

“The Burbage Legacy”

by Bernie Sahlins

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As the British say about cricket: Art is not a matter of life and death...it's much more important than that. We come and we go, but the music of Ariel's island sings forever. And you here today may honorably be addressed as mentors to the entrepreneurs of art.

There are those who are troubled by the conjunction of two words -- entrepreneur and art -- but the task of the arts *administrator* is the same as that of the art *maker*: to use his or her skills to serve and enable art.

Accordingly, you here today have elected to enter the great fellowship of the arts. Like most priests, like some doctors, and fewer lawyers, you have not a job, but a vocation, a calling. You have chosen not to enter the clock-watching world of nine to five. Yours is a consuming, full-time activity. While few of you will grow rich, you are members of a highly privileged group. You are able to make your work and your life one.

And most important work it is. There are many times in the history of your profession when the administrator's contribution led to enormous and beneficial change that radically transformed the art itself.

I would submit to you -- as an example of that -- and as a marker for the accomplishments and the importance of administrative achievement, the contribution of James Burbage, a sixteenth-century *English* entrepreneur in the arts.

This is his story.

In 1576, Mister James Burbage erected a wooden theater in Shoreditch, a section of London. It was the *very first* of the English public theatres. Burbage came out of the small artisan and middle class in England. He united in himself the *trade* of carpenter the *profession* of actor, and the *role* of arts entrepreneur, and he built a building such as had not been seen in England before. It was designed with a stage, a tiring room, sitting and standing room for audiences -- all for the practical purpose of providing a permanent home for a *company* of actors -- and which he simply called, “the theatre.”

In the course of his planning, while figuring out how to organize his project, Burbage made what is arguably among the most important -- if not *the* most important -- contribution to the theater world ever made by one man.

Now, to prove I do not say that lightly, weigh the fact that some twenty years later, in a company headed by James Burbage's son Richard, one of the company members was an actor (and incidentally, a playwright) named William Shakespeare, and you can see, when I so value Mister Burbage's contribution on a comparative scale, I do so quite seriously.

What he did -- like so many important discoveries once they have been achieved -- seems simple now. But I think you'll agree it really was revolutionary. What he did was nothing less than to invent -- the box office!

Up to the time James Burbage came up with this brilliant idea -- now picture this - - the players would give their performance, in a field, or in a castle hall or public square, then, at the end of the play they would bow and start to pass the hat, only to find that the much of audience had melted away. Burbage pondered this problem. In a eureka moment he came up with a solution: First build a special place designed exclusively to present drama, and -- here comes the genius -- charge the audience a penny as they entered, BEFORE the performance. Brilliant! Brilliant! To this day, theatre managers, staffs, and casts should offer up a little prayer to Mister Burbage every night before curtain time.

Now what was incredible effect of this simple, little idea? Only that Mister Burbage, the administrator, forever changed the structure of dramatic presentation.

Moreover, thanks to him and his invention, there followed in England a veritable orgy of public theatre building. Soon Elizabethan London was unique in Europe because of its many theatres. Like Burbage's playhouse, they were built of wood and were able to accommodate thousands of people. These playhouses were the wonders of foreign visitors. And, it follows that with so many theaters, there was an enormous demand for playwrights to write, for actors to act, for designers, musicians, crews -- all this from the simple notion of a box office.

Now what besides the delightful consequences of sudden administrative inspiration can we learn from this Englishman's story? What can we learn from Burbage?

First, take no practice for granted. We who train managers must teach them to constantly look with fresh eyes at every facet of the work. Are we leaving unexamined any of our methods, procedures, and assumptions? Are we departing from our mission? Are we overlooking the obvious?

For example, those organizations with subscription series, are understandably proud when the subscriber base increases. But a recent study undertaken by a music group in this city revealed what for them was a surprising fact -- that the cost of enrolling a new subscriber exceeded the income from that subscription. The costs in staff, telemarketing, mailings, etc. were greater than the income from that subscription, while, of course, renewals were nearly cost free. An increased emphasis on renewals in their marketing allocations improved their bottom line considerably.

One of my own peeves is with arts organizations who do not pay enough attention to the act of attending -- which by the way starts in the parking lot and covers the polite box office, the welcoming and even celebratory lobby, the smiling, cordial staff, and extensive pre-show and post-show activities. The very act of going to the theater should, itself, be at least as much fun as going to a rock concert.

From attending to scheduling, in examining and questioning on a regular basis every one of our assumptions, we may not achieve a Burbage revolution, but we may very well find new avenues for growth.

Now, the material advantages of Burbage's concept are clear. I will shortly come to the spiritual, perhaps the even more important, implications of Burbage's work. But first let me turn to the unique problems of the present and to the great challenge facing arts administrators.

We are especially in need of your administrative guidance because, as illustrated in this paragraph from an article that appeared recently in the *Herald Tribune*, this is a curious time in the west for those of us involved in the support and presentation of the arts.

“Last night 20 members of the Brandenburg Philharmonic shackled themselves to a new concert hall in Potsdam, Germany -- that is being especially built for them -- to protest plans to *disband* the orchestra. Fiscal belt tightening in the city means that the orchestra is due to be disbanded in the near future.”

Now, perhaps chaining yourself to an I-beam *can* be considered a form of entrepreneurship, but I dare say any one in attendance this afternoon would have devised a more effective plan.

Nevertheless, twenty shackled musicians are symptomatic of what is going on.

They and we are confronted with a peculiarly contemporary problem. Suddenly, many western nations are confused about the questions of how we pay for the arts and how we carve out a place for the arts in society.

For years the rest of the world has had no doubt about what to do. The first thing was to heap scorn on the United States. “*Our* government,” the Europeans would say, “supports the arts while *yours* does nothing.” And often we hung our heads in quiet acknowledgment of the criticism. For it was true that, while we in America have struggled with a wide-ranging mixture of private support, many European artists had long been sustained, intravenously, by huge cultural bureaucracies. But the times they are a-changing -- as symbolized by our shackled musicians.

Lo and behold, Europeans are learning that those who depend on the goodwill of a single patron can be left high and dry when that patron is faced with other priorities or with difficult times. In the case of our musicians, the Brandenburg budget needs to be cut and they are the ones to go. The result: they are left in limbo. They do not have anywhere in their society people with the initiative, the ingenuity, the skills and, yes, the passion, of you who are here today. Nor is the problem, in Europe, confined to music. Museums in some countries are flourishing, but others are curtailing hours and raising fees. Many dance and theatre companies are disbanding. Suddenly the American model of diversified support looks better and better.

But meanwhile, your students will be facing a different difficulty. “Why” -- ask many who have given to the arts in the past -- “Should we continue to devote resources to such activities when so many of our people are hungry, ill-housed, lacking health care and under-educated?”

We find this question even among ourselves, as arts advocates. In these hard times for many of our citizens, we are often led to doubt ourselves and our chosen vocation. We are often prey to a failure of nerve.

Way back in 1949, William Faulkner earned the Nobel Prize in Literature. The speech he delivered was not immediately intelligible -- both because of Faulkner’s Southern accent and because the microphone was too distant from his mouth. Also, I suspect, he brought along his private stock of Kentucky bourbon. But when his speech was printed in the press the next day it was immediately hailed as one of the most significant addresses ever delivered at a Nobel ceremony. I quote a small bit from the 600-word address.

Our tragedy today, said Faulkner, is a general and universal fear. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up? (way back in 1949!) Because of this -- the young artist has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict -- *only that* is worth the agony and sweat. He must learn them again.

Faulkner goes on to say -- and here is the important point -- It is the artist’s *privilege* to help man endure by lifting his heart -- by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice,

which have been the glory of his past. The artist's voice can help man to endure and prevail.

Faulkner had it right. Our voices together can be a mighty chorus.

He also had it right to remind us that we carry a heavy responsibility to those who have gone before us and to the work they have created. We should not live in the past, but the past should live in us.

Now what does all of this have to do with solving the financial problems facing arts organizations? Many of us who have been in this business of funding for a while have come across an interesting fact. It is true that the moguls and captains of industry, as well as the affluent members of the general public, would like to associate their gifts to the arts with recognition of their names or their businesses, or even in the case of many companies with a marketing benefit (and we *should* stress these opportunities). But, if properly approached, in many of those who would offer support there is also a surprisingly positive response to the power of spiritual benefits. Many hardened executives are, believe it or not, open to Faulkner's message.

I tell you ladies and gentlemen that, along with marketing opportunities, your students can be taught to sell *soul medicine*.

For this breakthrough, they will be called on to exercise the skills of a master psychologist plus the persuasiveness of a snake-oil salesman, while possessing an intimate knowledge of how to appeal to the idealist lurking deep within our bottom-line business supporters -- plus one other important quality which my English wife calls "getting on with it."

Too many of us are ready to accept that you can't get there from here. Zeno, in one of his famous paradoxes, pointed out that in order to complete any journey, you must first travel half the distance. But before you can do that you must travel one quarter of the distance, and before that one eighth and so on. In other words, you must complete an infinite number of journeys in reverse order. So, Zeno proved, since you can never get there, it's futile to even start. It's a very comforting idea for those of us who are fundamentally lazy. But, when Zeno told this to Diogenes, Diogenes refuted it. How? Simply by getting up and walking away.

So teach your students to step right up and fear not. They can appeal to the pocket book, yes. But they must be aware also of the spiritual hunger we all wish to satisfy. From a look at your records and achievements, it is clear you are a group of people who not only believe *can* get there from here -- you have *proven* it.

I have faith that this stellar group will continue to serve the arts by employing their considerable skills in that service. Each of you has asked the questions; “Will I accept the world as given? Will I look at it as a place to wrest things from – things that will materially enrich me?” And each of you must have, at one time or another, answered, “No, I see the world is a place for positive change. My enrichment comes from fostering that change in myself and others.” For you all share this delicious bit of knowledge: that the special value of art lies not in what it makes of the world but what it makes of the knower.

The artist and the administrator together with the audience are the readers of what Coleridge called the “mighty alphabet of the universe.” We are in the world and the world is in us. Those of us who subscribe to the idea that art is important have one of two jobs -- to make the art, and, in your case, teach how to make the art possible.

So in a Europe, where resources are being reallocated, and in an America, where social issues vie for those resources, you must strive to represent the reincarnation of the spirit of Burbage.

Let me close by *returning* to Mister James Burbage and by trying to convey a most important and really beautiful idea embodied in the *spiritual* effects of what he did. When Burbage had that brilliant notion (you remember, the box office), he not only changed forever the structure of play presentation but (and here is the delightful and wondrous point; here is the ultimate value of what an arts administrator does), he started the process of transforming the actor from being a *beggar*, who humbly passed the hat, to being an *artist*, who was held to be of great worth to the community. And there you have the indispensable, the crucial role of your teaching: to bring to art the world’s respect and to the artist, self-respect. May you all succeed in that vital mission.

Thank you.

About Mr. Sahlins:

Bernard “Bernie” Sahlins is an American writer, director, and comedian best known as a founder of The Second City improvisational comedy troupe with Paul Sills and Howard Alk in 1959. Sahlins also opened the Second City Theatre in Toronto in 1973. While his popular fame may be tied to improvisational comedy, Sahlins' roots and passion has always been in the theater. In 1953 he became a producer of Playwrights Theatre Club -- featuring such budding actors and directors as Ed Asner, Mike Nichols, Elaine May, and Paul Sills. In 1956, he presented a year of plays in Chicago's Studebaker Theatre, including the Chicago premiere of *Waiting for Godot*. He also co-founded The International Theatre Festival of Chicago. After launching The Second City, he remained as producer and, eventually, one of the directors until the 1990s. Among the many

talents he hired were John and Jim Belushi, John Candy, Dan Aykroyd, Gilda Radner, Harold Ramis, and Bill Murray. His years with The Second City are documented in his memoir, *Days and Nights at The Second City*. Sahlins was also one of the producers of the acclaimed TV show "SCTV." He is the recipient of The Sergei prize for playwriting, The University of Chicago Professional Achievement Award, The Chicago Drama League's Professional Achievement Award, Joseph Jefferson Awards for directing and professional achievement, The Illinois Arts Alliance "Legend" award, and the Improv Festival Achievement Award.

About the Association of Arts Administration Educators:

The Association of Arts Administration Educators (www.artsadministration.org) is an international association of degree-granting institutions in arts and cultural management, providing a dynamic forum for its members and advancing formal training and high educational standards for the field. Association members provide graduate and undergraduate programs in arts management, cultural enterprise, cultural policy, and research in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Finland, Australia, South Africa, and Japan.