Double Edge Theatre: Connecting Arts, Culture and Community with Hess Foundation Support

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Located in rural Ashfield, MA, Double Edge Theatre describes its work as “creating a ‘living culture’ by developing the highest quality of original theatre performance – based on artists’ interaction with the communities in which the work takes place.”

While maintaining a permanent center of performance, training, research and cultural exchange in western Massachusetts, Double Edge travels throughout the United States, South America and Europe, residing in communities for several weeks. The company works with residents, including local artists and tradespeople, to integrate the community and its history into each performance.

Double Edge’s goal is to elevate both artistic expression and the relationship between artists and their communities. This approach starts with their work in Ashfield. Each summer, the Theatre hosts educational programs for emerging artists, indoor and outdoor performances, community events and international artistic exchange. It was just as important for the program to become embedded in the community of their hometown as in their traveling programs. Double Edge knows first-hand that rural communities especially can be skeptical of, and even resistant to, arts and artists arriving on the scene and seeking connections. Yet residents came to see the value of the organization’s investment in their town, and it now enjoys tremendous local support, selling out its summer performances. Arts organization like this one are especially important in rural America, which is often overlooked by philanthropy.

Between 2010 and 2012, Double Edge received three annual grants from Hess totaling $18,000, with an additional $50,000 over the next two years focused on operations and infrastructure. Working at the nexus of arts, culture and community and offering both local and traveling programs, engagement of public schools and promotion of diverse performance and visual artists, Double Edge both aligns and contrasts with Hess Foundation’s arts and culture portfolio. Although Hess primarily funds large arts and cultural institutions, foundation board member Constance (Hess) Williams discovered Double Edge in Washington, D.C. when the group landed at Arena Stage, a prominent theater with a mission to produce “diverse and innovative works from around the country and nurture new plays.”

Williams met with Double Edge to discuss a possible grant, ultimately resulting in Hess’ investment in, “a distinct initiative to address Double Edge’s growth management, including support for a consultant to help us with board development and strategic planning.” According to actor, writer and co-artistic director Matthew Glassman, this project has proven critical to the organization’s sustainability. Moreover, the support targeted an area of nonprofit management that is too often ignored by most funders: organizational development and strategic planning. Glassman said:
“The fact is few other foundations … were able to help us deal with the issue of growth. If it had not been for the type of grant Hess gave us, our own growth, based on our good work, could have overwhelmed us. Hess support gave us the gift of time to focus on the business of growth, the development of our board, to hire strategic consultants. It has been vital as we have reimagined our scaffolding. … Where can an organization go when it is actually effecting change in the community, and really growing and succeeding but it is not clear how to grow and respond to success well?”

Hess Foundation support for Double Edge Theatre resulted from a bit of luck as well as both parties’ understanding of the challenges arts and culture organizations face when growing. Beyond the grant, the Hess Foundation has requested very little in terms of reporting or follow-up. Glassman notes, however, that he reports regularly on his own: “There hasn’t been a time that they’ve asked for more [information]. Given how impactful this grant has been for us, my reporting is pretty thorough.”

The relationship between Double Edge Theatre and Hess Foundation represents the best of Hess Foundation’s grantmaking, offering funding at the right time, in the right size and toward the right focus. However, examples like this, while promising, throw the Hess Foundation’s unrealized potential into stark relief. Much more common, in fact, are large unrestricted grants to established and elite institutions. By supporting the status quo, the more typical Hess grants, which go to institutions such as Harvard College and New York’s Museum of Modern Art, may or may not result in increased access or innovative connections between communities and the arts.

The Hess Foundation clearly recognizes the need for unrestricted grants for nonprofits to survive. Building off of lessons learned from Double Edge, Hess has the opportunity to be more responsive to the communities it serves, not just elite institutions. NCRP’s assessment of the foundation recommends that Hess include peers and grantees in the decision-making process to better envision the systemic impact it can have, especially among marginalized communities. The foundation would also benefit if it were to engage and learn alongside these grantees and to share what is learned with nonprofit and philanthropic peers. Strong, community-focused organizations attracting the support they need to sustain their missions is a success story for philanthropy and one from which foundations, first and foremost the Hess Foundation itself, can learn.

Elizabeth Myrick is an independent consultant with nearly 20 years of experience in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. She has served as principal researcher on NCRP’s Hess Foundation and Woodruff Foundation Philamplify reports. Photograph by Maria Baranova depicts the Double Edge Theatre’s 2015 summer spectacle, “Once a Blue Moon (Cada Luna Azul).” Image courtesy of Double Edge Theatre.