

# TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY:

## **A PARTNERSHIP CASE STUDY OF THE NATIONAL BLACK ARTS FESTIVAL AND THE WOODRUFF ARTS CENTER**

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**FEBRUARY 2008**

**COMMISSIONED BY THE NATIONAL BLACK ARTS FESTIVAL  
WITH SUPPORT FROM THE ANIMATING DEMOCRACY / WORKING CAPITAL FUND  
EXEMPLAR PROGRAM, A PROGRAM OF AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS  
IN COLLABORATION WITH THE LARSONALLEN PUBLIC SERVICE GROUP  
AND SUPPORTED BY THE FORD FOUNDATION**

“...There is little room for disengaged neutrality, little time for ‘sitting it out’ as events unfold, because we are all implicated in ways that we have yet to understand fully.”

— Sekou Sundiata<sup>1</sup>

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this case study is to tell a story about the building of a partnership among arts organizations with goodwill and “the courage of their convictions,” but with diverse histories, constituencies, scales, aesthetics, discipline backgrounds, and operating styles. At the time of this writing, the partnership was still a work in progress that sought to bring together organizations that believed that coordinating their efforts could produce something greater than the sum of the parts.

This study seeks to reveal the evolution of a process of intelligent and conscientious organizational leaders willing to explore synergies and shared interests, and sometimes grapple with tensions and discomfort to forge a mutually-beneficial relationship—both to serve the community they all live in more fully and deeply, and possibly to develop an interesting model for the field.

The Atlanta-based organizations involved in this partnership-building endeavor are the National Black Arts Festival (NBAF) and the Robert W. Woodruff Arts Center (Woodruff) and its resident divisions— the Alliance Theatre, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO), High Museum of Art (High), and Young Audiences (YA).

This study comprises a summary recounting of joint meetings that took place in 2006 and 2007 among the partners, followed by some reflections on unanswered questions, stumbling blocks, aspirations, and potential benefits of the partnership in process.<sup>2</sup>

A lot has been written about partnerships in the arts, with valuable words of advice and lists of lessons learned. (Field research on partnerships by Mikki Shepard was also conducted as part of this partnership process, and its results may be found at on the Animating Democracy website at [www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy/](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy/).) This case study is meant to ground more general partnership rules of thumb within a specific instance and to show that context matters—the devil is in the details regarding how we learn from experience.

## BACKGROUND

In 1987, the Fulton County Board of Commissioners founded the National Black Arts Festival (NBAF). Its action was based on a study commissioned by the Fulton County Arts Council to explore the feasibility of creating an Atlanta-based festival dedicated to celebrating and advancing the work of artists of African descent. Since then NBAF has grown into an organization with a \$2.5 million operating budget and which draws approximately 500,000 people to its ten-day summer festival, serving even more through its year-round local programming. Despite its growth and success, NBAF faces substantial ongoing challenges of raising 85 percent of its budget

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<sup>1</sup> Sekou Sundiata, “Thinking Out Loud,” Keynote speech, presented at *Diversity Revisited: A Conversation About Diversity in the Arts*, an annual convention of the National Performing Arts Convention, Pittsburgh, PA, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The interpretation herein of actions and discussions is the author’s. (The participants might differ on some matters). The study was vetted with participants, but any misinterpretations or inaccuracies are hers.

each year and, being a venue-less presenter, of finding reliable and affordable spaces in which to house its programs.

Throughout its history, NBAF has in various ways partnered with the Woodruff Arts Center. The Woodruff was founded by the Atlanta Arts Alliance in response to a tragic plane crash in 1962 that took the lives of many of Atlanta’s arts community leaders. With its resident divisions, it is one of the nation’s largest arts centers, with an operating budget of more than \$100 million and net assets of \$560 million, approximately \$300 million of which is in an endowment. NBAF and the Woodruff (as a whole and with its separate divisions) have collaborated in various ways over the years, including programming, marketing, and audience development activities.

In the spring of 2004, an anonymous donor made a five-year gift through the Kendeda Fund for Sustainable Atlanta that helps to underwrite NBAF’s access to venues on the Woodruff campus. This gift solidified the NBAF/Wodruff relationship in new ways—as a critical support to NBAF’s continuity in the city and, as stated by Shelton Stanfill (former president and CEO of the Woodruff), as an “agreement [that] greatly advances a mission of the Woodruff Arts Center to represent all audiences of the Atlanta Region and provide the Center national exposure through the audiences that the festival attracts.”<sup>3</sup> The gift (and its forthcoming expiration) has served as the impetus for NBAF to explore possible ways of working with the Woodruff that would institutionalize a relationship of mutual benefit and enhance the sustainability of both organizations.

## **BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP**

### **How It Started**

Though initial explorations into how NBAF and the Woodruff might collaborate were begun some five years before, in September 2005 NBAF, Woodruff, and Atlanta Arts Alliance leadership came together in a facilitated meeting convened by the High (and hosted by a board member shared by both the High and NBAF). This meeting marked the start of substantive conversations to “understand the nature, extent, and benefits of existing collaborations and partnerships, and to identify and explore opportunities for future partnership between Woodruff Arts Center divisions and the National Black Arts Festival.”<sup>4</sup> The planning team with leadership from the High, NBAF, and a consultant/facilitator developed a thoughtful agenda and discussion questions for a five-hour meeting. The agenda included a statement of the purpose of the meeting (cited above), its expected outcomes, and a list of assumptions (see below), as well as a brief history of the relationship of NBAF and the Woodruff to date.

### **Expected Outcomes**

1. Reach consensus on the value of continued partnership—beyond existing agreements.
2. Discover new opportunities for collaboration.
3. Designate responsibility and establish time frames for next steps.

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<sup>3</sup> National Black Arts Festival and the Robert W. Woodruff Arts Center. *The National Black Arts Festival Establishes Long Term Partnership with Woodruff Arts Center Campus Thanks to the Generosity of an Anonymous Donor Through the Kendeda Fund.* Press Release, May 10, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> All information cited about this meeting was gleaned from Summary Notes from the Woodruff Arts Center/National Black Arts Festival Partnership Explorations Meeting, September 16, 2005.

### **Assumptions**

1. The degree and nature of past and current partnerships varies among meeting participants.
2. Collaborations between Woodruff divisions and NBAF might include any combination of programming, marketing, facilities use, and other considerations.
3. Future partnerships will be based on mutual benefit to the units involved.

During the meeting, the areas of common interest such as programming, marketing, and facilities use were discussed in light of the following questions:

### **Concerning Past and Current Partnerships**

1. How have we (Woodruff divisions and NBAF) collaborated? In what ways?
2. How did we expect to benefit? How did we in fact benefit?
3. Was the gain expected to be short-term or long-range? Were there unexpected benefits?
4. What challenges did we encounter? How were they overcome?
5. What did we learn from past or present partnerships that can make future endeavors more successful?

### **Concerning Future Partnerships**

1. What are we planning that might profit from collaborating?
2. How do we decide whether or not partnering in a venture is a good idea? What could we expect to gain? What will collaboration require?
3. What is the process for exploring the idea? Who participates in the discussions?
4. Should partnership be approached on a project basis? Should the relationship be formalized in a larger context?

This was a very thoughtful and complex set of questions to pose, though probably too ambitious in scope to answer even in the span of a five-hour meeting. However, the participants were able to touch upon real issues: the characteristics and impetus for past collaborations (including challenges and impediments); methods for achieving understanding of cultural difference; financial risk; differences in work styles; opportunities and the case for future collaboration; ideas for next steps with regard to programming and content issues; and a desire to move ahead and include ASO and YA in future meetings.

A compelling case for collaboration was made that included the recognition of a number of possible positive outcomes, such as:

- Improved efficiencies to deliver the best arts and cultural programs and activities to the broadest audiences—emphasizing the leadership responsibility of NBAF and Woodruff in maintaining the vitality of Atlanta’s cultural landscape
- More diverse and increased audiences
- Potential for exemplary collaborations that are universally recognized
- Mutual respect for cultural differences
- An opportunity for the Woodruff to be seen as a universally-owned community asset

The discussion clearly had substance, scope, ambition, some clear-eyed critique, and aspiration.

### **Momentum Lost and Found**

Although the groups intended to meet sooner, they did not meet again until June 2006. In the meantime, NBAF applied for and received support from the Ford Foundation-funded Animating Democracy/Working Capital Fund Exemplar Program, a program of Americans for the Arts in collaboration with the LarsonAllen Public Service Group. It recognized that the resources needed to craft a partnership with the Woodruff and its divisions would be above and beyond normal activities for any one of the organizations involved and that the process could be of interest to others in the field. The funding was targeted to support the facilitation and documentation of the partnership building process, conduct field research on relevant organizational relationships to inform the process and the field, and guide the hoped-for institutionalization of a mutually-beneficial partnership.

Also in the interim a crucial personnel change took place: Joseph R. Bankoff was named incoming president and CEO of the Woodruff, replacing Shelton Stanfill at the end of June 2006 after his decade-long tenure. Potentially damaging to the earnest steps already taken by Woodruff and NBAF towards each other, the change in leadership in fact proved congenial to the process. Bankoff is clear-sighted about the Woodruff's role within and responsibility to the community, and the mutual benefit of an enhanced relationship with NBAF. It is important to note that the artistic divisions of the Woodruff—the ASO and the Alliance Theatre as producing organizations and the High and YA as presenting entities—all have histories of working together with NBAF where there has been significant programmatic overlap, generally during NBAF's summer activities. Thus the potential for enhanced collaboration between the Woodruff and its divisions and NBAF seemed ripe to explore.

### **NBAF/Wodruff Partnership Meetings<sup>5</sup>**

From June 2006 until July 2007, eight meetings took place with the leadership of NBAF, Woodruff, and its divisions. In addition to these “big picture” leadership meetings, numerous individual organizational meetings were convened by the partners regarding this endeavor, and a number of cross-organizational departmental meetings took place with regard to programming, educational activities, marketing and communications, and fundraising.

Each meeting both cleared the path to partnership as well as uncovered the stumbling blocks strewn in it—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Each also revealed that—despite the good intentions, willingness, and intelligence of those at the table—having such a breadth of organizational values, missions, priorities, aesthetics, cultures, economics, timetables, etc., to contend with made the process at times murky and confusing, but always complex and rather unwieldy. The process also underlined what we all know, but too often underestimate: it takes a lot of time to build the understanding, trust, and shared values and vocabulary needed to work collaboratively with just one other organization, let alone five.

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<sup>5</sup> The information cited and attitudes captured about the meetings on June 14, September 20, November 1, and December 1, 2006, and February 9, 2007 were gleaned from meeting minutes taken by the author as well as her personal recollection. The information cited about the meetings on November 9 and December 20, 2006 was taken from the minutes generated by project consultant Mikki Shepard, and those of January 12, 2007 by NBAF Director of Finance and Administration Muriel D. Hepburn.

Most of the leadership meetings to define the partnership took place during the day and were two to three hours in length. Advances made and issues raised at each meeting are summarized below.

### ***Reanimating the Process: June 14, 2006***

The Woodruff and all its divisions were invited to join in this three-hour meeting with NBAF, though ASO was unable to attend. The purpose of the meeting and the partnership project were laid out in the agenda.

Purpose of the Meeting: To determine areas of common interest and agreement, and the potential results of a successful partnership, and to agree on a plan that included cost, action steps, and a timeline.

Purpose of the Project: To explore a process and partnership that would strengthen the impact of the National Black Arts Festival and the Woodruff Arts Center and its divisions in the community and to make each partner more sustainable. Of additional benefit would be the development of a case study that could inform partnerships across the country.

Discussion points included: the nature of the collective work, the various organizational missions and how they fit together, the opportunities and challenges of the process, and a structure for decision-making and communication. (N.B. All of these were essential points to be addressed in an endeavor of this kind. However, each one of them could have reasonably constituted a topic for a daylong meeting with this number of partners.)

NBAF kicked off the meeting with its idea of what successful outcomes of the process might look as like, as well as its own vision for the Festival's future in the next decade. The meeting attendees then brainstormed a list of ideas of "what success would look like" to them. Ideas touched on a variety of promising areas of joint work—cultural and educational activities, crossover marketing and audience development, funding, and long-term sustainability. The planned discussion of missions and values was curtailed because the group's energy was focused on exploring the work environment in Atlanta and the possibility of the partnership being a model to "celebrate creativity, celebrate diversity, and...have excellence" while the partners could become "ambassadors for change" within the very black/white context of Atlanta and perhaps beyond.

Concerns about and challenges to the process were also identified: establishing mechanisms for ongoing coordination, maintaining each partner's discrete aspirations and work styles, securing buy-in from the top to the bottom of each organization, expanding the circle of stakeholders, moving beyond project-based coordination to a deeper relationship, and ensuring that the time and resources it would take to do that were secured. Though many concrete challenges were identified, the group acknowledged that it did not have time to address them in the meeting. In addition, some who were familiar with the varied past collaborations of the organizations involved in this discussion asked: Why hadn't things kept moving forward? and Do we have the courage of our convictions?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It was decided after this meeting that to the extent reasonable and possible the notes would capture and attribute comments by participants so that attendees could identify and "own" ideas and concerns, and that the notes would be distributed to all participants for accuracy before being finalized. However, for the purpose of this report, comments go largely unattributed.

As is often the case in situations where concrete action is at stake and many high-level executives are coordinating their schedules to have face-to-face meetings, the more philosophical discussions were postponed in favor of defining tangible next steps:— collecting each organization’s programming schedule for the next three years, developing a “wouldn’t it be nice” list of shorter-term or more micro activities for collaboration, and imagining at least one “big idea” that would be a compelling medium-term project that all could participate in as a potential field model.

***A Change of Direction: September 20, 2006***<sup>7</sup>

The staff leadership of all the partner organizations was present at this meeting. (More often than not, NBAF board members also attended the meetings.) This turned out to be the pivotal meeting for the trajectory of the NBAF/Woodruff partnership process. There was a creative spark and energy to the discussion that was palpable. All organizations had done their homework and came with prepared handouts on their views of what denoted a successful partnership, big and small ideas for collaborations, and three-year lists of projected activity. A key decision made at the meeting about the direction of the partnership was perhaps more a result of collective enthusiasm than premeditated strategizing.

The head of the Woodruff started with a summary of guiding principles it considered necessary for a successful partnership —provoked by the recognition that the current discussions built on a pre-existing history of collaboration, and that all partners had experienced strains on staff, time, and money regardless of the differences in scale. Therefore, they needed to be strategic about structuring the partnership: any relationship must be mutually beneficial, with balanced investments and returns; clear and thorough project management was needed; and a schedule established that realistically showed those activities that could be done year in and year out and those that could only be reasonably accomplished on a multiyear cycle. Other participants added that taking each organization’s mission, vision, and constituency into account was important, and that they needed to commit to meet on a regular basis, to transparency, and to buy-in at both staff and board levels.

Many ideas were then raised—with some caveats—about what kinds of activities could be engaged in together, taking into account the coincidence of significant anniversaries in 2008 (Woodruff’s 40th, YA’s 25th, NBAF’s 20th, and the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King). The ideas leapt from very specific cross-marketing and public relations strategies to relevant national partnerships. Many examples of “big idea” opportunities for joint programming development (mostly based on already planned exhibitions or commissions) were shared.

The attendees began to focus on the topic of civil rights as a unifying theme. The notion of looking through a new lens at the contemporary relevancy of the civil rights movement became the “big idea” that galvanized the group. A flood of creative programming ideas came forth to answer questions like: Who defines society’s sacred cows? What is Dr. King’s legacy today? How do we do something that makes a difference in Atlanta, to the field?

This collaborative project idea that in later meetings would come to be known and defined as *The Atlanta Dialogue: Artists and the Civil Rights Continuum* came into being at this meeting, and it was envisioned as a year-long initiative. The partnership’s subsequent grounding in the development of this project moved the center of gravity of the NBAF/Woodruff relationship

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<sup>7</sup> A NBAF board member hosted this three-hour dinner meeting at his home, which made for a lively and congenial atmosphere for conversation.

from a focus on process—space usage, marketing, ongoing programming and education, audience and board development, and fund and friend-raising—to one on project collaboration.

In negotiating a relationship, one can move from the macro to the micro—that is, from general principles, operating philosophies, or shared desired outcomes to specific engagement and activities—or from the micro to the macro, and begin by engaging in particular activities to reach a more general understanding and agreement on mutually acceptable ways of working together. There are pitfalls to taking either approach without periodically monitoring the alignment of the general with the specific. In this meeting, NBAF and the Woodruff began to move from their original impetus of institutionalizing agreements that to date had been ad hoc to a more specific approach of designing a project-based collaboration. The Woodruff was particularly interested in focusing on a concrete collaborative project as a means of exploring the possibilities for a more substantive ongoing relationship.

Meanwhile, organizational reevaluations and partnership challenges remained to be examined. For example, NBAF was shifting from being a summer festival to having year-round activities. The Woodruff, with its new leadership, had been recalibrating its intramural relationships. These ongoing processes, no doubt, had an impact on how the partnership was being viewed by the various organizations—even if these issues were not specifically raised at the meeting.

What also arose at this meeting was the unspoken assumption by some that a civil rights theme would unquestionably fit within NBAF's summer festival activities. This assumption later proved to be not only erroneous, but caused confusion down the road.

#### ***Off and Running: November 1, 2006***

The homework for the partners to complete before this two-hour meeting was considerable. Each organization was to distribute prior to the meeting its mission and vision statement, and a blue-sky prospectus for a “big idea” activity (or set of activities) with cost estimates and possible sponsors. In addition, the director of the High volunteered to take the prospectuses and outline a comprehensive budget, strategic partnership structure, funding plan, and timeline, and distribute it to the partners before the meeting. The partners would then be prepared to discuss the scale of sponsorship needed and what an equitable sponsorship agreement might entail.

In the time they had, however, it was not possible for the partners to have their blue-sky prospectuses ready for distribution before the meeting. As a result, it was not possible to produce the overall draft budget or comprehensive funding plan for consideration. Also, not all the groups included their mission and vision statements with their prospectus. The ability of the partners to assess each other's blue-sky ideas against their collective missions and consider which might be most resonant and cohesive for inclusion in the “big idea” project was consequently thwarted. The general idea of a contemporary perspective of civil rights continued to frame the “big idea,” although the proposed programmatic ideas had not yet come into focus.

Each group presented its programming ideas and budgets, ranging from \$36,000 to more than \$1.5 million. Despite a certain lack of specificity about the unifying theme and mechanics of the project, the partners recognized that the idea could resonate far beyond Atlanta and that the various programs might be replicated and mounted in other parts of the country.

Because of concerns NBAF had about moving quickly into a potentially multimillion dollar project, it prepared a handout with preliminary findings from the field research to inform the partnership process. The findings pointed to considerations regarding joint fundraising, partner roles and responsibilities, project management, fund allocation, and shared terminology. NBAF



also struggled with squaring the civil rights “big idea” with its already identified celebratory theme for its 20th anniversary festival in 2008.

The meeting participants recognized that the project required some outsourced management and fundraising—a person or two who could be at all the meetings, understand all the project pieces, help develop the project, and raise funds for it. The Woodruff and the High jointly invested in contracting someone to draft a fundraising budget. It also became clear that fundraising was needed for continued planning and project management. The Woodruff and NBAF were asked to take the lead on finding additional planning monies.

NBAF emphasized the need to tie together the programming, educational, and contextualization activities in a coherent way. It offered to ask colleagues at the Smithsonian for help and report back with the results. The group also decided that another leadership meeting was needed before delegating blue-sky idea development to program staff.

### ***Bumps in the Road: November 9, 2006***

If the previous meeting had begun to reveal a few cracks in the process, this one and one-half hour meeting evidenced deeper fault lines. The meeting began with NBAF making explicit its concern that a civil rights focus might clash with its predetermined celebratory summer programming theme. This appeared to come as something of a surprise to Woodruff participants. NBAF also expressed the fear that its initial impetus for the partnership to establish long-term institutionalized relationships with the Woodruff and its divisions for mutual benefit was being eclipsed by the programmatic focus.

NBAF also reported back on its meeting with five Smithsonian colleagues to craft possible unifying and consonant messages for the “big idea” project and for the programmatic Festival activities already in place. Unfortunately, no clear consensus on messages emerged from that meeting. The Woodruff partners, having pinned their hopes on being able to advance on this issue, appeared disappointed.

A discussion of a possible timetable for the “big idea” project revealed the assumption of some of the partners that major project activities would take place during the period of NBAF’s summer programming. It is possible that this assumption indicated that some believed the “big idea” project would principally help strengthen NBAF, so its arm’s length stance might have seemed particularly puzzling. The desires on the one hand for the partnership to concentrate on long-term integrated relationships and, on the other, to focus on a compelling and concrete joint project, tugged in different directions.

What became clearer during this meeting was the need for a unifying idea that would make the “big idea” project more than just a joint marketing venture of disparate activities. Planning funds were needed to cover the development of the key vision or message for the “big idea” and for the contextualization of each program around that message. NBAF suggested that consultants be brought into a full meeting to advise on an overall message. The High underlined the need for a detailed discussion of the programming content so that all could understand each other’s proposed activities.

### ***Defining a Collective Vision: December 1, 2006***

In order to engage those who would be working on and affected by the “big idea” project, the executive leadership invited staff from artistic and programming, marketing and communications,

finance, and development departments to this four-hour meeting. (The meetings to this point had had about 12 to 15 staff and board participants; this one had about 30.) The meeting's main purpose was to have each organization clarify through in-depth presentations and discussion its proposed programs for the "big idea" project. This, in turn, would inform the creation of the project message. The agenda also included discussion of contextual and educational programming and budgeting and a project funding case statement developed by the consultant.

The diverse programming ideas presented at the meeting included a reconceptualization of *The Cherry Orchard* in conjunction with a multifaceted residency, a possible new musical about Coretta Scott King, the commissioning and premiere of a new symphonic work by Wynton Marsalis, Martin Luther King, Jr.-related concerts, an exhibit of civil rights photographs and related commissions of new visual art works, school tours of a theater work about the young Martin Luther King, Jr., performances and residency activities with Bernice Johnson Reagon, and collaborations on other partners' projects.

A discussion of possible unifying themes followed, and the group articulated many impassioned ideas and approaches. Participants felt that the actual process of coming together could be as significant as any product they could produce. By the end of the meeting, however, no single idea about a unifying theme floated to the top to inspire consensus. To keep the process active, the group decided that the leadership of NBAF and the Alliance Theatre should craft a vision statement in a week's time and vet it with all partners. The partners would then decide what parts of their programs truly fit within the vision and revise their program descriptions accordingly. These would then be sent to the consultant who would revise the case statement and, with input, draft a budget.

Parallel to this process, members of the leadership teams of the Alliance Theatre, ASO, and the High volunteered to generate an overall project timeline for the next six to nine months. The additional needs for coordination among development and marketing departments, the definition of measures of success, a project fundraiser, and a sponsorship plan were mentioned at the meeting, but not specifically addressed.

### ***A Sense of Urgency: December 20, 2006***

Executive and departmental staff from artistic and programming, marketing and communications, finance, and development departments participated in this two-hour meeting. As in the previous meeting, an urgency had seeped into the discussions due to the exigencies of designing and raising money for a project set to begin in early 2008. The meeting goals were to reach an agreement on the vision statement, map out how to raise funds and how to allocate them, and determine the timeline.

The creation of the vision statement continued to be a sticking point. Concerns included: how to make it clearer and more compelling; how to acknowledge the importance of the partnership process as well as its products ("our work together is part of the legacy of civil rights"); how to make the programmatic descriptions richer; how to talk about the educational and humanities components in an integral way; and how to find the right project name. All of the comments on project content at this meeting were high-minded and heart-felt.

The group then discussed fundraising, driven by its sense of the shortening timeline. The inescapable realities of dealing with time and money raised very specific questions about principles for allocation (risk and reward), programming scope, event timing, defining partnership costs versus individual organization costs, earned revenue potential, drop-dead dates and

budgets, fundraising shortfalls, and priorities for inclusion or cuts. Aside from budgeting and allocation issues, the fundraising matters included: nailing down the vision and case statements; mapping out the fundraising plan and timeline; and identifying individual and joint sponsors, funders, and donors.

Financial and fundraising topics were discussed more specifically at this meeting than at any previous, and though some drop-dead dates were identified, many issues (including principles for allocation and determining shared costs) were left unresolved at the meeting's end.

Assignments were made to NBAF and the consultant to finalize the vision statement; to NBAF and the Alliance Theatre to contact potential project fundraisers; to the NBAF development director to coordinate the development of sponsor lists and packages with other partners' development staff; to the Woodruff divisions to clarify budgets; and to NBAF to schedule a meeting with content consultants to get feedback on messages and contextualization.

### ***In or Out?: January 12, 2007***

The partners' leadership, along with some development and outreach staff, were present at this two and one-half hour meeting. New vision statements and a development planning report were distributed, and some very concrete budget and fundraising numbers as well as potential risks to the individual partners and the partnership were outlined. The Woodruff expressed willingness to go out and pitch the project and to pay for some of the initial fundraising consultant fees, if commitment to the project was clear. All the partners expressed their willingness to move forward. The Woodruff divisions indicated they wanted to continue with the project if the needed funding for the "big idea" could be obtained.

Development staff reported on the importance of outlining shared costs and earned revenue potential, prospect and sponsorship lists and strategies, sensitivities around established relationships with funders and donors, risk factors of not reaching fundraising goals, engaging expertise regarding sponsorship packages and marketing innovations, and hiring a fundraising consultant with a clear understanding of the project vision.

The partners were then asked to develop sponsorship ideas, bring development and marketing teams together to evaluate costs and success factors, and prepare for the meeting with content consultants. Informed by findings from preliminary field research on partnerships, NBAF reiterated that the partnership process had two parallel tracks: 1) the "big idea" project through which the partners would work together in a high profile, mutual benefit/mutual risk endeavor; and 2) long-term institutionalization of their relationships regarding use of particular Woodruff venues, communications and marketing, and ongoing or short-term collaborative programming projects. NBAF was keen not to lose sight of track two.

### ***Internalizing the Message: February 9, 2007***

The goal of this two-hour meeting was to discuss the project's contextualization and humanities components with some guests (from the Atlanta mayor's office, the Smithsonian, and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center) who could bring a national perspective and be a barometer for how the project might be received inside and outside of Atlanta, especially within African American communities. The agenda also planned for the group to brainstorm how to educate audiences about the "big idea" project and prepare them for its programming.

The meeting began with each of the partners giving a brief description of their proposed activities for the benefit of the guests. The thought-provoking discussions of the previous meetings seemed to have been internalized by the partners because it was notable that the descriptions were framed in ways particularly relevant to the maturing ethos of the collaborative project.

The guests offered a number of observations on the project concept for the partnership's consideration. One emphasized the partners' role as people in the arts with a particular perspective on the civil rights movement; another introduced the concept of a "multilogue" (as opposed to a dialogue) that engaged a continuum of different kinds of people; still another emphasized the transnational quality of today's world and the need to create multiple points of entry into the project. The guests, in addition to offering their ideas, also recognized and commended the process that was taking place. "You need to applaud yourselves. No one is twisting your arms to build a truly public space from your different silos."

Although none of the urgently required definitions of financial risk and reward or fundraising strategies and deadlines were significantly advanced at this meeting, it did contain one of the most conceptually probing, honest, and wide-ranging conversations to date. Discussion touched on situations in which the Black community doesn't feel welcomed, the need to be mindful of engaging young people, creating platforms for public engagement to keep it "real," giving people an opportunity to be creative themselves and not just "gaze at the marvelous," how to achieve cultural equity between a mainstream institution and a community-based organization, and how to invest locally with the same commitment as internationally. Joe Bankoff succinctly observed that what was needed could be distilled into three concepts: dialogue (creating a space for people to intersect), continuum (connecting the past with the present); and collision (creating productive points of tension).

[This was the last joint leadership meeting of the NBAF/Woodruff partnership that the author was engaged to document.]

## REFLECTIONS ON A PROCESS

### Potential Benefits

“As we approach NBAF’ 20th anniversary, we will celebrate our growth and success but also use this milestone year to determine how we can better position and strengthen our reputation among key stakeholders and global leaders. As a year-round cultural institution we must use this opportunity to unite countries across all cultures and strengthen communities by bringing us together to value and embrace differences through the arts. I strongly believe a successful, sustainable partnership with Woodruff and its divisions can advance art and artists, play to our strengths, and allow all engaged institutions to achieve greater success and synergies.”

—Evern Cooper Epps, Chairwoman  
NBAF Board of Directors

The organizations involved in this partnership deserve kudos for their aspirations and efforts, as well as encouragement to see this project through and continue developing the various relationships. A number of benefits have begun to emerge.

- ◆ The partners have already learned a great deal about each other and have laid the groundwork for deeper engagement with each other in the future.
- ◆ The partners have the opportunity to be positively influenced by each organization’s different modes of working and artistry.
- ◆ Departmental staff at the different organizations who are getting the chance to work together might be more apt to share ideas or collaborate with each other more closely in the future.
- ◆ There is a potential for the partners to access new resources or visibility by working together.
- ◆ *The Atlanta Dialogue* has the potential to be “greater than the sum of its parts” if it continues to be pursued with thought and care, and is careful to remove the barriers that could derail it or make it more coordination than collaboration.
- ◆ Coordination of the contextualization of the various “big idea” programs will deepen the experience of those who attend, as well as the partners’ experience.
- ◆ With a successful partnership, Atlanta stakeholders will experience an enhanced unity and collaboration on the Woodruff campus. This could serve not only as a great asset for the local community, but also as a positive example for arts centers in other communities.

## Caveats

“...Struggle for honest language that means what it says whether it is fashionable or not.”

— Sekou Sundiata<sup>8</sup>

While keeping one’s “eyes on the prize,” it is also important to stay clear-sighted about the stumbling blocks of a partnership-building process. When stumbling blocks are cloaked by unexamined assumptions they are more likely to cause mischief. In this partnership there are, no doubt, assumptions being held that have remained unspoken (this being the nature of all human interaction). In turn, this may be causing some misapprehensions about the nature or goals of the partnership.

### **Possible Stumbling Blocks in this Partnership**

**Who benefits from this partnership?** Although not clearly expressed in the meetings, NBAF has had in mind the end of the Kendeda Fund subsidies for space at the Center and is concerned about its ability to continue to access affordable quality spaces for its programming, as well as to strengthen the overall sustainability of the organization as a community resource. That being said, NBAF has an array of other activities it would like to explore with the Woodruff. It also believes it has assets to offer the Woodruff and its divisions, and that there is something to be gained by all from working together. In order for a partnership to work, however, there must be value and benefit to all partners, and this must be believed by everyone at the table.

It may be the impression of some that the impetus for the partnership was to “help out the Festival” since an explicit discussion of shared goals and mutual benefit never took place. This assumption might have fuelled some misunderstanding about whose responsibility it was to define the “big idea” project, its being centered on NBAF’s summer programming, its needing to have a focus on black artists and issues, and that a civil rights theme should naturally fall into the purview of NBAF. (Sitting down and having a frank discussion about these assumptions could help partners clarify some issues that might have caused confusion.)

**Who are the partners?** NBAF has always considered the partners at the table to be the Woodruff and its divisions, and has been interested in forging relationships with each entity based on specific shared interests and past history. However, whether for administrative reasons or due to organizational culture, the Woodruff has in some cases acted on behalf of the divisions. Whether the relationship is bilateral or multilateral needs to be clarified, as this will affect how work responsibilities and risks are viewed and shared.

**The “big idea” project will not meet all ends.** *The Atlanta Dialogue* is a concrete means to begin to work through some of the ways the different organizations can partner with NBAF and with each other. However, joint agreements made in relation to this project may or may not address NBAF’s desire for long-term, ongoing working agreements with each of the divisions and the Woodruff as a whole. The hope is that the “big idea” project will, at least, productively inform long-term agreements. Due to ongoing space needs, NBAF should pursue its “track two” goal of institutionalizing the NBAF/Woodruff relationship simultaneously with the “track one” goal of implementing a “big idea” project.

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit.

**What values are at the center of the process?** In the discussions about some of the practical ways the partners could collaborate, there have been shifts of focus between considerations such as selling tickets, diversifying audiences, and gaining visibility and recognition on the one hand—and on the other, what it means to serve the breadth of Atlanta’s communities in meaningful and transformative ways. Neither is mutually exclusive, and presumably most nonprofits worry about sustainability issues in addition to having missions to serve the public good. However, the lack of upfront conversation between potential partners about the values that are central to the process can result in negative assumptions about differences in focus. Values can range from wanting to emphasize public engagement and social change to making great work that would not otherwise be accessible to the community, and from giving community members opportunities to exercise their own creativity to seeing their interests and concerns reflected on a stage or gallery wall. Whatever the emphasis turns out to be for each organization, it doesn’t necessarily mean that other aspects are not also important.

**Consider the differences in curatorial stance.** Another area in which misunderstandings could arise is that of the partners’ having diverse curatorial stances, in addition to underlying values. In the NBAF/Woodruff partnership, several different disciplines, aesthetics, constituencies, and artistic goals are at play. Having frank discussions about these could help the partners understand better each other’s choices, priorities, standards, and ideas about quality, voice, and equity.

### **Unanswered Questions and Unaddressed Issues**

Bringing together the leadership of six organizations (NBAF, Woodruff, the Alliance Theatre, ASO, the High, and YA) on a regular basis was no mean scheduling feat, and the frequency and length of the meetings were a testament to the seriousness with which the various groups took the partnership discussions. However, throughout the meeting summaries above, one can note that although a number of excellent points were made about what the partnership needed, they were not followed up. It is clear that a crucial reason was lack of time, but not having someone consistently in a “continuity” role from meeting to meeting was also a factor in these points falling through the cracks.

### **Unanswered Questions and Unresolved Issues**

**How have we collaborated in the past?** What were the benefits to replicate and the problems to solve from past interactions?

**What is the best method for exploring this partnership?** Is it best to build relationships one organization at a time, or to focus on the long-term institutional agreements, or to craft a big project to work on all together? (This question didn’t get considered thoroughly before a principal method was chosen. However, the “big idea” project doesn’t preclude working in the other ways.)

**Why come to the table in the first place?** One can only hope to determine a best method for pursuing a partnership by knowing what one wishes to accomplish and what the measures of success are. (This has yet to be explicitly defined by NBAF and the Woodruff, and accountability is difficult to have without it.)

**What are our various missions/visions/values and how do they fit together—or not?** This is a crucial question for which there has never been sufficient time to address in the

rush to do something concrete. The various partners may well have multiple goals and agendas, and without the group understanding what these are it cannot reasonably determine what “mutual benefit” really means in the partnership context. (The difficulty for the group in finding a unifying message for the “big idea” project may be attributable to the partners not addressing this at the onset of the partnership discussion.)

**Who needs to be at the table in order to move ahead?** Who are the relevant decision makers for the various decisions that need to be made to develop and sustain the partnership? Who are the informed stakeholders or knowledge-brokers who can advance the process? Who needs to buy in at which levels to keep the wheels turning and cement relationships? (To date, the partners have been good at bringing in those who can keep things moving. However, assigning the role for comprehensive project oversight has been difficult. The Woodruff, its divisions, and NBAF have consistently involved their board members, albeit in various ways. It might be helpful for the organizations to see how each shares and develops ideas and responsibilities within its staff, board, and community.

**Where the rubber meets the road.** In order to be truly viable, partnerships must work out the specifics of financial and visibility arrangements: the allocations of risk, return, and work responsibilities on behalf of the partnership (including outsourcing management and keeping on top of deadlines); what the order of priority is for activities if there are shortfalls; and how marketing and credit lines are designed to clearly communicate the collectivity of the endeavor. (Aspects of these were still being worked out when this essay was being written. This is often the place where partnerships falter and where terms of equity lie. The partners would be well advised to pay close attention to these aspects and allot the time necessary to achieve clarity on them.)

### **Some Reminders**

Reaching out beyond your “silo” and creating changes in perspective and work style is not easy—though ultimately it can be enormously rewarding. Here are some reminders to help “keep on keeping on.”

**Following advice is not always straightforward.** How and when to make use of advice and lessons learned from colleagues or other experiences are not always obvious when you’re in the thick of a process. Lessons always need to be learned anew since each context is different—the players, the environment, the moment in time, the stakeholders, the resource base, etc.

**Serious partnerships take a lot of time—and resources.** A lot of time is needed to build trust and transparency, to create a safe space to explore tensions, to learn about and appreciate different ways of working and kinds of work, and to find common ground, shared values and language. And the more groups at the table, the more time it takes. Time costs money, and extra resources are often needed to support the changes of behavior that partnerships can require.

**Be patient.** Being patient goes hand-in-hand with allocating sufficient time and resources to build partnerships. Strong relationships are not built overnight; therefore it is essential to set agendas that are reasonable and doable within the timeline you have. Time is often working



against you when you've embarked on a concrete project and make commitments that have hard deadlines. So if it's not feasible to build into the process separate meetings for joint reflection, it might be a good idea to have a regular agenda item at the beginning of each meeting that reminds partners of the critical questions and issues that have gone unanswered and unaddressed from meeting to meeting.

**Outside facilitation can help.** Aside from creating what should be regular “temperature taking” agenda items, partners also need to consider carefully the value of a sensitive facilitator. An ongoing, outside facilitator can provide continuity from meeting to meeting. He or she can also act as a more or less neutral party at the table to keep the process moving, stop when things need clarification, synthesize ideas, and make sure the to-do list is current. Without clear structure and consistent, knowledgeable facilitation, discussions can loop and repeat and thereby frustrate participants.

**Internal continuity is crucial.** Building outside relationships is often not something that clearly fits one particular person's job description. It is critical to appoint someone within each partner organization to be the “point person” to stay on top of the creation of various (leadership and departmental) meeting agendas, notes, and assigned next steps, as well as streamline inter-partner communication.

**Keep it real.** It is helpful to create opportunities for partners to voice something they learned, realized, or questioned that is influencing their way of thinking about the partnership. Hopefully, there will be an atmosphere of enough trust that people will be willing to put realizations and gnawing concerns on the table. An example of how productive a real discussion can be was when NBAF was willing to say that the topic of civil rights could be problematic because white people were tired of being hit over the head with it and black people were tired of having to talk about it. This admission unsealed what might have seemed like an “untouchable” subject and opened up an extremely creative discussion.

**Make sure you know enough and are comfortable before signing on the dotted line.** Have trust, but also be as careful and clear-eyed as possible to avoid hard feelings later. (Examining what might have gone wrong in the past would be useful before entering into new agreements.)

**Don't mistake aspirations for what is currently within your reach.** Having the goal of being a national model is great, but the depth and diligence that it requires is achieved a step at a time.

**Don't outsource your commitment to serving the community.** If you wish to serve a sector of the community that you believe is not being well served, don't just look to an organization in that sector to carry that load. Be willing to hire people onto your staff in leadership and visible positions from that community if you want to demonstrate real interest and good faith. The long standing efforts of the Woodruff divisions over the years to serve and address the African American community in its art, programming, and education should continue to be strengthened along with the efforts to find points of collaboration with organizations like NBAF that focus on the same sector of the community.

## **Moving Forward**

At the time of the writing of this report, the partnership was continuing to develop, with negotiations ongoing and program development and necessary management being put into place.

The partnership hired a fundraising consultant who was able to create an overall project budget, a case statement, and proposals for lead sponsorship for *The Atlanta Dialogue*, and met various times jointly with the partners' development staff to coordinate fundraising efforts. Several proposals were submitted to major funders and potential corporate sponsors, and a number of funder visits were made on behalf of the partnership project.

The group made some decisions about how the partnership would move forward with *The Atlanta Dialogue* should fundraising for the project fall short of the best-case scenario. They agreed at a minimum to use the confirmed funds to pursue the development of joint educational/contextual activities and materials, and marketing pieces for the events that each of the organizations would be able to utilize under *The Atlanta Dialogue* banner.