolla Playhouse and the Alley Theatre, Terry Dwyer became President of the Orange County Performing Arts Center. OCPAC was approaching completion of a significant expansion, and the Board recruited Dwyer to meet the challenge of responsibly managing a complex organization while fulfilling the Center's promise of delivering quality art.

This article discusses how Dwyer and his team have pulled together to deliver nationally recognized, innovative and exciting performances and education programming, and how they have extended the Center's reach into the increasingly diverse communities that comprise modern Orange County.

### **Weathering the Perfect Storm**

A tough economy, changing demographics and neglect of K-12 arts education in schools, has produced a perfect storm for the performing arts, and Terry Dwyer's team at the Orange County Performing Arts Center is prepared to weather the storm.

"Short term pressures are tempting arts presenters to neglect their audiences, artists and patrons of the future," comments Dwyer. "Times are particularly tough for classical forms of symphonic music, opera, ballet and theatre. The short term pressures are immense." He observes that, while ticket sales remain strong at certain venues and for certain performances, there is great pressure on fundraising and ticket revenues, and there is always the temptation to cut audience and artist development programs. "But we have no choice: we must think about the future right now or we will have no future."

For Dwyer and his team, this is not a matter of theory or conjecture. "Although we must weather current financial storms, if we neglect our connection to future audiences,

artists and patrons then we will face a downward spiral of continually waning support." He continues, "I believe that new opportunities for reinvention, planning and strategic growth abound. The steps we took last year - and will take over the next two years - will be key to ensuring a successful and impactful future for OCPAC. We mean to play a central role in bringing the performing arts to audiences and patrons in Southern California and nationally. Audience development is as much a part of our survival strategy as is selling out of tickets for our next performance."

### **The Stage is Set...**

The Orange County Performing Arts Center is nationally recognized for the presentation of the world's leading dance companies, Broadway shows, award-winning classical, jazz and cabaret artists, theatre and family entertainment and a rich cadre of educational programs; the Center also provides a home to three major performing arts companies. OCPAC artistic programs and educational initiatives are supported by some of the nation's most technically advanced and acoustically innovative performing arts ven-

ues. The OCPAC campus includes the 3,000 seat Segerstrom Hall, 250-seat Founder's Hall, the 2,000 seat Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, the 500 seat Samuelli Theatre, a huge community plaza used for outdoor performances, studio performance space in the Dodge Education Center and related production and rehearsal spaces.

OCPAC enjoys a strong national reputation and wide-spread support from the Orange County community. When Dwyer joined the organization in 2006 after serving as Managing Director of the La Jolla Playhouse and the Alley Theater, he found expanded facilities and world class programming. However, he was also acutely aware of the challenges performing arts centers face after a dramatic expansion. The Center had been enormously successful when it was physically smaller. "We added a beautiful and technologically advanced new concert hall, and with its opening our rehearsal and performance space had doubled. There was virtually unlimited programmatic potential but also the challenge of developing a compelling vision for the future of the Center. We needed to attract an expanded and more diverse

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audience and remain fiscally responsible while investing in artistic programs, creative use of technology and innovative community engagement initiatives.”

### Pulling Together

Dwyer’s team at OCPAC comprises 102 full-time personnel who manage an annual budget of \$44 million. “Leading a talented and diverse team of programming, education, development, finance and operations professionals is an art in itself. It is vitally important that all members of the team, from volunteers, to professional staff, to Board members, are respected, empowered and aligned in support of an ambitious vision. Equally important is having a culture of in-



novation and enthusiasm which supports realization of ambitious programs. We needed to determine, at this watershed moment for the Center what kind of institution we could become over the next 10 and 20 years. What kind of impact did we want to have on our artist, audience and patron communities?”

As a newly-arrived President in 2006, Dwyer soon realized that the OCPAC team had an opportunity to shape the Center’s future. “We had a mission statement that had served the organization well for over 20 years, guiding strong growth which was capped by the

opening of our new concert hall. But with our expansion we were wrenched out of adolescence and pushed towards institutional maturity. It was a new era, and we needed a mission statement, tailored to the ambitions and scale of our expanded organization, that responded to a culture and economy that was redefining itself on an almost daily basis.”

Development of the new mission statement was deeply collaborative, and engaged all OCPAC staff, Board members and volunteer stakeholders, as well as a diverse community outside of the OCPAC family. He notes, “You can’t just have a couple of people huddle in the corner of a room, craft a new mission statement and say ‘THAT’s where we’ll go’. You have to develop an institution-wide sense of investment, buy-in and shared values. In doing so it is important to involve Board, staff and current and future patrons. Developing a mission statement is a way to engage everyone, and the process is as important as the result.”

By “leaning into the future” in order to generate the mission statement, the ensuing dialogue among diverse parties, each with different perspectives, generated intensely debated ideas. Dwyer was not surprised when discussion of the mission statement also resulted in major changes to OCPAC’s operating infrastructure, communication strategies, positioning in the community and ultimately the charting of the Center’s path into the future. This work also led to a discussion of what the Center was doing well and what it needed to change.

“We flattened the organizational structure and significantly enhanced the professional staff. We recruited a new Vice President of Development to strengthen our outreach to individual and institutional donors. We also created the new senior staff position and then recruited a new Vice President of Education who works collaboratively with the Vice Presidents of Programming, Marketing and Development to inspire a uniquely meaningful engagement between audience, artists and community. Other changes strengthened management of the facilities, brought more strategic resource allocation and placed

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a unique focus on the audience’s role in the total theater going-experience.”

“It was rewarding to see how the development of the mission statement and the planning process itself impacted staff - they felt more empowered and engaged in shaping an organization they truly cared about. It was an energizing experience. We could feel the strength and motivation being gained from a unifying, compelling mission passionately shared by all involved. The team’s confidence in the future increased, and we are more focused in our efforts.”

### Engaging and Exciting the Community

Part of the overall consideration for the direction of the Center, was a discerning look at community involvement. “The Board and staff team recognizes that our current audience and donor base, while robust in their support, does not yet fully reflect the broad diversity of the Southern California community. The Board, staff and our volunteers are all determined to change this. We have to demonstrate respect for all audiences and actively engage them to find out what is important to them and to their lives as part of redefining the total attendance experience. At OCPAC we believe that we have a professional and moral obligation to reach out to the community, and we embrace the opportunity to do so.”

Dwyer notes, “We continually ask ourselves: do our facilities and performance and education programs act as beacons that draw people to our site? Or are we, at times, both a beacon and a wall that blocks the community

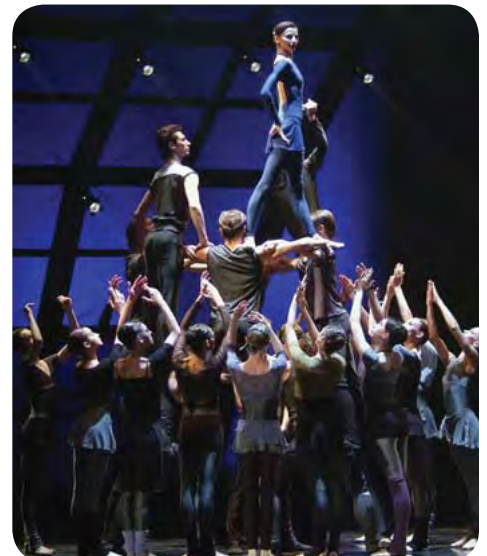


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from seeing what's inside and our attendees from experiencing other dynamic arts experiences available elsewhere in the county? The staff started to talk about how to become a 'center without walls', to become more transparent and committed to sustaining relationships with an expanded and increasingly diverse audience. One result has been the launching of several new artistic initiatives. 'Fall for Dance', for example, was an innovative four-night festival of dance showcasing ten international dance groups. Every ticket was only \$10, drawing in new audiences to see top dance artists perform."

Dwyer is enthusiastic about the results, "The companies that performed during 'Fall for Dance' broke new ground. They were gifted, passionate, extraordinary. When Shristi Dance, the London based Indian dance troop performed, the audience included many people from the local Indian community. Many brought their own food as part of, what was for them, a complete cultural experience. A South African company performed a thrilling and passionate dance based on a movement style created by slaves in the mines, chained at the ankles, whose boots had stomped out the rhythms of their historic plight. It was deeply moving. I saw how excited the audience was – people leaning forward in their seats, excited, thrilled and sometimes shocked. There were hundreds and hundreds of people who had never been here before, and many left with a new appreciation for the artistry on stage and the role that the Center might play in their own lives. Such performances are part of our effort to expand our audience while serving the community."

Additionally, OCPAC began an independent band series, keeping ticket prices low or free. An 'Off Center' series features off-Broadway, solo artists and other progressive performance. "We also added hip hop groups and a 'Free for All' series featuring free movies and dance events on the plaza to draw new audiences into the Center. We wanted to send a strong message to the community: Things are changing at OCPAC! We want to be important to your lives and hope to earn a

place on your cultural radar screen - we hope you will check us out."

This kind of focus on the mission serves OCPAC well in the current economic climate. "These are indeed very challenging times. Opera Pacific, which was one of our resident companies, suspended its 2008-09 season after 23 seasons. We had to adjust to that. At times like these, it's all the more essential to continue to make focused, mission-aligned progress. We talk through issues. We figure out how we feel, what areas require adjustment. And we create budgets that will allow us to sustain our mission."

### The Opportunity of Now

"We all believe there is great opportunity at times like these for individuals and organizations who can creatively respond to the challenge." Dwyer looks back to other times of great social stress and muses that, "...art tends to flourish during difficult times – the Great Depression, the turbulent times of the '60s and early '70s – these were all times when social challenges generated great art, and great art is being produced right now. The challenge for us is as it always has been: how do we reinvent ourselves in response to the rapidly changing technologically advanced society in which we now live, how do we remain artistically ambitious and bring this art to the public while remaining financially responsible as we do so?" He adds, "We are constantly nurturing and cultivating the kind of energy and alignment internally that allow us to succeed. If you neglect the art or take your audience for granted, if you don't pay attention to your institutional values or if you attend to institutional values but neglect financial reality, then your organization will be weakened and your mission will remain unfulfilled."

Dwyer is constantly vigilant as he monitors the impact that financial pressures have on his organization and OCPAC programs. "We are all wrestling with a challenging economy," he says. "It is tempting for an arts presenter like ours to just focus on today's financial concerns, be more middle-of-the-

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road, and present standard fare in order to reduce costs. But such an approach has little chance of sustaining the interest of vital audience and donor constituencies. Such a short term fix can lead to a perpetual downward spiral."

"In any event, I completely reject the notion that excellence needs to break the bank," Dwyer says, "By having a compelling mission, we have a way to make tough decisions that strike the proper balance between artistic inspiration, innovative community engagement and dealing with challenging financial realities."

Dwyer is proud of the accomplishments of the OCPAC family and understands the importance, "...now more than ever," of shaping an organization equipped to aggressively drive toward a renewed future. "Our direction is clear, and it has generated passionate support from our Board, staff, artists and other constituents. The overall result is an OCPAC filled with a vibrant energy that is tempered by an intensely practical business sensibility and programmatic creativity.

"Taken together, these are the ingredients required to generate the support of current and future audiences, staff and patrons," Dwyer asserts, "And that is exactly what is needed to create a dynamic performing arts center prepared to weather the perfect storm of these challenging times....and beyond." 🌟

