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Working Class Theater NW: “Building community through the production of theater that is socially conscious and relevant to the issues of working class people today.”

Working Class Theater NW

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Abstract

This project details the development of a small, community theater, in Tacoma, WA: Working Class Theater NW. Disparity between the audience that exists in Tacoma and the theater designed to serve that audience creates space to re-conceptualize the role of theater in the region. The power of drama to engage in communal problem solving is often undermined by reliance on money and thematic disassociation from the issues of every day life. Engaging citizens through stories that reflect and expand on lived experiences, such as economic uncertainty and social diversity, removes the necessity of power and privilege to gain access to an artistic life. This is vital if theaters and other non-profit arts organizations wish to create sustainable and relevant projects that serve local communities. Production of David Mamet's *A Life in the Theatre* is a case study that explores how the theoretical underpinnings of Working Class Theater NW perform in practice.

Keywords: theater, drama, community building, non-profit

Note on Usage

The word theater can refer to either the dramatic art or the building in which it is performed. I have chosen the spelling 'theater' over 'theatre' to cover all meanings, unless 'theatre' is embedded in a direct quote or title.

Preface

Theater showed me not just how I could communicate with people but that I could communicate at all. Until I discovered theater in high school, I was solitary and inwardly focused; theater spurred me to interact with others to accomplish a common goal. The stories I read in the literature about the transformative nature of theater? Those are my stories as well. I cannot divorce myself from theater; it is the ideal framework for me to organize my thinking and accomplishments.

Since 1995, I have been involved as an artist, technician and audience member through my studies and career in theater. I moved from Seattle to Tacoma in 2008 while employed as a stagehand at Northwest Stage and Sound. My then boyfriend was heavily involved in the Olympia theater scene, and I was used to participating in the wide array of performing arts in Seattle. It took a while to discover that the Tacoma theater scene had limited relevance to my life. Tickets were out of my price range, stories were dated or did not challenge me, and I felt like a fraud, trying but unable to support theater where I lived. Opening my own theater is a way to see if there is an audience in Tacoma for the stories I want to tell.

Theater is so simple, but good theater can be challenging to create. I knew I wanted more and different theater, but I didn't know the first thing about theater management. First, I had to prove that my vision of quality theater was worthwhile and backed by the literature. Then, I had to discover the best practices for managing a non-profit theater. Finally, I developed a theatrical mission that could serve the area I live in. Everyone deserves theater, but I do not see everyone reflected in the stories that local theater chooses to tell, or the audiences that attend the shows. Theater requires honesty, risk, and dramatic purpose. There are easier ways than theater to entertain, but no better and more complete way to investigate the purpose of life in a communal context.

I chose the name Working Class Theater NW (WCTNW) for several reasons. I do not wish to make theater that only reflects my narrow experience of the world. I have worked as a union stagehand for over a decade, which places me firmly in the working class. Tacoma is a working class town, both historically and currently. I can use class commonality to reach a broad audience. While I want to serve the audience in Tacoma, I would be a fraud to suggest that I know that audience from the inside out. Although there is a place for me here, I grew up in Seattle. NW is a nod to my non-native status, and my desire to reach outward, to position Tacoma as a hub of quality theater in the Puget Sound region.

Working Class Theater NW

Below a recent headline, "The Wal-Marting of American Theater," author Scott Walters (2012) laments the streamlining and homogenization of regional theater. He compares the effects of New York's stranglehold on the values and discourse that

surround the idea of worthwhile theater to the effects of big box retailers on a small downtown core. In his cries for valuing regional difference, there is an echo of other cultural movements that ask consumers to slow down and heed the place they are in. Like the money that stays in the community when people shop locally, communities are enriched by art that speaks to their lived experience.

Working Class Theater NW was born from the knowledge that high quality, relevant and cost-effective theater would be a welcome addition to the burgeoning artistic culture in Tacoma. Access to theater arts is examined in three areas: geographic, financial, and cultural. A brief overview of existing theater in the region precedes a survey of the relevant literature. As conceived here, theater is a tool for examining social justice in a broad communal context. In order to use theater as an effective tool, communities must accept that theater is worthwhile, gain experience of skilled theater practice, and manage theater well in artistic and business realms. A review of the literature strives to answer the following questions:

- How can theater be a vital component of an active community?
- What is the most effective way to manage theater?
- What is the role of effective theater management?
- What is the role of money in the arts?

Finally, the mission and goals of Working Class Theater NW are outlined and supported with current examples. A brief overview of the historic and thematic context of David Mamet's *A Life in the Theatre* situates the script within the context of WCTNW's mission and goals. Production of a four show run is reviewed in Appendix B.

Theater in Tacoma

Since the close of the Tacoma Actor's Guild in 2007, there has been a void of small to medium sized theater in Tacoma. Theater projects show up, do a few shows and disappear. Gold from Straw has been on hiatus since 2010 after producing four shows. Toy Boat Theater has been on hiatus since 2011 after a year of production. Live Paint completed a six month Spaceworks residency but could not maintain a physical space. Assemblage Theater produces one show a year. Duke's Bay Theater opened in 2013 with a thirty-seat theater above the Merlino Arts Center, but their space is inaccessible to those without the ability to climb stairs. The rapid rise and fall of small theater companies in Tacoma creates an atmosphere of audience confusion and wariness. In order to gain audience trust, it is crucial to choose shows that reflect our mission and character as a new theater company.

To determine the niche WCTNW hopes to occupy, it is important to understand the theater that currently exists in Tacoma. The Broadway Center for the Performing Arts anchors the Downtown Theater District, with three theater spaces that host a variety of local and international music, dance, theater and other performing artists. Their focus is on touring acts and renting space to local user groups. Limited focus on self-produced theater removes them from the range of WCTNW's mission and goals. Tacoma Musical Playhouse, while a producer of community based performing arts, only produces musical theater. Musical theater is not the focus of WCTNW. Youth theater, such as Tacoma Youth Theater and the many youth theater camps offered at theaters and community centers, produce excellent programs that educate the next generation of theater artists.

However, these theaters focus on education and do not address the artistic needs of adult audiences. As the purview of WCTNW is adult community theater, school theater programs and youth theater fall outside of that mission.

In Composing Ourselves, Dorothy Chansky (2004) examines the development of American theatre from vaudeville and melodrama into more realistic, socially conscious storytelling. “The American belief that theater is spiritually and emotionally fulfilling, socially elevating, of civic importance, a site for assaying social change and an enriching locus of cultural capital originated in the early decades of the twentieth century” (Chansky, p. 2). This set of assumptions influences everything from play selection, audience development, to management, marketing and education. According to the American Association of Community Theater, “ ‘Community theatre’ generally refers to a nonprofit theatre company that serves a locality, relies heavily on volunteers, and does not use Equity (union) actors on a regular basis. Community theatres tend to be operated for local recreation, education, and commonly seek to obtain the patronage and production participation of the community as a whole” (www.aact.org/resources/terms.html). Two community theaters in the Greater Tacoma Area fit the above description, produce more than one non-musical show per year and have produced more than two seasons of theater: Tacoma Little Theater (TLT) and Lakewood Playhouse (LP). The script choices of these two theaters shed light on why WCTNW will choose different scripts to reach the Tacoma theater audience.

Over the past five years, only sixty percent of scripts produced by TLT and LP were written after 1970 (Appendix A). Plays do not become obsolete just because they

have reached a certain age, but they do reflect the time in which they were written. Many themes are sufficiently universal that older scripts can be updated to address contemporary audiences. The plays of William Shakespeare have been successfully performed for centuries. However, technology and culture have shifted noticeably in the last fifty years. A play, such as *The Rainmaker* (Nash, 1954), that centers on marrying off an ‘ugly’ daughter to save the farm, is an historical piece. It does not automatically speak to the problems experienced by a modern, city-dwelling audience. The goals and script choices of WCTNW reflect the evolving needs of our target audience: the urban working class. One of the scripts chosen for our first season, *Enron* (Prebble, 2009) is the story about the human factors behind the Enron financial scandal, a potent topic in the midst of an economic recession caused at least in part by financial scandals.

In addition to thematic inaccessibility, high cost can reduce willingness and ability to attend theater. Tacoma is an urban environment with limited disposable income compared to the software developers in Seattle and the government workers in Olympia. The median household income in Tacoma is \$50,439 per year (US Census, 2010), thousands less than Seattle, Olympia or Washington State average. This income divides into \$147/day for an average of 2.4 persons per household. Thus, if two people were to purchase two \$25.00 tickets from Lakewood Playhouse (\$29.00 for musicals) it would cost over a third of their daily income. To compare, with a \$30,000 average annual income, I pay \$16.00 per day for housing alone. Theater becomes even more cost prohibitive once you factor in travel, meals, and childcare.

There are many discounted ticket options such as pay-what-you-can preview performances, student matinees, and season ticket discounts. In recent years, Tacoma Little Theater has offered more tickets at a lower price point; all second stage productions are \$10 a ticket and many other productions are in the \$12 ticket range. This trend is laudable and necessary to widen lower income families' access to theater. Working Class Theater NW will price tickets at the suggested donation of \$10- \$12, or as costs rise with inflation, at no more than 150% of area movie ticket prices. Reducing the financial burden of artistic participation and targeting working class populations with our script choices, will promote the idea of art as a common good.

The data clearly shows that population size does not determine performing arts density. Pierce County has fewer performing arts per capita than the neighboring counties of King and Thurston. (Table 1). The data was not available to show how many theaters there were per capita in the largest cities within each county (Tacoma, Seattle and Olympia). However, the data confirms the relative lack of performing arts in Pierce County. Tacoma, as the largest city in Pierce County, could be seen to have relatively little performing arts.

Table 1

City	Estimated 2012 Population	County	Performing Arts Non-profits per 100,000 Population (2010)
Seattle, WA	634,535 ¹	King	9.22 ²
Tacoma, WA	202,010 ³	Pierce	3.65 ⁴
Olympia, WA	47,698 ⁵	Thurston	6.34 ⁶

¹ US Census Bureau <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/5363000.html> retrieved 4/25/14

² Arts Index <http://www.artsindexusa.org/where-i-live?c4=53033> retrieved 4/25/14

³ US Census Bureau <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/5370000.html> retrieved 4/25/14

⁴ Arts Index <http://www.artsindexusa.org/where-i-live?c4=53053> retrieved 4/25/14

⁵ US Census Bureau <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/5351300.html> retrieved 4/25/14

There is a disparity between the people of Tacoma and the theater that is created to serve them. Working Class Theater NW is a case study of how and why theater is a vital component of cultural life in both Tacoma and the wider Pacific Northwest. Creating culturally relevant theater with ongoing community impact requires knowledge of the theater's cultural context, ability to create relevant theater, and successful theater management skills. A careful review of the literature reveals the best practices for building and maintaining a socially conscious, non-profit theater. This provides WCTNW with the highest chance of success in the current artistic climate of Tacoma, WA.

Literature Review

Building Community Through Theater

Community building is a complex term. It assumes both a defined community and a direction to build that community. Defining community is easier now that the term is no longer limited to strict geographic location, political ideology, race, or class, but can consist of any self-chosen group. As noted community artist Jan Cohen-Cruz (2005) explains, "community-based performance has become less about homogeneous communities and more about different participants exploring a common concern together" (p3). This flexibility of community membership allows a wider range of individuals to coalesce around the collective goals offered by the experience and production of theater.

⁶Arts Index <http://www.artsindexusa.org/where-i-live?c4=53067> retrieved 4/25/14

Theater is an art form with a long history and a diversity of applications. At its simplest, theater is a low-tech way to build community through co-operative story telling. Jaqueline Wood (2005) sums up the community building interplay between artist and audience: “The communal experience of drama does not rely only on the assemblage of an audience. In effect, the impact of audience response on performers helps to create the performance itself. The drama effect then becomes a communal project or effort” (p. 123). The requirement of audience participation makes drama a powerful way to bond with others by communicating ideas and soliciting emotional investment. In addition, theater studies can provide insight into the emotional underpinnings of charged subjects such as torture (McMahon, 2011) and capital punishment (Conquergood, 2001). Research has also shown that theater is a compelling way for marginalized groups to assert personhood and generate empathy (Encisco et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2011; Nelson, 2011; Perry and Rogers, 2011). When participants engage in community building within their performance group, they draw the audience into solidarity with their concerns (Sinding et al., 2011). Local communities can use theater to address social problems that affect specific groups or the entire population.

With a plethora of problems and potential solutions, beginning the work of social change can be daunting. In Arts for Change, Beverly Naidus (2009) disproves the idea of a perfect solution, explaining “There is no one way to transform our society into a non-oppressive, egalitarian place, but there are a multitude of ways to meet our human craving for poetry in a socially engaged way” (p. 2). Though the outcomes of creative expression are not measurable in the same way as profits or monetary value, they produce tangible results such as legislation, documentation, permanent or temporary art, and

intangible results such as community spirit, increased shared knowledge, education, inspiration and empowerment.

Contextualizing Theater Within Culture

It is not possible to separate art and artists from the culture that surrounds them. Art is a language of culture and interpretation of art is an expression of cultural history. Theater is as varied in expression as the communities it reflects (Cleveland, 2008; Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Leonard, 2006; Rohd, 1998), and has the opportunity to reach people where they live, in a language they understand. Such access creates an environment for art that is more likely to convey the intended message to a wider audience. However, theater participation is not always widespread across age, race, class and other demographics. If people can participate in theater, why would they choose not to? Various theories explain why a creative life is “out of reach” to the average citizen. Long hours at work or at home may decimate leisure time, leaving individuals too exhausted to pursue art. Individualist rhetoric may discourage a potential artist from seeking group expression (Naidus, 2009), or mire them in the dichotomy of high vs. low culture (Ivey, 2008). The belief that an artist without formal education is stupid and has nothing worthwhile to say (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Kadi, 1996) is yet another self or other imposed limit to artistic engagement.

It is evident that despite the best intentions of producers and artists, there are still barriers for participation in theater. Actual and perceived barriers of entry to the institution of theater can limit access to culture in America. In Arts, Inc., Bill Ivey (2008) discusses the classification of theater, dance and opera as high art that was purposefully separated from popular art in order to cement a position of social value that was worthy

of taxpayer funding (p.16-17). This class distinction reinforces a hierarchy of needs that sets theater apart as a luxury. As a luxury, theater would not be a priority over the food, shelter and safety that many American families struggle with.

In addition to theater's classification as a luxury, it is often used to tell stories that reinforce existing myths of cultural superiority-- either by telling stories that appeal to those in power with the hopes of getting money out of them, or by ignoring stories of those who do not have power in the misguided belief that those stories are not universally relatable. The use of theater should not be limited to mirroring hegemonic ideas of power and privilege. In America, the represented culture is often that of middle class white people. This culture is assumed by the people in power to be normative, relatable and set the standards for taste. James Loewen (1995) contends that high school history textbooks, which gloss over controversy and present the past as European, white and affluence centric, reinforce this narrative. This attitude of superiority disengages othered youth, especially those from working class, or poor backgrounds. "American history textbooks help perpetrate the archetype of the blindly patriotic hardhat by omitting or understating progressive elements in the working class.... Few textbooks tell of organized labor's role in the civil rights movement, including the 1963 March on Washington." (p. 303) Thus, youth who are not white and affluent are taught that they cannot contribute to history, culture or art in a significant fashion.

To counter this hegemony, artists have to invite desired audience members into the discussion (Graves, 2005). People like to see themselves in art; it is a way to personally relate to the stories other people tell. If an audience cannot grasp part of a performance, it is less valuable (Cohen-Cruz, 2005). Also, if performers excuse poor

quality or inaccessibility by blaming the audience for apathy and incomprehension, alienation of that audience is a reasonable expectation. When given the opportunity to work with developmentally disabled adults, Peg Wetli, the founder of CLIMB (Creative Learning Ideas for Mind and Body) Theatre Company, had to re-examine her traditional approach to theater. “I wasn’t willing to accept that there was something wrong with my audience, nor was I willing to accept that there was something wrong with theater. What occurred to my mind was that the artist, rather than existing just for art’s sake, rather than being self-serving, could be other serving, could take the craft as the embodiment of that service” (qtd. in Cleveland, 2008, p. 106). Wetli was able to develop scripts that solicited audience directed problem solving. The success of this approach is demonstrated by institutional growth such as the development of a second company. More personal success can be seen in the leaps in communication and functioning for developmentally disabled children and adults who participated in CLIMB Theatre programs (Cleveland, 2008).

Theater can counter widespread disenfranchisement through education and empathy, but not without a shift in the way people participate. As Ivey (2008) argues,

We can’t advance art without linking it to broad public purposes or the right of citizens to lead vibrant expressive lives. We don’t need new ‘instrumental’ arguments for investment in the arts education or the non-profit arts but an understanding of what kind of arts system serves public purposes and the importance of art to a high quality life (p. 267).

All members of a community, regardless of socio-economic status, race, or other demographics, deserve to lead creative lives in which they have the knowledge and ability to participate fully in arts and culture.

The Business of Theater

People learn and often choose to follow the standard method of theater production: find a space, acquire actors, directors, designers and technicians, and put on a show. Eventually, artists are unwilling to put art before food. Also, the idea that starvation is an essential component of contributing to America's cultural heritage is extremely problematic (Ivey, 2008). Although the majority of theaters are non-profit ventures, it makes sense to develop some business acumen in order to keep a theatre group going. The easier it is to operate a successful theater, the more people will be able to participate in theatrical communities.

Traditional, corporate based models for attracting and maintaining an audience do not fully meet the financial needs of the theater. Small-scale, amateur marketing efforts are not enough to attract sufficient audience interest. While the traditional corporate response to tough times is to cut costs, cutting costs without fundraising leads to a shortage of funds, which impedes artistic vitality and results in audience attrition (Kaiser, 2008). As donor corporations fold, individuals deal with economic downturns, and arts funding is slashed from the budget, managing and fundraising have become increasingly sophisticated and specific in order to bridge the financial gap between idea and performance.

In many ways, theater has always been strapped for cash and resources; a flexible approach to a tight financial situation can bolster creativity and encourage new solutions.

In an article dealing with the fallout from state funding cuts to the University of Washington, Odai Johnson (2011) recasts the severe budget shortfalls as an opportunity to reinvent the doctoral program's approach to performance education. Through conversations with faculty from fourteen university programs, the Center for Performance Studies was developed as a shared, interdisciplinary resource. Workshops were developed to fill in gaps in mentorship created by a thinly spread faculty, pedagogy and methodology courses were restructured to cross disciplinary boundaries, and departmental resources were pooled to bring in scholars who were of interest to many. By responding to financial crisis with creativity, Johnson saved a threatened doctoral program.

Though creativity and flexibility are important means of adapting to trying circumstances, they are not a substitute for financial planning. Optimism and naiveté can compel artists to ignore financial pitfalls and open a theater company, only to be felled by a lack of business sense. "Successful theatre company personnel know when to be creative and when to take their heads out of the clouds and get down to the nitty-gritty of making the money they need to keep going" (Mulcahy, 2011, p. xii). Artistic quality and business savvy are both necessary to the creation of sustainable theater. Too often, a theater group will have one or the other.

Compounding the art versus finance divide is the literature on the subject, which is often focused on one or the other of these two camps. To focus exclusively on art is to create a well-imagined piece that is poorly attended or lacks the funds to achieve the full realization of its artistic vision—an invitation to burnout. To focus exclusively on money and the bottom line is to constrain artistic endeavor to that which is safe, known,

repeatable and proven successful, thereby removing risk and the possibility of failure. This attitude is the antithesis of creation. A holistic approach to theater arts that includes both artistry and business savvy is necessary to ensure the survival of the art.

After all, most people do not go into theater for the money. As Joann Green (1981) warns, “Theater is work. If it makes you miserable, go from it. If it makes you happy, go to it. But do not expect to make a living” (p. 2). Is it necessary to choose between making art and making a living? Art has long been thought of as a value that exists in opposition to money, where one is either a starving artist or a sell-out. If art is not an economic good, then it makes no sense to judge it on an economic scale.

Theater does not provide people with basic economic or survival necessities. Theater will not feed children or house the homeless. Nor will it teach essential skills such as farming or house building. The value of theater is in both the process of collaborative creation and the presentation of story based performance art. It is difficult to place monetary value on a temporary, collective experience. While this makes it harder to argue for wages and standards of living for artists, it also helps to buffer theater against the changes wrought by greed. Barry Schwartz (2000) makes a case for different ways of valuing economic and non-economic goods: “Traditionally, the goods people realized by participating in practices like these [family life, community life, democracy] were not economic goods, and the rules by which these practices operated were not economic rules” (p. 191). Valuing art as a non-economic good removes the relentless focus on the bottom line that artistic decision making often devolves into.

Even when theaters are set up as non-profit ventures for the benefit of their surrounding communities, money enters every aspect of decision making from

management to production. However, the increasing emphasis on the need for theater to make money, instead of the need for theater to make art, devalues the meaning of theater. In order to increase the quality, availability and impact of theater in Tacoma and create a culture of theater art in the South Sound, we must address trade-offs and conflicts in values, especially those that conflict with the values of money and economics.

Defining Artistic Goods on an Economic Scale: Non-Profit Arts

Non-profit would seem to be a term that defines itself: a venture conducted without the intent to profit. Money made in excess of expenses is folded back into programs rather than distributed to shareholders as in a for-profit business model. However, there are several problems with non-profit. The very term ‘non-profit’ gears the conversation toward money while simultaneously denying that money is involved. It also belies the fact that it takes money to run a non-profit, while expecting that it should take very little or no money to stay afloat. By allowing the marketplace to define non-profit as its antithesis, non-profits are divorced from the benefits of money, yet saddled with the costs.

In many ways, successful businesses and non-profits pursue similar goals and practices: mission creation and adherence, audience focus, and co-operative hierarchy (Carlisle and Drapeau, 1996; Collins, J., 2001; Kaiser, 2008, 2010; Meyer, 2006). Research suggests that the profit evaluations used by the corporate model, though widely used, are insufficient to evaluate the full impact of an arts organization (Boorsma and Chiaravalloti, 2010; Collins, J., 2001; Kaiser, 2008). Corporate models are based on financial records and are easily quantifiable. This ideology, with its focus on money and

the bottom line, can reduce anxiety by providing a clear method for developing and maintaining a budget (Moore, 1968). On the other hand, while non-profits must make money in order to fund their programming, Jim Collins (2001) argues that non-profits should not use money as the only measure of success. He suggests a closer examination of monetary and resource inputs and outputs.

The confusion between inputs and outputs stems from one of the primary differences between business and the social sectors. In business, money is both an input (a resource for achieving greatness) and an output (a measure of greatness). In the social sectors, money is only an input, and not a measure of greatness (p. 5).

He does not use this distinction as a case against fiscal responsibility, but to promote different ways to measure the impact of a non-profit organization.

While the corporate model can serve the need to make money, it does not fully serve the other needs of a theater. Drawing on over twenty-five years experience of turning collapsing non-profits into thriving, financially stable art institutions, Michael Kaiser (2008) argues persuasively that the first role of a non-profit is not to make money. More important than money is forming a clear, concise, artistic mission statement and adhering to it in all decisions. Fredric Vogel (1985), a long time Executive Director of the Foundation for the Extension and Development of the American Professional Theatre (FEDAPT), agrees that a clear plan can aid creativity by eliminating the need to accomplish goals that fall outside of the plan. The corporate structure of financial focus can be put into practice in the social sectors as one of the desired outcomes of a clear mission statement.

A clear mission statement is crucial to both business and non-profit. In their non-profit planning workbook, Allison and Kaye (1997) suggest that “The challenge is to create a vision that is grand enough to inspire people, but also a vision that is ground in sufficient reality that people can start to believe that it can and will happen” (p. 71). Refining this idea is Jim Collins (2001), who suggests that any company should rigorously adhere to a mission based on what an organization is passionate about, what they can be best in the world at, and what drives the economic engine. When developing and implementing a mission, keeping the financial motive in its correct place alongside other resource-based economic considerations is the key to financial and artistic longevity.

Modern theater is a resource heavy art form. Regular business expenses like rent and utilities are just the beginning. Theater requires costumes, scenery, and marketing materials that are different for each show. Also, theater requires huge people resources to create, promote and watch a show. Without money, theaters would be unable to hire artists, produce copyrighted plays, or perform in a stable venue.

In addition to the goods and services that money can buy, money is also a handy method for donors to show that they value theater and the community that surrounds it. When an audience member doesn't have the time or skill to volunteer, or when a company wants to paint itself as a patron of the arts, a monetary or in-kind donation can feed a philanthropic goal. Arts need funding; earned income from ticket sales and merchandise counts for only around half of a typical non-profit budget (Klein, 2011). Filling this income gap by raising ticket prices, cutting expenses, or raising contribution levels, are three common scenarios outlined by renowned arts manager Michael Kaiser (2010). Raising ticket prices can drive off price sensitive patrons, or those with less

expensive entertainment options such as television. Cutting expenses can curtail artistic excellence or the ability to promote events. Pursuing greater contributions from wealthy donors and organizations would seem like the best way out of the financial crisis.

But money is not the strings-free donation that many expect. The pursuit of money can shift focus from programming and artistic goals. As Barry Schwartz (2000) explains,

If the only point of your work is to make as much money as possible...concerns about product or service quality, consumer satisfaction, consumer safety and the like will fade into the background. These aspects of your work will only be relevant to the extent that they contribute to profit. They will simply be the means to an end (p. 246).

When the point of arts funding is to increase arts funding and not to pursue artistic excellence, the non-profit mission is lost.

Money can distract from artistic goals. In his book Arts Management, Derrick Chong (2010) argues “Artistic excellence can be difficult; it can be displaced by goals such as fundraising targets that can be achieved, or are easier to measure. One knock-off effect is a disproportionate increase in fundraising staff relative to professional, arts-based staff” (p.107). Pooling a large portion of financial and human resources in management, is an example of how the focus on money can turn art from a calling that strives for excellence into a job that anyone with the skills can do just for the money. It is difficult to assess the value of artistic practice. Alasdair MacIntyre defines practice as “certain kinds of complex, cooperative human activities. Each practice establishes its own standards of excellence and, indeed, is partly defined by those standards. ...There is

no common denominator of what is good, like wealth accumulation, by which all practices can be assessed” (qtd. in Schwartz, 2000, p. 190). This lack of quantitative measuring tools for artistic practice does not lend itself to ready evaluation. Unclear means of artistic evaluation coupled with a dependence on money for ever-present expenses means that artistic goals are easily neglected in favor of money.

In addition to undermining artistic concerns, money translates into leverage so readily that non-profits in the United States are prohibited by law from receiving more than thirty percent of their income from any one source. This helps prevent a single donor or granting organization from having undue impact on programming. The amount of a donation in relation to the non-profit’s budget determines the perceived influence of the donor. As fundraising expert Kim Klein (2011) explains, “I have never heard of an organization debating whether to accept a \$50 gift from a corporation with even the most foul practices...because that amount of money cannot buy any influence” (pp. 497-498). Regulating large donations from individual sources is a key way to ensure that non-profits continue to serve the public good.

Unfortunately, the class system is set up in such a way that the people with enough money for large-scale philanthropy tend to fit the limited demographic profile of wealthy Americans. Shaping art to pursue donations from this limited audience curtails artistic accessibility. Playwright Mark Lew, in his evocatively titled article “Arts Education Won't Save Us from Boring, Inaccessible Theater,” exhorts theater artists to fix the real problems with theater accessibility and stop blaming audience attrition on a lack of education or interest in theater.

Right now the institutional theater has the same demographic problems as the

Republican Party: largely aging, largely affluent, largely White. If you truly want a young and diverse audience, you're going to have fundamentally change up your programming in a way that may very well alienate your existing base. Which may be okay. Because that base isn't large enough to form a sustainable coalition (Lew, 2014).

Because homogenous stories do not reflect the actual composition of a community, they decrease audience diversity over time as people seek reflections of their lived experiences through other means. Without enough money to buy a vote, artists and other poor or working class people lose access and influence.

The use of theatre should not be limited to mirroring hegemonic ideas of power and privilege. As Ivey (2008) argues, "we can't advance art without linking it to broad public purposes or the right of citizens to lead vibrant expressive lives. We don't need new 'instrumental' arguments for investment in the arts education or the non-profit arts but an understanding of what kind of arts system serves public purposes and the importance of art to a high quality life" (p. 267). Theater can counter widespread disenfranchisement through education and empathy, but not without a shift in the way people participate. Thomas McEvelley (1992) expands on this idea that the power of art can encourage this shift, "We feel that to change a preference we held in the past would be to admit that we had been wrong. But when the idea of universality is abandoned, this issue disappears. We realize that from the point of view we once held, such and such a judgment was valid, but from a different point of view which we now hold, another becomes valid. Yet we can understand both points of view at once and therein lies the key" (pp. 24-25). When theaters focus only on selling tickets, the goal is money and not

answering the deep-seated need of the audience for art and engagement. Everyone, regardless of socio-economic status, race, or other demographics, deserves to lead creative lives in which they have the knowledge and ability to participate fully in arts and culture.

A New Model of Theater

As a dialogue between artists and communities, theater can address questions of who constructs the value of arts and culture. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1984) counters the positivist idea that “cultural judgments (that the poor are worthless? that Blacks are subhuman? that women are irrational?) are insufficient to ground real evil” (p. 269), by examining the myriad ways that culture and its stories influence our perceptions and thus our actions. Our culture is the only thing that allows evil or good to flourish; by defining the basis of what is good or evil and influencing us to follow one or the other path. Art has the ability to examine the construction of culture, to see where it is leading us and make steering decisions from a more informed vantage point.

Through a deliberate extension of this ability, the act of self-recognition can grow into an act of expanded self-creation. By learning to appreciate the value stance of groups other than the one we were born into, we in effect expand our selfhood.

(McEvelley, 1992, p.24)

Since a story untold is only important to the one who experienced the actual event, theater widens the impact of an event by making it accessible to more than the direct recipients.

Theatrical participation enriches artists, audiences and communities. Though often expressed as a bailiwick for the elite, participation in the arts need not be limited to

those with specialized skills and training. Renowned theorist Paulo Freire underlines the value of common effort: “Every human being, no matter how ‘ignorant’ or submerged in the ‘culture of silence,’ is capable of looking critically at his world in a dialogue encounter with others, and provided the proper tools for such an encounter he can gradually perceive his personal and social reality and deal critically with it” (qtd. in Cohen-Cruz, 2005, p. 98). Anyone can join together to create art.

Case Study: Working Class Theater NW

Mission and Goals

In July of 2013, WCTNW was accepted as a participant in The Spaceworks Tacoma program, which places artists and creative entrepreneurs in empty buildings and storefronts in Downtown Tacoma. In addition to the legitimacy conferred by acceptance, Spaceworks participants receive six months of free rent to establish themselves. WCTNW has not yet found a physical space, but has been using the waiting time to establish a strong mission and enact the goals that support it.

Grounded in the diverse history of Tacoma, WA, Working Class Theater NW builds community through production of theater that is socially conscious and relevant to the issues of working class people today. WCTNW serves our community and artists by:

- Developing awareness of theater art in our community.
- Promoting the value of theater arts to explore society.
- Increasing theater participation in middle and lower income families.
- Showcasing local and emerging talent.

Each of these goals reflects an idea of what theater can do. “Theatre is a language through which human beings can engage in dialogue about what is important to them...It is a lab for problem solving, for seeking options, and for practicing solutions.” (Boal, qtd. in Rohd: xix) Theater is an active, flexible tool to create trust, focus and motivation and empower communities to work together to solve public problems.

Goal 1: Develop awareness of theater art in our community.

The website for WCTNW, www.workingclasstheaternw.blogspot.com was created by local author and scenic designer Judy Cullen. The front page has links to local theaters, theater critics and community businesses and resources. Other pages cover auditions, our first season, a planned new late night comedy and a community forum. There is also a Facebook page, a twitter account and a blog. Meetings with community leaders, small business owners and theater managers have generated interest and support. Planned workshops and play reading groups await only a place to host them. Future plans include the following:

- Partner with local bookstores and libraries to increase readership of performative literary works.
- Meet new artists in order to increase learning and collaborative opportunities.
 - Attend monthly Tacoma Arts Commission meetings.
 - Open theater lobby up to the Tacoma Art Walk and Arts at Work program.

Goal 2: Promote the value of theatre arts to explore society.

Theater is a tool, and artists and audiences need to be taught how to wield it effectively. To this end:

- All workshops and productions will explore current social problems.

- Self and peer evaluations will be available in print and online to encourage documentation of artistic development.
- Artistic growth will be a substantial focus of every program.
- Ticket sales for new plays will grow over a five-year period until the average audience exceeds 75% of capacity.

Goal 3: Increase theater participation in middle to lower income families.

The current outcome of this goal is the choice of where to place advertisement, including posters for *A Life in the Theatre*. As of this writing, thirty posters have been distributed to senior centers, employment aid offices, public libraries, community centers and schools. When the theater has a permanent location, partnerships with local child care providers will be sought, to increase the participation of working parents. Other means of achieving this goal in the future include the following:

- Volunteer and training opportunities offered first to persons who make less than the area median income.
- Space rental to other performing artists will be offered on a sliding scale.
- A minimum of 100 low-income audience members per month.
 - Ticket prices will be less than 150% of area movie tickets.
 - One night per week will be offered as pay what you can for all performances lasting more than three days.
 - Donations for St. Leo's Food Bank will be accepted in lieu of money for all non-rental productions.
- At least 50% of Board Members will have family incomes at or less than the median income of the Greater Tacoma Area.

Goal 4: Showcase local and emerging talent.

Currently, every director, actor, playwright and volunteer involved with WCTNW lives in the Puget Sound region. Using the first show as an example; the director for *A Life in the Theatre* lives in Tacoma, one actor lives in Lakewood and the second actor lives in Enumclaw, but has a long history of involvement with Tacoma theater. Working with the wealth of talent in and around Tacoma, and training additional talent from the local population, maintains the theater's investment in the community and the community's investment in the theater. Additional long-term goals include the following:

- Produce annual New Play Festival.
 - Solicit 75% of submissions from South Sound playwrights.
- Offer first choice of open performance dates to artists who work or live in the Greater Tacoma area.
- 50% or more of plays written within the previous ten years.
- Host at least one reading of a new or unpublished script every quarter.
- Seek, analyze and publish ongoing feedback on quality and relevance of production from audiences, volunteers and staff.

These goals set the boundaries of what the theater's mission is trying to achieve. This allows stakeholders to contribute to the mission from a shared understanding of the conversation that is taking place.

A Life in the Theater

As a new theater company in a challenging theater environment, WCTNW has something to prove. In order to build and maintain audience trust, we must situate

ourselves as appropriate storytellers of working class issues. We must produce quality art and invite our audience into the conversation. The size of the theater limits the scripts we will be able to produce effectively. Our mission of focusing on theater that is relevant to the modern working class is a second limiting factor. Similarly, the goals we have chosen to achieve that mission shape its outcome. Finally, our pool of available talent has guided the choice of our first season of scripts. Staged reading of the following scripts were performed at a temporary theater space in November 2013- *A Life in the Theatre*, *Sunset Limited*, *Enron*, *School for Lies*, and *Tracers*.

A Life in the Theatre was chosen as our first script because it tells the story of why theater is important to its practitioners: the artists who chose to make their living treading the boards. David Mamet wrote *A Life in the Theatre (LiT)* in 1975. First produced in New York City in 1977, the play centers around the lives of two actors at different points in their careers. Because it is a two-person show with few technical needs, *LiT* can be produced within limiting space and budget constraints. Because it is a lesser-known play of a well-known playwright, it has broad marketing potential. Finally, as the story of the relationship of two actors onstage and off, the play serves as an explanation of why artists choose the titular life in the theatre.

With this play, we can show why we are passionate about theater, what it means to work in the theater, and why people choose theater as a profession. By positioning theater artists as members of the working class that we seek to engage, we are using similarity as a foundation for building trust. Mamet promotes the idea that actors work hard and are not abstract and above the working class but an integral part of it. While the

script is not a direct reflection of any actor's experiences, it helps address the question of what drives actors to act and in turn what drives WCTNW to open a theater. Themes of the show, which include the interdependency of artists with each other and the audience, mirror WCTNW's dependency on the surrounding community and explain our goals of community building, education and outreach. Telling this story is a way to situate ourselves within a working class context as trustworthy narrators of community concerns.

As of this writing, the actors are in rehearsal. We have just started to paper the town with flyers, send out press releases and crank out web content. A full overview of the performance will be included in Appendix B, once the production has closed.

Conclusion

In his polemic guide, True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor, David Mamet (1997) urges actors to be honest with themselves and the audience.

The character to do your exercises over the years creates the strength of character to form your own theatre rather than go to Hollywood; to act the truth of the moment when the audience would rather not hear it; to stand up for the play, the theater, the life you would like to lead. There is nothing more pragmatic than idealism. (p. 104)

Theater allows participants to answer that age-old question (Who am I?) by comparing personal stories to other viewpoints and feeling out where you fit. Theater allows you to contextualize, to locate yourself within possibilities. Theater offers stories, reflections, boundaries and choices.

We build and experience theater as a community. It is inherent in the structure: playwright, director, actors, audience co-create and interpret the story as a team. Theater has practice, refinement and the deadline of opening night. Everyone who participates is responsible- actors for learning their lines and blocking, directors for communicating their vision of the play and shepherding it to fruition, costumers for making sure that no one goes on stage naked unless they are supposed to. Theater is not an easy way to tell a story. It requires time, money, education and skill. But if you take the time to do theater well, you can tell emotionally engaging stories that move people to empathy, and challenge them to act.

It is idealistic to open a theater in a depressed economy, especially in an area that has an uneasy history with new theater companies. But I am not a theater person if I do no theater. There is a point where it is more constructive to open a new theater under challenging circumstances, than to complain endlessly about my inability to relate to existing theater. If my needs as an artist and audience are not being served, it is my responsibility to change that. I want to participate in modern, challenging, underperformed works of theatrical excellence. Working Class Theater NW is my opportunity to meet that goal.

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Appendix A- Tacoma Theater Produced from 2009- 2014

Season	Lakewood Playhouse		Tacoma Little Theater	
	Title	Year	Title	Year
9/2009 to 6/2010	The Mousetrap	1952	The Star Spangled Girl	1967
	Tuesdays With Morrie	2008	Lend Me a Tenor	1989
	Tom Sawyer: The Musical	2001	A Christmas Story	2000
	You Can't Take it With You	1936	Over the River and Through the Woods	1999
	HMS Pinafore	1940	Noises Off	1982
	The Grapes of Wrath	1991	Major Barbara	1941
	A Tuna Christmas	1996		
9/2010 to 6/2011	Sherlock Holmes and the Doom of Devilsmoore	?	Sleuth	1970
	The Best Christmas Pageant Ever	1982	Eleemosynary	1985
	Ring Around the Moon	1998	Annie	1997
	My Name is Asher Lev	2003	Frost/Nixon	2006
	The Lion in Winter	1966	A Flea in Her Ear	1907
	Sweeny Todd	1979	The Who's Tommy	1992
			A Transylvanian Clockwork	?
9/2011 to 6/2012	Something Wicked This Way Comes	1962	The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee	2005
	Oliver!	1960	Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde	1886
	Play it Again, Sam	1969	A Christmas Carol	1843
	The Farnsworth Invention	2009	California Suite	1976
	The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940	1987	Someone Who'll Watch Over Me	1992
	A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum	1963	Footloose the Musical	1998
9/2012 to 6/2013	Love Letters	1989	Sylvia	1995
	Sherlock's Last Case	1984	Night Watch	1972
	Twelfth Night	1600	Miracle on 34th Street	1947

	Best Christmas Pageant Ever	1982	Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks	2003
	The Children's Hour	1934	The Joy Luck Club	2007
	The Woman In Black	1983	Little Shop of Horrors	1982
	The Rainmaker	1955	Complete Works of Wllm Shkspr (Abridged)	1987
	The Importance of Being Earnest	1899	The Laramie Project	2000
9/2013 to 6/2014	Arsenic and Old Lace	1942	Complete Works of Wllm Shkspr (Abridged)	1987
	Pride and Prejudice	1936	Steel Magnolias	1987
	The Chronicles of Narnia	1950	The Weir	1997
	Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf	1962	It's a Wonderful Life	1946
	12 Angry Men	1955	To Kill a Mockingbird	1960
	The Odd Couple	1966		
	Monty Python's Spamalot	2005		

Dates	Total Plays Counted Number	34 % of Total	32
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Pre 1900	4	6%
1901-1910	1	1%
1911-1920	0	0%
1921-1930	0	0%
1931-1940	4	6%
1941-1950	5	7%
1951-1960	5	7%
1960-1970	8	12%
1971-1980	3	4%

1981- 1990	13	19%
1991- 2000	11	18%
2001- 2010	9	13%
2011- 2014		
Not Known	2	3%

“You start from the beginning and go through the middle, and wind up at the end.”

Robert in *A Life in the Theatre* (Mamet, 1975, p. 23)

The foundation of theater is community. The foundation of community is respect. The foundation of respect is gratitude. Working Class Theater NW would not have been possible without the communities of support in my personal, professional and academic life. Although WCTNW sprung from my experience and research in theater, it is not a vanity project that lives and dies by my personal talents and drawbacks. Working Class Theater NW is a reflection of the time, talent and dedication of a great many people. Putting on a show is a huge achievement that I am proud to be a part of.

A Life in the Theatre was so much better than I had any right to hope. I have nothing but praise and gratitude for the actors, directors, and volunteers who made this show happen. There were seats, lights, and props, because someone built, found or bought them. People enjoyed themselves, complimenting the actors, the director and the artistic director on the way out the door. “Funniest thing I’ve seen in a while.” “Can I buy a season pass?” A review in the Tacoma Volcano had nothing but love for the director and actors. The truth is, you never know what will happen until after it is over. I did not know who would come to my shows until they had. I did not know what their reactions would be until I saw them laugh. However, each milestone offers the opportunity to examine what is being built and evaluate and course correct based on those findings. This production of *A Life in the Theater* is the largest milestone to date and I’d like to reflect on what it took to get here.

Putting on this show took time. The actors and director rehearsed three days a week, for two to three hours at a time, for a month and a half. I joined them in rehearsal for two days a week, when I was not in class, as stage manager. Load in of the show happened on Sunday before the first Friday performance, and tech rehearsals lasted for four hours Monday through Thursday in the evenings of that final rehearsal week. In community theater, everyone takes on this time commitment as a volunteer, in addition to their work and family responsibilities. While the actors were doing their work outside of rehearsal memorizing lines and blocking, I was trying to find an inexpensive performance venue, design publicity and marketing materials and make sure the show was going to happen.

In addition to time, the show process made use of existing community relationships and helped us build new ones. For a while, it looked as though we would have to pay hundreds of dollars to rent a performance space, or perform outside in a park. A month before the performance, Candi Hall from the DASH Center offered us the use of their second studio space for free. Doing favors and expressing gratitude builds mutually beneficial relationships. We had loaned DASH a number of pink velour curtains offloaded by a touring musical production before their performances in Asia. The curtains weren't doing any good waiting in the basement of my house and were put to better use by DASH while WCTNW waited for a theater space of our own. Because of this favor, they offered us a favor in return. I am likely to help DASH move into their new space, let them perform in our theater, or offer help when they need it, because I know they appreciate the help and will support me in turn. Spaceworks Tacoma helped publicize the show. Tacoma Youth Theater loaned us seating. NW Stage and St. Martin's

University loaned us lighting gear. This outpouring of help expressed the community's belief that we were doing something worth supporting. These are the relationships that WCTNW will develop and build on in the years to come.

The theater space we carved out of the DASH Center had only fifty seats. Each night, the audience was more than half full; on the final performance, there were thirty-eight people in attendance. Many were friends of myself, or the cast. However, newspaper ads, the Face Book page, and the review of the show drew in several people each night. More than forty people signed up for the theater's mailing list. Although the event was free, people donated enough money that after two shows I was able to pay back the production costs and still give everyone involved \$22.00. It says something about the state of community theater, that no one expected me to divide the profit equally among the six participants (myself, the theater, the tech/artistic director, the show director and the two actors). \$22 isn't much money, but it is a concrete example of my principles-fairness and equal respect for the work put into this project.

I am building a theater. I am not personally pouring the concrete, or framing the walls. My role is building the supporting base of artists, patrons and other helpful, interested people. Building community. It is difficult, especially for an impatient person like me. I can't provide all of the support that this nascent theater requires. If I were going to act, direct, and financially benefit from every show I produce, it would be different- a vanity project that requires no external input. But that is not the case. Why am I building this theater then? It needs to happen. Tacoma needs quality, accessible theater. It's not about me, except for my role in making it happen.

Theater is magic: deceptively difficult, time-consuming magic. Like the actor who has to memorize his lines and then present them every night as if he had just thought them up, a theater manager must lay a lot of groundwork and then deny that it was a stressful chore. A lighting design is never mentioned unless something has gone wrong. It doesn't matter how many hours, volunteers and resources were spent hanging and focusing lights and writing light cues, if nobody can see the actors' faces, that energy was wasted. I have spent a lot of time talking up the theater, building a base of support online through Facebook, our website and our monthly newsletter. This work pays off indirectly, when a portion of those likes, or subscribers enjoy a production. It pays off when I can draw a direct line from the values of our mission to the art we place upon the stage. We have a lot to learn and a very long way to go, but we have begun.

Appendix C- Promotional Materials



WORKING CLASS
THEATRE NW

Working Class Theater NW Presents:

A Life in the Theatre by David Mamet

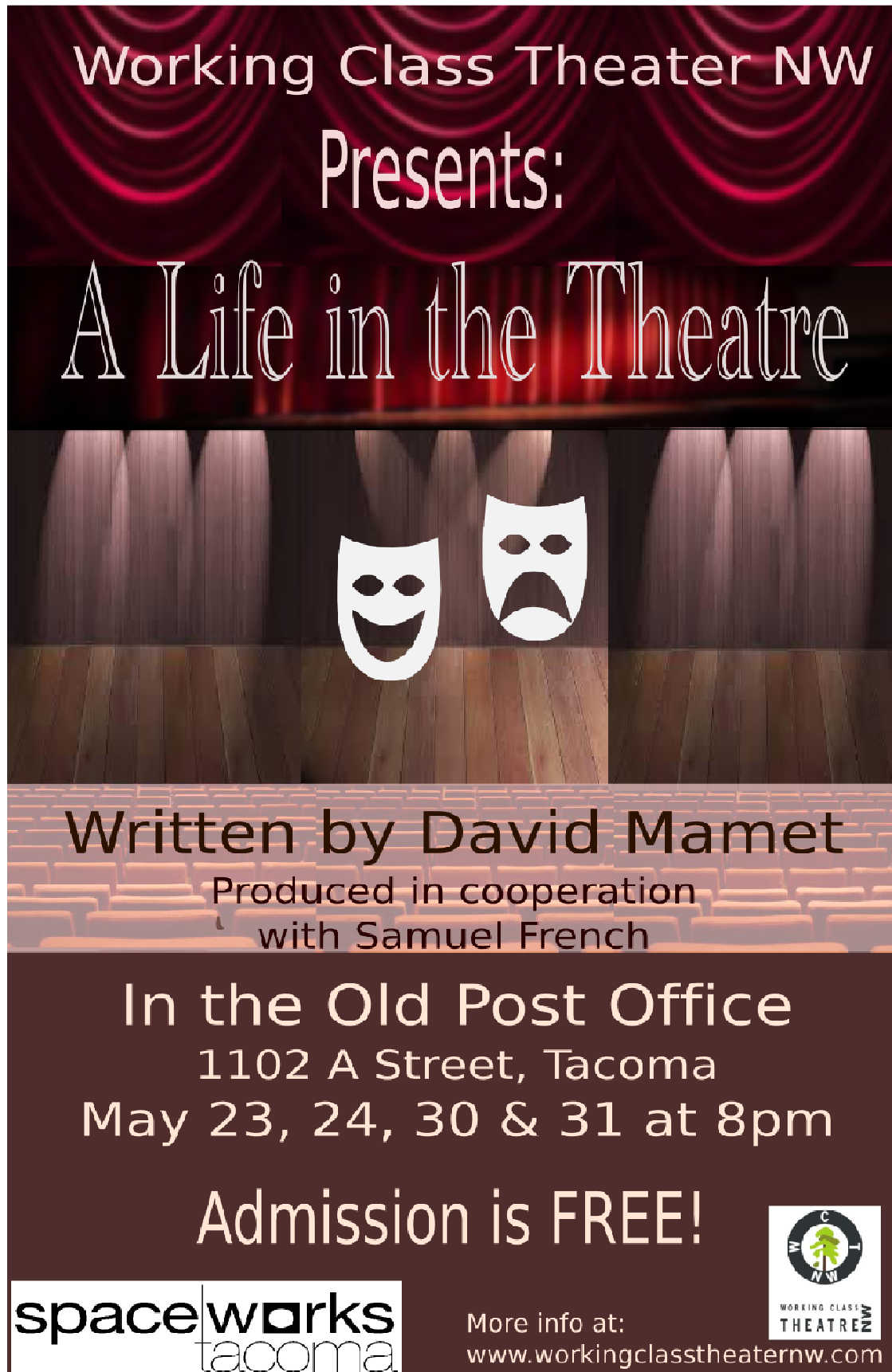
May 23, 24, 30 & 31 at 8pm

In the Old Post Office: 1102 A St, Tacoma

Admission is FREE!!

WARNING! Contains some adult language.

Have you ever wondered why actors choose the demanding life of theater? Do you enjoy quality, inexpensive theater? Do you catch yourself thinking, “I’d like to see more theater in Tacoma!” Well, we have your solution. Join Tacoma’s newest theater company, Working Class Theater NW, for their first production! *A Life in the Theatre* chronicles the lives of two actors at different points in their careers as they explore drama onstage and off! It’s a deeply personal, hilarious exploration of the crazy people and situations that make up the world of theater. As a new theater company, we have something to prove. This show is our answer to the question, “Why on earth would you open a theater in Tacoma?”



Working Class Theater NW
Presents:
A Life in the Theatre

Written by David Mamet
Produced in cooperation
with Samuel French

In the Old Post Office
1102 A Street, Tacoma
May 23, 24, 30 & 31 at 8pm

Admission is FREE!

spaceworks
tacoma

More info at:
www.workingclasstheaternw.com

