Delta Theatre Productions: A Start-up Theatre Company

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Delta Theatre Productions:
A Start-up Theatre Company

An internship report submitted to the graduate faculty
of the University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Arts Administration

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May 2012
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Abstract

This report is the result of a year-long internship with a new theatre company in New Orleans, Delta Theatre Productions, currently operating under the name Delta Productions. I functioned as the Managing Director for this start-up, building organizational infrastructure from the ground up, guiding the process of its first production from idea to final product, and creating the branding of the organization in order to set it apart from its competition and establish it as a viable and healthy theatrical company for the New Orleans community. This report tells the story of how the organization began, reports on my duties as an intern, analyzes the successes and failures of the first year of operation, relates guidance from the best practices of other theatrical organizations around the nation, and finally offers practical recommendations for Delta Productions as it pursues growth and sustainability.
Introduction

Delta Theatre Productions is a new theatre organization in New Orleans, founded by four friends and colleagues who share a vision for a large, regional theatre based in New Orleans that serves the entire Louisiana-Mississippi Gulf Coast region. My internship with them lasted a year, where I functioned as the Managing Director, though as one of the founding members my relationship with them continues even now. I led the organization through the process of creation, from the first meeting where plans for the immediate and long-range future were discussed through the closing night of the first production. In between, I handled organizational issues, created and managed the branding and marketing, and guided it through a successful run of the play. The internship was difficult and exhausting, but was extremely rewarding. It challenged a new arts administrator to tackle jobs worthy of a seasoned veteran, while allowing me to stretch my wings and try things I wasn’t always sure would work.

The following is a description of my work with the organization; an analysis of what worked, what didn’t, and the overall strength of the organization; a layout of some of the most important best practices in the non-profit theater industry nationally and regionally; and some important recommendations for the future of Delta Productions. While my intimate relationship with the organization might be seen by some as detrimental to an unbiased analysis, I believe that my personal and professional long-term investment in the organization gives me the ability to look deep into the heart of its strengths and weaknesses and come to conclusions that others might not see.
Chapter 1

History

Delta Theatre Productions is a new theatre organization based in New Orleans, LA. It is the brainchild of four founders. As graduate students at the University of Alabama in 2005, Andrew Crusse, an MFA student in the Directing program of the University’s Department of Theatre and Dance, and Alice Harp Hopkins, a resident of New Orleans studying for her Library of Science Master’s degree, met on a school sponsored study abroad program. Their friendship, buoyed by a shared love of the Irish countryside and theatre scene, flourished in their weeks together. During that time, they discovered another shared love: the city of New Orleans. One afternoon while sitting in the courtyard of Trinity College in Dublin, the idea of establishing a regional theatre in New Orleans began to take shape.

Having both spent lots of time in New Orleans, they each felt that though there was a vibrant but small theatre community in New Orleans, it lacked a large theatre that consistently produced both musicals and plays focusing on fresh interpretations of older material while also producing newer work. Because of its location and cultural heritage, it seemed to be the perfect place to serve central and southern Louisiana, as well as central and coastal Mississippi.

In the fall of 2005, my husband, Jeffrey M. Davis, entered the University of Alabama to get his Master’s degree in Stage Lighting and Set Design. Andrew and Jeff became fast friends and collaborative partners in various productions. Because their partnership in theatre was so fruitful, Andrew shared his dream of the New Orleans-based theatre with Jeff. As it became a shared dream, Jeff and Andrew began to map out more clearly what their hopes for establishing this theatre would be.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures in New Orleans, the group waited to see what the future would hold for New Orleans and for their plans. Undaunted by these challenges,
Andrew and Jeff decided to begin the story of Delta Productions where they were. They mounted a production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* as a co-production with UA’s chapter of Alpha Psi Omega, the theatre honor society of the Department of Theatre and Dance. The production was highly successful in its 11pm time slot, selling out nearly every performance and garnering excellent press from the local newspapers (Thompson).

Upon graduating in 2007, not seeing enough opportunities for work in New Orleans at that time, Andrew left for Los Angeles. Jeff and I joined him in the summer of 2008. Working together with a theatre Andrew had helped found years earlier, Delta mounted another co-production with the Ark Theatre. The West Coast premier of *The Glass Mendacity*, a spoof of Tennessee Williams’ best known works, had a long and successful run (Stanley). It is not a coincidence that while producing this show, which drips with New Orleans’ charm and humor, conversations about moving to New Orleans and making plans for Delta began in earnest. By the spring of 2010, Andrew, Jeff, Alice and I were all living in New Orleans, ready to begin producing.

**Leadership/management structure**

Delta Productions is managed entirely by volunteers. The four people responsible for the idea behind Delta, Andrew Crusse, Alice Hopkins, Jeff Davis, and myself, form a leadership team that governs all aspects of the organization. Each person has certain skills that make them uniquely qualified to head each important portion of the organization.

Andrew Crusse, with his background in directing and having already assisted in founding two other theatre companies, is a natural fit for Artistic Director. He is responsible for setting the vision and major artistic goals of the Company, choosing shows to produce, and overseeing production. In the first production that meant directing, casting, producing, and assisting in a few administrative tasks. He is also the face of the Company, and takes on part of the responsibility of making artistic
friendships/partnerships within the Community. He also works closely with the Managing Director in branding and marketing, assuring that both the artistic and administrative sides of the organization match in tone and vision.

Jeff Davis, as Head of Production, manages all technical aspects of productions. In this early stage of the Company this often means designing lights and set, assembling costumes, buying or gathering props, and building the set. He also finds and coordinates with outside designers, artists, and technicians that will be involved with productions. Jeff provides excellent feedback on locations for productions since the Company currently has no permanent home. He also handles some administrative tasks as needed.

Alice Harp Hopkins, with a background in library science, will eventually be the main grant writer for the Company. There are currently no grants being written, due to some restrictions imposed by the Company’s fiscal agent, so Alice helps with all aspects of fundraising and administration, carrying the title of Director of Development. She is responsible for the overall fundraising program, including finding and soliciting potential large donors, finding potential grants, keeping track of donations and donors, and planning any fundraising events. Alice also assists in creating and maintaining community relations. This year she attended local events to network and reached out to local politicians, including the New Orleans’ Mayor’s Office, to introduce and promote Delta Productions.

I make up the fourth member of the leadership team, handling all things administrative. I will go into greater detail in Chapter 2 about my responsibilities and jobs. I work closely with each member of the team to oversee and support ongoing projects. Like all other members of the leadership team, my position is unpaid.

The Company currently has no board. Though Delta Productions is registered through the State as a non-profit organization, it has not yet applied for IRS tax exempt status. This means that all
governance is currently held by the four-person leadership team. Decisions are fairly democratic, with the Artistic Director having a final say if disagreements arise. The team holds monthly meetings to discuss ongoing issues, make plans for the future, and to check in on current projects. Minutes are taken at each meeting and electronic copies are filed. The minutes from the previous month’s meeting are redistributed at new meetings so that old business can be easily discussed.

The team has recently decided to put off applying for tax-exempt status in order to avoid the sometimes difficult compliance issues involved with having and maintaining 501(c)(3) status, and to allow for greater flexibility in decision-making. As the group’s work continues and reaches a greater segment of the community, a Board will be found and tax-exempt status will be applied for.

In addition to the above unpaid leadership positions, Delta Productions is fortunate to have a small but energetic group of volunteers to assist in fundraising, box office management, and other small tasks. This group is almost entirely made up of friends, co-workers, and professional peers of the leadership team. Though they don’t have any part of decision-making, they are an important part of the organization.

**Purpose of the organization**

The mission statement of Delta Productions, created in 2011, reads: “Delta Theatre Productions is a professional theatre based in New Orleans which seeks to promote the Gulf Coast Region through development of the regional cultural economy. By bridging a contemporary vision with an historical foundation, we create vibrant and relevant productions of the highest quality. Through community engagement and educational outreach, we seek to conserve and extend the theatrical arts for future generations.”

Delta Productions intends to bring to the stage fresh, new productions of both contemporary and classic plays and musicals. Productions are chosen carefully in order to find material that is either
virtually unknown or forgotten that deserves to be revisited, or to discover a new take on familiar material. It is the Company’s goal that one will never see a scene-for-scene copy of a Broadway production, or costumes similar to the movie version of a play. These productions could play with staging or design techniques, have a unique twist on casting, or simply emphasize themes that may have never before been explored.

The secondary, long-term goal of the Company is to grow to become a major force in the Gulf Coast region as a regional theatre that serves audiences throughout central and southern Louisiana, central and coastal Mississippi. There will be a year-round season of productions, as well as educational and mentoring programs for under-privileged youth, especially focusing on Orleans Parish.

In the short-term that means producing shows when it is fiscally possible, expanding audience and donors, and constantly looking for opportunities to grow. Growth may come in the form of partnerships with other local theatre companies, or the opportunity to host an educational summer camp at a local school. The leadership team aims to produce 2-3 shows in each of the first few seasons (with seasons running from August-May).

**Funding**

Funding will always be the greatest challenge for a new organization, and has been a real challenge for Delta Productions. Because the leadership team is comprised of mostly newer transplants to New Orleans, and because the group was completely unknown before this year as a producing organization within the community, finding local donors was very difficult.

To make attracting donors easier, the organization established fiscal sponsorship through a national arts support agency called Fractured Atlas, based in New York City. Through this relationship, donors to Delta Productions can receive tax deductions for their contributions. Fractured Atlas also partners with several crowd-funding websites and oversees grant writing by the organization,
facilitating and assisting with the process to better position the new organization to receive such funding.

Throughout the first year of Delta Productions, donations came mostly from friends, family, co-workers and peers. Significant donations were from members of the leadership team when donated funds from other sources fell short of production and administration needs.

As of now, because of rules put into place by Fractured Atlas, no grants have been written. Fractured Atlas requires $1000 worth of donations be processed through its sponsorship before an organization is allowed to write for grants. This is to encourage young organizations to build a community base of support before seeking funding from foundation and corporate sources. While more than $1000 was received when donations from the leadership team are taken into account, not all the monies from the leadership team were processed through Fractured Atlas so this minimum requirement for writing grants has not yet been met.

Delta Productions is currently pursuing ways to handle these funding challenges by planning fundraising activities for the spring of 2012. These will take the form of an email fund drive, at least one small to mid-sized fundraising event, and an educational auditioning workshop for young people that will charge a moderate fee. It is also targeting local corporations and approaching potential private donors.

Programs/Projects

While the organization has many plans for future programs, including educational workshops and camps for children, a mentoring/apprenticeship program for underprivileged New Orleans teens, and an annual festival of Greek plays to be performed outdoors at City Park, the main focus on programming for the first 2-3 years will be on productions of plays and musicals.

Early planning sessions in 2011 were intentionally ambitious, with the team proposing to
produce one mid-sized play in the Fall of 2011, a very small play in the early spring of 2012, and a large musical in the summer of 2012. Most of the team’s efforts, then, were channeled in 2011 toward producing Delta's first-ever New Orleans production: *Torch Song Trilogy*.

The play, a cycle of three full-length plays, was performed in November-December of 2011. It was chosen because of its historical and current significance for the national gay community, and because 2012 marks the 30th anniversary of the Tony-winning Broadway production. This story of a gay man searching for love and a sense of normalcy through adoption of a teenage son felt newly fresh and relevant to the leadership team. Because the play has a natural following in people who were familiar with the original production and its film adaptation, it was thought that it would attract a middle-aged audience, while its subject matter would attract a younger demographic. The performances took place at the Allways Lounge and Theatre, located in the Marigny neighborhood, a newly popular arts district in New Orleans.

Because of lack of funds, plans for any productions for the remainder of the 2011-2012 Season have been postponed. With the renewed focus on fundraising, the leadership team plans to produce a medium-sized musical in September/October 2012, and at least one other production in the spring of 2013.

Plans for future productions will also incorporate an educational aspect, as educational programs remain an important major goal for the organization. This may mean involving community youth in stage managing and other technical aspects of production, as well as encouraging school groups to attend productions. Delta Productions may also seek a partnership with a local school to facilitate a summer theatre camp or weekend workshops. This would be both cost-effective and a stepping stone to future growth for the organization.

The history of Delta Productions, though quite short, establishes the seriousness with which the
founding leadership team takes this endeavor. They approached the creation of this organization with an ambitious vision for its future and confidence in their professional abilities. My contribution toward both its history and its future is detailed in the following chapter.
Chapter 2

The nature of my internship put me in a rather unusual position. Because the organization is not only new, but had not even begun programming when I began the internship, there was no infrastructure, no history, no marketing, no precedent established by what had come before. Though Delta Productions had officially co-produced several productions in Alabama and Los Angeles, it was generally a silent partner, with Andrew Crusse and Jeff Davis heading up the artistic portion of each project but none of the administrative. While the co-producing partner kept records of budgets, marketing, and attendance numbers, Andrew and Jeff did not keep such files, not thinking about the value these would bring in establishing a working history of Delta’s productions. They had also never established a website or developed language about the vision of the organization. Thus, one of my first tasks was to create and organize all parts of the administrative infrastructure.

While I worked closely with the other members of the leadership team, I handled many tasks in their entirety. This gave me the unique opportunity to build and shape the way that the community would perceive the organization. The pressure of this was both exciting and daunting, resulting in an internship full of opportunities for me to learn in a very real way how to create a lot with very little.

For ease of understanding, I have divided the following chapter into two major sections. The first will cover the administrative tasks I undertook to establish the organization and get it ready to produce its first show. The second half describes the work I did that was primarily programmatic.
Administrative Tasks

Legal Fundamentals

The first task was to legally create the entity. This involved finding a lawyer to assist us and to begin the paperwork. Fortunately, Alice Hopkins introduced us to Mr. Wayne Garret, an attorney with non-profits experience. He helped us file as a non-profit with the Secretary of State of Louisiana as well as create simple articles of incorporation. Unfortunately, our lawyer incorrectly wrote the official title of our organization as “Delta Theatre Productions, LLC” on the paperwork. This caused a problem with finalizing the paperwork, which we didn’t discover until some months later as we attempted to open a bank account. Several phone calls and unhelpful state websites later, our lawyer re-filed our corrected paperwork and we were officially a non-profit.

Once we had completed paperwork in hand, we were able to file for an Employer Identification Number, or EIN, which we would need to open a business bank account. This also assists in identification of our organization for tax purposes. This task was accomplished easily online by Alice, with some input from me.

In meetings with our lawyer, we also discussed and planned to move forward with filing for 501(c)(3) status. He gave us the paperwork to look over and explained the process. It quickly became apparent, however, that we would not be able to get the status in time to raise funds for our fall project. Knowing this, we tabled the IRS paperwork and began researching alternatives to having our own tax exempt status that would still allow us to give donors a tax deduction.

Fiscal sponsorship and other financial matters

I knew that there were organizations that would act as fiscal agents for emerging groups, basically allowing an organization without tax-exempt status to “piggyback” on the agent’s tax-exempt
status. This service is fully IRS compliant and is legal, and keeps our young organization from having to deal with its own IRS compliance issues. While there are a few local groups that offer such a service, I was attracted to a group called Fractured Atlas out of New York City. They are a national organization that serves arts organizations and artists. It is my hope that being associated with a well-established, well-recognized national organization will help us to establish our creditability as a legitimate company.

Fractured Atlas’ entire fiscal agency process is handled online. This was very attractive to me since it would allow me to access our information from anywhere. I can input donor information, check amounts, etc online, and then mail the checks to its headquarters. Fees are immediately assessed, and then the money is held for us until we request it. This can also be done online, and is delivered electronically to our bank account. Since we don’t technically own the money until it is released to us, we will only pay taxes on the portion released to us within each fiscal year.

The fees for this service are nominal. A 6% fee is assessed on each donation, with no additional fees charged for online credit card transactions. Fractured Atlas also sends receipts to donors and assists with the grant writing process, helping its clients find and solicit appropriate grants for their programming.

I wrote the application for us to gain this fiscal sponsorship through Fractured Atlas, and within a month we were accepted. We now appear on the Fractured Atlas website as one of its sponsored projects. This relationship allowed us to give donors a simple, tax-deductible way to give money, while keeping us from having the responsibility of IRS compliance. For the purposes of our first project, this worked very well.

Once all these items were in place, we turned our attention to finding a bank for the organization. I asked Alice to research a few options, as well as contact her personal accountant for advice. She reported back to me that Gulf Coast Bank & Trust was a young, local bank that had already
had some experience with working with non-profits. Because the bank is still building its clientele, the account manager was eager to meet with us and to make things simple. After meeting with both our account manager and the bank manager, we felt very comfortable that they could serve us well. For accountability purposes, both Alice and I are on the account, and no checks can be written without two signatures. This has presented some logistical problems since we don’t work together daily, and we are exploring the idea of adding the other leadership team members to the account or only requiring that checks over a certain amount require two signatures. Once the account was opened, I was able to connect our Fractured Atlas account to it, speeding up the process by having funds transferred electronically from our donor fund directly to the bank account. This allowed much more flexibility in making payments to vendors and contract employees.

I was also in charge of keeping accounts for the organization. This was perhaps the greatest logistical challenge for me, not being a bookkeeper. I was able to track receipts as our project went along, but, unfortunately, managed most of the actual accounting only after closing night. Because of my time constraints, however, there were few other options for me.

**Branding**

My next goal after the legal and financial structure was in place was to establish the public image of the organization through brand creation. I envisioned the major components of this to consist of creating a logo, developing a website that effectively tells our story and represents us to the world, and creating a mission statement that accurately represents who we are and what we are attempting to do in our community.

I called a separate and special meeting of our leaders to work on the mission statement. It was my feeling that this was the most essential piece of the branding puzzle. It not only tells the community, donors, and grant makers how we see ourselves, but it also serves to unite us in a single purpose. I
guided the group to develop our main vision for the organization, and we worked orally to create the statement.

We intentionally wanted a mission statement that would be broad enough to allow us to do a wide range of productions and projects, while still clearly communicating who we are. We decided that it was important that we specifically establish that we intend to serve the greater community of the Gulf Coast area, and that we see theatre and the arts as an economic building block for this region. We also wanted to make it clear that we will build upon a foundation of theatre that has been long-established, carrying into the future an art form we think is important and prescient. We also wanted to communicate that we were a professional organization, committed to quality in all our programming, which would include theatrical productions and education.

Building upon a mission statement that Andrew had developed in graduate school as part of a class project where he created a new theatre organization (and he naturally used the Delta as his framework), we created this mission statement:

“Delta Theatre Productions is a professional theatre based in New Orleans which seeks to promote the Gulf Coast Region through development of the regional cultural economy. By bridging a contemporary vision with an historical foundation, we create vibrant and relevant productions of the highest quality. Through community engagement and educational outreach, we seek to conserve and extend the theatrical arts for future generations.”

While this serves us well now, when a board is established and we prepare to apply for IRS tax exempt status, this statement will be re-evaluated and possibly rewritten to reflect the growing vision of the organization.
We went through a similar process in designing a logo. I did some research on color theory, and also looked at the colors used in other similar organizations nearby. I settled on purple as a main color choice for our brand since it denotes richness and quality. I found complementary colors of turquoise and orange to use as accents. Not being a graphic designer or having the money to hire one, I began playing with fonts and styles, moving the words into different arrangements. The team had also discussed the idea of using the lower case Delta symbol from the Greek alphabet as a trademark of sorts to be included with the name of the organization. I created various versions of this trademark and included them with the different arrangements of the name.

At our next meeting, the leadership team discussed the various options, deciding first that the color scheme was distinct and representative of us. We then narrowed the options down to about five versions and discussed some changes that could be made to each to make them stronger. From there I redesigned our favorites, finally coming up with one version that I thought incorporated everything we had talked about. At the next meeting, after deciding we needed one final tweak to the trademark, we agreed on the final logo.

With these two important pieces in place, I could then begin to build an online presence for us. I knew that a website was a must, and I wanted a simple, clean site that would be easy to create and update. After some extensive research into various options, I settled on Weebly, a free web-building service. Weebly offers a simple “drop-and-drag” builder, with many simple templates offered for free. It also gives me a fair amount of flexibility in making the site unique to us, a very important part of branding. I can add photos, multimedia, and even a blog. It is also easy to connect it to various social media sites.

Once I was pleased with the look and feel of the site, I bought the domain name www.deltatheatre.com through Weebly. Because Weebly now hosts our site, we gain access to Google apps for businesses, which allowed me to set up email addresses for the theatre as well as each leader
so that we have name@deltatheatre.com addresses. These small things all assist in making us look legitimate and professional, so I felt they were important steps to take.

The website features a landing page that introduces the organization, briefly explaining who we are and what we want to accomplish. It also features a history of the organization, bios of leadership, our mission statement, and pages devoted to the fall show we produced. It also has pages for how to support us (featuring links to the donation page on our Fractured Atlas page) and a page for contacting us. From this website you can see pictures of past productions, sign up for our newsletter, as well as share any page on Facebook and Twitter.

The website is a continual work in progress. Even while producing our fall show, I found new uses for it, adding a “Donor’s Hall of Fame” page to recognize those who have given money to us, and an entire page for review quotes and a photo gallery. I credited photographers whose work appears on the site, and made sure that we had their permission before posting. I wanted the website to be a hub of information about the organization, as well as expanding our reach and brand.

I also opened a Twitter account for the Company where we could share information about projects, and created a Facebook page. The set-up for these is fairly straight-forward, though management is extremely time-consuming. I included our logo as the picture for each network, furthering our branding possibilities. I tried to post to these at least once a day, using TweetDeck, a social media aggregator site, to make this task a little more streamlined. I could set up posts before I wanted them to launch, giving them a time to “go”, as well as post to both Twitter and Facebook simultaneously.
Program Tasks

Choosing the project

With all these things in place, the first project was in a good position to succeed. In this second section, I will tell about the project specific jobs I worked on throughout the internship. This portion was far more challenging, while also more rewarding, than the infrastructure set-up.

Around early summer, 2011, conversations began in earnest about what our first project should be. Though there was input from all leadership team members, I engaged one-on-one with Andrew as Artistic Director to discuss potential projects in terms of artistic possibilities, potential for community interest, and cost. Many scripts were read and considered.

Knowing that our first project would take place in the fall of 2011, I suggested that we submit ourselves to be a part of the New Orleans Fringe Festival. The Fringe Fest is a young but growing organization, and it has received wide recognition for both the quality of the work exhibited there and its spirit. I knew that being a part of the Festival would give us a somewhat built-in audience, allowing us to save some money on marketing while bringing people to our production that already enjoy seeing theater.

The major problem with this idea is that we are not primarily a new works organization, and though both Andrew and I have written scripts in the past, we did not have a script that we felt was perfect for the Festival. We finally settled on a script that Andrew had adapted from an ancient Phoenician play. It was a timely political satire, positing an alternate United States where Barbara Bush had become Queen after her husband had turned us into a monarchy and died, leaving her to lead. It featured a crazed George W. Bush leading America to war in the Middle East, and news reporters and soldiers making harsh commentary about the reality of war.

Our main concern was that the script was imperfect, and had a lot of technical issues that might
not be possible given the constraints of the Festival’s load-in and load-out policies. We decided that Andrew could work on the script, while Jeff would figure out the technical issues. Andrew and I went to Fringe informational meetings, introducing ourselves to the leadership and preparing our application. We felt we could move forward, and I submitted our application.

As time drew closer for the selection process to be completed, we found that the script’s issues were greater than we had anticipated, and I felt that Andrew was discouraged. Knowing that nothing artistically great could happen without Andrew’s full passion, and sensing his growing frustration, I sat down with him to discuss our options. We considered letting the selection process play itself out and dealing with the possibility of needing to go forward with the production. I felt very strongly, however, that we were a group built around professionalism and quality, and it felt very unprofessional to move forward with anything that we didn’t feel very strongly about. I also didn’t want to be involved in a sticky situation with Fringe should we be chosen and then need to pull out. That felt unfair to both the Festival and our fellow applicants. With my encouragement, Andrew decided to pull our application. I emailed the Festival and as respectfully as possible withdrew our application, wanting to preserve our reputation and relationship with the Festival leadership.

Left with no project on hand, Andrew admitted to me that he had another play in mind that he was particularly interested in. Partially through conversations with a local actor whom Andrew had recently befriended and partially through his own personal experience with the play, *Torch Song Trilogy* had recently arisen as a viable option in his mind. I read the script, and though I had some hesitations about the dated script, I discussed with Andrew his vision for the show. He felt we could produce it for a relatively low cost, that it was an important play with a significant anniversary approaching, and he felt that his friend, Chris Wecklein, was the perfect centerpiece for the production as the show’s main character, Arnold. He knew he could set the piece in a modern-day setting, giving it a fresh feeling and bringing the still-relevant issues raised in the play into focus.
We approached the leadership team with this suggestion, gathering everyone’s thoughts on the content and vision, as well as exploring the issue of cost. Everyone agreed that we could get a great audience response to the production, and that costs would be low enough that we could raise the money to cover them. United, we moved forward with plans for the project.

Andrew, Jeff and I discussed possible locations for the production. I was aware that the Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods had become the new hub of the arts community in New Orleans. Because we hoped to target a young audience with the production, I suggested that it seemed like a great place to set our first project. Additionally, Chris Wecklein tended bar at The Allways Lounge & Theater, a venue that has already become well known in New Orleans as a place to see good theater. We decided to use our connection with Chris to approach the Allways with our proposal. A date was set, giving us about four months to produce the show.

**Fundraising**

While Andrew and Jeff handled casting the show and the other production needs, I set to work on the marketing, fundraising, and other administrative needs of the play. The three of us worked together to create a working budget for the production based on our expectations of costs as well as our research into what actual costs would be (e.g. printing costs, our expectation of venue costs, etc.). It came to about $8500.

Working from the overall costs we found in our tentative budget, Alice and I developed a fundraising plan for the production, including approaching some individual large donors, sending emails and letters to friends and family announcing the theater and requesting their financial support, and trying to pre-sell tickets at a discount. I gave Alice the tasks of contacting some potential larger donors and pre-selling tickets, while I prepared to send an email to our friends and family.

I wanted to be able to insure that our emails wouldn’t end up in everyone’s SPAM boxes, so I
did some research on free email services. Though Constant Contact offers a nice service, I settled on iContact as an email service. It is completely free, and offers HTML email building, which allows me to make professional looking emails and newsletters. I also liked that I could easily sign up people for our newsletter through the service, or add a link on our website that would allow them to sign up themselves. The email building is a simple drag and drop, and allows me to modify the underlying HTML for greater flexibility. The service helps me be sure that the emails I am sending out will be far less likely to be flagged as SPAM, ensuring a greater amount of successful sends. With the service set up, I prepared and sent a note to family and friends, letting them know about the production, the dates, and that we were raising money.

Additionally, it came to my attention that Fractured Atlas, our fiscal agent, had recently begun a partnership with IndieGoGo, a successful crowd-funding site. IndieGoGo campaigns let anyone set up a fund raising campaign online that can be viewed by people all over the world. Most donors on this site and those like it are likely to give small amounts of money, around $25 or less, to causes they feel strongly about. Many filmmakers, musicians, theater professionals, as well as general entrepreneurs are now using these sites to fund their projects and start-up companies. The partnership allowed funders of our program to receive a tax deduction for their donations as well as exempt Delta from any fees above and beyond the 6% already levied through Fractured Atlas. It also kept one single list of donors through Fractured Atlas, so I could more easily manage our donor list.

I created a campaign on IndieGoGo, including our marketing materials and some information about who we are and what we do. I noticed that many of the projects on IndieGoGo were new productions, or scripts in the process of being created, and thought that a general fund raising campaign for the play might be unsuccessful. Instead, I decided to focus on one aspect we felt strongly about--paying our actors for their work. I tailored all the language on the site to reflect this focus, talking about how we feel strongly about artists being not only paid but paid well for the work they do. I launched
the site, adding it to our website and posting it at various times to our social networks.

During this time, several months before the show opened, we started to see some donations trickle in through IndieGoGo as well as some checks we received from friends and family. I processed checks through Fractured Atlas, filling out the online form for donations received and then mailing received checks to the headquarters in New York. I also began an Excel spreadsheet for keeping track of donors, their contact information, their relationship to us, and how much they gave.

In the end, we were able to secure only a small amount of money from individuals, through both general donations and the IndieGoGo campaign. Of our $8500 budget for Torch Song Trilogy, $560 came from individual donors, after the 6% fee was levied by Fractured Atlas. An additional $4500 was donated by the leadership team members. The production came in under budget at around $8300, and the additional costs above these donated monies were covered by ticket sales.

Marketing

In addition to heading up fund raising efforts, I also did virtually all the marketing for this project. Working with Andrew and the leadership team, I mocked up several versions of a marketing image to be used on postcards, posters, and digitally on all of our various online sites. I purchased an image through iStockphoto, an online image aggregator. The license I purchased for using the image allowed us to freely use the image in any way we chose as long as we didn’t sell products with the image on them. Since we were using the image for marketing purposes only this was fine.

I used a free graphic design program called Gimp to create the marketing image. Gimp is an open source version of Photoshop, which allowed me a lot of flexibility in manipulating the image. This was extremely helpful since every use of the image had slightly different requirements. Using this tool I created high resolution images for the postcard and poster since they would be printed, as well as low resolution versions of each for digital marketing. I used the image on various pages of our website,
sent it to local media, and posted it on our social networking sites.

Once I had a viable image, I was ready to make a marketing plan for the project as a whole. Knowing we had little money for advertising, I focused my attention on free options. I worked backwards from opening night, creating a timeline for when the press release should go out, when to follow-up with media, and when to contact reviewers about seeing the show. I also found which local websites and organizations offered free theater listings. Unfortunately, because these are online many of them required separate online applications rather than me just being able to send a press release. The upside is that I was often able to include the marketing image with the listing.

I had postcards printed through Vistaprint, an online printing site. I asked my friends and colleagues along with the leadership team to disperse these all over the city a few weeks prior to opening night. We put them in coffee shops, book stores, the Healing Center just blocks from the Allways Lounge, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, NOMA, and other places where people gather. I made sure that the Marigny and Bywater were especially well-covered. I also arranged for a few posters to be printed through a local printer, and some of these went up inside the Allways Lounge and a few other neighborhood places, though I saved a few for our records and one as a giveaway for our audience.

I also wrote a press release that served to both announce our presence as a new producing company in New Orleans and promote *Torch Song Trilogy*. In it I included a brief introduction to Delta Productions, while focusing on the production. I also included a short bio of Chris Wecklein who, as a well known and respected local actor, I was treating in our marketing as the “star”. I printed a few copies of this, but it was primarily sent to local media via email as I have found this to be the preferred method around New Orleans. I worked from a publicity email list I was given by a colleague at another local arts organization. Though it was not a perfect list for a theatre company, I modified and added to it to get a fairly complete email list. I added all the email addresses into our email client as a separate
list and was able to send professional-looking press releases by email that included our logo at the top in full color.

I discovered rather late in the game that many news outlets want images other than a poster image before the show opens. This was a simple oversight on my part—we had made no publicity shots of the actors early in the rehearsal process as we probably should have. I did arrange to have a few photos taken of Chris in costume, posing as Arnold’s drag queen persona in front of a mirror. They were a bit low-quality, but did convey a nice story about the show. Additionally, I arranged to have a friend come to our final dress rehearsal to take action stills of the entire show. This gave me lots of nice shots that I sent to reviewers, the press, and posted on Facebook and Twitter to help promote the show.

**Legal Issues**

I also managed the various legal issues that were specific to the production. Borrowing from an actor’s contract from another local theater company, I created contracts that outlined what we as producers expected of our actors and what they could expect from us. I attached a rider specific to each actor that said how much they would receive for their role. Included was a place for them to sign and to give me their contact information including their social security number for IRS purposes.

I also had an unusual challenge for a start-up theater company. We cast an Equity actress for one of the roles, and though we knew that she would cost us more than many of our other actors, our previous experiences with her told us that she would be worth every penny. We also would not ask her to jeopardize her relationship with Equity by asking her to work for us “off the books”. Wendy, our Equity actress, was extremely helpful in this endeavor, introducing me to her contacts at the Equity Chicago office. They guided me through the process of hiring Wendy. She and I each had paperwork to fill out for them, and then they issued her contract. I also had to research and enlist the assistance of a paymaster who would handle the actual payments to both Wendy and for the taxes and insurance
required by the NOLA Equity Agreement.

**House and Box Office Management**

I wanted to encourage pre-sales of tickets, so on all my marketing I included a discount code for a “Buy 2, get $5 off” discount for online sales. To make this happen, I needed an online ticketing company that could process online sales cheaply. I did a lot of research for this, calling several companies and looking extensively at their websites. There are plenty of options, but I found that ShowClix gave me lots of flexibility with codes, seating charts, adding and taking away performances, etc. The fees were charged per ticket, and I could pass those along to the customer. This was a gamble, but I decided that people are used to paying fees for online tickets sales at large places like TicketMaster, and that they wouldn’t balk at a few extra dollars tacked onto their ticket price.

ShowClix allowed me to create a very professional landing site that could be accessed through our website. Their customer service agents helped me set up a direct deposit to our bank so that we received weekly deposits of tickets sold that week. I allowed tickets sales to stay open online until one hour before show time, giving people plenty of time to reserve tickets. I could then pull a report with that evening’s guest list to give to Alice who ran the box office.

I also managed a separate list of VIPs and comps, unpaid reservations, and those who bought tickets online. I combined these lists together for the box office each night, clearly denoting who needed to pay and who did not. Alice checked people in and sold tickets at the door by cash or check.

I acted as House Manager each night, moving between the box office, the house, and backstage to make sure that everyone had what they needed and that guests could find seats. Seating was all general admission, but because we began the play in the bar area of the venue which had an open seating plan and moved later to the theater which had a much more formal theatre seating arrangement, I wanted to be able to facilitate people finding their way and getting enough seats together for each
party.

I also arranged a raffle to encourage people to give us their email addresses. They could give us their name and email address for the chance to win a framed show poster signed by the cast and director. I was able to add about 60 email addresses to our newsletter email list. To try to get a little extra income, I also had some stickers printed that said “I Support the Arts”. We sold these at the box office for $5. This was only marginally successful, but I was then able to include the stickers in thank you notes to donors. I opened the show with a curtain speech each night, announcing these opportunities and welcoming our guests. I took special care to communicate our thanks for coming to a new, untested company’s first production, and to let them know that we appreciated all the support of our community.

At the end of each night, Alice and I counted the cash and checks we had received. We also counted ticket stubs so that we could get a fairly accurate head count of how many people we had in the audience each night. I kept track of these numbers in an Excel spreadsheet for our future reference. At least once each weekend I made a deposit of cash and checks into our bank account. I often made change for our change box from this cash as well, trying to keep about $200 in fives and ones in the cash box at all times.

Once the show closed, I made an accounting of the income and expenses. I found that we came in mostly on budget, though we lost money overall. I sent the appropriate paperwork to the IRS for the two actors who made $600 or more for their work in our show. I also sent these actors 1099s reflecting the wages they earned from us. Alice and I will work with an accountant to make sure that we pay any appropriate taxes based on our income and losses at the close of our fiscal year, ending June 30.

Other management issues

Beyond all these physical tasks, I found that there were other things that became a part of my
job. For example, I found that I became the hub of information between the leadership team. Arranging meetings, making sure everyone knew the logistics of moving into the venue and how performances would run (at least on the administrative side), and just generally keeping everyone on the same page was an important part of what I did throughout the year-long internship.

Because we had no central office we worked in every day, this could be quite the challenge. I had to learn how each person is best contacted and how to motivate them to respond quickly. For example, I tend to prefer email as my primary mode of work communications. This was not, however, the best way to get several of our team members, and I found myself relying on phone calls and voicemails more often. This helped reduce the time between a need arising and getting a response, making things run much more smoothly. Learning each person’s communication style was frustrating at times, but ultimately essential to completing our project well.

I also had to learn quickly how to manage the expectations of our team. For example, once I realized that our fundraising efforts were not getting money into our hands as quickly as I had hoped, I knew that we would probably not reach our ultimate goals for covering our initial costs. With this in mind, I began very early to let our leadership team know that we would most likely have to supplement our fundraising with personal funds. Gently laying the groundwork for the leaders to open their wallets when the time came was important.

I had a similar experience with audience numbers. I was able to somewhat gauge the community’s response to our production because of my intimate work with our online social networks and my dealings with the press. I had a feeling that our numbers would be lower than we had guessed, so I tried to help everyone understand that though there were empty seats, we were successful on many levels. Managing expectations and keeping spirits high through a difficult and sometimes frustrating time became an important part of my job description.
This internship, by its very nature, was a tremendous opportunity for me. I was able to “get my feet wet” in nearly every aspect of non-profit theatre. It also presented a unique challenge, as I felt that both the success of the first production and the future of our organization lay fully on my shoulders. The feeling of “do or die” pervaded my experience, which lent an urgency to every task and forced me to find ways to be resourceful with limited resources and to learn to deal with stress in a way I never had needed to before. Needless to say, I felt a great sense of accomplishment with every completed task, and an even greater sense of relief when *Torch Song Trilogy* came off so well. The year was rewarding and exhausting, and I learned much that will assist me in my professional work.
Chapter 3

In this chapter I will provide an analysis of both the internal strengths and weaknesses of Delta Productions, and the opportunities and threats that lie outside the organization.

Strengths

- Talented leadership team with the artistic and administrative qualities necessary for success
- Strong, bold vision for the future of the organization
- High-quality artistic work
- Flexibility afforded by being a small organization

Leadership Team

The leadership team of Delta Productions is unusual among the smaller theaters currently working in New Orleans. Most small theater troupes have sprung up among a group of writers or actors, often frustrated with the available roles and productions offered by the larger theaters. These groups are then actor-led, meaning that there is a company of actors divvying up jobs to cooperatively get things accomplished. While this is a model used by many, many small theaters across the country, there are few larger theatres that have made this model work long-term. This model can lead to “too many cooks in the kitchen” with no single, clear voice defining the way forward. It is also true that actors, while often specialists in their craft, are rarely experts at administrative management, directing, or other aspects of running a theater. It can also be difficult to manage the competitiveness that arises among actors, and shows may be chosen to showcase a certain actor or give an actress her dream role despite the fact that the play may not fit the mission of the group or make sense financially.
The Delta leadership team is made up of people on the other side of theater--those who know and love the backstage rather than the spotlight. No member is in direct competition with another, rather their roles are defined by each person’s background and area of expertise. This gives them the advantage of knowing who is in charge of what and whose voice should be heard on different subjects. Having, for example, an Artistic Director who has an academic and professional background in directing means that not only will productions be high quality, but also that he is comfortable with leading and managing others and knows how to envision the “big picture”. Having this expertise in each aspect of the organization will serve Delta well into the future.

Vision for the Future

The leadership of Delta Productions began the organization with a clear vision of what they want to accomplish and where they want the Delta to be in 10-20 years. Rather than focusing on the minutiae of how to begin or even what to do next, the focus has been, throughout the dreaming/planning stage, on how to get to that vision. The tag-line of the Delta website is “A Small Group with a Big Vision”. It is a mantra that serves them well as they move forward.

For example, while they are still looking at ways to begin an educational program, they have a long-term vision for an intensive apprenticeship-style educational program that would serve underprivileged youth in the Greater New Orleans area. While this is a program that really can’t happen until the organization has a regular, year-round season, knowing that this is something they feel strongly about and want to work toward makes a difference in the way they think about early stage educational programs. It also helped them know that education should be an explicit part of the organization’s mission statement.

Knowing that they eventually want to have a permanent home, want to serve a large regional audience, and know the types of productions that will become the Company's signature style lets the
leadership team think about capacity building and financial management in a way that promotes growth. The great twentieth-century thinker and author of *Think and Grow Rich*, Napoleon Hill, said “Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe, it can achieve. Thoughts are things! And powerful things at that, when mixed with definiteness of purpose, and burning desire, can be translated into riches.” (Lee) It is this same dedication to the larger vision of the organization’s leadership that will most affect its future trajectory.

**Quality Work**

Without the ability to produce a quality product, having drive, vision, and resources mean very little. Delta Productions, however, as a group of artists working together have time and again produced meaningful and high-quality work. Since their time in graduate school, Andrew Crusse and Jeff Davis have worked together on more than 20 shows, some while students at the University of Alabama, many in professional theatres, and some as teachers together at St. Martin's Episcopal School (Firefly Digital; Davis). Often, their productions have garnered positive press, and have consistently been praised by their academic mentors and audiences. Their work in New Orleans, both individually and together, has helped to establish that they consistently endeavor to produce quality work.

*Torch Song Trilogy* garnered Delta Productions 6 local theater award nominations, several positive reviews from local press, and an audience of enthusiastic supporters. Nearly 300 people attended *Torch Song*, and many made an effort to communicate their enjoyment of the production and their excitement for the future of Delta Productions.

Because of this growing reputation, there is great support for the organization and its leadership among their colleagues in the field. Local actors want to work for Delta Productions because of the challenges afforded them by working with such professionals, as well as the well-organized administration which helps them feel confident about their work. Other technicians and designers have
been supportive, some even volunteering their assistance for the fledgling organization, simply because of the work ethic and professionalism shown by the artistic leadership.

The fact that quality of production is a top priority of the group will help insure that this trend continues. It is a belief of the leadership team that people will come to see good theatre; if one puts out quality productions, the audience will follow. As the Company's work continues to earn them praise from the press and their colleagues, as well as grant them additional local theatre awards, word of its quality productions will help build its reputation and grow the opportunities for funding and support.

Flexibility

There are inevitably many disadvantages to being a small organization, but one of the great advantages is the flexibility allowed by being small. With a leadership team of only four people and no current governing board, decisions can be made relatively quickly and easily. This means that opportunities can be seized upon as they arise, without having to wait for bureaucratic approvals. This can bring unexpected great opportunities to the organization if they are willing to look for them and take a risk.

It also means that if a program simply isn’t working, it is relatively easy to change directions. A large, well-established organization often has many safe-guards and levels of red tape that come with age and size. This makes it nearly impossible to change things midstream, sometimes leading to waste and even bad publicity for the organization. Delta Productions can use its “smallness” to its advantage by seeing issues and immediately responding with solutions.

Weaknesses

- Lack of financial resources
• The amount of time that the leadership team can devote to Delta projects is limited
• Clear need for more administrative assistance
• Overly complex mission statement

Lack of Funding

Delta Productions faces major challenges in this raising money: 1) It doesn't have a fiscal “champion” in its corner fronting a large amount of money, 2) none of the founding members has large personal or family assets from which to draw, 3) none of them are originally from New Orleans, so community partnerships and relationships are still being built, 4) new organizations, because they are mostly untested in their effectiveness, are much more difficult to “sell” to even local groups and individuals for support.

Many theaters and arts organizations were started not with a vision for artistic integrity and creativity, but as a vision of a community legacy for a rich investor or real estate giant. The rich have historically been important sponsors of the arts, and even in recent times many of the largest and most respected arts organizations were begun only out of the generosity of a well-to-do benefactor. This is true for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery, AL, the prestigious Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and even New Orleans’ own New Orleans Museum of Art. There is no such sponsor currently interested in Delta.

Building community support for an organization that is made up of non-locals would not necessarily be a huge hurdle. But in a city as insular as New Orleans, having the local advantage is substantial. For example, a few local young people have recently begun their own theater organization, called Ampersand Theatre Company, with a lot of vocal support from the community. These young people are still university students, with no professional and few academic achievements among them.
But because they have worked within the local community and their families are well known, they may be better supported generally than Delta, even with the combined professional experience of the Delta leadership.

And last, new organizations face challenges that more established ones don’t. It’s that old paradox: one needs work experience to be hired somewhere; so how does one get work experience? The problem here is much the same. An organization needs to be able to show a history of quality programming and fiscal responsibility. Creating that history is very difficult without already having it. Being able to create quality programming on a shoestring budget is always difficult, but may be necessary for success.

Lack of Time for Leadership

Because the organization will probably not provide salaries for any staff in the near future, the Delta is still a side-project for all the leaders who are each gainfully employed elsewhere. This means that their attentions are necessarily divided. Finding space in the schedule to produce a play is difficult enough without even considering the needed time for maintaining administrative processes and keeping the Company’s brand fresh in the minds of the public.

This severely handicaps what can be accomplished, as many administrative tasks such as fundraising and marketing could be full-time positions, even for a “part-time” company like Delta. Having volunteers to help accomplish tasks is helpful, but nothing can truly substitute for full-time salaried staff who can give their entire attention to the task at hand.

Need for more administrative support staff

While all areas of the Delta could use more staff, the administration is suffering dearly from lack of qualified professionals to do the work. While Alice Hopkins has some great skills and has
worked with many non-profits over her career, managing a theater is new territory for her. This means that many of the theater-specific tasks require additional explanation and sometimes supervision. This takes time, which is often at a premium.

Additionally, though Andrew Crusse and Jeff Davis are both exceptionally equipped to handle the artistic side of programming and can assist with some clerical tasks, neither is particularly adept at the detailed organization required by most administrative tasks. Still, a few tasks were managed by them throughout the first production. For example, Andrew Crusse approached and negotiated with the venue for *Torch Song*, and also acquired the rights for the play. Jeff Davis created the layout of the program for this production. Outside of a few tasks like these that are programming specific, neither has the skills to manage more complex administrative tasks such as accounting or marketing.

This lack of administrative support means that all areas of the organization will suffer. Without recruiting qualified volunteers or finding ways that tasks can be spread more efficiently among the leadership team, the future of Delta is in jeopardy.

**Mission Statement**

Though the leadership team worked together to create a mission statement that states the vision and goals of the organization, it is too wordy and obtuse to be truly useful. It may serve the purposes of the IRS when filing for tax exempt status, but for marketing, branding, and fundraising purposes it is simply too dense. The best mission statements are concise, communicate the driving passion behind the organization, and state clearly why the organization exists. It should also motivate staff, the board, the constituents, the donors, and other stakeholders to support the organization and to work for its growth and sustainability. If this statement doesn’t do these things, it should be rewritten.

It is my opinion that this mission statement doesn’t motivate or inspire passion in the stakeholders, and may not accurately reflect what should be the true mission of the organization. It
should be shortened and simplified, and perhaps broken down into a vision statement, a mission statement, and a listing/statement of core values. This would better communicate the true nature of the organization, while also helping to secure internal and external support.

Opportunities

- New Orleans is a city that already loves the arts
- Few direct competitors with similar visions
- Local public and charter schools are in need of additional support for arts education

New Orleans is an arts city

The cultural diversity and long-standing heritage of the arts makes New Orleans a natural place to grow a new arts organization. New Orleanians and tourists have traditionally supported numerous art forms, especially music and visual art. And the growing interest in the performing arts in New Orleans means that young theater groups are growing and producing more than ever before.

New Orleanians flock to arts-related activities and support them with their donation dollars. This interest has allowed many kinds of arts organizations to flourish throughout the years. From the prestigious Contemporary Arts Center to the underground experimental theatre troupe Skin Horse Theatre, New Orleanians seem to love and expect quality arts presentations. The longevity of arts organizations such as Preservation Hall, Southern Rep, and New Orleans Museum of Art point to an ongoing love of the arts among residents and tourists.

Few viable direct competitors

Though there is a growing theater community in New Orleans, very few of these organizations
have the very same vision or mission as Delta Productions. Many, including Southern Rep, Skin Horse Theater, and the Fringe Festival, are dedicated to creating and producing new works. Others, such as Cripple Creek Theatre Company, Junebug Productions, and the Anthony Bean Theater Company, are dedicated to a particular ethnic or racial audience or have social intentions to their productions. Still others, including Jefferson Performing Arts Society, Rivertown Theatre, and the now somewhat defunct Le Petit Theatre, produce mostly musicals, and of those, mostly well known musicals with immediate name recognition.

Perhaps the closest competition comes from The NOLA Project, an organization whose mission is similar in scope to Delta’s. Beyond them, however, few theaters are dedicated to producing a mix of musicals and straight plays, new works and classic productions, and none have the distinct vision of bringing something new to the material for each production. If well communicated to the public, this specific vision, and the uniqueness of being one of the very few organizations whose leadership are not also interested in being actors, puts them in a good position to fill a gap in the needs of the local audience.

Theater Education lost from local schools

The tightened budgets and Federal reforms in public schools has caused a major shift in the way the arts are being funded and provided in local schools. In low-income urban areas of New Orleans this loss is being felt at increasingly high levels. Even with many charter schools taking over public education, the arts can often get lost as educators are struggling to even teach the essentials.

Delta Productions has education as one of its core values, and providing high-quality, low-cost education to the schools in New Orleans is a priority. Though getting the organization on its feet is quite difficult, the leadership team is already brainstorming ways they can make education a viable part of its growing programming. While many other organizations provide after-school and summer arts
programs for New Orleans youth, there are still many gaps left to be filled. Finding creative and cost-effective ways of filling these gaps can be one more way that the Delta can make itself a prominent and important part of the community.

Threats

- New Orleans already has a crowded social and cultural arts scene
- The geography of the Metro New Orleans area presents a unique challenge
- Local, regional, and national funding opportunities are limited

Crowded social and cultural scene of New Orleans

While it is true that being part of a city that makes cultural activities part of its regular routine is helpful to a new arts group, it is also true that there are many other productions, concerts, art openings, and food and culture festivals vying for the attention of a fairly small populace. In fact, in 2008 alone there were 29 arts and cultural non-profits in the Metro New Orleans area, and many have incorporated since then (Plyer and Ortiz 35). This can make separating oneself from the crowd a challenge. It is also true that while New Orleans is known for its food, music, and Mardi Gras, the other arts must push their way to the front to be noticed by tourists and locals alike.

Additionally, even though there are few theatre companies in New Orleans that share similar goals as Delta, there are still many other theater groups in New Orleans, and many new groups coming on the scene regularly. A good number of them are in the early stages of development, having been founded in the years following Katrina. All these new groups are rubbing elbows with one another, finding out who has staying power and who will fold after just a few years of existence. While the mission-related distinctions are clear to theatre professionals and educated, regular theater-goers, the
general public is less likely to pay attention to such details. Separating the Company from this “herd” thus becomes a greater challenge.

**Metro New Orleans Geography**

The very things that created and define this city, the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, separate the populace of New Orleans in a very literal way. The geographic realities of this region have lead to a mental block by many of its residents. They feel that driving “into town” from a mere five or ten miles away is too far to go for an event, or they refuse to drive across the river or lake for any event, no matter how interesting. If an organization attempts to reach the many different areas of the New Orleans Metro area through advertising and marketing, the money and efforts are dispersed so that they are effectively “watered down” and become ineffective. Additionally, neighborhoods in New Orleans denote specific feelings from locals, and events happening in particular neighborhoods are branded by those sentiments. If an organization has a permanent facility, they can be pigeon-holed by this locale as locals associate it with its neighborhood rather than with the metro area at large.

This creates a challenge for organizations trying to meet the needs of the entire metro area. Touring has recently become a way some organizations in New Orleans are using to address this issue. Even a larger theatre company like Jefferson Performing Arts Society has decided that taking its productions to various areas of southern Louisiana and even Mississippi might help it expand its regular audience. However, this comes at a significant cost in time, money, and resources. Finding inventive ways to meet the challenge of eventually expanding the core audience of the Company will be a have to be an ongoing part of Delta Productions' planning process.

**Lack of Local Funding Opportunities**

Having already expressed the internal difficulties of fundraising for this organization, it must be
noted that funding for the arts in general is in decline, making the possibilities of finding it even less. Entergy, once a bustling corporate sponsor for many organizations, has recently stopped giving at least one of its grants which used to provide funds for cultural projects. It is not alone in its pull-back, as many corporations in the region have cut back or stopped funding social and cultural endeavors. Some of the smaller, family foundations in the area were forced to stop giving grants after the economic downturn of 2008 because of their own financial issues.

Further, with so many ongoing social issues in this urban landscape including extreme violence, poverty, and lack of proper education, competing for the small amount of foundation dollars and new donors is extremely difficult. People would often like their money to go toward measurable, social change. Though I firmly believe that the arts can help to bring that about, it can sometimes be a hard sell for donors wanting their dollars to go as far as possible.

Another challenge to arts funding in New Orleans is that small businesses, many of them start-ups, tend to anchor the local economy rather than larger, national companies. Businesses have traditionally been willing to fund cultural organizations, but small businesses have a much more difficult time doing so, even though many are willing. Small businesses rarely, if ever, can give large amounts of money to a single organization, rather, they donate gift certificates or food for silent auctions and fundraising events. Additionally, many of the larger national companies in New Orleans have their headquarters elsewhere, including the many hotel chains such as Hilton and Sheraton. Their corporate dollars, then, are far more likely to go to their local communities as opposed to New Orleans.

The lack of funding opportunities within the local community exacerbates further the challenge that Delta Productions faces in finding the financial resources for supporting its programming and administrative overhead.

Delta Productions faces many challenges, both from within and without. Some of these
challenges will take a lot of planning and dedication to overcome, and some may not have solutions. The success of the Company will depend on how well the leadership team can leverage their strengths and the opportunities that present themselves.
Chapter 4

It is important for the growth and development of Delta Productions to know what best practices are within its industry. A helpful tool in this learning process is to use existing support organizations for professional theatres to see what advice and standards are currently being met, as well as comparing Delta Productions to a similarly-minded theatre company who is successfully using best practices in their day-to-day business operations. This chapter will highlight some of the organizations from whom Delta Productions could learn as it strategically plans for the future.

League of Resident Theatres

The League of Resident Theatres, also known as LORT, is a national theatre association that supports resident (also known as regional) professional theatres and helps these theatres to manage their relationships with theatrical labor unions (lort.org). New member theatres are inducted at the discretion of the Board of LORT according to their strict guidelines. LORT membership denotes a commitment to artists through their connection to the labor unions, and usually signifies that a theatre has reached a high level of stability, both artistically and financially. The 75 current members of LORT are among the most acclaimed and largest regional theatres in the country.

LORT membership may never be a reality for any theatre in the New Orleans area. The requirement to hire union members boosts a theatre's overhead significantly, forcing the organization to increase tickets sales and fees to compensate. This could mean that the theatre's ability to compete in this market would be compromised. Nonetheless, the core requirements for LORT membership hold some clues to how best to achieve growth and sustainability for a young organization.
LORT membership has four requirements: 1) the theatre must produce at least a 12 week season each year, 2) each production must receive at least a 3 week rehearsal period, 3) the theatre must be a non-profit, IRS approved tax exempt organization, and 4) the theatre must agree to comply with all labor union collective bargaining agreements. Each of these requirements represents best practices of large, successful regional theatres (“How to Join”).

Producing a 12-week season means that the theatre has grown to full-time status, that the theatre is in a more self-sustaining position, and that audiences are consistently attending productions. It indicates that fundraising is successful enough that a regular season can be planned, promoted, and produced on an annual basis, and that the financial status of the theatre is healthy. This kind of growth and financial stability should be a goal for a new organization.

A 3-week rehearsal period gives the actors, director, and technicians adequate time to be well-prepared for the production, and assists in reaching a high standard of quality. A shorter time period might force corners to be cut not only artistically, but also in safety for the actors and technicians. Giving plenty of time for working out technical, artistic, and safety issues promotes a good working environment for all involved. This makes it an important goal for Delta Productions, who already instituted this 3-week period with its first production, *Torch Song Trilogy*.

Existing as a non-profit, 501(c)(3) approved theatre means that the artistic and educational components of the organization are primary above the profits made by productions. This insures that the needs of the community and artistic merit stay at the forefront of governing decisions. The IRS designation is also a “seal of approval” from the government, denoting good standing in its financial dealings. Delta Productions is already incorporated as a non-profit organization, and may seek tax exempt status within the coming year.

Theatrical labor unions, while they are sometimes a pain to work with and lead to higher labor costs, do promote the well-being of working artists in America. They help to provide living wages,
insurance, retirement, and on-the-job safety for their members. Without them, artists would need to entirely fend for themselves. While working with unions isn’t the only way to promote good working relations with artists, they insure fair practices among employers and also require the artists themselves to be good employees. It is an important balancing act. Delta Productions has always viewed paying artists well as an important core value, and seeks to treat them well while they are employed. Good relationships with artists both local and national are essential to promoting a positive public image of the theatre and to being ethical employers. Continuing to seek to pay artists well, especially when compared to other local theatres, and working with theatrical unions when feasible is a solid business practice for this organization.

**Alley Theatre, Houston, TX**

The Alley Theatre in Houston, TX has a similar mission to Delta Productions. Its website describes it as existing “to provide audiences with the highest quality theatre, offering a wide variety of work including new plays, classics, the re-discovered and the rarely-performed, and new musical theatre, with an emphasis on new American works – to provide the inspirational and the provocative – to make our audiences think, feel, dream, and be entertained.” (“Welcome to the Alley Theatre”). This tracks closely with the vision that the Delta leadership team has for its organization. The Alley Theatre is also a major regional theatre serving the entire Houston metropolitan area. It has a large staff, including a regular company of actors, and is a major force for economic development for Houston. Because it has attained both financial stability and the support of its community, while also having a similar vision and mission to Delta Productions, the Alley makes an excellent aspirational example of best practices.
The programming of Alley Theatre is similar to what the Delta wants to offer. Each season presents a variety of different kinds of shows, from new to old, period pieces to modern, comedy to drama, from mainstream to edgier fare, as well as a mix of musicals and straight plays. Presenting seasons full of variety allows there to be something for everyone so that both hardcore and casual theater-goers can find something to interest them. It also attracts subscribers who want to have a varied year-long experience at the theater. Casual fans can be comfortable seeing something that may feel more familiar, while the theatre is able to expose its audiences to new, sometimes edgier fare. This allows you to go even further the next time, introducing the community to theatre they previously never thought they could enjoy. Additionally, shows with name-recognition or family-friendly holiday fare can help financially prop up shows that perform less well at the box office. This kind of diversification of show choice makes sense in a professional theatre.

The educational programs of the Alley are similarly diverse. It has educational programs that specifically serve the local schools; programs for young performers; internships for college and graduate level students in the onstage, backstage, and administrative arenas; programs that serve their audiences-at-large; and playwriting programs for young people. It has designed the educational programs to reach the broadest number of its constituents, from low-income audience members who benefit from donated tickets to high school students who attend the Career Day hosted each year involving all the professionals in the theater. These educational programs serve to build the audience, increase accessibility for underserved community members, and promote the theatrical arts to young artists. The Alley represents an organization committed to what it describes as “Education and Community Engagement”. This makes it a good steward of its resources, builds goodwill for the organization within the community, and, most importantly, furthers its mission. This commitment to a well-rounded educational program can serve as a guide for the future of the Delta Productions'
Marketing and Branding Best Practices

Alleytheatre.org is an excellent website, featuring a simple design, uncomplicated by flashy pictures that might crowd out the important information. The simple red-on-white design is readable, making the links to information easy to find. The information is well organized within the tabs at the top of the page, never causing the user to search for important links such as “Contact Us” or “Buy Tickets Here”. They offer information on the season, the theatre’s history and staff, how to purchase tickets, the extensive educational programs, and how to give your support to the theatre. Because it effectively communicates who it is and how to become a part of its programming, it is a very effective marketing and branding tool.

The mission of the Alley reads thusly: “The mission of the Alley Theatre, under the direction of Artistic Director Gregory Boyd and Managing Director Dean Gladden, is to deepen the understanding of ourselves, one another, and the world we share by uniting theatre artists and audiences to experience the power of stories that illuminate the breadth and complexities of the human condition” (“Welcome to the Alley Theatre”). The Company goes one step further on its website by listing its core values, which include a commitment to creative excellence, Alley Artists (the resident company of actors), community engagement, openness, and education (“Welcome to the Alley Theatre”).

This mission is useful in several ways. First, it is simple, brief, encompasses accurately who the organization is and what it does, and uses language that evokes a passion for the work. This in turn can inspire passion in staff, the board, donors, and the community. By sharing the main purpose of the organization in this way, it brands itself appropriately making attracting donors and sponsors much easier. Second, by breaking the core values out into a separate listing rather than try to squish everything into a long and overly complicated mission statement, it better articulates its intentions and
commitments. This can help keep everyone on track with the goals and values so simply stated. No one should wonder why a new program has been introduced or why a particular show was chosen for the season--the reasons are communicated for everyone to see. Unifying staff and stakeholders in such a way keeps the organization on track, both in day-to-day operations and in decision making for the future. Delta Productions could use this as a guide for stating its mission and goals effectively.

Financial Health Best Practices

The Alley has been in existence for more than 60 years, giving it plenty of time to develop financial security. Still, in recent years longevity has been no guarantee against bankruptcy or financial instability. The Alley Theatre seems to have wisely managed its wealth and fundraising practices so as to grow and create stability, an important goal for any non-profit institution. It is a Better Business Bureau Accredited Charity and also has a 3-star rating on Charity Navigator ("Better Business Bureau Report"; "Alley Theatre Charity Rating"). Both indicate good financial practices that should be emulated by Delta Productions. While the Alley is fortunate to have a community rich with oil companies and other large corporations to support local art endeavors, its financial practices can still shed light on how best to manage this vital aspect of theatre administration, even within a much poorer urban area.

The Alley wisely has varied its income streams. It receives monies from corporate sponsorship, giving the corporations the option of supporting either productions or educational programming specifically in order to better suit the giving purposes of the sponsoring company. It also pursues individual donors both large and small, and boasts an impressive list of large donors in its annual report ("Alley Theatre Annual Report"). This indicates that it has formed an important bond among those in the community who want to support a reputable and viable organization. The various "circles" denoting levels of giving allow donors of all sizes to find a place within the organization.
The Alley's special events cater to large donors, and must be highly anticipated events since the sponsorships and ticket prices are set very high (often $1500-2500 for basic tickets). Making special events a major cultural event can insure good attendance and large amounts raised. It has also wisely used the local culture to inspire events that will attract attendees. For example, the “Sporting Clays Shoot” hearkens back to Texans’ love affair with guns and hunting. The Alley has tailored the events to the interests of the community so that attendees feel important and understood. This can be essential to the success of fundraising.

Earned income, of course, plays an important role in the life of any theatre. According to the 2010-2011 annual report, nearly 50% of annual revenue came from ticket sales and fees (“Alley Theatre Annual Report” 23). This effectively covers nearly 82% of production and artistic expenses. Often theatres bring in a much smaller percentage of their budgets from ticket sales, leaving programs vulnerable to subsidization through grants and donations. This number means that the theatre can effectively cover programming costs by seeking donations, sponsorships, and partnerships (since people would rather give to these programs than to overhead), while allowing earned income to cover operating expenses. This gives the leadership an envious amount of freedom to take risks on new genres of plays or to begin new educational programs. It may also make the Alley less vulnerable the loss of grants and can make them less dependent on receiving them. This also indicates that the Alley has priced show tickets to market, showing that they have paid attention to what people can and are willing to pay within the local community.

The last important piece of the financial puzzle is the endowment. The Alley has obviously used its impressively-sized board to help it bring in and manage an extensive investment portfolio. The endowment in 2010-2011 was $17.1 Million, and paid out $300,000 in interest for the year (“Alley Theatre Annual Report” 22). This insures long-term stability by providing a consistent source of income and a buffer for major catastrophes.
The Alley's financial health is further illustrated through several key indicators. Charity Navigator uses a few significant financial ratios to set its rankings (“How Do We Rate Charities' Financial Health?”). First, a non-profit that is functioning properly should have a high programming to overhead expense ratio. In other words, it should spend the bulk of its money to fulfill its mission, not to over-compensate employees or otherwise divert the money inappropriately. According to Charity Navigator, 15.1% of the Alley’s expenses go to administrative costs and 6.2% to fundraising expenses which are considered overhead (“Alley Theatre Charity Rating”). 78.6% of expenses go toward programming (“Alley Theatre Charity Rating”). The 21.3% of overhead costs is well below the 35% recommended by the BBB (“Standards for Charity Accountability”). With the cost of doing business growing every day this is a significant challenge, and one that the Alley has met well.

Fundraising efficiency is also an important contributing factor in non-profit effectiveness. Charity Navigator indicates that the Alley spends $0.16 for every dollar raised by its fundraising efforts (“Alley Theatre Charity Rating”). This is also remarkable, as the cost of event fundraising can be hard to manage, and donors are more careful than ever with every dollar they give to non-profits. This must be the result of careful planning, wise decision-making in regards to how to court new donors, and leadership in maintaining a dedicated base of donors.

The last important indicator of financial health is what Charity Navigator refers to as the “Working Capital Ratio” (“Alley Theatre Charity Rating”). This is simply the assets it has on hand to continue functioning at the current level without receiving new income. The Alley Theatre’s ratio indicates that it could function at the current level for nearly 2 years (“Alley Theatre Charity Rating”), achieved partially because of the $1 Million cash surplus it has accumulated in recent years (“Alley Theatre Annual Report” 5). This is an extraordinary achievement for a non-profit of any type, and is more extraordinary for an arts non-profit, where a financial attitude of acceptable poverty often reigns. This significant cushion gives the theatre the freedom to pursue new opportunities as they arise, to face
unexpected fluctuations in giving and grants, and to weather any number of crises that would otherwise threaten to close its doors.

The Alley is in an enviable position. By balancing mission-mindedness with smart financial planning, it is likely to continue its work for many years and will remain an important cultural touchstone within its community.

**Accountability and Transparency Best Practices**

It is also necessary in the nonprofit world to be carefully transparent and accountable in all dealings. In a world of savvy donors, having these characteristics can help get and keep new donors and audience members. People like to support organizations that they feel are trustworthy and effective. The Alley has achieved this in several ways, and received excellent scores in this area from Charity Navigator. These include items listed on its 990, the document that all 501(c)(3) non-profits submit to the IRS to relate their financial status in lieu of filing business taxes, such as any Board compensation, the salary of the CEO, and how money was spent. It also cites other policies of the organization, like its whistleblower and conflict of interest policies (“Alley Theatre Charity Rating”). Having these policies not only in place and functioning, but also available to the public are important ways of achieving transparency and keeping accountability.

Charity Navigator also evaluates the ways in which the organization’s website offers easy glimpses into its accountability policies. The Alley lists key staff and board members, provides a link to its 990, and shows a copy of the audited financial statements (“Alley Theatre Charity Rating”). I was equally impressed with the Alley’s candor on its website. The Annual Report that is available in a lovely “flip-through” format on the website provides all these things, including its financial statements (“Alley Theatre Annual Report” 22-23). Though Charity Navigator cites the Alley for not having a Donor Privacy Policy listed on the website, it does have a separate Privacy Policy page that includes
how the Alley uses personal information gathered through its website and through ticket sales or special events (“Legal and Privacy Policy”). These clear indicators of accountability and transparency are essential for getting and keeping good ratings through organizations like BBB and Charity Navigator, both sites commonly used by donors for making giving decisions. This trust can make the difference between success and failure for a new or older organization.

**Theatre Communications Group and ArtsReady**

Theatre Communications Group, or TCG, is a national organization that serves professional theatres around the country in many different ways ([tcg.org](http://tcg.org)). While many of its services are helpful to theatre organizations, one of the recent additions to its resources focuses on disaster management (“Disaster Management”). This is an important practice for any arts organization, but it should be more of a priority for organizations in areas prone to earthquakes, tornadoes, and in the case of New Orleans, flooding and hurricanes. While a start-up like Delta Productions has few financial or real estate assets to protect, information such as financial records, historical marketing and archival materials, and records of past grant applications, can be just as important an asset. Having some policies in place could allow Delta to resume business quickly will protect it as it grows and collects more assets.

To help its constituents meet the challenge of disasters, TCG has partnered with several organizations that specialize in disaster preparedness, including ArtsReady, an organization who assists arts organizations in preparing for a disaster before it strikes ([ArtsReady.org](http://ArtsReady.org)). ArtsReady was founded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina when the arts support organization, South Arts, while assisting arts organizations through the loss of resources, discovered that most had few or no disaster plans prepared ([ArtsReady.org](http://ArtsReady.org)). This meant that their return to work was slower, and that the losses they suffered were greater. ArtsReady provides a number of resources to assist organizations, including links to other
organizations that can help in particular aspects, guides for creating disaster policies and for seeking financial assistance after a disaster, and news stories and discussions about disaster preparedness (ArtsReady.org).

The seemingly most important aspect of these preparations is the creation and maintenance of a readiness plan. The five main steps to take to make this a part of the organizational structure, as outlined in ArtsReady’s “What is a Readiness Plan?” handout, are as follows:

1. **Identify and describe your Critical Functions.** These are the activities – internal and external – of your organization that must be functioning for you to carry out your business. For most arts organizations, Critical Functions can include these, but you may add critical functions specific to your organization: Productions (the performances/presentations/installations/screenings); Ticketing & Messaging (including communications with staff, volunteers, artists, patrons and stakeholders); People (roles of volunteers, staff, board and vendors); Facilities (event area); Finances and Insurance; Technology; Exhibits; Programs; Grantmaking

2. **Determine a “Plan B” for each critical function.** What method will you use to operate if your standard mode isn’t available (alternate communications methods, cross-training of staff/volunteers, remote banking, etc.)?

3. **Collect the Information that will enable functioning during crisis.** Everything from data backups in a remote site, to contact information/phone trees, to copies of insurance documents, to workplans/action calendars that alternate staff can access – collect key information for every Critical Function.

4. **Develop and assign Action Items to increase your readiness.** Go through each Critical Function and identify places you can be more prepared. Insurance, documentation of your
facility and equipment/artwork, lists, calendars, crisis communications plans, backup systems, drills – find those areas where you have potential risk and can prepare now.

5. **Share the Readiness Plan and train key individuals** – staff, board, volunteers. (“What is a Readiness Plan?”)

These simple steps can be undertaken by any organization and will help in a crisis of any size, whether it is a hurricane or a theft. Having this plan in place can protect information and other assets and help the organization get up and running quickly and efficiently. This will not only protect the current and future programming, but will also ease the minds of staff and constituents who may be bogged down personally in disaster recovery.

The power of the arts in a disaster can also not be overstated, as stories of the first play to be produced in New Orleans following Katrina are still told with much emotion. People can still recall the relief they felt to be attending an event of such “normalcy”, and a feeling of great kinship spread through the crowds at that event. The arts unify us and make us feel more human which, in the face of a devastating event like Katrina, can make the difference between continued hope and despair. It should be the goal of Delta Productions to take these simple but critical steps to be prepared for any crisis that might affect them.

Delta Productions' diligent following of the best practices of the non-profit theater industry will give it a leg up as it continues to grow. Having a vision of itself as a large, well-funded, full-time theater can guide decisions for today, making it far more possible that that vision can be achieved. Paying close attention to the financial practices of larger organizations can allow the Delta leadership team to lay the groundwork for its own positive financial policies. Though disaster preparedness is something that few leaders want to think about in the good times, planning for such crises can be the
difference between continued growth and a major set-back. The above organizational, financial, and programmatic best practices will offer invaluable guidance for Delta Productions, helping it make better decisions for the future.
Chapter 5

The following recommendations are based on the analysis of the present status of Delta Productions and the theatre industry’s best practices that could assist in the organization’s growth.

Mission Statement Re-evaluation

The current Delta Productions mission statement has several flaws that make it inadequate for its purpose. For example, placing the idea of supporting the local cultural economy as the first thought in the mission dilutes the mission’s focus and misrepresents the organization. I recommend that Delta leadership conduct a strategic planning session to spend time developing the “big ideas” and the direction of the organization. The hopeful outcome would be a vision statement, a simplified mission statement, a listing of the core values of the organization, and even some measurable goals and objectives that will lead to specific action plans. The core values seem to me to be stated in the mission statement, but this makes the statement itself bulky and lifeless. Breaking these values out from the true mission statement makes each part more effective and meaningful.

The Delta leadership team might also consider developing a mantra as part of this process. In his book, the Art of the Start, author Guy Kawasaki makes the case that mission statements, at least for for-profit entrepreneurial companies, can be frustrating to create, and may end up all-encompassing statements that don’t actually say anything (Kawasaki 18). He prefers for new organizations to create a mantra that is only a few words long that quickly sums up the main driving force of the organization. For example, Nike’s mantra is “Authentic Athletic Performance” (Kawasaki 19). This statement is for internal use to help remind employees what they are striving for, and is simple enough for anyone from the receptionist up to the CEO to know and repeat (Kawasaki 19). Few mission statements can live up
to that level of brevity and specificity.

As a non-profit, Delta Productions doesn’t have the luxury of not creating a mission statement. However, a mantra could be very useful to the leadership to remind them of their main, true purpose. It could also be helpful for media usage, in newsletters and on the website to help distinguish Delta Productions from the pack of young start-up theatre groups. Working to create this succinct statement of purpose could also be an effective jumping off point for further discussions of vision and mission statements.

**IRS Tax-exempt Status and Establishing a Board of Directors**

I recommend that Delta pursue seeking 501(c)(3) status within the year. This will allow it to begin proper accounting practices in preparation for future growth and will help establish its reputation as a successful independent group. It will also simplify many fundraising issues that arise with working with a fiscal agent. Many donors may not understand the relationship, and thus may be hesitant to give their money to an organization who is seemingly unaffiliated with Delta Productions. Many local and regional grant makers won’t work with fiscal agents, preferring to only give their money directly to the organization in need. Additionally, it will “cut out the middleman” so to speak, since every fundraising idea, event plan, grant submission, and even wording for appeal letters and websites must go through Fractured Atlas for approval. Having the ability to simply run with a decision would significantly streamline and simplify the fundraising process.

Additionally, having tax-exempt status may legitimize the organization in the minds of the community, making recruiting a board easier. Even though a board, and tax-exempt status in general, may make the Company less flexible in the short-term, the advantages will outweigh the disadvantages. Having a board will inevitably increase Delta’s community connections, increasing its possibilities for partnerships and finding new opportunities. The expertise brought by a well-qualified board can also
greatly benefit the organization in developing important infrastructural policies, and begin the process of accountability. A not-to-be-understated advantage to having a board is also the immediate influx of cash, as board members can be required to pay dues or just encouraged to donate. Their assistance in fundraising and community outreach would be incredibly beneficial.

**Clarify Jobs of Leadership**

While each person on the leadership team seemingly has their specific place and specialty, it became clear throughout the process of producing the first show that expectations did not always meet reality. This leads to frustration, tasks going unfinished or complete poorly, and general confusion. This could be simply remedied by the creation and implementation of job descriptions for each person.

I recommend that the leadership team work from existing job descriptions such as those provided by the American Association of Community Theaters on their website (“Theatre Folk”). By starting from a standard description of each particular job, the team can shift tasks from one person to another, creating descriptions that accurately represent the way the group will function. This will not only ensure that all aspects of production and administration are covered adequately, but will also empower each leader to feel confident in the expectations and needs of their position. Such a process is vital to keeping a united and efficient leadership team functioning well as they move forward.

**Business Plan**

With all the above recommendations completed, the natural next step is to create a business plan for Delta Productions. Accurately researching the New Orleans market, evaluating the current financial standing of the organization, and projecting for the future will give the leadership team a clear view of what it will financially take to grow and expand the business over the next 3-5 years, and give the board clear steps for the future. Additionally, a business plan will help Delta approach businesses and
grant makers when seeking support. This kind of due diligence and attention to the financial aspects of the business will build confidence among potential partners and grant makers in the leadership team’s ability to properly use and manage their donations. Since the artistic side of the organization is so strong, creating a business plan will be an important part of strengthening Delta’s financial side and insuring the stability of its future.

**Organizational Infrastructure**

While much of the necessary infrastructure has been created, maintaining and refining these systems will be of the utmost importance as the organization grows. Additionally, there are several places where the infrastructure is significantly underdeveloped and still needs work. The accounting for the organization was sorely neglected throughout the first year, and databases of donors and other important constituents are in their infancy. There is also no plan in case of a disaster or crisis.

The accounting is very important, as establishing a financial history for the organization will help in fundraising, and accountability protocols will help make sure that all monies are accounted for accurately. If the organization plans to seek 501(c)(3) status within the year, having a system for maintaining an accurate account of finances will assist with IRS compliance issues. Especially needed is a very basic system for tracking expenses and revenues including donations and earned income, a procedure for turning in receipts for anyone spending money on behalf of the organization, and the creation of quarterly and annual reports. Delta Productions may want to find an accountant that is willing to provide pro bono services for auditing and the creation of annual reports. This accountant might also be a great resource for helping to set up these preliminary financial procedures.

Keeping track of venue contacts, donors, actors and other artists, media contacts, theater reviewers, and other important contacts of the Delta will become increasingly important as the organization grows. Creating and maintaining an accurate database could begin with a simple Excel
workbook, but there are also many data-basing programs available at little or no cost. Some, including a company called TrackVia, offer cloud-based programs that can be accessed from any device, a helpful service when there is no central office for the leadership (trackvia.com). These programs usually also offer reporting tools, which could be very helpful in generating reports about donor numbers or other useful figures for creating business plans or developing strategies for the future. Regardless of the platform that is chosen, data-basing these vital contacts will eliminate loss of data.

Another important part of infrastructure is the creation of a disaster preparedness plan. Though Delta Productions has very little to protect in this early stage of development, setting up procedures and safeguards now will help them maintain the practice as they move forward. Once the plan is created, it can simply be updated and changed as new assets are gained and as the organization’s circumstances change over the next few years. This could make a big difference for them if a disaster should strike, making them more capable of getting back to work quickly.

Fundraising

Raising funds for new productions is probably the most distasteful part of making theatre for most artists. It is also the most challenging and perhaps most important part of production. For Delta, it must become a focus of every person on the leadership team, as it can only be achieved through coordination and hard work of every stakeholder. There are a few steps that should be taken to achieve this important goal.

First, there isn’t one single person who appears to be taking on the main responsibility of fundraising. Though this is traditionally the job of a Director of Development, Alice Hopkins is not specifically trained for this role. Creating a job description that is both tailored to her strengths while also achieving fundraising goals is a vital first step. This position needs to become the coordinating point for all fundraising activities, even if many of the duties are divvied out among leadership and
volunteers. The Director of Development, with assistance from the Managing Director, needs to map out an action plan for fundraising, including specific events, grants, and plans for approaching and reaching new donors. This will allow the Director of Development to then act as a coordinating person for all activities, and give her measurable goals and expectations for her job. This puts everyone on the same page, making achieving fundraising goals more possible.

Second, the organization needs to focus on establishing a local donor base. While having friends and family support is always welcome, finding and maintaining local donors is essential to the sustainability of the organization. This plan could include a mail or email donor appeal to the existing database of emails, as well as targeted appeals to specific potential donors. It is suggested that they adopt a regular giving cycle, and that they create levels of giving complete with benefits for larger donors. Though these benefits would be meager at this stage, even offering a few inexpensive VIP events and opportunities could entice donors to give that little bit more. Keeping good records of these donors and maintaining regular contact with them will assist in retaining them as donors, a vital part of ongoing fundraising.

Third, the organization needs to plan some special events. Since productions are expensive, having small, inexpensive alternative events are a great way to keep the organization in the public spotlight while also bringing in some much-needed revenue. For example, a simple cocktail party, hosted in the home of an existing supporter and featuring musical entertainment by a friend of Delta, could garner attention through the media while also providing an excellent opportunity to invite potential large donors and community leaders. By leveraging the connections of the leadership team, including the very important relationship with St. Martin's Episcopal School, it is possible to get much of the food, alcohol, and volunteers needed for this type of small event (Firefly Digital). As long as it is well planned, this could bring in at least a few hundred dollars. In addition to this type of event, some educational workshops could be offered to the community for reasonable entry fees. This would serve
the dual purpose of bringing in revenue and creating educational opportunities which is a core value of the organization.

Fourth, a calendar and database of grant opportunities needs to be created. This should include corporate grant makers, local and regional foundations, national foundations, and governmental grants at the city, state, and national level. Having all this information in one place will assist in matching grants to the Delta programs which best fit the criteria of each grant maker. The leadership team can then prioritize which grants to pursue since grant writing takes an exorbitant amount of time, a valuable resource for Delta Productions. Even getting one or two grants in the next year will be a great achievement for Delta, and will begin to build a history of positive community support.

**Programming**

The programming of Delta Productions needs to steadily grow over the next few years. Keeping the organization in the minds of constituents and media will help establish it as part of the arts community. Creating quality production and education opportunities will maintain and build its reputation for excellent work, increasing its audience and supporters. Delta should aim to produce 1-2 productions a year for the next two years, finding pieces that make an impact and that further communicate the group’s unique vision and strengths. To increase its visibility in the region, I would also recommend the leadership consider touring a production to the North Shore, into Jefferson Parish, and/or to New Orleans East. If a tour is financially impossible, mounting a production solely in one of these areas is recommended.

Strategic partnerships are also an excellent way to extend resources and expand programming. Delta Productions could find a school or school system in need that would benefit from inexpensive or free tickets to see a production. It could even provide theatre education in the classrooms or for after-school programs already working in the schools. This would allow Delta Productions to jump into
offering educational services without having to bear the majority of the cost.

Partnering with another small theatre organization with similar (or totally dissimilar, perhaps) aesthetics and mission could allow for an interesting production opportunity. This would allow the two groups to share resources and expenses as well as audiences, giving them each the chance to expand their programming. Knowing and working with other like-minded artists in the community could have long-reaching benefits for the future, providing both Delta and its peers with ongoing support and friendship.

Business partnerships would also be beneficial. Strategic business partnerships would provide both funding and support for Delta, while Delta could provide artistic opportunities for the partnering company. Many corporate companies are interested in how the arts can benefit their employees and their work. Offering free or discounted tickets for employees or in-office creativity training will expand employee creativity at work, while expanding Delta’s audience base and funding. Seeking out the perfect partner could be time-consuming, but the lasting effects of such a relationship could be immeasurably important. The pARTnership Movement initiative begun by Americans for the Arts provides information and resources for organizations and corporations seeking such partnerships (partnershipmovement.org).

The above recommendations, if followed, could make a tremendous difference in how well Delta Productions functions day-to-day and how successfully it grows and expands. Many of the recommendations are simple, easily within the reach of such a small organization. Additionally, the fundraising recommendations are essential to the future sustainability of the organization, without which it simply will not survive. With careful planning it can interject these changes into the ongoing processes of the organization and insure more successful operations moving forward.
Conclusion

Despite success with its first production, both in terms of artistic merit and community response, Delta Productions has many obstacles to overcome. Because it is led by a rather small group with few personal financial resources, financing and producing future programs will continue to be a difficult process. The leadership team is limited by time and sometimes knowledge of what it may take to continue the process of growth. Fundraising is difficult in the current economic climate even for well-established organizations, and doubly so for new, relatively untested groups. Financial and other organizational policies are still in their infancy for this organization, sometimes making otherwise simple processes more difficult and undermining the artistic successes of its programming.

The strengths that the leadership team of Delta Productions brings to the table, however, are considerable, and may be able to overcome these obstacles with some ingenuity, hard work, and careful planning. They must establish administrative roles for each leadership team member, even those who regularly only attend to artistic matters. By having all four members working together to build their fundraising programs, extend their community partnerships, and spreading the Delta Productions brand through social media and other avenues, they can work towards growth and sustainability. Additionally, the personal relationships of the team outside of this professional endeavor mean that they can trust one another with their respective Delta roles. Even if they have some failures, it is likely they can come together to analyze the issues and find viable solutions without damaging the “glue” that holds them together professionally.

The leadership team should look to leveraging personal and professional relationships to play an increasingly important role in fundraising, community involvement, and production. By so doing, they can increase the reach of their limited resources to further Delta's programming possibilities and to extend its visibility among the theatrical community of New Orleans. Positive word-of-mouth among
those who regularly attend theatre events in the area can help to establish Delta as a leading voice in the arts in the New Orleans Metro area. To get this word-of-mouth it will need to continually produce plays and musicals, and should plan to create new avenues of production including educational opportunities for children and adults.

With creativity, love of the craft, and commitment to building this organization, Delta Productions has the possibility of establishing a niche for itself in the New Orleans theatre community. The team must continually foster realistic expectations for what can reasonably be done with current resources, while always looking to push the envelope artistically and administratively to pursue growth and community support. While understanding one's limitations is important, a big vision for the possibilities of the future should never be undervalued in terms of how it can lead to success. The strong vision for a theatre that is financially stable and artistically fruitful, along with the willingness to take the risks necessary to achieve that vision, can carry this ambitious young organization well into the future.
Works Cited


Appendix A
Delta Theatre Productions’ Articles of Incorporation

| Tom Schedule |
| Secretary of State |

**ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION**
(R.S. 12:203)

| Domestic Non-Profit Corporation |
| Non-Stock Corporations Only |
| Enclose $60.00 filing fee |
| Make remittance payable to |
| Secretary of State |
| Do not send cash |

Return to: Commercial Division
P.O. Box 84125
Baton Rouge, LA 70894-8125
Phone (225) 925-4764
Web Site: www.sos.louisiana.gov

**STATE OF LOUISIANA**

**PARISH OF ORLEANS**

1. The name of this corporation is: **Delta Theatre Productions**

2. This corporation is formed for the purpose of: (check one)
   - [x] Engaging in any lawful activity for which corporations may be formed under Chapter 2, Title 12, of the LA Revised Statutes (Non-Profit Corporation Law)
   - [ ]

   (Use for limiting corporation activity)

3. The duration of this corporation is: (may be perpetual) **perpetual**

4. This corporation is a nonprofit corporation.

5. The location and municipal address (not a P.O. Box only) of this corporation's registered office is:

   4216 Jena St, New Orleans, La 70115

6. The full name and municipal address (not a P.O. Box only) of each of this corporation's registered agent(s) is/are:

   - **Jo Alice K. Hopkins**
   - 4216 Jena St, New Orleans, La 70115

7. The full name and address of each incorporator of this corporation is:

   - **Jo Alice K. Hopkins** 4216 Jena St, New Orleans, La 70115
   - **Amanda Davis** 2335 Napoleon Ave, New Orleans, La 70115

8. The corporation’s initial board of directors, municipal addresses (not a P.O. Box only) and term of office are:

   - Name(s)/Address(es)
   - Term of Office
   - **Jo Alice K. Hopkins** 4216 Jena St, New Orleans, La 70115
   - 1 year
   - **Amanda Davis** 2335 Napoleon Ave, New Orleans, La 70115
   - 4 years

9. This corporation is to be organized on a non-stock basis.

10. Other Provisions:

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Page 1 of 2
Incorporator(s) Signature(s):

Jo Ann T. Hopkins
Amanda Davis

On this 26 day of July, 2011, before me, personally appeared Alice K. Hopkins and Amanda Davis to me known to be the person described in and who executed the foregoing instrument, and acknowledged that he executed it as his free act and deed.

Wayne E. Garrett, APLC
Notary Public
LA Bar #5947
Issued for Life

AGENT’S AFFIDAVIT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ACCEPTANCE

I hereby acknowledge and accept the appointment of registered agent for and on behalf of the above named corporation.

Registered agent(s) signature(s):

Jo Ann K. Hopkins

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 26 day of July, 2011.
NOTARY NAME MUST BE TYPED OR PRINTED WITH NOTARY #

Wayne E. Garrett, APLC
Notary Public
LA Bar #5947
Issued for Life
Appendix B
Fractured Atlas Sponsorship Application

Description of project: The most important question on this application! We want details about your work and how your it will be presented. Think broadly and include all current and future activities.

Delta Theatre Productions is a start-up theatre organization in New Orleans, LA. We are the work of four individuals, and though we are only now formally launching our work in the Gulf South, we have been working together for several years to produce excellent and challenging work in several cities, including Tuscaloosa, Alabama and Los Angeles, CA. We have three major goals: 1) To produce theatre that is challenging and of the highest quality for the New Orleans metro area and surrounding cities; 2) To pay artists well by working with theatrical unions, which we believe is both a moral obligation and in the interest of producing excellent work; and 3) To reach our communities and future theater audiences through creative and effective educational programs and outreach opportunities.

We are launching our inaugural season in New Orleans with three productions. The first is an original play to be produced as part of the New Orleans Fringe Festival. “The Bushes” is a political fantasy set in an alternate America in which the first George Bush has turned the US into a monarchy and Barbara reigns as Queen. The second is a groundbreaking production of “Torch Song Trilogy”. The play will take place inside the Allways Lounge, a local bar and venue that is a favorite of the LGBT community of New Orleans. We are partnering with local artists to make this production happen, and we believe that this show will set the tone for everything we do after. In the spring, we will produce the classic musical “Falsettos” to round out our first season. We have chosen these three projects for their quality of content, their small casts, and our belief that we can produce them in a fiscally responsible way while still creating theater of the utmost quality.

Looking broadly into the future, we will do another season of 3-4 shows in 2012-2013. Building on the first season, these shows will hopefully be a bit larger in scale, and continue to build our audience. For these first two seasons, we will not have a permanent home, instead finding venues that work well per each production. By the spring of 2013, we hope to be looking for a more permanent residence, while also looking to capacity building by pursuing the establishment of an endowment, which we hope to build to at least $1 Million. Within three years, we hope to begin educational programs, including a
mentoring program for under-served urban youths to learn theatrical trade skills which will translate into important life skills.

We are an organization that thinks big, though we are starting small. Living in New Orleans amidst a creative renaissance in the theatrical arts, we are fortunate to have a city that frequents engaging, challenging, and entertaining theatre. We want to live up to the expectations of our city by building an organization that can engage in economy building though job creation, tourism, and cultural engagement.
Appendix D

Selection from Delta Productions' website, [www.deltatheatre.com](http://www.deltatheatre.com)
Appendix E
Selection from Delta Productions' Facebook page
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 18, 2011
Media Contact: Amanda Davis
(504) 264-2977
adavis@deltatheatre.com

Small Group with a Big Vision: New Theatre Group, Delta Productions, Opens First Season with a Harvey Fierstein Classic

The newest group on the scene in New Orleans’ burgeoning theater community is Delta Productions, a group of artists and administrators (including one long-time resident of NOLA) making plans to serve not only New Orleans, but the entire Gulf Coast region. Though most of the founding members are relatively new to New Orleans, the dream of opening a theater is something they’ve been planning for a long time. As graduate students, Andrew Crusse and Jeffrey M. Davis, a director and a lighting designer respectively, spent many hours between rehearsals dreaming about building a regional theater in New Orleans that could serve a much larger population through producing classic plays, musicals, new plays, and aiming to produce these works with professionalism and an eye toward quality.

Those dreams and plans culminate this fall when Delta Productions opens their first New Orleans season with Harvey Fierstein’s **TORCH SONG TRILOGY**. Fierstein’s classic is celebrating the 30th anniversary of its Broadway run, for which it won the Tony Award for Best Play. The play follows Arnold, a lovable yet sometimes neurotic drag queen, as he searches for love and “normalcy” in his life.

“Torch Song Trilogy’ . . . give(s) us a progressively dramatic and illuminating portrait of a man who laughs, and makes us laugh, to keep from collapsing.”

--Mel Gussow, *The New York Times*

This production is at times funny, at times poignant, and always boldly truthful. Arnold is an easy hero to root for, a man who fearlessly accepts who he is, and dares the world to do any differently. He asks the question “What is normal?” with a dismissive shrug, even while longing for that sense of normalcy himself. In a day when we are still asking questions about what a family is and what love between two people can look like, this piece has never felt so timely. The torch songs of the title provide a powerful and soulful soundtrack throughout, performed live by both Chris Wecklein as Arnold and Wendy Miklovic as the show’s torch singer, Lady Blues.

"It's a story about Love. Finding it and accepting it in others as well as in ourselves."

--Chris Wecklein
Originally from New York, Chris Wecklein is a singer and actor. He was in the original cast of “The Black & White Blues”, the restaurant musical comedy. He served as co-producer of (and appeared in) the 2006 off-Broadway production as well. In addition to many musical theatre shows, he has performed at French Quarter Festival, the Big Easy Awards, Boomtown Casino, and in “Bustout Burlesque” (as emcee). He is also partnered with Becky Allen and Harry Mayronne in their comedy act. Chris is the recipient of the 2011 Storer Boone Award for Best Actor in a Musical.

Big Easy Award voters are encouraged to join us. If voters attend any of the Nov. 25-27 performances, we will be glad to offer them 2 complimentary tickets. Also, there will be a reception after the performance on Saturday, Nov. 26, and we would love for voters to join us that night to celebrate our opening! If voters want to attend either the second or third weekends of performances, we will guarantee 1 complimentary ticket, and will be glad to offer a second complimentary ticket if space allows. To reserve your seats, please email us at info@deltatheatre.com or call us at 504-264-2977. Please be aware that seating is General Admission, and the house will open at 7:30. We look forward to seeing you there!

TORCH SONG TRILOGY
by Harvey Fierstein
Produced by Delta Productions
Directed by Andrew Crusse, Artistic Director of Delta Productions
Starring Chris Wecklein as “Arnold”
Featuring Tracey E. Collins as “Ma”, Wendy Miklovic as “Lady Blues” and “Laurel”, Andrew Farrier as “Ed”, Dustin Gaspard as “Allan”, and Daniel Amoss as “David”.

Opens Nov. 25, 2011
Allways Lounge and Theatre
2240 St. Claude Ave., New Orleans, LA 70117

Tickets are $15
Get $5 off of two when you purchase before Nov. 25!
Purchase at the door or online @ www.deltatheatre.com

Friday, Nov. 25-Sunday, Nov. 27 @ 8 pm
Thursday, Dec. 1-Sat. Dec. 3 @ 8 pm
Thursday, Dec. 8-Sat. Dec. 10 @ 8 pm

For more information, please go to www.deltatheatre.com.

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Appendix G
*Torch Song Trilogy* promotional poster

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*Torch Song Trilogy*

by Harvey Fierstein

Directed by Andrew Crusse and

Starring Chris Wecklein

"…a progressively dramatic and illuminating portrait of a man who laughs, and makes us laugh, to keep from collapsing."

--Mel Gussow, *The New York Times*

The Allways Lounge & Theatre
Nov. 25-Dec. 10 @ 8 pm

For more information go to www.deltatheatre.com
Appendix H
*Torch Song Trilogy* promotional postcard, front and back

*Delta Productions presents the Tony Award-winning*

**Torch Song Trilogy**

by Harvey Fierstein

Starring Chris Wecklein

—

*Harvey Fierstein*

**Torch Song Trilogy**

November 25–December 10

@ The Allways Lounge and Theater
2240 Saint Claude Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70117-8421

Tickets only $15
Buy online:
www.deltatheatre.com

Performances:
Fri. Nov. 25—Sun. Nov. 27
Thurs. Dec. 1—Sat. Dec. 3
Thurs. Dec. 8—Sat. Dec. 10
8 pm each night

*Get 2 tix for $25!*

Now thru Nov. 24, get $5 off when you buy two tickets!

More info:
www.deltatheatre.com
Appendix I
Delta Productions Basic Actor Contract

Delta Productions
4216 Jena St.
New Orleans, LA 70125
www.deltatheatre.com

Actor Agreement Overview

1. The following contract constitutes our Agreement and is subject to all terms and conditions of Delta Theatre Productions, Inc. as stipulated in the attached contract. Delta Productions agrees to engage the services of ____________ as ACTOR; the ACTOR accepts such engagement in the role of “________” with respect to the production of ____________.

2. Your services will be rendered during the production period beginning ______________, 2012 through ______________, 2012. Please see the Performance Rider for all performance dates, times, and locations.

3. In consideration of full and timely performance by you, Delta Productions agrees to pay $____ in two (2) equal sums. Actor will receive half of the total fee $_____ on opening night of above said production ______________, 2012 and the remaining portion $_____ on closing performance of above said production _____________, 2012. In the event of a holdover, additional compensation will be communicated in writing when the holdover is announced.

4. In the capacity of Actor, the current duties and responsibilities are set out in the attached contract.

5. Delta Productions may terminate your services at any time for not performing duties and responsibilities, in which case you are not entitled to any advance notice of termination.

6. By signing below you acknowledge you have both read and agree to all terms in the attached actor’s agreement. If this contract is not returned within three business days, this agreement shall be considered null and void.

Print Name

_____________________________

Address

__________________________________

Signature

_____________________________

______________________________________

Date

____________________________

SS#
STAGE MANAGER CONTRACT
Delta Productions makes the following guarantees:

1. SHOW TITLE will run for the following NUMBER OF PERFORMANCES at the VENUE NAME AND LOCATION in MONTH(S) AND YEAR OF SHOW:

LIST OF SPECIFIC SHOW DATES AND TIMES

2. Stage Manager will receive TOTAL FEE for services rendered in rehearsal and performances. The fee will be paid in two equal amounts, with Stage Manager receiving one half the fee of $________ on opening night, and one half the fee of $________ on closing night.

3. When possible, an assistant stage manager will be available to assist with rehearsals and a technician will be available for the run of the show.

The undersigned artist guarantees to Delta Productions:

1. To be available for the aforementioned NUMBER OF PERFORMANCES of SHOW TITLE, plus load-out on DATE.

2. To attend up to NUMBER OF REHEARSALS from DATE RANGE. This includes availability for setting up the space prior to each rehearsal and securing the site after each rehearsal. Except in emergencies, all rehearsal conflicts must be clearly stated before first rehearsal.

3. To prepare a prompt book and a separate cuing book, record all blocking during rehearsals, coordinate the integration of sound cues and costume changes into rehearsals, keep track of props and costumes throughout rehearsals and performances, assist with scheduling of actors and technicians for rehearsals and performances, and facilitate communication among all members of the production.

4. To assist the set, lighting, sound and costume designers with the execution of their designs, as needed. This may include some work on obtaining props.

5. To bear the final responsibility for the running of performances, including calling cues, and the maintenance of the performance space, including preparing the house for audiences prior to each performance and securing the site following each performance.

______________________________  ________________________________
Producer Sign Name Here          Artist Sign Name Here

______________________________  ________________________________
Producer Print Name Here          Artist Print Name Here

______________________________  ________________________________
Date                               Date
Appendix K
Selections from the reviews of Torch Song Trilogy

The Examiner.com
Review by Alan Smason

Highlights:
"[Chris] Wecklein is at his neurotic and comedic best. . .but in the end 'Torch Song Trilogy' is not about comedy, it is about reality. The issues it raised when it first was seen three decades ago are still valid and pertinent. Whether Arnold is gay or straight is really secondary to his quest for normalcy and the way he deals with love and loss talks more about his humanity and less about his sexual preferences."

"In the final act we are introduced to Ma, played by Tracey Collins and David, played by Daniel Amoss. They balance out the family from which Arnold has emerged and that which he is building. Collins is especially noteworthy as an overbearing mother figure, while Amoss is strong in his role as a teenager."

"'Torch Song Trilogy' is brilliantly directed by [Andrew] Crusse . . ."


The Times-Picayune
Review by Theodore P. Mahne

Highlights:
"The biggest challenge to any production of TORCH SONG is the overwhelming presence of Fierstein's original characterization as Arnold. Chris Wecklein wisely chooses not to attempt an imitation of Fierstein, but brings his own flamboyant chops to the role....Tracey E. Collins gives a remarkable performance opposite Wecklein as Arnold’s put-upon mother."

"There is a real chemistry between Wecklein and Dustin Gaspard, who plays Arnold's eventual true young love, Alan. Gaspard brings an appealing sweetness to what is all too brief of a role and were it not for that chemistry, his true importance in Arnold’s life would be lost."

"Daniel Amoss gives a heartwarming and real performance as David, Arnold’s adopted teen son, making a credible case that he is the one character who loves Arnold unconditionally. "

Continue reading on Nola.com:
The Nola Defender
Review by Jim Fitzmorris

Highlights:
"[Director Andrew] Crusse has in Chris Wecklein a lead worthy of the chosen material and surrounded him with gifted performers like Andrew Farrier and Wendy Miklovic."

"Wecklein has a role he was meant to play in Arnold. He is a showy, audience-pleaser ... He tempers Arnold’s catty neurosis with genuine hurt and self-deprecating likability. Along with the lovely chemistry between him and [Tracey E.] Collins, Wecklein’s scenes with Dustin Gaspard as Alan are an engaging mixture of tenderness and affable frustration."

Continue reading on noladefender.com: http://noladefender.com/content/coming-out

An independent review from the incomparable Jay Stanley:

Highlights:
"The third act scenes between Arnold (Chris Wecklein) and his Mother (Tracey E. Collins) are very poignant. Director Andrew Crusse gets credit for bringing a tear to the eye in these scenes. Crusse knows his material and his direction is right on target."

"Crusse directs with taste and knows how to get the performances from his actors that are needed to carry Fierstein's delicate dialogue."

"The entire production is very worthwhile and should be seen! We welcome Delta Productions to New Orleans!"

Vita

Amanda Sutton Davis was born in Clearwater, FL and grew up in a small suburb of Atlanta, GA. She attended North Gwinnett High School in Suwanee, GA and Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, TN where she graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Communications and a Minor in Music, with Special Honors in Communications in 2003. After working in the for-profit and non-profit arts industry in Alabama and California, she moved to New Orleans in 2010 to pursue her Master of Arts in Arts Administration at the University of New Orleans. She is married to Jeffrey M. Davis, a high school theatrical design teacher and professional lighting designer.