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## Building a Strong Ensemble of Teaching Artists: Characteristics, Contexts, and Strategies for Success and Sustainability

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### Abstract

This research analyzes the techniques, strategies, and philosophical foundations that contributed to the quality and maintenance of a strong theatre-in-education ensemble. This study details how the company selected ensemble members and describes the work environment the company developed to promote collaboration and encourage actor-teacher retention. Specifically, this research documents the contribution of the directors and actors in the ensemble-building process. This study, which identifies factors that contribute to selecting, developing, and sustaining a successful ensemble, can serve to inform theatre-in-education professionals as they strive to develop and improve their ensemble-building practices and can inform other arts educators as they work to establish and sustain collaborative communities of teaching artists.

## **Introduction**

A number of research studies have identified factors that contribute to the quality, functionality, and success of educational organizations (Davis, 1993, 1996; Guin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). Research indicates, for example, that the ability of a school to function well often relies on its ability to hire, develop, and retain a high-quality teaching staff (Guin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). Teacher retention is of particular importance as schools with high teacher turnover rates often function poorly (Guin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). Moreover, schools with low levels of teacher attrition are more likely to benefit from professional development programming, maintain developmentally appropriate instruction, and foster a climate of collaboration among staff members (Guin, 2004). Research also indicates that strong interpersonal relationships often contribute to the success and continuity of community arts organizations (Davis, 1993, 1996). The present study extends the investigation of factors that contribute to the success and sustainability of educational organizations, and specifically arts-in-education organizations, by documenting the techniques, strategies, and hiring criteria utilized by a well-respected company of theatre-in-education professionals: The Creative Arts Team's Early Learning Through the Arts: New York City Wolf Trap Program.

Creative Arts Team (CAT), an award-winning organization affiliated with the City University of New York, employs "theatre as a medium to promote social, emotional, and intellectual growth in communities throughout New York City" (City University of New York: Creative Arts Team, 2007a). The Early Learning Through the Arts: New York City Wolf Trap Program (ELTA), the context in which this study was conducted, is one of a number of educational theatre programs under the CAT umbrella. A CUNY Web site described the ELTA theatre-in-education (TIE) program:

The Creative Arts Team's Early Learning Through the Arts: New York City Wolf Trap Program actively involves Head Start and pre-kindergarten through first grade students and their teachers in interactive drama activities designed to explore human, social and curricular issues. Within the context of a story that unfolds over a series of days, CAT's professional actor/teachers, together with the children, play characters that address and resolve dilemmas raised during the drama sessions. The decisions the children make impact the evolution and outcome of the story, offering young people the opportunity to examine the consequences of their actions within a fictional context. Through their contributions, the children also come to learn that they have the ability to positively affect themselves and those around them. (City University of New York: Creative Arts Team, 2007b)

Establishing and maintaining a well-qualified ensemble of actor-teachers is critical to the successful implementation of the ELTA program. This study analyzes the policies, practices, and philosophical foundations that contributed to the quality, maintenance, and vibrancy of the

ELTA ensemble. This study also details how the company selected ensemble members and describes the work environment the company developed to promote collaboration and encourage actor-teacher retention. Specifically, this research identifies the contribution of the directors, actors, and partnerships to the ensemble-building process.

### Research Design

This study, which is part of a larger research project focusing on the Creative Arts Team (CAT) Early Learning through the Arts Wolf Trap Program (Mages, 2008), employed data from three sources: observations, interviews, and written documents. Systematic observations were conducted of the ELTA actor-teacher training program and of the ELTA actor-teachers as they facilitated the drama program at six Head Start<sup>1</sup> sites. Detailed field notes of these observations were taken during each observation session and the field notes were entered into a computer directly following each observation.

In-depth interviews were conducted with each of the six ELTA actor-teachers and with the two interim co-directors of the ELTA drama program, Max Ryan and Helen Wheelock. In addition, the originator of CAT's ELTA program, Karina Naumer, was also interviewed. All of these interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Documents detailing the ELTA curricula, the intervention schedule, and the mission and goals of the intervention were collected. Both hardcopy and Web documents were utilized. All of the field notes, transcripts of the interviews, and documents were coded and analyzed.

This study employed two qualitative research strategies designed to guard against threats to validity: *rich data* and *triangulation*. Rich data are "data that are detailed and complete enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 95). "Triangulation refers to soliciting data from multiple and different sources as a means of corroborating evidence and illuminating a theme or a theory" (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 100). Thus, rich data provided the foundation for illustrative fine-grained descriptions of the ELTA ensemble-building policies, practices, and philosophies, and triangulation provided evidence from multiple perspectives to corroborate and verify these descriptions.

Before the start of the study, all of the Head Start sites that received the ELTA program gave permission for observations to be conducted for this study. Written permission was also granted

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<sup>1</sup> Head Start is a federally-funded preschool program for children whose family income is at or below the poverty line.

by the directors of the CAT organization and everyone who was interviewed signed a letter of informed consent.

### **The ELTA Company**

Max and Helen<sup>2</sup> co-directed ELTA and worked in close collaboration. Max was primarily responsible for the administration of the Head Start program and Helen was primarily responsible for ELTA's other endeavors, such as ELTA's work in New York City's public and parochial schools. Both directors shared responsibility for leading company rehearsals and were, therefore, integral to the success of the Head Start program. Hence, both directors are featured in this study.

Six ELTA actor-teachers comprised the diverse multiethnic Head Start ensemble. The ELTA Head Start team had an equal number of male and female members. Each of the six actor-teachers (ATs) had both formal training—some having earned advanced degrees—and practical experience in theatre before joining the ELTA team. A number of the ELTA ATs had worked as ATs in other divisions of CAT, such as the Elementary School Program or the High School Program, before they began working with ELTA.

In ELTA every actor-teacher was assigned a partner. Hence, the Head Start program had three two-partner teams: Daniel Berlfien and Zina Camblin, Steve Elm and Trina Fischer, and Ginger Legon and Karim Sekou. In the year this research was conducted, each of the three teams had one male and one female AT and each team had one member who was fluent in Spanish. The partnerships lasted throughout the implementation of the Head Start TIE program: they rehearsed together, they taught at the Head Start centers together, and they were jointly responsible for completing any necessary paperwork, such as maintaining records and filing reports.

### **Requirements of an ELTA Director**

Casting, training, and maintaining a strong ensemble required a director with effective leadership skills, as well as someone with talent and discipline specific expertise in directing. Karina, ELTA's founding director, believed that to be a successful ELTA director one must be able to listen and collaborate. She contended that these skills allow the director to communicate clearly and to develop a good rapport with the company members. Karina embraced the primacy of collaboration:

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<sup>2</sup> This study refers to members of the ELTA team by their first names to reflect the way that they are addressed within the culture of the CAT organization.

I think one of the things that's really key is being able to include your staff in the process always, so that you're always taking ideas from your staff. And then you may be the person with the final say in terms of how something is implemented, but honestly I feel the only reason that the early learning program [ELTA] has been...as successful as it has over the years is it's a contribution of a lot of people's ideas, not just mine....And I'm the first to say I'm not the one with the biggest and best idea. But I'm willing to really listen and look and take the ideas that I think are going to work.

When asked the key to sustaining a program such as ELTA, Karina reiterated, "Listening to your staff, including their ideas in everything that you do....trusting your staff." Karina felt that listening leads to trust, which she believed was the key to ELTA's success.

Karina also thought that good communication skills helped build the necessary rapport amongst company members:

Be clear in your expectations, what you expect for them. Have high expectations for them. Don't let them slack off....Challenge them to do the best work they could possibly do....Outline things clearly so that they know what to expect from you and from their colleagues. And keep checking in a lot. We always provided chances for them to check in....I always had an open door policy. If something's bothering you, come in and talk to me about it.

In addition, Karina stressed the importance of adaptability: "It's really important to be flexible, as a director, because things change on a dime." Finally, Karina recommended that, in addition to an understanding of drama and theatre, the director should also know about education and educational practices. She realized the import of this knowledge particularly because she needed to develop this understanding as she went along. Karina admitted, "I mean I know I didn't know a lot about early childhood [education], but I learned. And I've read a lot...."

The way Karina led the ELTA team greatly influenced the way Helen and Max viewed the ELTA directorship. Helen and Max also valued listening, collaboration, trust, adaptability, and knowledge of the field of education.

Helen said that the job of an ELTA director "is about protecting the actor-teachers to the best of our ability, getting them prepared, being thorough, keeping them informed, making sure we're both informed of what's going on, being respectful, keeping them part of the whole creative process." She saw her job as similar to a "mom with teenagers." She explained,

Because there are times where you have to be "the mom" and tell them what to do, but times you also have to trust them. I want them to believe that I will stop and listen to whatever their issues are. And I think I do. Again, I want them to believe that we're doing everything that we can in their best interests....I want the actor-teachers to feel like

they can do stuff and we're not going to say, "WRONG!" We might say, "Well, something more successful might have been..." or "You might have considered this..." knowing that we've been there. But we also need to be the bosses.

Similarly, Max enumerated his criteria for success as an ELTA director:

Overall, I think a good ELTA director is somebody that's open to suggestions, that has an open door policy, that people can talk to, no matter what is happening...but also has enough "know how," and enough knowledge about early childhood that others can trust them. So that combination of someone that's really educated, somebody that knows what they're doing...I think someone that's done it a lot is good, cause it helps....Compassionate, you have compassion, you understand. So that automatically I think gives other people respect. You respect....You've been through it....You've been around the block. You know how to do it and you're open to talking about it. And you're not a dictator about it. Like, "This is the way I did it, so you should do it this way." No, not a dictator. And fun. Someone that's fun. I think that that's really important...because our work is fun.

Max, like Helen, found aspects of directing the ELTA program akin to parenting. "I like being a paternal figure," he explained. "I like to be a person that people can depend on. And so that's a really good part of this job." Thus, both Max and Helen seemed to view the ELTA company as a type of family.

It is noteworthy that the metaphor of an educational theatre company as a family, with the director as a parent figure, is not unique to the ELTA program. This notion of the company as a family unit has been documented in the educational drama research literature (Mages, 2004) and research on exemplary community arts centers has also highlighted the centrality of interpersonal relationships (Davis, 1993, 1996). Moreover, the metaphor of family is a prominent theme in a number of the studies of community arts centers (Davis & Soep, 1993; Galazzi, Eppel, & Solomon, 1996).

In order to create this sense of family or ensemble, an ELTA director needed to be a compassionate skilled listener who trusted the ensemble members and valued their input. It is worth emphasizing that, in addition to being knowledgeable and proficient in the art of directing, an ELTA director had to be well versed in the field of early childhood education. An interdisciplinary understanding of both theatre and early childhood education allowed the directors to design theatrically effective, developmentally appropriate, and educationally sound dramas and to train the ensemble members to employ theatre techniques and strategies in ways appropriate for young audiences.

## Requirements of an ELTA Actor-Teacher

John O'Toole (1976) described the role of the actor-teacher in the context of theatre-in-education:

The *teams* (that is, those who participate in TIE) need to have the communication skills of both teacher and actor (the controlled energy, understanding of his medium, absorption, projection and sensitivity to both audience and colleagues of the good actor; the sensitivity to the children, ability to be absorbed and project that absorption, understanding of his medium and controlled energy of the good teacher). Accordingly they are called with heavy accuracy actor/teachers. (p. 14)

The job of an ELTA actor-teacher was multifaceted and required a diverse skill set.

Hence, the job of identifying, training, and maintaining qualified personnel was one of the more demanding aspects of running the ELTA program. The challenge of hiring and sustaining capable and experienced staff members was not unique to the ELTA program, or to TIE programs. A school's ability to hire and retain qualified teachers is often an indicator of the quality of the school's climate and a gauge of how well the school functions (Guin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001).

Karina confessed that "keeping a staff of actor-teachers who are consistent and like the work" presented a "tremendous" challenge:

'Cause you train people and they're here for three years and you think, "Wow, this person's incredible," and they leave....So then, there's sort of this endless turnover of actor-teachers....There is that sort of pressure to continually train people, because you're only as good as the people that you have on staff doing it and implementing the work.

Thus, the job of auditioning and selecting the best candidates for the job was critical to the success of the program. Karina articulated her criteria for selecting ELTA ATs:

Well, first and foremost I looked for people that were serious and committed about the work and willing to learn and grow as much as I could tell that. Because I don't think anybody comes into this work knowing how to do it....There's a learning curve for everybody, I don't care how talented you are. So, I look for people that are flexible and willing to look at themselves and willing to reflect on their own learning process. That's one thing that's really important to me. And I certainly looked for people that had a desire and a willingness to work with young children. 'Cause not everybody does. And I look for people who are playful. And I look for people that have acting skill....But also have a propensity and interest in education....So somebody comes in and they're *just* an actor, I'm not interested....I need to see that they have an interest in learning about how acting and education can be linked.

When asked what qualities are important for success as an ELTA AT, the members of the ELTA company often reiterated Karina's criteria.

**Flexibility.** Max and Ginger both mentioned flexibility as a key characteristic of a successful AT. Max said he looked for, “People that are very flexible, that can deal with curves coming at them and it not frustrating them....That’s one of the first things: flexibility.” Similarly Ginger said an ELTA AT

...would have to be flexible in personality and able, when something doesn’t go your way, to say, “Okay, let’s make it the best that it can be, given the circumstances.”...You just have to have a roll-with-the-punches kind of ability.

**Playfulness.** Like Karina, Zina mentioned the importance of “playfulness.” Helen also thought playfulness was a particularly important characteristic for working with preschoolers: “I think, especially with earlier learning, [ATs have] got to have a sense of wonder and play. That’s not a background thing. That’s just a personality trait.” Karim recommended hiring people who are able to combine playfulness with confidence. He felt an AT must have

A very good sense of play....You have to also be very confident with yourself, because the kids are going to be very honest about who you are....You have to have a good sense of yourself and a good willingness to play.

**Enjoys working with children.** Zina, Ginger, Trina, and Karim all mentioned that the ATs must enjoy working with young children. For example, Zina maintained that an ELTA AT must be someone who “*genuinely* likes children.” Ginger agreed, “The big, big thing is you have to love young people. You have to care about them and their growth and their experience.” Trina felt that “experience with children” was essential. She noted that “with ELTA, it’d be great if they’ve had experience with very young children, but experience with any age is great.” Karim warned that, before coming to work for ELTA, ATs should “find out whether or not [they’re] able to be with kids. Not everybody can.” This was important, he said, “Because it begins and ends with them. They’re what it’s all about. If you’re the type of person that can’t be with kids, forget it. If they’re going to annoy you because their shoe is untied, you probably shouldn’t do it.”

**Values education.** Helen stressed that a good ELTA AT had to have an appreciation of education and, specifically, of CAT’s educational philosophy:

[In ELTA] you’re teaching on so many different levels. You’re teaching the kids, and you’re teaching the teachers....So you have to be able to really think critically about “Why education? And [why] this particular philosophy of the Creative Arts Team, which is interactive, which is supposed to be child centered, centered around imagination and critical thinking and [creativity]?”



Trina concurred, stating that ELTA AT's should be "excited about the mission of CAT. It's not just a great day job, but they really believe in what CAT is doing." In other words, ATs had to believe in the value of educational theatre and drama. Ginger elaborated:

You have to believe that art can make a difference in [children's] lives. And that at this young age, opening up their imagination, opening up...the possibility of magic and of excitement to them, and to give them a tangible, interactive experience has to be so important to you. You have to believe in what drama can do for them....You have to believe in the tools that it can offer them for their literacy and for their vocabulary skills and for their [ability] to express their emotions. So you have to really believe in what drama can do. [That it can] make a difference.

**Trained actors.** Above all, the ELTA company members emphasized that a good AT must be a trained actor. Steve asserted,

In order to make this experience work for the children, it has to be dramatically effective, it has to be theatrical. The emotions have to be real that the characters are playing. The children have to believe that they're in the world of that drama. Therefore you need a trained professional, in theater or drama or acting, in order to create that with the children, or else it becomes didactic....The more theatrical, and the more experience that actor has in theater, the more effective this work is going to be.

Karim expressed similar sentiments:

For this work, I do think you need to be an actor. I don't think that somebody without any type of acting talent could do this work. Mainly because you just have to be able to make the kids believe the world. If you don't believe the world, then they won't. And that's just acting 101: if you don't believe it, they won't believe it.

Likewise, Trina highlighted the importance of selecting ATs who have trained to be actors:

Well, first and foremost, through all the CAT programs, I think it's important that someone be a skilled trained actor. Not just someone who's done some theater and a little more teaching. But someone who's a trained actor. 'Cause it's easy in the teaching [moments] in a story to really lose your character altogether and lose the drama of the story....I think the drama of the work suffers when the person isn't a trained actor.

Steve agreed, "To me when it's least successful is when the theatricality and the magic goes out of a story." Daniel concurred, "If you have no acting experience, the work will suffer."

Other company members specified particular acting techniques such as improvisation and character work. Helen said that to be a good AT "you have to have a strong improvisational background." She then added, "I think it's great if you're a great character actor, because a lot of our characters are not human, so your physicality and your voice...It has to be broad." Zina also

valued the “ability to do characters.” She emphasized the need for people who are “not afraid to be expressive, and who can use their voice and their bodies well.”

**Kind, patient, and professional.** In addition to flexibility, playfulness, experience working with young children, an understanding of education, and acting training that includes character work and improvisation, there were a number of other traits ELTA members thought were valuable. Max required “a kind person. Because you have to work with such little kids. I think that’s a big quality that they need....Some kind, nurturing quality.” He saw this quality as akin to having a “maternal” or “paternal” instinct.

Trina, Karim, and Zina all advocated for ATs who were patient. Zina clarified, “You know, someone who is not easily frazzled or razzled and who can work with people.” Trina and Ginger also looked for actors that, in Trina’s words, “play well with others.” Ginger also noted that an AT required the “basic stuff that you need for any job”:

You have to be professional. It’s important to be on time. It’s important to be prepared. There’s a lot of paperwork, having that in on time. Remembering your costumes in the morning....Because if you don’t have the costume it really doesn’t make it what it could be for the kids.

**Respect.** Trina commented that “within ELTA there’s a lot of respect.” She continued, “ELTA’s been sort of famous for people really liking to work in that team, and staying and not leaving.” Trina noted that the ELTA ensemble had a lower turnover rate than other CAT teams. According to Trina, the respect among the ELTA team members, their enjoyment of the work they do together, and their low rate of attrition led a member of another CAT team to call them “The ELTOIDS: The Curiously Strong Team.”

The ability to foster a strong sense of trust and respect within the ELTA community not only contributed to the company’s ability to collaborate as an ensemble, but likely affected the company’s ability to retain high-quality actor-teachers. This is consistent with research on teacher turnover. Guin (2004) found that “schools with high rates of teacher turnover are less likely to have high levels of trust and collaboration among teachers” (2004, p. 19).

Although it was necessary that all of the members of the ELTA team were talented theatre professionals, talent and training alone were not sufficient for success as either an ELTA director or AT. The members of the ELTA team needed to value education and enjoy working with young children. In addition, they needed to be flexible, playful, kind, and patient. Moreover, all ELTA ensemble members had to be good team players who were respectful, professional, and willing to collaborate with their partners and with the team as a whole.

### Requirements of ELTA Partnerships

Karina structured the ELTA program so that the actor-teachers always taught the curricula in teams of two because she was convinced that the interplay between the actor-teachers contributed to the theatricality of the drama. Trina concurred, “The work is so much more effective with two in the classroom. You can create a moment of conflict so the children can observe. ’Cause you don’t want to create a moment of conflict *with* the children.” In other words, the actor-teachers could dramatize an argument with each other, but it would not be appropriate or effective for an adult AT to engage a preschooler in a similar argument. Trina added, “It also helps in terms of classroom management.” Thus, creating successful partnerships within the ELTA ensemble was imperative for the successful implementation of the ELTA TIE curricula.

Over the years much thought and energy had been devoted to assigning partner pairs. As Ginger pointed out, partnership teams were created based on “many different factors: experience, race, gender, personality.” Helen highlighted the role experience played in selecting AT partnerships: “With our work, we have to think [about] seniority and experience.” When assigning partners, Helen tried to ensure that each partnership had at least one veteran ELTA AT. Creating partnerships between novice ATs and more experienced ATs supported the novice team members as they engaged in the rigors of the work, while it preserved and passed on the institutional knowledge of veteran team members. This practice also encouraged novice and veteran team members to work together and helped create an integrated cohesive ensemble.

Personality also played an important role in partner assignments. Helen began the assignment process by asking herself, “What are the personalities that match?” For example, when matching Karim with Ginger, Helen reasoned, “Karim, he seems like a very, very gentle soul. Smart, intelligent, a good match for Ginger’s gentleness.”

Another factor that ELTA considered is the ATs’ ability to speak Spanish. Trina, a Spanish speaker, explained, “We’ve gone back and forth [to determine if] it’s better to have one Spanish speaker in each team or an all Spanish-speaking team....I think it works better having both [partners] speak Spanish.” She explains that if only one partner is fluent in Spanish “the actor-teacher who doesn’t speak Spanish gets alienated.” She noted, however, that the ELTA directors believed it was important to have at least one Spanish-speaker in each team to ensure that they always had coverage for schools with large Spanish-speaking populations that required a Spanish-proficient AT. Thus, factors such as personality, experience, gender, and ability to converse in Spanish, could influence partner pairings.

Reiterating the notion that relationships within ELTA are like familial relationships, a number of ELTA members mentioned that a partnership was like a marriage. Zina explicated this simile,

“It has its ups, it has its downs....But it’s a good thing.” Although having some areas of conflict in a partnership was not uncommon, Trina insisted that “keeping the lines of communication open” could resolve most partnership difficulties. Similarly, Karim noted that, although communication between new partners could be “awkward” at times, it was important for the ATs to be “vocal about what [they] think needs to be changed or vocal about what’s going on in the moment and how to work together and fix it.”

One way ELTA helped foster partner communication was through “partnership contracts.” Trina explained that the partnership contract was a document that partners filled out during training. She said, “You answer certain questions [about] what you bring to the partnership, what your strengths and weaknesses are, what you need from your partner in order to make this relationship work.” According to Trina, discussions around the partnership contract afforded the ATs an opportunity to “set up standards” for “ways to communicate or check in.” In addition to the partnership contracts, Karina said that at ELTA

We set up lots of opportunities for [the ATs] to talk with their partners. Because, you know, when you’re working every day with someone else in the classroom, things come up. And there can be a lot of conflicts. So if you don’t provide the structured conversations, I’ve discovered they don’t happen.

Ginger admitted that partnerships can be both “a triumph and a hindrance”:

I’ve had some really amazing partnerships, but it takes a lot to really invest in a partnership. In the past two years, I’ve had a different partner every semester. And I’m finding it’s a little bit taxing—a new person every six months—because then you don’t really get to go deep with someone and really find that success together.

Helen understood how taxing it could be to establish new partnerships. She asserted, “The hardest thing is that you have to constantly switch partners.” Helen continued, “My biggest challenge [when I was an AT was] every year I would get a new partner.” Karim explained that new partners must “learn each other in the classroom.” In other words, they must learn “how each other works, what the signals are.” He added,

It’s a partnership where [ATs] have to kind of move in concert with each other. When one person is finished talking, if you leave a little bit too much time, the kids are going to wander off. So your partner has to be able to pick up [your cues].

In sum, good communication was essential for productive AT partnerships and productive AT partnerships were critical to the strength of the ELTA ensemble and the success of the ELTA program. Thus ELTA created a variety of systems, structures, and opportunities to support healthy dialogue between partners. This undoubtedly contributed to the strength of the ensemble

and the coherence of ELTA's TIE programming. It is worth noting that organizations that fail to provide strategies for teachers to communicate problems or difficulties and to settle disagreements risk encountering staff attrition difficulties (Ingersoll, 2001).

### **Discussion**

This research investigates a theatre-in-education program that successfully developed, trained, and retained a strong ensemble of actor-teachers. Their success was founded on an organizational philosophy that emphasized a collaborative culture, open communication, clear expectations, and a deep sense of respect and trust among the company members. This philosophy was operationalized in the company's policies, practices, and procedures. For example, actor-teacher pairs were required to create partnership contracts. These contracts enumerated each actor's strengths and weaknesses and made each actor's needs and expectations transparent. ELTA also provided opportunities for structured conversations between partners to facilitate communication and rapport, as well as to resolve any conflicts that might arise. The directors—Max and Helen, and Karina before them—maintained an open door policy. This not only encouraged communication among the company members, but it was one way the ELTA directors demonstrated their respect for the ATs' ideas, needs, and concerns. Moreover, the bond that developed among ELTA members seemed to foster a high level of actor-teacher retention within the ensemble. The strong rapport within the ELTA community and the company's track record of long-term actor-teacher retention did not go unnoticed. Even within the larger CAT community the ELTA ensemble was considered "curiously strong."

By identifying the practices and strategies the ELTA company developed to successfully build and sustain a strong collaborative community of actors, this study contributes to the literature on effective practices in arts organizations. As in other arts organizations (Davis, 1993, 1996; Davis & Soep, 1993; Galazzi, et al., 1996; Mages, 2004), ELTA's strength was due, at least in part, to the positive rapport and the sense of "family" that pervaded the company's endeavors. Moreover, the strong interpersonal relationships that were nurtured within the ELTA company seemed to be a factor that contributed to the extremely low levels of actor-teacher turnover. Low levels of actor-teacher attrition contributed to the sense of continuity and community within the ELTA company and reinforced the culture of collaboration within the ensemble. The relation between low rates of actor-teacher attrition and the strength of the ELTA ensemble echoes a similar relation found in studies investigating the effect of teacher turnover on school efficacy (Guin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001).

This study of a theatre-in-education company found that factors similar to those identified in the research literature as fundamental to successful schools and community arts organizations were also critical to ELTA's success building, training, and sustaining a strong ensemble. This study also identified additional factors associated with ensemble-building in the context of an

educational theatre program. Although this study focused on a single theatre-in-education company, the factors that contributed to the success of the ELTA ensemble and to ELTA's ability to retain qualified actor-teachers may be pertinent to other educational theatre companies and other arts educators. Understanding the factors that contributed to the success of the ELTA ensemble can not only inform theatre-in-education professionals as they strive to develop and improve their ensemble-building practices, but it will also inform other arts educators as they work to establish and sustain collaborative communities of teaching artists.

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