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Effingham Performance Center: Art at the Crossroads

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Effingham Performance Center: Art at the Crossroads

(TITLE)

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A Reflection On

Effingham Performance Center: Art at the Crossroads

During the summer of 2011, I worked in the main office at the Effingham Performance Center writing press releases, designing posters, and operating the in-house video projection system during performances. During my time there, I received an inside look at the difficulties of running a non-profit theater in Southern Illinois. Beyond that, I learned about the struggle to survive that theaters across the country are facing.

This was not my first time working at 1325 Outer Belt West. Just a couple of years prior, in another life, the building had been home to The Rosebud Theater. In high school I worked there interning with their video projection systems hoping to build a portfolio of working with high profile musicians. The Rosebud was a for-profit theater with bold ambitions. The original business plan for the theater intended to bring sixty shows a year to the facility. This was a goal that the small area of Effingham simply could not sustain, and the theater ultimately failed. The theater in Effingham was not particularly unique in its challenges. Most theaters struggle in a similar way, and many are forced to go out of business. What really makes the story of the Rosebud and of the Effingham Performance Center interesting is its location in a remote part of the country.

Effingham county has a long history of entrepreneurship. Businesses are started, and while some succeed, many fail. Many residents of the area saw the failure of the theater as the failure of a business. It tried, it failed, and it was over. When talk of the city of Effingham purchasing the building surfaced, this upset many members of the community. It

was viewed by them as a government bailout of a for profit business. Some members of the community however saw the loss of the Rosebud as the loss of an arts venue, not a business, and did not want to see the community lose something that they viewed to be vital to its culture.

Once the Effingham Performance Center was established, the outrage that many in the community had quieted down. It was replaced with a lack of understanding of the Performance Center's importance and value. This manifested less in the form of letters to the editor and angry phone calls than when there was opposition to the establishment of the venue. Instead opponents showed their disapproval by not attending shows or donating to the venue. The general consensus among these individuals was that the center would eventually fizzle out quietly and the city would realize how bad of an idea it was.

During my time working at the Effingham Performance Center, I was asked to disprove these critics with hard numbers. One of my jobs was to examine the ticket sale data from shows and map out where patrons came from. Surprisingly many of the patrons were coming not just from out of town, but also from outside of Effingham County and even outside of the state of Illinois.

Type of Documentary

Effingham Performance Center: Art at the Crossroads is an advocacy film. Advocacy films have a very clear agenda, and the agenda of this film is to glorify and show the importance of the presence of art in a society no matter the size or where it is located (Rabiger, 2009). My personal relationship with the Effingham Performance Center lead me to create a film like this because I do feel that what the Performance Center does is of great value to the Effingham area.

The film also contains elements of archive-based filmmaking. Particularly the beginning moments of the film are highly dependent on using old photographs and newspaper articles to move the story along and explain the history of the facility (Rabiger, 2009). This is only used as the primary mode of communication in the film during the first few minutes however, as traditional b-roll and current photos and video become available once the story of the Performance Center enters modern day.

The Process

This documentary is to date the most complicated and involved project that I have undertaken. It started late in 2012 with regular emails to Janie Oldfield, who at the time was the executive director of the Effingham Performance Center. We then met in person and discussed the project in detail. Janie helped to put me in contact with many of the interview subjects featured in the documentary.

I pre-interviewed my subjects on the phone and by email so that I knew they would have relevant information for the project and so that they would have a foundational knowledge about the project and what I was expecting from them. Some people that I talked to were very open to the idea of appearing in the film, but others required some convincing. One interview in particular almost ended prematurely and certain material could not be used. Interestingly, this interview was with a donor, not someone that was on the board or that worked at the Effingham Performance Center.

The first half of the documentary talks a lot about events that took place in the past. For this it was necessary to rely not on footage that I could shoot, but on the interview content I acquired and on photos and news headlines that already existed. Content from the Effingham Daily News is featured heavily as b-roll in the early parts of the film. These

headlines chronicle the opening of the Rosebud Theatre and the closing of its doors. They also depict the struggle to keep the venue open by the non-profit organization.

The nature of the latter parts of the documentary allowed me to shoot new footage. It was nice to not be limited by what material already existed and was available to me, but shooting footage at the Effingham Performance Center yielded its own set of problems.

This documentary went through countless edits and revisions. Hours and hours of footage were shot, much of which was very good and could have been used, however the key to the film was finding out what parts were most interesting and most necessary to tell the story. This project started out as a feature length documentary that was targeted to be an hour long with commercials. Very quickly in the editing process, it became clear that the project did not lend itself to that length. The stories that an audience would want to hear would not take that much time to tell, and attempting to stretch the film out would only result in a less interesting and engaging final piece. The project was shortened to its current length, which by contrast, moves along at a quick pace and does not dwell on superfluous details.

As it stands, the film is not a traditional documentary. It has fallen somewhere between public relations piece and documentary. If the project were to be revisited, it would make more sense to approach it as a series of vignettes. The basis for these already exist in the film in the form of the interviews that talk about the struggle for financing to keep the venue open, the arts education component, and the partnership with local businesses and what that means for economic development in the city of Effingham.

Challenges

The biggest hang-up in regards to using old file photographs and news articles was that I was dependent on others to get access to much of these materials. One issue not explored in detail in the film is how limited the Effingham Performance Center is on staff. The few full time employees that they do employ have to wear many hats in order to accomplish all that needs to be done to successfully operate the theater. For this reason, calls and requests for access to files, documents and photos sometimes fell on deaf ears. I needed to frequently remind staff members through emails and phone calls of my requests or they would be forgotten.

The online archive I was directed to by the Effingham Daily News seemed to be far from complete. My searches for even the most basic of terms, for instance "Rosebud Theatre" yielded very few results. This required me to search by date and spend a lot more time than should have been necessary tracking down articles and information about the weeks and months surrounding the closing of the Rosebud and the opening of the Effingham Performance Center.

For all of the issues associated with using archived assets, filming b-roll in the Performance Center presented its own set of problems. Blanket releases were secured for filming in the lobbies, but only one traveling artist granted permission to film inside the hall for the project.

It was difficult to find people who were willing to talk about The Rosebud Theater. I was able to acquire enough interview content to tell the story and establish what The Rosebud was and why it failed, but many people involved in the city's decision to purchase the building were gone or unavailable for the documentary. The mayor at the time of the

closing of The Rosebud and the founding of the Effingham Performance Center had retired and moved out of the area. Current staff at the Performance Center was very careful in the way they spoke of The Rosebud because they still have issues with patrons not understanding the difference between the old and new establishments.

Between the time that principle photography began on this documentary and its completion, I have learned quite a bit about interviewing. Specifically, I have a far greater understanding of the use of light and what sorts of meanings and moods that it can convey to an audience (Bernard, 2011).

My interview setups for this film were very basic. I used a small sensor ENG style camcorder, a Canon XF300, and just a single battery powered LED light. The size of the light panel was only about four by six inches. The light output from such a small fixture is far from enough to fully satisfy the requirements of a small sensor camera like the one that I used. I now light all interviews with between two and four fixtures, each measuring twelve by twelve inches and have a very powerful light output. The number of fixtures I use depends largely on the amount of space that is available to me where the interview is being filmed. When limited by space I occasionally substitute one light fixture with a reflector. Because it is flat, in extreme situations the reflector can be taped to a wall, taking up no measurable space. I also now use large sensor DSLR cameras that are far more sensitive to light than small sensor camcorders.

This project survived two separate computer failures and was twice restored from backups. Luckily good practices were followed in keeping backups of both the project and all related assets. However, one restoration yielded quite a few problems in the form of

corrupted files that required much of the project to be recut at a late stage in the editing process.

Evolution of the Project

When the project was first being discussed, the plan was to focus on the conflict in the town surrounding the closing of the Rosebud Theatre and the opening of the Effingham Performance Center. As was mentioned earlier, finding individuals who were willing to give useful insight on the conflict that existed surrounding the founding of the Effingham Performance Center was difficult. Through the interviews, different stories presented themselves.

After doing preliminary interviews with those involved with the Effingham Performance Center, I became very interested in the things that it is currently doing and is hoping to do in the future. These components of what the facility does seemed to be more interesting and lent themselves to talking art as broader piece of society than the conflict that once existed in the life of the building.

I also thought back to my work validating the existence of the Effingham Performance Center when I worked there over the summer. The statistics that I helped to compile ended up convincing the city government to extend their agreement with the Arts Council of Central Illinois to continue funding the Performance Center. Evidence that the venue is an asset to Effingham is what they needed to see, and I believe that it is what other citizens need to be aware of also. It is my hope that this film demonstrates the value of the Effingham Performance Center not only to the people of Effingham, but also to other communities who may be seeing their arts venue or arts education programs suffer as the

economy declines. I found it to be more important to focus on the role and importance of art to our society than the conflict of the differing opinions on the role of government.

The Rosebud Theatre story remains a component of the documentary. The film opens with a brief history of the Rosebud and how it came about. The ideas that guided the founding of the Rosebud and the construction of the building carry through today into the non-profit that now occupies the same space.

Lessons from the Film

When the Effingham Performance Center formed, a large component of its mission became art education. Explored in the documentary is the fact that they now host summer theatre camps and bus in school children from all over the area. Some of these young students come from nearly one hundred miles from Effingham or further. In her article, Naomi Savage describes a situation in Toronto where the local school district partnered with a local theatre co-op to not only offer its students more options for becoming involved in the arts, but to give the students academic credit for their efforts.

The school board saw the academic value in encouraging students to get involved in something that takes place outside of a classroom and that is not found in their textbooks. Beyond that, the students that were placed into the program were of a diverse background. One of the goals of the program is to strengthen relationships between students who may otherwise never come into contact with each other. Theatre has this sort of leveling property about it. People from all walks of life with all sorts of different experiences can come together and create, enjoy and learn from the experience of being involved in theatre. This holds true for audience members, actors, crew and everyone else involved in the complex process of the art (Savage, 2008).

Over the long term, the Effingham Performance Center hopes to expand the work it is doing with school children. Research data shows the importance of arts education to children. Children that have arts education as a part of their educational curriculum tend to perform better in subjects across all disciplines (Simaeva & Kosheleva, 2012). Other research shows that educators themselves have become less attune to recognizing artistic abilities and skills in their students. When educators believe that their students do not possess an artistic skill set they tend to avoid implementing art in the classroom, which further reduces the exposure a child may have to art (Garvis, 2012). As school budgets get cut in tough economic times, art classes like band, chorus and painting get cut before core curriculum subjects like math and English.

As a society, we trail behind most other developed nations when it comes to success in math and science. As our country, the state of Illinois specifically, struggles with funding for school and education, many school administrations look at programs such as art and music and unnecessary consumers of funding. Many schools have deemed such programs unimportant relative to the primary goals of an educational institution and have cut, or intend to cut them from curriculums. Research shows that while on the surface few people will realize the interconnectivity of art with math, science and other traditional educational focuses, the relationship is there. Students who are exposed to and participate in creation of art, music and theatre perform better across the board in their studies (Emmer, 1993). The Arts Council of Central Illinois and the Effingham Performance Center recognized this need and made art education a priority.

The Effingham Performance Center is very similar to a lot of theatre venues around the country during this period of time. The rising costs associated with bringing acts in to a

venue are making it very difficult for venues to survive as for-profit enterprises. Many theatres are being forced to close their doors, but others are finding second lives in the non-profit sector.

The non-profit structure allows a theatre to take more chances and to do more in general than a for profit theatre. This is because patronage at a non-profit reduces the operating cost. A non-profit operation softens the budget constraint and allows theatres that would otherwise not be profitable to survive. The non-profit structure allows theatres to try new things and innovate. The article depicts progress as alive and well within the arts community. Theatres are able to outfit themselves with high-end technology and provide a top-notch theatre experience to an area that would otherwise be unable to sustain a performing arts venue (Gapinski, 1988).

Particularly at the Effingham Performance Center, summer drama camps and educational programming targeted towards school children are the sorts of programs that would have been difficult to have as a for-profit enterprise. As a non-profit theatre, the Performance Center has access not only to donations, but also grant money. Grants exist for venues like the one in Effingham, and specifically to fund arts education. In the documentary Janie Oldfield explains how, simply because of the geographic location of Effingham, the Performance Center does not even need to justify how they fulfill a need for arts education. The area that the venue is in is underserved for arts education by the nature of its location.

Conclusion

This film was nearly two years in the making, and over those two years I grew immeasurably in my craft. This was by far the largest and most complex project that I have

every orchestrated. I learned more about working with a large number of people on a video through this project than in any other project in my past or through any class that I have taken. Scheduling and communication were nightmarish at times, but in the end things came together to result in a finished piece that I am proud of.

Project management skills that I developed through this project extend to the process of ingesting, storing and editing the large amounts of data that went in to making this finished video. Not just one back up, but at least two are necessary to truly feel comfortable with a project of such importance and size. Staying organized is absolutely the key to the success of a project this big, and that was a challenge at times. Through this, however, my organization skills have improved across all projects that I work on no matter their size.

Working on this documentary was not always easy or even enjoyable, but was a highly rewarding experience. I likely will not realize all of the ways that this project helped me to grow as a video maker for quite some time. I am very thankful that my institution allowed me to conduct such a project during my academic career.

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