

Accinosco / Walker Art Center
The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success)
Case Study by John R. Killacky
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Accinosco is a Brooklyn-based ensemble built around hybrid artist Cynthia Hopkins and her collaborators. Hopkins is a singer, composer, performer, and director working with designers Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg, and often with Hopkins' band, Gloria Deluxe. The ensemble's stated intention is to combine "contemporary pop/art song, performance art, storytelling, experimental theater, and media immersion."

The ensemble was awarded a \$30,000 grant to help develop *The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success)* in partnership with Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. This work became a solo *tour-de-force* multi-media rumination of evolution, forgiveness, and self-redemption that begins with an ironic sci-fi tale of Hopkins' character trying to save the earth in a stage environment of marvelously handcrafted videoscapes. It concludes with a delicate and raw autobiographical coda of dysfunction and healing, intimately spoken and sung by the artist.

Walker Art Center and Cynthia Hopkins have had a long relationship with one another. Walker curator Philip Bither first became aware of Cynthia Hopkins as a performer with Big Dance Theater. At that time she was talking about creating a trilogy of multimedia works with a working title of *Accidental Trilogy*. Bither and the Walker subsequently presented and helped commission this trilogy, including the culminating piece, *The Success of Failure (or, the Failure of Success)*. The Walker had made a similar commitment to Ralph Lemon's *Geography* trilogy.

In 2005, Bither presented the first work in Hopkins' trilogy, *Accidental Nostalgia*, in the Walker's annual *Out There* experimental theater series. He and the Walker then stepped up and co-commissioned the second work through hosting a two-week full production residency in 2006 – providing the ensemble full access to the Walker's state-of-the-art theater with crew so the technical aspects of its multi- and interdisciplinary work could be fully realized. Hopkins and her collaborators in Accinosco returned home to further refine the work and then came back a few weeks later to premiere *Must Don't Whip 'Um* in the 2007 *Out There* series.

Finally, in April 2009, the final work in Hopkins' trilogy, *The Success of Failure* premiered at Walker Art Center following another fully supported two-week residency in its theater before moving on to St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn for its New York premiere in May.

While Walker Art Center was co-commissioner and presenter of *The Success of Failure*, the onus of developing and producing of the work rested on the artist and her ensemble that received the Ensemble Theatre Collaborations Grant. Hopkins described this process as "arduous" and "stressful" as she arranged residencies at MacDowell, CalArts, White Oak, University of Northern Carolina, and Hunter College.

Each relationship with these venues was different from one another. UNC and Hunter College provided concentrated periods of time for the company to set up and rehearse when their theaters were dark. This was essential because of the architectural elements of video and set design in the work. Hunter also allowed a showing of the work-in-progress during Arts Presenters' conference to interest presenters in touring the work. Wexner Center for the Arts came on as a co-commissioner with \$10,000 but without a commitment to present the work before seeing the finished piece.

The residencies were dispersed over time, which Hopkins found useful: “We require fully supported space and time in order for the work to be developed. It serves the work better if periods of time are broken up for us to make progress and have a little breathing room in between.”

Hopkins described the Walker as more of a partner than the other presenters on the project, because it not only provided the production residency in its theater, but also served as a fiscal agent and advocate for grants. And her long history with the Walker helped when financial realities changed the scope of the proposed work.

Originally, Hopkins' band, Gloria Deluxe, was to be in the piece. During a residency at UNC, she realized live musicians would make touring the production prohibitively expensive for most presenters. Therefore she decided to pre-record tracks, increasing the production budget, but lessening touring costs.

Bither at the Walker was a fan of Gloria Deluxe and was at first “disappointed,” feeling “the band was such a powerful component and added greatly to the ensemble’s previous work.” However, once understanding the artist’s intention of how a layered voice and instrumental environment would better serve the work, he was fine and actually stuck to the Walker’s full financial commitment that had originally been based on the larger scale for the proposed work.

One point of contention did arise during the final production residency at the Walker. There is a miraculous moment in *The Success of Failure* when Hopkins flies. During rehearsals, Walker tech staff became uncomfortable with the design of the rigging apparatus and wanted the ensemble to bring in a consultant from Flying by Foy in New York. Neither the ensemble nor the Walker had budgeted this expense. Ultimately, the Walker paid the additional unbudgeted costs of between \$3,000 and \$4,000.

An added benefit of the Walker’s multi-year support of Hopkins’ trilogy was the deepening engagement and relationship between artists and audiences. From her first visit, the artist found “audiences exceptionally attentive and appreciative.” In subsequent visits, she’d often get messages from the Twin Cities’ community prior to residencies, on how much people were looking forward to upcoming visits.

With an audience familiar with her aesthetics, the artist reported *The Success of Failure or, the Failure of Success* received standing ovations every night. And Bither loved that

he and his Twin Cities' audiences could recognize references made to characters and situations from the previous two works in the trilogy.

Other relevant relationships

Walker Art Center partnered with two other projects that received support from Ensemble Theatre Collaborations Grants: Meredith Monk's *Songs of Ascension* with Stanford University and The Builders Association's *Continuous City* with Krannert Center at University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. In each project, the different presenters played various roles.

With the Monk project, Stanford put up the majority of the commissioning costs, but Walker provided 2 1/2 weeks of essential theater time for Monk and collaborating visual artist Ann Hamilton to find their way. With the Builders Association, Krannert provided six weeks of development time along with constructing the sets and costumes, while Walker committed to a commissioning fee.

This was the second time Hopkins' Accinosco ensemble benefitted from an Ensemble Theatre Collaborations Grant. In 2007, Arts at St. Ann's was awarded \$36,000 to partner with Accinosco to support *Must Don't Whip Um*, the second part of her trilogy. For this work, St. Ann's Warehouse functioned as a full producer, and took responsibility for raising the entire production budget, including an additional rehearsal period. Both Hopkins and Bither remarked how exceptional this is for a presenter to fully produce a work.

Issues

This grant entailed support given directly to the artist rather than the presenter. While both Bither and Hopkins agreed it is more appropriate to provide support to the ensembles, Bither feels it does make the presenters less engaged. "When presenters are involved in fundraising and receiving grants," Bither stated, they are "more invested and deeply engaged, closer to the process."

For the third and final work of the trilogy, *The Success of Failure*, Hopkins felt that since her ensemble received the grant, St. Ann was less committed to the work, not even able to provide additional tech days prior to the New York opening.

The issue of who should pay for additional unbudgeted costs when they arise is an interesting one for the Ensemble Theatre Collaborations Grants. Responsibilities for overruns need to be clarified when presenters commission a new work. What about co-commissioners in other cities in these kinds of situations; should they be asked to contribute additional support? A prototype Memorandum of Understanding developed by Arts Presenters for commissioning agreements would be useful for presenters and artists to adapt for future projects.

Something else that should be clarified from the beginning of a commissioning relationship is what role presenters will play in fund raising, as they have more of a fund development infrastructure than the small ensemble theaters. The role of infrastructure, or lack thereof, played a determinant role in fund development in this project.

Hopkins estimated that her ensemble raised \$17,000 for the first work in the trilogy and St. Ann raised \$200,000 for the second piece. Given the success and profile of those first two works, she is frustrated that she has only been able to raise \$80,000 to \$100,000 for the third and final component.

Hopkins is doing all of this alone at this point since she had to let her administrative support go. This not only compromised the full development of the piece, but also threatens the future life of the new work. She said, “We don’t have money to pay our agent and we are not raising enough money to run the company.”

Recognizing the sustainability of her work depends on branching out to the European touring and commissioning markets, Hopkins is turning for the first time to individual supporters to raise \$40,000 so that she can bring *The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success)* to the Edinburgh Festival. Soliciting contributions from individuals has turned out to be “the gift from desperation,” as Hopkins feels she can now be successful when asking individuals with the visibility of the trilogy.

Activist presenters

Bither explained, “Exemplary presenters provide space, money, resources, and feedback for solutions without squeezing out the lifeblood of an artists work,” giving artists “freedom to make their own work and even fail.” And many of the presenters listed in this case study are indeed exemplars: Krannert Center, Wexner Center, Walker, St. Ann’s, and BAM.

However, these activist presenters are few and far between in an artist’s life. Bither worries about presenters “only giving space and nothing else.” The harsh reality in this case study, is that, even with support from programs like Ensemble Theatre Collaborations Grants, artists work in this country is still undercapitalized with the burden on artists to, in Bither’s words, “patch together a coherent process for their work.”

Bither feels that the “best practices from the 1980s and 1990s of presenters working to support artists has fallen away” and Arts Presenters could play a role in convening presenters and artists to candidly learn from successes and challenges. From these meetings, “Arts Presenters could hold up what it means to be a great presenter since many aren’t aware of what is expected to do that.” Bither also feels “Arts Presenters has a role in encouraging the next generation of 30-something presenters; bringing them together with more established institutions.”

While there has long been a perception that activist presenters offer more freedom and support for artists than repertory theaters, this no longer is the case as more and more

artists, developed with alternative presenters, graduate to full producing partners in the theater world. Berkeley Rep and ART are stellar examples.

What's next?

Hopkins has been commissioned to create a new work with Soho Rep in New York and a theater in Lyon, France. After mining her own biography in the *Accidental Trilogy*, she does not see the next work as autobiographical. As important, she doesn't "want anything on the stage but me." Not only does she find it challenging to fundraise, develop, and create multi- and interdisciplinary works, but she is also "one of the crew people who loads and unloads the truck" and does not want to do that anymore.

Bither looks forward to discussing what Hopkins is planning after coming to the end of this cycle, impressed that she so "courageously and artfully handled personal history without ever being self absorbed or indulgent." For him, continued relationships must be balanced with new commitments.

There are 20-25 ensembles that Bither is "excited about and following their work," knowing "the traditional theater producing world is not really there to support these kinds of programs." Next season Bither is presenting *Radiohole* from New York, with the hope of deepening that relationship over time.

The Walker does plan to continue its decades-long commitment of developing the work of experimental performance ensembles through annual production residencies and commissioning support. These artist-centered residencies are invaluable for artists with complex technical needs. However, Bither states "production residencies cost the Walker anywhere from \$20,000 to \$50,000." Due to the current economy and loss of endowment assets, Bither expects to do only three or four next season, rather than the six he has been able to support in recent years.

On tap for the Walker is working with local artists Raneé Ramaswamy and her Ragamala Music and Dance Theatre to create a new interdisciplinary work with an Indonesian gamelan master, and choreographer Morgan Thorson collaborating with the rock band Low from Duluth. Choreographer Reggie Wilson will have a production residency with a Senegalese choreographer prior to performing at Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival and Bill Frisell will work on a new collaboration as well. Choreographer John Jasperse was slated to have a production residency, but Bither decided that sending the choreographer \$10,000 in cash as a commissioner was, "a clear-eyed solution to diminished resources" for both the artist and institution.

In this down economy, Bither will present only 25 events in the 2009/10 season, down from 29 in the previous season. He has also opted for "more indie avant-rock" programming that has "more of an audience base and lower costs," mentioning it is "hard to find \$20,000 to subsidize a concert of Bang on a Can" at present.

Final note

Hopkins finds herself in a grateful place and wanted to “express gratitude. It’s so easy to get caught up in all the money still needing to be raised. On the other hand, it is mind boggling that I can do what I want to be doing in my life.”

John R. Killacky, Program Officer for Arts and Culture, joined The San Francisco Foundation in March 2003. Previously, he served as Executive Director of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts for six years and Curator of Performing Arts for the Walker Art Center for eight years. Other past positions include Program Officer at the Pew Charitable Trusts, General Manager of PepsiCo SUMMERFARE, and Managing Director of the Trisha Brown and Laura Dean dance companies. He received the First Bank Award Sally Ordway Irvine Award in Artistic Vision; the William Dawson Award for Programming Excellence from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters; Dance USA’s Earnie Award as an “unsung hero;” a Gerbode Foundation Professional Development Fellowship; a scholarship to Harvard Business School’s summer intensive; and in 2004, the Fan Taylor Distinguished Service Award for Exemplary Service to the Field of Professional Presenting from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters. Mr. Killacky has served as a panelist, lecturer, and consultant for a broad range of arts and funding organizations. He has written numerous publications on the arts, and written and directed several award winning short films and videos. He most recently produced and co-directed “Janis Ian: Live From Grand Center” broadcast on PBS in 2008 and 2009.