DEVELOPING A FUTURE AUDIENCE:
HOW THREE REGIONAL THEATRES
BALANCE MISSION, PROGRAMMING,
AND FINANCES IN THE WAKE OF AN
ECONOMIC RECESSION

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ABSTRACT

How do League of Resident Theatres (LORT) that operate under the Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) agreement balance mission, programming, and budget while continuing to build an audience for the future? In one word: commitment. The current literature on the TYA movement shows devotion to producing high-quality children’s programming, but little is stated on how or why these theatres produce TYA work. It also focuses mainly on children’s theatre companies and not on regional theatres. Much has changed in the world since these articles were written so to bridge the gap in the literature, it was imperative to talk with theatre professionals across the country.

For this paper, the Alliance Theatre, Arden Theatre Company, and South Coast Repertory serve as case studies showing what the current literature has left out. These three theatres place significant value on children’s programming in their strategic plans, focus on instilling solid educational experiences, and manage to keep adult and children’s programs running in tough economic times, therefore, illustrating the importance they place in providing a solid cultural experience at an early age. The theatres profiled firmly support the theory that LORT Theatres can balance mission, programming, and budget with their existing adult repertoire all while continuing to build an audience for the future.
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INTRODUCTION

The Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) movement has put children’s theatre on the map, providing an outlet for high-quality, intelligent productions for a younger audience. Though children’s theatre is not a new phenomenon, the way in which it is presented today is a form of artistic expression that has transformed the way children and adults view the arts. While the current literature presents a strong background on the subject of audience development and the implications for attending TYA productions, little is known about any connections to the current regional theatre sector. The literature is focused more on the topic of TYA productions than looking into specific theatres or cases.

In building off of what has already been published, I plan to add to the body of knowledge by looking deeper into why youth audience development is important and why regional theatres have taken such an interest in providing these high-quality arts experiences. I also plan to explore how each theatre balanced programming and finances during the recession of 2007–2009. After looking at the three regional theatres I have selected, it is my hope to expand what is already known about the TYA movement, increase the knowledge of the work that these regional theatres are completing, and spread the importance of youth audience development throughout the arts and culture sector.
PURPOSE STATEMENT

I study League of Resident Theatres (LORT) that operate under the TYA agreement with Actors’ Equity Association. According to their website, LORT is the largest professional theatre association of its kind in the United States, with 75 member theatres located in every major market in the U.S. Specifically, I plan to research how LORT Theatres that operate under TYA agreements balance their artistic mission, programming, and budget with their existing adult repertoire. This will illustrate if LORT companies are growing future audiences for the arts by supporting youth audience development in creating high-quality children’s programming.

My question is important to published research because it will explore the importance of catering to younger audiences as we grow the future arts audience, and the role theatre and the arts play in youth development. This is key to the arts sector, because it explores how in tough economic times, theatres across the United States are growing and nurturing their youth and adult audiences. It also illustrates the importance of providing high-quality theatre performances for children and the value that regional theatres are placing on it, specifically through their organizations’ strategic plans. The study will also show the variety of different approaches theatre companies are taking to expand their younger audience and demonstrate to all arts organizations how to re-shape their own ways of catering to a younger demographic.
I explore literature in two different areas, including the evolution of children’s theatre with a focus on programming and audience development and the role of funding of theatre for young audiences. My research question fits with current published literature because it looks at the theatre industry as a whole, explores the role of children’s theatre from beginning to present, and explores the role that audience development has played in building that theatrical genre.

METHODOLOGY

I explore three different cases, taking on interviews with theatre professionals across the country. Through exploring the LORT directory as well as Theatre Communications Group, the national service organization for non-profit theatres, I found ten professional theatre companies that fit my study guidelines of being LORT theatres operating under the TYA agreement. From that group of ten I decided to study three of the companies. The companies are:

- Alliance Theatre- Atlanta, Georgia
- Arden Theatre Company- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- South Coast Repertory- Costa Mesa, California

Due to their locations, the choice of these three companies provides me with data from three different metropolitan areas that all have diverse socioeconomic levels and cultural offerings.
The in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with two members of the professional staff at each theatre. One interview was with a key staff member from the artistic department and another was from either the administration or education department. Since each theatre varies in size, interviewee titles varied. Due to location limitations, the interviews for the Philadelphia-based company were conducted in person, since the author currently lives there, while the other four interviews were conducted by phone.

This study does present several limitations, the biggest one being that it is impossible to interview all theatres that present children’s theatre. There are hundreds of theatre companies in the United States and it would be extremely time consuming to interview each one of them, or even a representative sample. These limitations also do not let me look at theatres that solely present work for youth audiences. While many are world renowned, they do not fit the profile of the companies that I am looking at. By focusing solely on LORT theatres that operate under the TYA agreement, I am exploring companies that are similar in size and budget, and that present work to children and adult audiences.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions serve as a framework for the literature and interviews compiled for this thesis. To read the complete questions and sub questions please refer to the appendix.

1) What was the evolution of children’s programming at each theatre company?

2) What prompted the theatre companies to add children’s programming to their seasonal repertoire?

3) Why did the companies feel adding children’s programming fit in with their artistic mission?

3) With expanding the core audience, has there been room for collaboration with other artists and organizations?

4) How were the theatre companies affected during the December 2007– June 2009 recession and the on-going economic climate?

5) How have the theatres continued to fit in a world where excess time and money per household are limited?
REGIONAL THEATRE AND THE TYA MOVEMENT

In the late 1940’s, theatre pioneers Margo Jones, Nina Vance, and Zelda Fichandler changed the landscape of the arts and culture sector forever by developing the nation’s first regional theatres, bringing the arts out of an elitist category of catering to solely the upper-class, making it accessible to everyone (Grossberg 2000, A6). While regional theatres continue to struggle across the country, many hold on to the original belief that “art should become more dispersed and that the people have the right to artistic expression” (Grossberg 2000, A6). Ed Stern, Artistic Director of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park said that, “any regional theatre has to be the marriage between the community and the artistic director” (Grossberg 2000, A36). Through their community connection, regional theatres have taken an interest in appealing to younger audiences as well as adults.

Around the same time that the first regional theatres opened, the Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) movement began. What was once a white sheet hung on a few poles (Horwitz 2003, 28) has grown into an artistic journey for professional theatres across the country. Children’s theatre started with fairytales being performed on stages, but began to shift in the 1960’s and 1970’s to more realistic productions. The success of the children’s productions has stemmed from companies choosing plays that focus on everyday problems in people’s lives (Horwitz 2003, 29) but making them accessible and approachable for younger
patrons. Theatres produce shows that represent children’s “hopes, dreams, and fears” (Aram and Mor 2009, 392), leaving a lasting impact on the children, keeping them wanting more.

The success of these regional theatres can also be attributed to the risks involved in producing work for a younger generation. Theatres want their audience to identify with the characters, which are “often racially or ethnically mixed to reflect the demographics of the kids in the audience” (Horwitz 2003, 30). These productions give children a chance to see people just like them on the stage, which make them successful to audiences throughout the country.

However, the current literature is limited, often focusing on theatre as a whole, not looking at specific examples currently in the theatre industry. The researchers make conclusions based on opinions of theatre scholars, rather than interviewing a variety of theatre professionals. There is also a focus in the literature on theatres developing in certain parts of the United States, rather than looking at the regional theatre movement across the country.

What appears consistent throughout all of the literature is that the authors agree that programming is the key to successful children’s theatre, though there is never a discussion on the parallels drawn to a company’s adult repertoire (if there is any). While regional theatres have often struggled with the balance of what is presented on stage, they are continuously surprised by the risk younger audiences continue to take. Studies have shown that audiences generally frequent shows
with name recognition in higher numbers, but they are also interested in the relevance and quality of the productions they attend (Johanson and Glow 2011, 70; Horwitz 2003, 30).

The literature also discusses how professional theatres must trust their younger audiences when picking programming for the season (Zeder 1993, 26). Adults often underestimate how smart children really are and how much they appreciate the work they witness. Author Jeanne Klein feels that:

“Theatre artists have a tendency to discredit the intelligence and attention spans of children by assuming that young audiences will not understand complex characters in difficult situations or sit still for quiet, emotionally charged moments. To “compensate” for these false assumptions, playwrights often tend to write shallow, didactic, and condescending plays” (Klein 1992, 97).

While Klein gives a skewed opinion on a group as a whole, she brings up a valid point that the success of children’s theatre stems from what is produced year after year. When dumbing down the material for children, they are not given them the artistic journey they so desire and their intelligence is not valued. Author Suzan Zeder (1993, 25) feels that, “plays must reflect the world of the child and speak to the totality of that experience. Plays and performances must have social immediacy, political potency, and personal relevance.” Authors Zeder and Hanson also believe that the reimagining of classic literature has contributed to programmatic success.
Name recognition has always been key to picking the right programming. “Young children often delight from repetitious encounters with a favorite book or television show; the rigid permanence of these types of media ensures a consistent experience” (Hanson 2012, 205). However, Zeder advises against the reimaging of popular fairy tales citing they can be a huge risk for theatres. She writes that, “Not all Cinderella’s are alike, or are created equal. Parents with fond memories of the Disney version may be surprised by a postmodern feminist take on the tale” (Zeder 1993, 26).

Children’s theatre is heavily focused on the overpopulation of fairytales and fairytale adaptations on the stage. Many of the authors briefly discuss the potential for new work being created by professional companies, but fail to discuss in detail the productions being generated. All three of the theatres in this study have produced at least one world premiere in their past three seasons. Some of those productions have even won awards for new theatrical work, yet the literature glosses over the new work being written for younger audiences in US regional theatres, limiting the information presented.

An interesting theme the literature pointed out, is the risk that regional theatres continue to take from season to season. Professional theatres consistently present a “unique theatrical experience to an audience, many of whom will be first time theatergoers” (Water 2001, 517). These productions continue to trigger something in their audiences, which keeps bringing them back year after year.
What is most important, though, is that regional theatres are doing more than just presenting elaborate and entertaining productions; they are fostering a future generation of arts attendees. By placing the importance on experiencing art at an early age, theatres are valuing the honesty of the child rather than the accolades or monetary values a theatre may (or may not) receive from each production.

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT AND FUNDING OF TYA

The success of the TYA movement can be attributed to the theatres’ faithful returning patrons who have shown that the productions are enjoyable for children and adults. Zeder states that, “in most cases, adults, not children, make the decision to attend the theatre” (Zeder 1993, 26); so it is essential that adults instill arts and culture in a child’s life at an early age.

Children are in a state of “being” or “becoming” an arts patron at an early age, when adults make the arts an important part of their up-bringing (Johanson and Glow 2011, 70; Hanson 2012, 203; Klein 1992, 102). With the burgeoning of regional theatre, the arts are extremely accessible throughout the United States. No longer do you have to go to a big city to experience the arts. Adults are the ones who will help the younger generation experience the arts, so it is important that the theatres take on a more active role in getting patrons into their seats. In today’s society, many families do not have extra time in their schedules. Theatres need to adapt to this or they will not retain patrons. Horwitz states that TYA
productions must have time restraints. “Children’s plays don’t go more than 90 minutes” (Horwitz 2003, 29) which helps keep productions within children’s attention spans.

Audiences also like to make a connection to the material before experiencing the production. As discussed in the programmatic section, popular titles from literature sell tickets. For one company the title, The BFG [Big Friendly Giant] was the selling point (Hanson 2012, 204). For another company their productions created “meaning for the audience at both the cognitive and emotional levels” (Aram and Moor 2009, 392).

As arts become more accessible, the regional theatre/ TYA audiences tend to become more culturally diverse (Grossberg 2000, A37) than that of other arts entities. The literature begins to discuss the demographics of the audiences that attend TYA productions. It is my hope that when studying the three theatres in-depth to discuss their audience make-up, as well as the outreach they have taken within their community. The literature also discusses the financial success theatres experience when producing productions with popular titles, but does not go into any detail about theatres that are taking more of a “risk” by producing a world-premiere or a production with a lesser-known title. While there is an outpouring of the arts, the literature fails to discuss the accessibility (captioned and signed performances) of TYA productions for children of various developmental backgrounds, something I plan to explore with the theatres.
While adults can be thanked for getting their child to the theatre, it is the child who should be thanked for the success of TYA productions. Klein states that, “child audiences do not cut actors any slack” (Klein 1992, 102). At an early age, children have not yet developed a social filter and will be very honest if they love or hate what they just witnessed. It is important that the artistic team keeps this in mind when shaping productions. Getting into the mind of the child is important (Klein 1992, 102) as well as having “empathy with our audience to see a play through its eyes” (Kosidowski 2003, 86).

While theatres have garnered much success from their children’s programming, the literature presented little information on the role of foundation and corporate funders for these youth-specific productions. What was discussed in the literature will carry over into my research conducted with the three theatres, providing new information to the current arts sector on the interest foundation and corporate funders have taken in funding children’s theatre programming.
LITERATURE CONCLUSION

Previous scholars (e.g., Aram and Moor 2009; Grossberg 2000; Hanson 2012; Horwitz 2003; Johanson and Glow 2011; Klein 1992; Kosidowski 2003; Water 2001; Zeder 1993) have made a strong case for the importance of TYA productions in children’s lives, often showing the value audiences have placed in instilling this art form in a younger generation. While the literature discusses programmatic elements of TYA productions, audience development, and funding, most was presented in an extremely broad manner with little focus on specificity. These scholars paint a portrait of America without giving examples from specific theatre companies. While strong comparisons can be made to the current regional theatre sector, much of that is left to the reader as opposed to discussing the current regional theatre climate.

The previous studies are a valuable asset in bridging the gap between what has already been studied and the study I plan to conduct. By looking at the three regional theatres, I plan to take a deeper look at why it is so important for these theatres to present children’s productions. I also plan to explore if there are programmatic parallels between the adult theatre counterparts, how these productions fit into these individual companies mission and strategic plans, how each theatre rebounded post the 2008 recession (something the literature glosses over), and the outreach they are partaking in with the local community.
It is my goal to add to what the literature only begins to explain, making a strong case for the importance of developing future audiences by supporting youth audience development and the value these theatres place in instilling quality cultural experiences in these children’s lives.
Alliance Theatre, Atlanta’s Tony award winning regional theatre has been delighting audiences since 1968, transforming Atlanta’s arts and culture sector. Widely known as one of the sole professional theatres in the South, the Alliance has brought to life some of Broadway’s newest musicals including Aida, The Color Purple, and Sister Act. Having won the Regional Theatre Tony Award in 2007, the Alliance continues to produce new work through their 10 productions annually. The theatre caters to more than 200,000 patrons a year, presenting the most cutting-edge work for Atlanta’s audiences, thrusting the company and Atlanta to a national spotlight.

Artistic and Programming

Children’s programming at Alliance Theatre began in 1977 as a merger with the Atlanta Children’s Theatre. Adding children’s programming seemed to be a natural succession for the company, as a major goal for Alliance Theatre is to, “diminish the age gaps between us,” according to the company’s website.
Education Director Christopher Moses feels the company succeeds in their goal, as the material chosen and approach taken does not talk down to youth, and the company always treats their audience with respect. Since their start, Alliance has successfully produced two main stage children’s productions each season.

Moses also stated that while “fairytales anchor the program,” (Moses 2013) Alliance usually puts an interesting spin on their productions, like last seasons folk-art inspired *Wizard of Oz* or their upcoming production of *Charlotte’s Web*, which incorporates circus-inspired aerial acrobatics. Alliance’s programming is unique in that they offer a variety of performances for a wide age range. The company has ‘Theatre for the Very Young,’ for ages 18 months–5 years, ‘Theatre for Youth and Families,’ and programming designed specifically for middle school aged children. Moses feels that the Middle School programming is the most focused programming, citing that, “authenticity represents the middle school voice” (Moses 2013).

What is most fascinating about Alliance is their commitment to education and how the company ties their programming to what is playing on their stage or from past seasons. Moses stated that the company strives to, “blur the line between arts and education” (Moses 2013). The company has developed a new tactic as part of their recent strategic plan, transforming Alliance into a world-class theatre that offers high-quality arts and education (Moses 2013). This summer, Alliance is piloting a new program in which their summer drama camp
will re-mount last season’s production of *The Wizard of Oz*, where kids will collaborate with the production’s original designers and actors. The company also plans to produce an original production of *Shrek* in preparation for next season’s winter main stage production (Moses 2013).

Alliance’s uniqueness has helped them in forging relationships with Atlanta’s public school districts, creating a three-year commitment between Alliance and these schools. As Moses puts it, the commitment is a professional learning partnership (Moses 2013) where teaching artists come into the schools for a minimum of 12 times a year as well as the schools come see performances at the theatre. While the program offers a wonderful opportunity for school-aged children, Moses admits that it is a huge commitment (from the school district) for time and money.

Alliance is also heavily committed in creating solid, meaningful work for teenagers. The company has started a program called the “Collision Project.” Through this program, teens create a new play from a classic text, with teens this year working with *The Emancipation Proclamation*. What’s so striking about this program is that it brings together teenagers of all different backgrounds and helps kids overcome their differences through theatre (Moses 2013). Alliance has also recently started a teen council, which has brought a lot of “collaborations between arts organizations” (Moses 2013) in and around the theatre.
Alliance Theatre is fortunate in that they are housed in the Woodruff Performing Arts Center. The center is home to theatre, music, and art, making it a hub for arts in Atlanta. The company takes pride in the fact that organizations are collaborating with each other, making the arts a huge part of the Atlanta community. Alliance’s national acclaim has put them at the forefront of creating high-quality work for children and adults of all ages, and their commitment to arts and education will help build the theatre audience of tomorrow.

**Financial**

Alliance Theatre funds its children’s programming through single ticket sales, subscriptions, and contributed income. The company does not treat their subscriptions for children’s performances differently than that of adult main stage performances, in part to their 1977 merger. While the company finds their subscription model sustainable, they don’t “tout it as successful,” cites Max Leventhal, General Manager. “I think it’s good business— I don’t think we pump it as success, it’s just good business. It does what it does— I don’t think we call our subscription season a success, it’s a subscriptions campaign— which is one of the business tools we use” (Leventhal 2013).

Leventhal feels that the Alliance’s success can be attributed to their national acclaim as well as their regional prominence, with no theatres around them for more than 1,000 miles (with the closest being Alabama Shakespeare and
Asolo Repertory). Because of the company’s regional prominence, Alliance has seen a major boost in contributed income, especially for their children’s programming, with funders donating money to give free tickets to children.

Alliance was recently awarded a three-year multi-million dollar Department of Education grant that will support the company’s Wolf-Trapp program, an early learning literacy program that they bring in to the schools through the study of theatre (Leventhal 2013). The program, which is a partnership between the theatre and Georgia State University, yielded better test scores for students enrolled in arts-based activities and helped the company replicate it for other communities (Leventhal 2013).

Leventhal also feels that while schools in the South aren’t culturally minded, kids involvement in the arts is at the top of funders’ lists. “Funders are providing something that government won’t” (Leventhal 2013). Through the generous support of donors, Alliance has been able to offer children’s performances to over 45,000 children and families and drama classes and camps to over 2,400 students each year.

**Recession of 2007–2009**

While the recession of 2007–2009 hit Alliance hard, it gave the company a chance to step-back and question the work they were doing. During the recession the company went under a major restructuring model, making sure that only the
work that was meaningful to the company survived. The company’s education department saw one of the biggest shifts; “we committed to making the education programming we offer relate to the artistic work we do at the theatre,” said Leventhal (Leventhal 2013).

Leventhal discussed how Alliance built a curriculum around the work they have done in seasons past or in season’s future. The company has seen that children are more inclined to come see a performance when they are primed through an arts activity. “We’ve integrated our programming so that participation leads to spectating and spectating leads to participation— they’re not separate activities” (Leventhal 2013). This new company restructuring has paid off for Alliance, as the predispositions to material make kids want to be apart of the (Alliance) family; thus transforming a dark period in Alliance’s 45-year history into a positive example of how one company spent time focusing on what was best for their audiences future, not just their own.
CHAPTER TWO – ARDEN THEATRE COMPANY
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Arden Theatre Company has quickly become a staple of Philadelphia’s thriving theatre community. Celebrating their 25th season in 2013, the Arden has become a theatrical pioneer on and off the stage. Founded in 1988 by Terry Nolen, Amy Murphy, and Aaron Posner, the Arden began in a time when the Philadelphia theatre community was in the early stages of blooming. Now more than a quarter-century later, the Arden has changed Philadelphia’s cultural landscape, telling magical stories on and off the stage, changing the lives of audience members’ young and old.

Artistic and Programming

The Arden added children’s programming to their repertoire during the 1998-1999 season, nearly 10 years after the companies founding. Founder’s Nolen and Murphy added children’s programming to the season because they grew up doing children’s theatre, but when the company first started, there was just not enough space. After moving to their home in Old City, Murphy and Nolen
finally knew they could present the type of programming they wanted. “They were concerned with building tomorrow’s audience, they believed in it, and believed they could tell stories well in that area” (Decker 2013) cites Matt Decker, Arden’s Associate Artistic Director. “No one in the area (at the time) was doing work for kids and the Arden felt that they could capitalize on that” (Decker 2013).

When the Arden originally started their children’s programming they experimented with the format. They started in early incarnations with one show a year (1998’s Charlotte’s Web) and quickly added in work for teenagers. The Arden decided to shift away from work specifically aimed at teenagers, as they could see the main stage shows, and focus solely on the younger audience the company continues to cater to today.

Children’s programming at the Arden seemed like a natural fit as it fell right in the company’s original mission of “Telling great stories, by great storytellers.” Decker feels that children’s programming expands the mission as the productions continue to draw from great literary sources. “Even if adaptations may not be as strong, you could say E.B. White wrote that or Lewis B. Satcher or whoever—you know it was always drawing from a great kids book” (Decker 2013).

In 2010 the Arden expanded their mission to include “on stage, in the classroom, and in the community” which helps bridge the gap between the educational outreach that the company consistently does each season. The
company also underwent a large strategic planning process for the 2012-2015 seasons, which addressed the Arden’s challenge in finding titles to produce each year for their children’s season.

The Arden continues to draw from actors and designers who work on their adult main stage shows, because for some it’s the most fun they’ll have all season (Decker 2013). The company has achieved much success with their recent productions of *Cinderella, Robin Hood, and Charlotte’s Web*, but when taking an artistic risk picking a lesser-known title such as *The Borrowers*, the company saw audience numbers dwindle. The Arden has addressed the challenge of finding titles by beginning to commission new work. In 2011, *The Flea and the Professor* was a production that the company was proud of, a production that went on to win the Barrymore Award, a regional award for excellence in theatre for Best Musical. Decker feels that, “there can be 1,000 Treasure Islands or 1,000 Pippi Longstockings but we want to create an adaptation that’s good and useful and that’s how we’re trying to address that” (Decker 2013). The company has also collaborated with Chicago’s Lookinglass Theatre to present their children’s work to Philadelphia audiences.

The Arden’s work continues off the stage as well working with school children from Philadelphia, Camden, and Ridley Park through their Arden for All (AFA) program as well as through their Drama School. AFA brings teaching artists into the school four times around Arden’s children’s theatre productions.
The schools also come see the shows (free of charge), giving students an accessible cultural experience they will never forget.

Arden’s accessibility doesn’t stop there. The company has partnered with Hands Up Productions, a local sign-interpreting organization, where the company does shadow-signing right along the performers, making them apart of the show. Hands Up teaches the Arden’s actors sign language as well, so they can add it into each production, making even the youngest hearing-impaired audience member able to enjoy the performance. The Arden has also expanded their programming, offering educational drama classes to children of all ages, as well as a new teen council. The company continues to expand and at the end of the 12/13 season will open a second home, geared specifically to their educational programming.

Decker finds that children’s’ theatre audiences are the most honest audience that will ever come into the Arden’s two theatres. He feels that they “really respond to human experience, universal themes, things that you would think that an adult audience would respond to— much more than special effects and magic” (Decker 2013); and while at times these audience members may sword-fight with their programs when they get bored, Decker feels that “kids should get a great experience when they go to the theatre not something that panders to them or thinks they’re lower” (Decker 2013), because well known title or not, the Arden hopes they’ve “instilled some appreciation of culture in their audience members when they’re young” (Decker 2013).
Financial

Arden Children’s Theatre was originally funded out of a capital campaign for the company’s home in Old City. “We were talking to a lot of people about the building but we knew we wanted to start this program but we needed to have the ability—we needed starting money,” cites Managing Director Amy Murphy (Murphy 2013). Murphy approached two big-name foundations in Philadelphia and asked if they would be interested in funding this new programming— with a need in the area, both bought in. The funding “basically paid for our first *Charlotte’s Web* which was hugely successful and that branded it (children’s theatre), started the brand and built the audience” (Murphy 2013).

The Arden has continued to fund its children’s programming through a mixture of earned and contributed income and most recently added a subscription package specifically geared to their children’s season. Murphy continues to bring her and Nolen’s opinion when pricing the programming so even if prices go up, a family of four can come for under $100 (Murphy 2013). “It has become the culture of the Arden to make children’s theatre fully accessible to everybody be it financial, disabilities, never been to the theatre before—we market that way” (Murphy 2013).

The Arden also partnered for many seasons with Target, who helped fund discounted tickets for specific performances during the runs. To Murphy, the Target name had integrity and people knew that they were getting a quality
performance, just like buying a product from Target’s stores (Murphy 2013). To the staff of the Arden, affordability is key in providing a quality cultural experience. Murphy states that, “it came out of my (and Terry’s) personal childhood experience not my personal motherhood experience and I think it helped design the brand of Arden children’s theatre” (Murphy 2013).

Recession of 2007–2009

The recession of 2007–2009 did not hit the Arden as hard as it did to other theatre companies across the country. Murphy said that while 2007 was fine for the company, 2008’s programming needed to be a bit retooled. The company had planned a co-production with another area theatre, but removed it from the season, adding a show that would sell more group performances. Arden Children’s Theatre was left unharmed.

The Arden did undergo a hiring freeze, and budget cuts were made. Murphy says that budget cuts were done proactively so that the company did not get to the end of the season with a fiscal deficit, so by doing that the Arden was able to strategically restructure financially (Murphy 2013). While the recession may have not hurt the company programmatically or financially, Murphy says that the company did not grow the way the strategic plan had originally intended them to grow.
“If you look at that strategic plan that came out the summer of 2008 with all these big growth plans and we didn’t do any of them because of the economy. That’s where we really see it affected us” (Murphy 2013). With the trimming back of the budget, putting a hiring freeze in place, and changing some minimal programmatic elements, the Arden was able to weather the recession and has pulled out of the tough economic times that affected so many. The company can now continue focusing on telling stories to Philadelphia audiences for years to come.
CHAPTER THREE – SOUTH COAST REPERTORY

Costa Mesa, California

South Coast Repertory (SCR), one of the country’s oldest regional theatres has been at the forefront of creating new work for its audience since its founding by David Emmes and Martin Benson in 1964. With three stages, the company produces 12 productions annually with one holiday show, catering to audiences of all ages. Having won the Regional Theatre Tony Award in 1988, South Coast Repertory continues to explore thought-provoking themes on its stages season after season. Now more than a half-century later, SCR has transitioned its leadership and will continue delighting audiences for years to come.

Artistic and Programming

South Coast Repertory has been presenting children’s programming since the company’s formation in 1964. In the beginning, SCR originally presented an educational tour, which was completely original and toured to local elementary schools (Glore 2013). “We had long been interested in offering on-site programming for young audiences, but there was no way to add that to a busy
schedule that already included 9 – 11 subscription productions and two holiday productions every year,” (Glore 2013) says John Glore, Associate Artistic Director.

In 2002, SCR opened a second theatre (the Argyros Stage), finally giving the company a space to produce in-house children’s programming. Glore feels that the company’s motivation for adding children’s programming stems from the fact that “that there is no professional theatre programming available to kids in Orange County, and we feel it’s imperative to introduce the youth in our community to the cultural enrichment and pleasure that comes from live theatre” (Glore 2013). In 2003, the company presented their inaugural production of The Emperor’s New Clothes followed by Sideway Stories from Wayside School and The Wind in the Willows and as Glore states, “There wasn’t really a trial period—we just hit the ground running” (Glore 2013).

Since the start SCR has always presented three children’s productions a year, bringing to life a variety of stories each season. The company has also commissioned many new plays specifically for their TYA series. Glore finds that the commissioning of new work can often be challenging in attracting a younger audience. “Any time you select something for TYA that doesn’t have a recognizable title, you’re taking a risk, because parents are particularly careful about choosing what they expose their kids to. They might be willing to take a
risk on something unknown for themselves, but they’re less likely to do so when choosing entertainment or art for their kids” (Glore 2013).

New work has not stopped the company with building a brand that provides high-quality experiences to audiences of all ages. SCR has also presented productions that take on challenging material, showing they respect even their youngest audience members. Glore said that the company’s most recent production, an adaption of Lois Lowry’s novel *Anastasia Krupnik* deals honestly about the topics of senility, death of grandparents and childbirth (Glore 2013); illustrating a trust level with SCR’s patrons in picking material that families may deem risqué.

While the company does not mirror themes between the adult and children’s programming, they often work with actor’s that the company has worked with before, making them familiar to audiences that continue to attend productions. While SCR collaborates more with other companies for their adult programming, the company did add local troupe ‘Four Clowns’ into their TYA production of *Robin Hood* earlier this season (Glore 2013). SCR also offers a myriad of theatre classes and makes sure that theatre is accessible to children of all backgrounds. The company hosts a Neighborhood Acting Conservatory, which offers free acting classes to children who would not be able to afford it as well as a Theatre Access program providing free tickets to students.
Children’s programming at SCR has continued to enhance the company’s mission of “exploring the most urgent human and social issues of our time, and to merging literature, design and performance in ways that test the bounds of theatre's artistic possibilities,” as stated on the SCR website. While Glore admits that children’s theatre has helped them plant the seed for future audiences, he also feels that with a new strategic planning process starting, the company takes pride in presenting high-quality art to children. “When we had our most recent board retreat, the first under the leadership of new artistic director Marc Masterson, we laid the groundwork for the next long-range plan, in which we re-affirmed our commitment to offering quality programming for young audiences and our intention to continue to strive for the highest excellence in our TYA series” (Glore 2013).

Financial

South Coast Repertory continues to fund its children’s programming through contributed income and ticket sales, with a special subscription package for children’s theatre performances. General Manager Lori Monnier feels that while ticket prices are steady, they are accessible to families of all different sizes. “The child price for theatre for young audiences is less expensive than the adult price. If you’re an adult and bringing two kids, it’s affordable. It hasn’t shifted that much” (Monnier 2013).
SCR also receives grants from corporate and foundation funders who help the company support their free ticket program for the student matinees. During the company’s two week performance schedule, SCR hosts six student matinees where they rotate local school districts (per show) to come to the theatre and see a performance.

Recently, SCR opened specific student matinees to school districts or to home-schooled children who do not qualify for the free ticket program. Monnier felt that “there was a niche of people who weren’t available for free tickets that wanted to see the show that we weren’t serving” (Monnier 2013). She also added that the company has transitioned its free ticket program to their adult main stage shows, too. “We also have a theatre access program and that is for our main stage and that provides access to kids and groups that we identify as wanting or needing free tickets to other shows” (Monnier 2013) bridging the gap between child and main stage performances.

**Recession of 2007–2009**

Like many theatre companies across the United States, South Coast Repertory fell on hard times during the recession of 2007–2009, but has rebounded, refocusing the company to fit in to today’s changing economic times.

Monnier says that while the company underwent budget cuts like everyone else, SCR strove for their programming to go unaffected (Monnier 2013). Sadly,
there were two things that did fall victim to the recession, the company’s educational tour (which had served schools since 1964) and *La Posada Mágica*, one of the company’s two holiday shows. Monnier felt that putting these two programs on hiatus reflected the “changing of the times and changing of the needs” (Monnier 2013) of the SCR audience.

A main reason SCR put the educational tour on hiatus was that it was not as cost effective as it had been in the beginning. Monnier said that, “the funding in the schools to get the tour there wasn’t as strong, we weren’t able to book as many tours” (Monnier 2013). The company also heard from the schools that because of their academic schedules, there wasn’t as much time to add assemblies into an already busy day (Monnier 2013).

*La Posada Mágica* ran for over 15 years next to the company’s annual production of *A Christmas Carol*. *Mágica* is seen as a contemporary version of *A Christmas Carol*, blending Mexican holiday traditions with Latin music. As with the educational tour, the audience was not nearly as strong as it once had been. Therefore, SCR felt that this production was an area they could cut-back on.

While both the educational tour and the holiday production of *La Pasado Mágica* were put on hiatus, the company has yet to bring them back to their annual season repertoire. The 2007–2009 recession proved harsh on SCR, but the company has found only the positive in it, deciding to focus on building up all in-house programming, as well as their neighborhood conservatory.
CHAPTER FOUR- KEY FINDINGS

While all producing similar programming, the Alliance Theatre, Arden Theatre Company, and South Coast Repertory are three very different regional theatres, each offering great knowledge and insight relevant to theatres big or small.

Artistic and Programming

The three theatres profiled all present very similar work, drawing mainly from literary classics. What is unique among all three is when each theatre decided to start presenting children’s programming. SCR has been presenting children’s work since the company’s inception in 1964 (adding seasonal productions in 2003)— the longest time out of the three theatres profiled. The Alliance added children’s programming in 1977 as a merger with the Atlanta Children’s Theatre, and the Arden started their inaugural children’s production in 1998, nearly 10 year’s after the company’s founding.

While each theatre took on children’s programming at different times in their life-cycles, all place a significant value in making sure they can offer their youngest patrons the best possible experience. It was unanimous in speaking with
the three theatres that when selecting productions for each season, the most important element is that scripts chosen do not talk down to children. The theatres profiled take pride in their children’s and adult programming and do not feel that one age is more important than another.

This importance has transcended into each of the theatres beginning to commission new work for their children’s season. The Arden has begun commissioning new work due to their challenge of finding titles that tell a good story, and that in commissioning new work, the company can walk away knowing it has a solid, useful script. SCR has also commissioned a lot of work for its children’s season and finds that while it’s rewarding, it can also be a huge risk when trying to get families to attend—something all three companies can attest to. While the Alliance has commissioned new work, the company has also placed a focus on catering to children of all ages. The company has programming that starts at 18 months and goes through high school. The Alliance has developed an array of different programming options that grow with the child.

While selecting the right programming is a major theme with each company profiled, the educational programming also plays an extremely active role in each theatre. From their most recent strategic plan, the Alliance wanted to make a connection between the work in drama school and the work on stage, blurring the line between arts and education. They have achieved this by making sure that everything relates to each other, giving children an opportunity to be a
part of the Alliance family each season. Alliance also does work in Atlanta’s school districts, requiring a three-year commitment from the schools that will participate in acting workshops and see performances over the course of their partnership.

The Arden has continued to build-up its educational programming offering an array of options for children and teens. The company is currently in the midst of a capital campaign and will open their second building The Hamilton Family Arts Center, in the Spring of 2013. The building will offer a brand new home for educational programming at the Arden. The company continues its Arden For All program making theatre accessible for children in Philadelphia, Camden, and Ridley Park. The Arden’s educational programming continues to have students working with professional actors, many of whom appear in productions each season. This helps comfort children when they remember that Kayla the Fairy Godmother will be their acting instructor.

South Coast Repertory’s educational programming starts at the theatre’s roots in 1964, when the company began their educational tour. The company continued it’s educational tour until the economic recession of 2007-2009, citing changing times in the commitment from the schools. SCR has continued its educational work through its Neighborhood Conservatory Program, which offers free acting classes after-school to children who would not normally be able to afford them.
All three theatres have broken new ground in presenting thought-provoking work to patrons young and old, making sure that anyone who wants to attend has the chance to attend. Affordability plays a huge role in each of the theatres pricing models for children’s programming— with many offering discounted rates, student tickets, and free tickets to area schools, making the financing of children’s programming a challenge in itself.

Financial

All three theatres profiled have similar strategies for generating and sustaining revenue for their children’s programming. While not built overnight, each company has devoted much time and effort in creating a “brand” for high-quality children’s theatre.

The Alliance, Arden, and South Coast Repertory all use a mix of single ticket sales, subscriptions, and contributed income to sustain programming from season to season. Much like many other theatres across the country these numbers can vary from time to time, and when taking artistic risks on newer or lesser-known works can sometimes see audience numbers dwindle. An interesting finding was the role of the corporate funder for children’s theatre. Funders like to support cultural experiences for children and each of these theatres has benefited from this.
In Nicholas Hanson’s article *Back to the Books: Evaluating the Economic Factors Behind Literature-Based Theatre for Young Audiences Productions* he focuses heavily on the role of corporate funders stating that:

“Corporate sponsors are reticent to fund a form of theatre that has such a low profile— and an audience that does not control the purse strings. Producing shows aimed primarily at the very young strains resources even further. Whereas the costs for building set pieces or paying actors are comparable between professional theatre for adults and for young audiences, the revenue potential for TYA is limited, because the expectations exists that theatre companies will offer lower ticket prices for children than for adults” (Hanson 2012, 203).

Hanson’s point is valid, but the three theatres used in my study paint a drastically different picture.

The theatres’ adult seasons attract big name sponsors, but their children’s season sponsors garner just as much support. With corporate sponsors such as Comcast (Arden Theatre Company), Target (South Coast Repertory), and Delta Airlines (Alliance Theatre), these regional theatres have proven to attract big name sponsors for all of their productions. I believe these big name corporations are not only interested in the educational impact that theatre (and these productions) have on the younger generation, but also about creating a positive reputation for themselves in the community.

**Recession of 2007–2009**

The recession of 2007–2009 hit everyone hard, changing arts organizations across the country forever. When researching the theatres I was
interested to see how each company survived the recession and how it has affected them to this day. Since the theatres are in different parts of the country, they all traveled different paths.

The Arden was the luckiest of the three theatres. The company had to make small changes and sacrifices, but nothing was majorly different on a day-to-day basis. There was a programmatic change, so that a show would sell more groups, a hiring freeze, and budget cuts were made, but while they weren’t hurt financially, the company didn’t grow as intended during those years. Even with minimal growth during that period, the Arden has been able to continue their growth with expanded programming and a second home.

The Alliance took the recession as an opportunity to reevaluate the company’s work. The only things to survive were the ones that were most meaningful to the company. As discussed in the artistic section, Alliance made a major shift in their educational programming as they built a curriculum around shows previously performed by the company, or ones happening in seasons to come—blurring the line between arts and education. The company’s restructuring efforts have helped them become a stronger company internally, letting the work they generate externally soar to new heights.

While South Coast Repertory cutback financially like most theatres, the company was forced to cut two programmatic elements that had become staples of the company. First, SCR ended their educational tour, which had been serving
schools in Orange County since 1964. Second, the company ended one of the two holiday shows, which ran for over 15 years. SCR felt that ending these programs reflected the changing times and addressed current audience needs. While these programs were each originally put on hiatus, neither one has been brought back. Instead, SCR has been able to focus on its seasonal programming as well as its thriving educational programming in and around Orange County.

The Alliance, Arden, and South Coast Repertory took different routes to weather the recession, which speaks to the geographic location of each company. Together, they paint a portrait of how arts organizations change over time and how these three adapted during a difficult economic downturn. With their strategic thinking, all three emerged stronger than ever and will be able to entertain audiences for seasons to come.
CONCLUSION

LORT Theatres that operate under TYA agreements balance their artistic mission, programming, and budget with their adult repertoire by instilling strong company values and solid strategic plans paving the road for future success. The three theatres profiled illustrate how the regional theatre movement strives to create an audience for the future. These companies continue to grow their audiences by presenting high-quality children’s programming that respects even the youngest audience member. These three case studies add to the current literature published, creating a strong connection from the theoretical framework laid-out by theatre scholars to the work being done by theatre professionals in regional theatres across the country. The Alliance Theatre, Arden Theatre Company, and South Coast Repertory have all shown their commitment and desire in providing the best cultural experience possible to patrons of all ages. It is my hope that other arts organizations can learn strategies from these three cases, because they have illustrated that instilling quality arts and theatre programming at a young age builds an appreciation for the arts and leads to building an audience for the future.
APPENDIX A

Sources Cited


http://alliancetheatre.org/Alliance_ChildrensTheatre_FY10.ashx


APPENDIX B

Research Questions

1) What was the evolution of children’s programming at each theatre company?
   a. How many productions were presented during the early seasons?
   b. Was the initial funding for the programming through a grant/corporation
      or through general operating funds?
   c. How has children’s programming been sustained at the companies since
      it’s initial start?

2) What prompted the theatre companies to add children’s programming to their
   seasonal repertoire?
   a. How do the companies view young theatre audiences?
   b. Was there a specific need the companies’ saw/felt for solid children’s
      entertainment?
   c. Had the company been approached by funders to start presenting
      children’s programming?

3) Why did the companies feel adding children’s programming fit in with their
   artistic mission?
   a. How does children’s programming fit in with the company’s strategic
      plan?
   b. Did the companies ever try to have a resemblance between the adult and
      children’s programming?
   c. Have the companies commissioned new work for the adult and children’s
      audiences?

3) With expanding the core audience, has there been room for collaboration with
   other artists and organizations?
   a. Do you consider outside collaborations in order to sustain programming?
   b. What types of impacts have these collaborations had on the companies?

4) How were the theatre companies affected during the December 2007–June
   2009 recession and the on-going economic climate?
   a. During the tough economic recession of 2007–2009, were there any
      cutbacks to the season?
b. Was there a shift in the budget with less money to produce children’s programming during 2007–2009’s seasons?

5) How have the theatres continued to fit in a world where excess time and money per household are limited?
   a. Have any of the companies instated ticket savings programs to make theatre affordable and accessible to families?
   b. Has there been a new pricing strategy or change post June 2009?
   c. Do any of the theatres have community partnerships or provide school scholarships, making the arts accessible for all?
APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

Artistic and Programmatic
1) Why was Children’s Theatre added to the already existing adult season?

2) Did the company feel there was a need for quality children’s programming?
   o Did the company really feel the need to build/foster a new audience in the area?
   o How have you bridged the gap between the young and old audiences?

3) When children’s theatre was in its early seasons how many productions were presented and was it produced on a trial basis?

4) When the decision was made to add children’s theatre to the company was the mission of the organization re-evaluated?
   o How does the company fit “children’s programming” into their organizational strategic plan?

5) Have there been any artistic risks children’s programming has taken?

6) Has the company ever tried to “mirror” themes, authors, or actors between the adult and children’s season?

7) Over the seasons have you participated or considered collaborations with other companies for productions?
   o Were these productions predominately for adult or children’s programming?

8) What types of educational outreach does the organization currently do with the local community?

Financial
9) How was the children’s programming originally funded? How is that funding sustained today?
   o Was the adult programming originally funded the same way?
10) Have you started any ticket savings programs or provided scholarships to schools or families to see performances?
   - Have you considered shifting programming times so more audiences can attend productions?

'07–'09 Recession
11) Did the December 2007–June 2009 recession put the company under any tough financial constraints?
   - Did this impact budget allocations for adult and children’s programming?

12) Did the money originally allocated for adult and children’s programming shift at all start in the 2009/2010 season and thereafter?
   - If it did change, how did the company address it?

13) How does affordability play into your pricing model in the post recession economy?
   - How has the company made theatre performances accessible to people of all backgrounds?
APPENDIX D

Background on the TYA Agreement

The Actors’ Equity Association (AEA) website states that the TYA agreement is as follows:

“The TYA Agreement covers productions of plays expressly written, created or adapted to be performed for children. There are two forms of contract: the weekly contract and the per-performance contract. Performances are generally done during normal school hours and are limited to 90 minutes in length. In addition to performances, the agreement allows associated ”Artist Activity,” such as classes with the students. Local and overnight touring are permitted, but expenses are required when actors are required to sleep away from their place of residence.”

To read the full TYA agreement visit:
APPENDIX E

Theatres and Interviewees for Study

Alliance Theatre
1280 Peachtree St. NE
Atlanta, GA 30309
www.alliancetheatre.org

Max Leventhal, General Manager
Christopher Moses, Education Director

Arden Theatre Company
40 N. 2nd Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106
www.ardentheatre.org

Amy Murphy, Managing Director
Matt Decker, Associate Artistic Director

South Coast Repertory
655 Town Center Drive
P.O. Box 2197
Costa Mesa, CA 92628
www.scr.org

Lori Monnier, General Manager
John Glore, Associate Artistic Director