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## Sustainability in the Performing Arts

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### ABSTRACT

Are old ways sustainable? This article aims to explore the dynamics between the traditional modes of what constitutes performance and the need for increasing resources in a dynamic and digital world.

The performance art disciplines of musicianship, acting and dance have been taught for centuries by utilizing the traditional resources of instruction, instruments, and studio space. The paper examines the sustainability of traditional learning formats in the digital age and how the studio practice techniques challenge and offer resources for the 21st Century Performance Artist. While modes of presenting performance work have changed, the basic fundamental structure of practice and preparation remain the foundation of training.

Examining the current practices of performing arts training, as well as trends and data from research drivers, which examine the quality of life generated by performance arts, the presentation will argue that Performance Artists presume sustainable of careers.

**Keywords:** *Sustainability, Performance, Arts, Training*

### Sustainability in the Performing Arts

Recently, I attended a conference where a presenter confessed that the skills he learned in college twenty years earlier were now obsolete. Having majored and worked in communications and marketing, his training and education in the 1990s had not prepared him for the digital age. Consequently, he was in the ongoing process of job training. In addition, while he credited a university liberal arts education as providing him the foundations in which to apply himself to the job market, it was not the core skills he learned, but the knowledge of *how to* learn which ultimately allowed career mobility. His situation was not unique; his story can be applied to several vocations as technology advances and changes how we connect to industry. Harkening back on a time when there was not the internet, or digital literacy, or (please insert the latest technologies here) is becoming difficult. In today’s job market, techniques and technologies quickly become obsolete.

Admittedly, many lucrative professions are relatively new and benefit from innovations in data driven technology. Careers in information technology, human resources, and blogging are all recent occupations. Educators must possess keen abilities to prepare students for the careers of the future, many of which are currently and admittedly yet to be discovered. In researching the sustainability of a career, one must not only consider the core skills developed, but also account for how sustainable the actual training and education received for the longevity of the projected career. Academic and vocational training follows industry; new curriculum created from necessity often takes years to develop into an academic plan of study. Currently, for example, craft beer making is having an academic renaissance component in the United States. As universities realize the market trend towards entrepreneurial breweries and microbreweries, both of which have gained popularity in the past decade. The drive to create a sustainable industry by offering education and training in not only beer making, but also market analysis, environmental impact, and advertising all revolve around a developing industry in search of an educated work force. By all accounts, these programs are sustainable.



The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (1985) defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability, which is regarded as the ability to maintain at a certain rate or level, is a trending topic relatively new to higher education and borrowed from the private sector world of business. Business sustainability is often defined as managing the bottom line, whereas companies forecast their financial, social and environmental risks, opportunities and obligations. These three impacts are sometimes referred to as profits, people and planet (The Financial Times, 2018). Sustainable industries avoid the depletion of natural resources in order to succor the global environment. These hallmarks of sustainability, maintenance and environmental support are under constant analysis by industry and organizations. While this definition of sustainability presumes that resources need to be maintained and are fixed or restricted, the same definition can play an important role in the advocating for performing arts training as a sustainable commodity that has positive impact on future generations.

While modes of presenting performance work have changed, the basic fundamental structure of practice and preparation remain the foundation of training. The performing arts contribute to a sustainable future by providing social cohesion, economic vitality, cultural education and health as well as personal development. Through sustainable studio practice techniques, performing arts training provides critical resources, which develop and maintain relevance for the future of societal and cultural identities. As with the business model, arts training profits people and the planet. The sustainability of training offers resources for the 21st Century performance artist.

### **The Passion and a Plank Theory of Performance Training**

In the arena of performing arts, sustainable methodologies identify as resources that have been consistent for hundreds of years. In the world of studio based practice, the sustainability factor is exceptionally high as the raw materials needed to train actors, dancers and musicians. A studio and a teacher have not intrinsically changed. Technology has greatly advanced the art forms contributing to the presentation and production of the performing arts. Conversely, not much has fundamentally changed in how the forms are practiced in studios. Dancers need access to a dance studio, actors need a rehearsal space, and musicians need a studio and the instrument of choice. Practice and repetition are completed in the same space, which can be sustained with basic maintenance. For this perspective, performance arts training is relatively economical. In other words, all that is needed is the persistence and dedication to practice (the passion) and a space to do it in (the plank). This simple theory of passion and a plank, which has driven the sustainability of performing arts, has recently been tested with the introduction of technology. Online education and digital caption allow the instructor and student to be in different time zones, but the training remains essentially the same. Practice, practice, practice. Repetition at the core of performing arts requires sustainable practice skills to advance to higher technical levels in any art form. While the disciplines of acting, music and dance have been appreciated since ancient times, the formal training of these forms in higher education is relatively new. Once again, the academy follows sustainable trends. Musical theatre and entertainment enjoyed for centuries is a relatively young academic discipline. University unified training of musical theatre artists only began in the late Twentieth century. The Musical Theatre program at Cincinnati Conservatory of Music (CCM) claims to be the oldest in the United States, having only been established in 1968. The proliferation of Musical Theatre programs in higher education illustrates the level of sustainability, as the demanding major is now available in over 90 college programs in the United States and gaining popularity worldwide. Music, dance and acting programs have all proven sustainable in higher education as each has allowed the next generation of artists to benefit without depleting resources. While the resources to produce musical theatre (e.g., a rehearsal hall, dance studio and a piano) are often finite, the training methodologies used are very sustainable.

The combination of passion and a plank, hard work and the space to do it in, are at the heart of performance training. The simple and untechnical approach of human contact and mentoring artists is at the



core of theatre training. Additionally, this makes the performance arts increasingly necessary in our ultra-digital and high-resolution media world. No technology, however adaptable, can compete with the human contact of a master artist training in a studio. The need for human connection is becoming more fragile and thus the need for sustainability.

### Sustainability of Training Opportunities and Needs

Performance training often explores the human condition and the recreation of truthful behavior including intimacy. One area of performance training which has seen a need for reinforcements and thus creates a sustainable training program is in the creation of intimacy for the stage. Maintaining the illusion of violence has been a standard of theatrical training for decades with approaches to theatrical combat and stage fighting to provide safe and standard practices while maintaining the recreation of behaviors. In recent years, actor training has evolved and developed the need to recreate moments of intimacy for the stage. This is more evident in the digital age as the lack of physical interactions have created setbacks among younger actors in recreating intimate and truthful moments in a safe and sustainable way.

According to Psychology Today, the fear of intimacy and avoidance of closeness in relationships is the norm for about 17% of adults in Western cultures (Shorey, 2015).

Compounded with a lack of intimacy in social contexts, there also exists the need to advocate for social skills in training young people in the art of interaction as the computerized classroom focuses on a single contact and detracts from socialized behavior. As everyone focused on a screen and often a tiny one, a central criticism of computer led learning is the lack of socialization and interaction it provides. This has led school districts to develop programs in order to instill socialization in public schools. In early education, the need to socialize young students often completes with, or is as important as the need for academics. The lack of socialized interactions necessitates educators to create experiences where children can react and develop skills to teach tolerance and empathy. The need for training has developed into a new approach to performance training. Performing arts serve as a strong platform for social interaction. With the lack of confrontation afforded by physical contact, young artists are finding greater need to be coached in the ways of socialized interactions. Thus, the sustainability of performance training is aided by the way of a new career in the arts; that of the intimacy director.

Recommended and trained intimacy directors operate in a specific code of ethics with a high artistic standard, while operating their rehearsals in a professional, respectful, appropriate and amiable atmosphere. If current trends continue, the sustainability of training intimacy directors is likely to rise as socialized behaviors are becoming increasingly recognized due to the fact that acquired skills needed to improve theatrical interactions that convey deeper emotional conditions. All which contribute to academic learning and performance (Garibaldi & Josias, 2015). Intimacy Directors International (IDI) is a nonprofit organization that represents like-minded artists. The organization’s website provides a description of the work of an Intimacy director:

Intimacy for the Stage is choreographing of Moments of Intimacy in performance. The focus is on subtle and specific details in movement and intention, for the purpose of telling the story of the scene. This is not just "making out" or sex scenes, but can also encompass moments of intimacy found among dear friends, between parents and children, and can also cover scenes of sexual violence. Intimacy for the Stage has been enthusiastically received as a practice that empowers actors to respect their own boundaries while improving the quality and clarity of scenes of intimacy (Intimacy Directors International, n.d.).

In an environment where actors unaccustomed to physical contact are challenged by the creation of undisclosed moments, the use of an intimacy director allows the continuum of training. Just as the dialect coach, movement coach, stage combat or fight director and choreographer who assist in the recreation and execution of performance behaviors, the creation and development of intimacy recreated on stage becomes



part of the sustainable practices employed in arts training. This recreation may serve purpose beyond the rehearsal studio and into classrooms and boardrooms as an effective way to communicate. Imagine how the authenticity of recreating physical touch, emotional intimacy and character role-play could influence group meetings or conferences. Such interactions recognize the cultural value of the arts to transform communities, and to tackle social issues while identifying the struggle to keep relevant and valued. Although the arts have delivered this spectrum of entertainment, inspiration, and transformative value for as long as humankind has existed, they have faced a roller coaster of recognition and marginalization in our country since even before our founding. We are now; however, at a moment where there seems to be an increased recognition of the broad value of the arts (Lynch, 2015).

### **Sustainability of the Organizational and Artistic Mission**

To be sustainable, arts organizations ensure their mission whether it is sustainable and recognized as impacting society. Impact drives arts sustainability. The public does not buy tickets or donate money to an orchestra so that it will be financially strong; they attend because they are inspired by music and recognize the impact in their community. A performing arts training program must operate on a sustainable mission that promotes cultural education and the personal development of young artists as the impact of individual artistic growth provides inspiration. The recognition of artistic excellence is a foundation of an enlightened society. Training to inspire, rather than gain financial success, should be the purpose of artistic sustainability. It is only after the mission which is clarified that the organization can work on financial, organizational and programmatic sustainability.

Musician and archeologist Scott Chamberlain writes extensively about the balance between financial sustainability and the role organizational structure plays in arts management.

Ah, “sustainable.” It is a buzzword of the moment, showing up in discussions ranging from the environment to manufacturing, agriculture...even the arts. Of course, everyone wants to be sustainable, thinking that they, their product, or their service will stand the test of time and last forever. Sustainability is, and must be, comprehensive especially for a nonprofit, which is not solely about turning a profit. ...

For many people, “sustainability” simply means *financial* stability, as if we were thinking in terms of a for-profit enterprise, which the arts are not. To define sustainability without using more holistic criteria that can better ensure arts organizations thrive, is far too narrow.

Arts organizations need to ensure their programmatic sustainability. It is only after the mission is made strong that the organization can work on financial, organizational, and programmatic sustainability. These areas are critical, but they must be put in service of making the mission strong. Otherwise, there is no reason to do any of it (Chamberlain, 2015).

A sustainable nonprofit organization has the ability to carry out activities that achieve its mission while also developing and ensuring the organization’s relevance in the future. In the world of higher education, mission is crucial in maintaining sustainability. Once the mission is secure, an arts organization can drill down into the measurements of programmatic sustainability. This ability to develop, mature, and modify training programs as needs, which are realized over time, helps arts maintain relevance and move forward. In other words, no money in the world can keep an uninspired program sustainable.

### **Sustainability as no longer Optional**

Ian David Moss, founder of Createquity, identifies the intrinsic need for sustainability in performing arts in his article entitled Everything We Know About Whether and How the Arts Improves Lives (Moss, 2016). Moss’s research on the educational, health, economic, and other positive effects of performing arts and culture provides support to the benefits of sustainable training programs in the arts and the arts in society. The informative reports investigate how the arts and arts training improve lives in four key areas including



social cohesion, economic vitality, physical and mental health and education and personal development. While economic vitality is often recognized as the primary sustainability model in most for-profit sectors, the impact of the arts on education and personal development are equally impressive, and equally invite investigation. Moss’s report covers a broad cross section of art forms to find general effects of art on the population. The study presents significant variations between disciplines, between different modes of artistic participation and between participants. The report maintains that music is the most-studied intervention, and supports the most scholarly evidence regarding the benefits music brings to our quality of life. The report further identifies key values associated with all arts and arts training including:

- Participatory arts activities help to maintain the health and life quality of older adults.
- Arts therapies contribute to positive clinical outcomes for patients, such as reductions in anxiety, stress and pain.
- Arts participation in early childhood promotes social and emotional development.
- Student participation in structured arts activities enhances cognitive abilities and social skills that support learning, memory, problem solving, and communication.

The last point is exceptionally revealing as it identifies that performing arts training reinforces itself in the pursuit of techniques through memorization, which not only provides mastery of aesthetic practice but also supports cognitive development and socialization in young artists. In an age where social skills are taught in school along with formal curricular subjects, this is a valued commodity and adds to a sustainable society.

### **Sustainability as a Cultural Identity**

In addition to the sustainability of technique, performance arts training affords another benefit equally more impactful as it is continued to break global boundaries through technology and the digital age. Cultural literacy, another unique position central to performing arts training is the ability to embed cultural representation into performance training practices. This allows the dance community to not only study traditional western Eurocentric dance forms (e.g., classical ballet) and European ballroom dance, but also to open the training menu to include culturally authentic practices (e.g., Irish Step dancing, Ukrainian folk dance, Balinese Kecak dance and the cultural and tribal dances of Sub-Saharan Africa). Global awareness and the need for authenticity not only allow cultural meeting points between master teachers who address the need for both cultural literacy and sharing of traditions, but also create a support for students to find similarities within the challenges of learning something stylistically diverse. In addition, there is great joy in sharing cultural traditions with others via performance work.

Recently, Kent State University’s School of Theatre and Dance benefitted from two cultural pairings in different performance disciplines. Through the Dance division and Professor Jeffrey Marc Rockland, students of Kent State have developed a sharing pattern of working with Thai dancers associated with Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The dancers share traditional American dance (i.e., Western dance styles) as they learn traditions specific to Thai dance culture. This intersection provides transference of cultural and aesthetic mastery of the disciplines and an appreciation for the otherness of different dance cultures. During the school’s summer program at Porthouse Theatre and with the leadership of Professor Jakyung Seo, students from South Korean universities have spent each of the last four years in residence at Kent State to learn traditional American Musical Theatre dance, and to share a traditional Korean cultural dance and song. The impact of both American and South Korean students singing in both English and Korean, during the same period in history when leaders from both nations are in summit served as a powerful representation of cultural sustainability. The union promotes a message of oneness and collaboration. These messages of goodwill and social development continue long after the performance ends as the experiences gained from each group are shared with other students back home.



Performing arts generates a cultural sustainability as the traditional methods are codified, taught, presented, and represented in small and profound intersections every time dancers, actors or singers work together. Performance arts allows a two-fold cultural sustainability. The continuance and insurance of an art form which has traditionally been preserved through practice and the appreciation and transformative awareness of exposure to traditional performance genres that are best experienced live and in community with performers. Anyone who has ever travelled abroad to be treated to a performance by local folk dancers or musicians can testify to the appreciation of a gained cultural identity through performing arts.

While performance art practices have endured centuries, no discipline or technique can assume a cultural permanence as each is transmitted from teacher to novice, and is only one generation away from extinction. To assume sustainability of any art form, it is simply because it naturally continues and defeats the purpose of advocating for arts funding, innovation and inclusivity. Social Inclusion, Cultural Education and personal development all benefit as the performing arts contribute to a sustainable future. Through sustainable studio based practice techniques, performing arts training provides critical resources, which develop and maintain relevance for the future of societal and cultural identities. A love of the arts and a passion for the people, who provide training and continue the traditions of technique and skill, promotes sustainability. For too long, many arts groups focused on financial sustainability as the sole criterion to access an organization’s health. The education and personal development of young artist does carry expense, but provides immeasurable benefits. The data presented that arts and culture make communities stronger, promote healthier lifestyles, create a more engaged citizen, and generally make the world a better place which serves as proof of programmatic sustainability.

For all these beliefs, sustainability of the performing arts training affects our future lives, and with advocacy, it will continue long after the new careers of tomorrow become obsolete.

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