



WOOLLY MAMMOTH: A BRIEF HISTORY

By Howard Shalwitz

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This article is dedicated to the late Peter Culman, one of the giants of our field, who first encouraged me to write about Woolly's history and edited the original version in 2009.

BIG IDEAS

I can't recall precisely when Roger Brady and I first broached the idea of forming a theatre company together. But sometime during the summer of 1976, when we were fellow acting interns at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, the idea became a source of consuming intellectual passion that took hold of our friendship and conversations for many months.

Roger and I might have seemed an unlikely pair. He grew up in Tacoma, Washington, was very involved in theatre during high school, and had just completed a year of intensive actor training in London. I had a BA in Philosophy plus an MA in Teaching, followed by what I thought would be a gap year acting in my hometown of Buffalo before seeking a job teaching history. Somehow, between Roger's obsessions over theatrical technique and my sense of political urgency, our minds clicked. One thing led to another, and my gap year extended to four decades.

Following our stint in New Jersey, Roger and I headed to New York to continue our acting careers. We met regularly in cheap New York cafés to discuss books and theories about theatre, to talk about shows we were seeing and acting in, and to speculate how our new company might be organized. From the beginning — and this is the most important thing to know about Woolly Mammoth — we were obsessed with our theatre's mission, with developing it, articulating it, and refining it.

Influenced by Peter Brooks' radical essay, *THE EMPTY SPACE*, we looked around at the theatre we knew and pronounced it lacking. The commercial and regional theatres were too easy, too homogenized, not relevant. Hit plays emerged on Broadway and were produced across the country in predictable ways. A small collection of well-known classics was produced over and over, while hundreds of equally interesting but lesser-known works were ignored. Provocative experimental works were hastily created in New York warehouses for a brief time, never to be seen again.

In 1978, after drunkenly selecting a name for our new Theatre, we wrote a high-minded manifesto called "A Statement of Artistic Intent." We imagined new plays that were uniquely theatrical unlike the realism of film and television. We sought a style of acting that was bold and expressive unlike the "mumble and wheeze" approach common in New York. We pictured a

company of actors who would work and train together over many years to develop new approaches. We posited that theatre must be treated as a genuine art form progressing according to its own history and logic, not by the dictates of the marketplace.

And yet — the second most important thing to know about Woolly Mammoth — we believed it was possible to both advance the art of theatre *and* build a new, more adventurous audience. We were determined to succeed precisely where so many American companies had failed: at making provocative plays popular.

TESTING THE WATERS

Our first tentative step toward launching the new Woolly Mammoth was producing two plays in New York, about as far off Broadway as one could get. The first was in the community room of a housing cooperative on the Lower East Side where, for our somewhat elderly audience, we selected Austrian playwright Arthur Schnitzler's classic, *LA RONDE* — a series of frank seduction scenes about the capriciousness of sexual relationships. Our second show came months later at a Jewish Community Center near the northern tip of Manhattan. On a shoestring budget we tackled the neglected Yiddish classic, *THE GOLEM*, an expressionistic tragedy about a Frankenstein-like savior who flies violently out of control.

Already much was clear about our new company: Like the Woolly Mammoths of old we would traipse the earth seeking not food but a place to perform. We would treat our audiences to something different that lay just at the edge of their comfort zone. We would challenge ourselves to take big artistic and producing risks, often on material we didn't totally understand — trusting that working on each play would reveal what we needed to learn.

Buoyed by the positive response to these fledgling efforts, Roger and I decided to start our company in earnest. Rejecting the idea of staying in New York (where all theatre was poisoned by the lure of commercial success!), we embarked on a search for a location, researching and visiting Buffalo, Tacoma, Niagara Falls, Albany, Seattle, Chicago, and Washington, DC. The nation's capital was a draw because of our political interests, plus a combination of appealing factors: a major regional theatre (Arena Stage) proving there was a ready audience, several small companies just getting started (New Playwrights, Source, Studio, Gala, Horizons), a growing pool of local actors, a smart and diverse population, and encouraging funders. In the summer of 1979, we found a tiny apartment to share on Capitol Hill and moved to DC.

PLUNGING IN

The Woolly story during our first few years in Washington was one of dogged determination and quick development — artistically, financially, building a staff and audience. At a party shortly after our arrival we met Linda Reinisch, who had just completed her BA at American University; responding to our idealistic plans, she signed on as a third co-founder and Managing Director.

Before we had a place to perform, we held our first auditions outdoors in Glover Park and began workshops and rehearsals in an auditorium at the Health and Human Services Department. We traipsed the streets looking for a performance venue, and eventually found a home at the Church of the Epiphany by the new Metro Center — in those days a somewhat forbidding location. There we produced plays in the Parish Hall for six seasons, removing our seating risers every Saturday night to make way for a Church reception the following morning.

This was a period of intense experimentation to find our core artistic identity. Our early workshops with actors (which lasted for several months before we picked any plays) involved extreme physical and vocal improvisations to see if we could develop new language about acting and find a more liberated sense of style. Our earliest productions included an improvised one-act created by the company (a disaster); absurdist works from Chile, Poland, France, England, and Czechoslovakia; and American plays by radical young writers like Mark Medoff and Jean-Claude van Itallie. Most had a strong political or social message couched in an intellectual comic style derived from Beckett or Ionesco.

Roger and I traded off acting and directing duties. To open our second season, I directed Roger in Mark Medoff's *THE KRAMER*, our first big hit. The play is a macabre portrait of a malevolent young man named Bart Kramer who bullies his way into a job at a Washington temp agency and systematically destroys the life of a good-hearted co-worker. I had the idea to cast Kramer with three actors who would play the role simultaneously. This heightened the play's surreal qualities and injected some unexpected physical humor into the grim story – imagine three actors scratching their noses at the same time. *The Washington Star's* review said: "Isn't this what our alternative theaters should be?" Suddenly Woolly Mammoth had a label that everyone understood: alternative! The success of *THE KRAMER* emboldened us to not only seek unusual plays, but to take unusual approaches in staging them.

HITTING OUR STRIDE

Roger left Woolly Mammoth in 1983, largely for personal reasons, yet partly due to our diverging taste in plays. After his departure, Linda and I shifted toward more American works, and we hit our stride with two very fresh plays that had the hallmarks of many Woolly plays to come.

MARIE AND BRUCE by Wallace Shawn (1984) depicts a day in the life of a seemingly hip New York couple, complete with their bizarre sexual fantasies. Marie appears to despise her milquetoast husband, tries to leave him, but ultimately cannot pry herself loose because of his passive-aggressive neediness. *CHRISTMAS ON MARS* by Harry Kondoleon (1986) depicts the fraught reunion of a young pregnant woman with her mother-who-abandoned-her-as-a-child, while her desperate boyfriend and his flamboyantly gay ex-roommate lay claim to her baby as a savior.

Neither of these plays had been very successful in New York but both were huge hits in Washington. They focused on lovably neurotic characters in dysfunctional romantic or family relationships. They demanded high stakes acting and stylized, non-realistic staging. They were caustic in their language and unorthodox in their narrative structure but still told a reasonably clear story. Most of all, they fused extreme comedy with desperate sadness – a Woolly sweet spot for many years to come.

By 1986, Linda and I had done plenty of soul-searching about the purpose and values of our company, prompted by the ups and downs of critical response, the intense hours, and the continuous scramble for funds. Running Woolly Mammoth, we concluded, was more like running a church than a restaurant; we weren't creating a product to be marketed and sold, instead we were converting people to a new way of seeing and feeling. Two corollary mantras were repeated often: (1) Stay one step ahead of the audience, not two — i.e., avoid esoteric work or "theatre for its own sake." (2) The further out on a limb you go, the better your work needs to be; in other words, challenging plays done badly appeal to no one.

CHRISTMAS ON MARS was part of a hugely successful three-play rep that concluded our tenure at Epiphany. It introduced our first permanent company of actors, including Grainne Cassidy, Nancy Robinette, Michael Willis, Grover Gardner, and T.J. Edwards. The talent and energy of this group propelled Woolly through its swift growth in the late 1980s and distinguished us as a theatre with a fearless, even reckless sense of style. The critic, David Richards, said that watching a Woolly actor was "like going over Niagara Falls in a barrel."

TO CHURCH STREET

Following our six years at Epiphany, we spent a nomadic year performing at New Playwrights (now the Keegan Theatre) and the Washington Project for the Arts (now Jaleo Restaurant). We were on the verge of moving to a space in Takoma Park but it fell through at the last minute when asbestos was found in the building. For the 1987-88 season, we landed in a rented warehouse on Church Street along the historic 14th Street corridor — a strip that was burned down in 1968 on the day Martin Luther King was shot. We thought we would stay for 5 years before finding a more permanent home. We stayed for 13 years. The theatre had 132 cramped seats arranged around two columns and a tiny thrust stage. The ceiling was 13 feet above the stage. In this womblike setting, you could see the actors sweat.

Several of our productions in the late 1980s and early 1990s were directed by Grover Gardner. He injected our work with a sharper focus on character detail (Grover was a fan of the quirky character-based films of Preston Sturges). Our language about acting became more psychological, aiming for an intense inner life that allowed the actors to not only make bold choices, but to support them more truthfully. We referred to it as Woolly's "keyed-up psychology." We modified the usual Stanislavsky language about "character objectives" and referred instead to "objectives that you fail at." In other words, each character is trying desperately to achieve something, but it's constantly slipping away. This approach proved ideal

for neurotically charged playwrights like Harry Kondoleon, Nicky Silver, Amy Freed, and David Lindsay-Abaire.

Our long stay on Church Street was marked by a greater diversity of plays and programming: works by women and writers of color; politically charged solo performances; off-stage activities including theatre classes and community outreach programs. Our company expanded with more exceptional actors, including Jennifer Mendenhall, Rob Leo Roy, Sarah Marshall, Naomi Jacobson, Mitchell Hebert, Doug Brown, and Daniel Escobar. Our go-to directors included Lee Mikeska Gardner whose signature style was very personal and real, and Tom Prewitt, whose intellectual approach helped re-connect Woolly with European writers like Friedrich Durrenmatt and Dennis Potter.

NEW PLAYS

The most important artistic development on Church Street was our increasing emphasis on new plays. Beginning with Nicky Silver's *FAT MEN IN SKIRTS* in 1990, we began to think of new plays as the very heart of Woolly's mission. We found it stimulating to work directly with writers. We liked the element of risk involved, plus the reward of contributing to scripts in a formative way. It distinguished Woolly from our local competitors. And it opened up a much larger world of plays to choose from, despite the daunting task of reading hundreds of un-produced manuscripts.

FAT MEN IN SKIRTS carried on the tradition of plays like *CHRISTMAS ON MARS* but pushed farther into neurotic, even psychotic, territory. The Oedipal plot focuses on a mother and son marooned on a desert island after a plane crash. They eat the dead passengers and become lovers. Once rescued, they attempt a normal life with their husband/father, but the son finally kills both parents. All this is portrayed in a campy style, hilariously funny at first but ultimately spooky. The play has since been seen in dozens of productions across the country and around the world. Other premieres by Nicky Silver followed: *FREE WILL & WANTON LUST* and *THE FOOD CHAIN*, which subsequently ran for a year Off-Broadway. The success of these plays proved that Woolly's audience was willing to stretch far, and would reward us for producing outrageous, even shocking works — so long as the writing and acting were dazzling.

Other notable premieres on Church Street included Amy Freed's *THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF SAVAGES*, a sardonic riff on the lives of four famous American poets; Christi Stewart-Brown's *THE GENE POOL*, a sitcom-like depiction of a lesbian couple and their son; Robert Alexander's *THE LAST ORBIT OF BILLY MARS*, a shocking tragedy about sexual tensions in a black family; and David Lindsay-Abaire's *WONDER OF THE WORLD*, a hilarious travelogue about a woman on the run from her husband's weird sex fetish.

Non-premieres included Wallace Shawn's *AUNT DAN AND LEMON*, a provocative examination of American political morality; and Don DeLillo's *THE DAY ROOM*, a Beckettian exercise in madhouse linguistic comedy. A number of English and Canadian works also received their first

or second American productions at Woolly. These included Steve Berkoff's KVETCH, a riotous send-up of repressed thoughts; Nick Darke's THE DEAD MONKEY, a tragicomedy about the collapse of an aging surfer following the death of his pet monkey; Ann-Marie MacDonald's GOODNIGHT DESDEMONA, a lovable riff on Shakespeare; Philip Ridley's THE PITCHFORK DISNEY, a post-apocalyptic nightmare; and George Walker's HEAVEN, a violent examination of the clash between liberal values and the reality of life on the streets.

NEW FRIENDS

In 1990, Woolly Mammoth went through a financial crisis as the Gulf War kept people glued to their televisions and away from theatre. At the same time, we were looking for a new Managing Director following Linda's departure a couple of years earlier. I lured our former Development Director, Molly White, to take the job. As part of this courtship, Molly and I had a series of intense conversations about how Woolly could operate from our deepest values. Influenced by the writings of art critic Suzie Gablik, we felt that the arts should play a direct role in improving society. In college, Molly had been involved with the Cornerstone Theatre, a company formed by Harvard graduates who adapted classic plays to address the concerns of community residents. We decided that, with Woolly's emphasis on plays of social and political relevance, we too should find ways to impact our community directly.

Repeating a time-honored Woolly strategy, Molly walked up and down 14th Street and knocked on the doors of neighboring businesses and social services agencies. We learned about their work and asked how we might use our theatre skills to help. This led to Woolly's curating a series of neighborhood murals as a means of creating pride in the run-down corridor. Then we began a series of arts workshops tailored for the clients of nearby service agencies like the Boys & Girls Club, Martha's Table, and Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind. Dubbed "Outside Woolly," the new program played an important role in building bridges within the Shaw and Cardoza neighborhoods.

When Molly left in the mid-1990s, our new Associate Artistic Director, Tom Prewitt, took over the leadership of Woolly's community programming. Collaborating with Young Playwrights Theatre, he developed two programs which became the heart of our outreach work for many years, affecting the lives of hundreds of city kids. The first was "The Art of Playmaking" — students wrote their own short plays and saw them performed in public readings with professional actors. The second was "Community Playbuilding" — with the guidance of professional playwrights, kids and adults from many organizations created plays based on interviews with their neighbors. INVISIBLE CITY, performed at the True Reformers Hall in 2000, focused on the gentrification of the 14th Street corridor. THE OTHER RIVER, performed at TheARC in 2005, focused on overcoming gun violence in Anacostia.

HEADING DOWNTOWN

After 13 years on Church Street, I was sick of the tiny space. Our resourceful designers and actors had plumbed its depths many times over. Throughout the late 1990s we searched for a new space with no success. But under the far-sighted leadership of Managing Director Imani Drayton-Hill, we clarified our long-range goals, conducted a feasibility study, and strengthened our fundraising capacity.

Miraculously, just as our lease was about to expire (a victim of neighborhood gentrification and redevelopment), we won a year-long competition giving us the right to build a theatre in a mixed-use development downtown. The decision to move to DC's trendy new 7th Street corridor was not an easy one. It would test our conviction that, by sticking to Woolly's unique mission, we could build an even larger audience looking for theatrical adventure. But the can-do attitude of our new Managing Director, Kevin Moore, along with the increasing sophistication of our Board of Directors, gave us confidence we could pull it off.

Unfortunately, it would take four years before our new space was ready, so we scrambled to find an interim home. The Kennedy Center came to our rescue and offered to house us for a few shows each season in the former AFI Film Theater. The DC Jewish Community Center, along with their resident company Theater J, offered to supplement our schedule. We set up temporary offices in a warehouse at 9th and M Streets, and embarked on a series of eclectic seasons with works that ranged from a 1930s classic (Clifford Odets' ROCKET TO THE MOON) to a harrowing urban tragedy (Suzan-Lori Parks' IN THE BLOOD) to a smutty English fantasy (Lee Hall's COOKING WITH ELVIS) to an international epic (Tony Kushner's HOMEBODY/KABUL). Over the four-year period we performed in four different venues.

If anyone had asked, "How would you like to move from stage to stage at the same time that you need to raise \$9 million and build a new theatre?", I would have said no thanks. But the experience of performing on other stages paid off. The Kennedy Center helped expand our audience. And we gained valuable experience working in larger venues, which prepared us for the move to an even larger one downtown.

The most significant artistic development of those nomadic years was our increasing confidence working with playwrights. We committed to producing two wildly creative new works — David Bucci's sci-fi fantasy, ANDROMEDA SHACK, and Craig Wright's 9/11 meditation, RECENT TRAGIC EVENTS — before a first draft was even completed. Through a series of workshops, each script moved steadily forward. RECENT TRAGIC EVENTS was a major success with subsequent productions in New York and around the country. Then, with support from the A.S.K. Foundation, we commissioned three new plays from scratch with a commitment to produce them no matter what. This is rare in the American theatre and set us apart as a company willing to say "yes" to playwrights. Two of the three plays (Neena Beber's JUMP/CUT, about a gifted young man with manic depression, and Craig Wright's GRACE, about a religious zealot who commits a grizzly murder) were sellout hits, and GRACE eventually made it to Broadway.

Meanwhile, we immersed ourselves in the challenge of designing a new theatre. Naturally, the project would require its own mini vision statement — “transparent theatrical laboratory” — and a set of characteristically bold goals: 1) to build one of the great small theatres in the world; 2) to reflect Woolly’s risk-taking mission and aesthetic; and 3) to make the theatre affordable for our community. We conducted a national search for the perfect architect, which led to a boutique local firm, McInturff Architects, paired with one of the biggest theatre design consulting firms in the world, Theatre Projects Consultants. Four years later — with intense dedication from our staff and great passion and generosity from our Board and donors — we achieved an award-winning result, a “courtyard-style” theatre inspired by the Cottesloe and Tricycle in London, but with its own American flavor.

As breathless as we were when we opened our doors in May 2005, our new theatre immediately felt like home. Though four times the square footage and nearly ten times the volume of our previous home on Church Street, it had that unmistakable Woolly feeling: edgy but welcoming. At the time, I liked to refer to Woolly Mammoth as one of the great experiments in the American theatre. Could we take provocative, risk-taking new plays — of a kind most often associated with younger companies working in warehouses and churches — and launch them at the highest level of artistry in a world-class theatre? Could we sustain our risk-taking artistic profile and, at the same time, build the audiences and financial support needed to operate at our new mid-sized scale? This, in essence, was the latest version of the thesis we had set out to prove in 1980.

Did the move downtown change Woolly? Absolutely! The very shape of the theatre (which heightens the audience’s awareness of itself), the increased scale and visibility, the centralized location near the National Mall, the tumultuous times of the Obama and Trump presidencies — all these factors affected our work directly. They made it clear that every play needed to be about something significant. They raised expectations, pushing us toward higher levels of artistry, technical expertise, and management skill. We expanded our programming with the addition of guest companies like the Neo-Futurists and Second City. We reached out to new and more diverse audiences. And all this required us to build our staff, Board, and base of support — challenges that were met by Managing Directors Jeffrey Herrmann and Meghan Pressman, who quickly established themselves as national leaders in the field.

A new Woolly mantra was pinned on the bulletin board in my new office: “from Woolly to the world.” The goal was not merely to give new plays a leg up, but to launch them at a level of excellence which set a standard for every subsequent production.

BUILDING OUR CAPACITY

Fortunately, all the money to build our new theatre was raised before we moved in. But the first couple of seasons made it clear that we had a long way to go, artistically and organizationally, to live up to the full potential afforded by the move. In 2007, sparked by a remarkably generous gift from Robert and Arlene Kogod, we launched a five year “capacity building” effort which

helped Woolly get ahead of ourselves financially and aim for new heights. We made investments in artist salaries, technical support, staff growth, audience building, and fundraising – with the idea that these investments would prove self-sustaining over time. The result (despite the financial downturn!) was a permanent doubling of the theatre’s budget, and a huge leap in the level of our work.

Toward the end of the five-year period, Woolly was approached by our landlord about purchasing the space as a condominium rather than continuing our 30-year lease. We settled on a ridiculous price of \$330,000 for the 30,000 square foot space, an unheard-of deal for DC real estate. Around the same time, Woolly was one of five arts organizations in the country awarded a major one-time grant from the Doris Duke Foundation to support our long-term “adaptive capacity.” It allowed us to start a financial reserve and make further strategic investments in artistic and institutional growth.

More recently, as part of the transition to a new Artistic Director, Woolly launched the Mammoth Legacy Campaign. It provided a financial platform for the start of Maria’s tenure, and also (thanks to a generous gift from the city) gave us funds for a much-needed lobby face lift.

In short, our local and national supporters rallied around Woolly’s move downtown and gave us the tools to succeed in our new home. Picking a season on D Street was a scary proposition at first, with financial stakes much higher than before. Knowing that Woolly believers were encouraging us to be the same risk-taking company as ever – only better – made it less daunting.

DEEPENING OUR ARTISTRY

In the first several years downtown, I felt a growing tension between our long-standing commitment to a company of actors and our rising status as a national launching pad for new plays. Working with a who’s who of America’s most daring playwrights – not to mention great national directors like Rebecca Taichman, Pam MacKinnon, Daniel Aukin, Anne Kauffman, Chay Yew, and Liesl Tommy – led to some amazing work on the Woolly stage. Yet too many projects felt like one-off events, separated from the historic flow of artists who had worked at our theatre over many years. To bridge this gap, I added several new actors to the company and invited some directors, designers, and playwrights to join them as well. The goal was to create full teams of artists who would collaborate over time.

The new core included playwright/director Robert O’Hara; directors John Vreeke, Michael John Garces, Yury Urnov, Shana Cooper, and Nataki Garrett; designers Misha Kachman, Colin K. Bills, Ivanya Stack, and Jared Mezzocchi; and actors Kimberly Gilbert, Jessica Frances Dukes, Dawn Ursula, Emily Townley, Tim Getman, Gabriella Fernandez-Coffey, Kate Eastwood Norris, Cody Nichol, Erika Rose, Shannon Dorsey, and John Hudson-Odum. (Maria deserves the credit for Woolly’s newest company member, Justin Weeks.) This remarkable group of artists has

built the theatre's identity in our new home, continued to elevate our artistry, and put a unique stamp on dozens of provocative new plays.

Based on some deep conversations with company members in 2010, I concluded that Woolly's process for working on new plays felt truncated. I articulated a bold goal – to “get off the assembly line” – and we launched the “Free the Beast” campaign to invest extra resources in 25 new plays over a ten-year period. Thanks to exceptional support from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Woolly Board and many others, this became a game changer! Commissions, workshops, extra rehearsals, larger casts, technical enhancements – whatever a play needed to reach a great result, “Free the Beast” could provide it. Some projects like Mia Chung's YOU FOR ME FOR YOU and Aaron Posner's STUPID FUCKING BIRD had a year-long series of workshops before reaching the stage. Others like Jenn Haley's THE NETHER or Clare Barron's BABY SCREAMS MIRACLE got a few extra days, with the designers and actors exploring specific challenges well before rehearsals began. We learned that small investments could make a big difference, shaking up the normal process and giving artists a chance to collaborate in new ways. We even used “Free the Beast” to return to the free-form lab process from Woolly's first year in DC. The artists who participated felt like they had died and gone to heaven, as opportunities for new skill-building by theatre professionals are so rare.

All this activity coincided with an expansion of my own artistic horizons. Starting in 2009, with the support of Philip Arnoult and the Center for International Theatre Development, I visited major theatre festivals in Poland, Bulgaria, Budapest and Moscow. Why had I waited so long? I found the director-driven work in these countries so revelatory that I scrounged for funds for other company and Board members to join me. At a national theatre conference in Boston, I gave a speech about my travels that sparked a field-wide dialogue about theatrical innovation and helped establish Woolly as a thought leader in the field. You could begin to see the influence of Eastern Europe's aggressively political theatre in Woolly productions like David Adjmi's MARIE ANTOINETTE, Robert O'Hara's ZOMBIE: THE AMERICAN, Guillermo Calderon's KISS, and Rajiv Joseph's DESCRIBE THE NIGHT – all featuring scenic designs by the Russia-trained Misha Kachman.

Playwrights have by no means taken a back seat in our new home. Rather, their work has grown through more robust collaboration. The list of playwrights who've had multiple productions at Woolly since 2005 makes perhaps the clearest statement about the continuity of our provocative mission: Sarah Ruhl, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Bruce Norris, Nilaja Sun, Mike Daisey, David Adjmi, Jason Grote, Peter Sinn-Nachtrieb, Robert O'Hara, Sheila Callaghan, Danai Gurira, Rajiv Joseph, Anne Washburn, Lisa d'Amour, Jackie Sibblies Drury. This diverse group has taken big risks in a dazzling range of styles, and often re-invented the very form of theatre to startle and awaken audiences.

Think about the unexpected interweaving of hilarious sketches in Robert O'Hara's BOOTYCANDY; the hopscotching timeline of Rajiv Joseph's GRUESOME PLAYGROUND INJURIES; the futuristic mutation of The Simpsons in Anne Washburn's MR. BURNS: A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY; the outlandish death-by-lettuce in Sheila Callaghan's WOMEN LAUGHING

ALONE WITH SALAD; the layering of history and stereotypes in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' AN OCTOROON. These plays opened new possibilities for theatre in America. Their authors are drawn to Woolly because of the intense focus from our artists and staff, the high level of collaboration and commitment, and the open-mindedness of our intelligent, diverse audiences.

ENGAGING OUR COMMUNITY

Woolly's move in 2005 took us away from the 14th Street corridor where we had been based for many years, and away from the neighboring schools and front-line service agencies that had been our partners in "Outside Woolly." From our centralized perch downtown, we aimed to engage even more quadrants of the city. Gradually, however, we sensed a growing disconnect between our ambitious community goals, focused largely on high school kids, and the adult-themed plays on the Woolly stage.

While puzzling over this problem, we celebrated our thirtieth season in 2009 by hosting a one-day conference on a lofty theme: "Who's In Your Circle: Theatre and Democracy in the 21st Century." During the conference, we sought advice from local and national stakeholders on how Woolly might re-think and deepen our connection to the DC community. The result was a new initiative called "Connectivity" which was to have a profound impact on the theatre's development.

The basic principle was simple: every play poses a timely question for our community, and it's our job to reach out to the people who have the most urgent stakes for engaging with that question. In other words, designing the audience for each play is just as important as designing the sets, costumes, and lighting. This simple idea led to a whole new set of tools for creating our work, connecting with our unique city, and evolving our audience.

Interactive lobby displays, community forums, panel discussions with government and social service representatives, art exhibits, trivia nights, storytelling events, post-show dialogues led by lawyers, journalists, bloggers, authors and citizens of all kinds – these are just some of the tools of connectivity. Each production is accompanied by a unique sweep of activities, which in turn is supported by specific outreach efforts, social media campaigns, discount ticket programs and more. All these are spearheaded by the theatre's Connectivity Director along with a team of community ambassadors who help to generate ideas and build partnerships. Generous support from the Doris Duke and Wallace Foundations has enabled us to sustain this effort for a decade, test our approaches, and share what we've learned as a model for theatres across the country.

Engaging more substantively with our community made us feel the need for even more tools—especially in the areas of inter-racial dialogue, building diversity on our staff and Board, and social justice activism. A grant from the Weissberg Foundation in 2016 provided Woolly with three years of institutional training around these themes. This gave a boost to our collective consciousness, our sense of values and purpose. As the end of my tenure approached, I felt

that Woolly was finding a new meeting point among the goals that had been packed into our beginning: artistic experimentation through a resident company, political and moral provocation, and substantive engagement with all the people of our community.

A NEW ARTISTIC LEADER

As early as 2012 I had begun talking with Woolly Board members about planning for my eventual departure from the theatre – just to make sure we were prepared. We started to take it seriously, however, when consultant Ed Martenson conducted an organizational assessment of Woolly for the Doris Duke Foundation. He put my departure at the top of his list of institutional threats and challenged the Board and Staff to “own the mission” of the theatre. This was prescient advice.

We started inviting more company members to Board meetings so both groups could get to know one another better. Board members hosted lunches with playwrights and directors to gain perspective on the theatre’s identity. Board and staff members became more involved in long-term planning, and several began attending national theatre conferences to build their knowledge of the field. When I announced in the summer of 2016 that I was ready to set a date, there was still plenty of shock, but the organization was prepared to swing into action.

Managing Director Meghan Pressman and Board President Linette Hwu developed a transition timeline for the next two seasons. They engaged Greg Kandel of Management Consultants for the Arts to help us complete a new strategic plan in preparation for the search process. The Board launched a transition team headed by Liz Freedman, a Search Committee headed by Michael Fitzpatrick, and a “Mammoth Legacy” fundraising campaign headed by Scott & Evelyn Schreiber to make sure the necessary funds were in place.

Looking back, I think my final two seasons were the most satisfying of all. The political moment was intense with the election of Donald Trump in the fall of 2016 – but Woolly was totally engaged. In one production after another we leaned into the urgency of the moment: Guillermo Calderon’s KISS about the Syrian tragedy, Mike Daisey’s far-sighted THE TRUMP CARD, The Second City’s BLACK SIDE OF THE MOON which created a zone of solidarity following the election, Taylor Mac’s HIR spotlighting transgender issues, Max Frisch’s THE ARSONISTS which spoke forcefully to the issue of complicity, Danai Gurira’s FAMILIAR which lifted up the lives of African immigrants, UNDERGROUND RAILROAD GAME about the collision of race and sex in American history, and BOTTICELLI IN THE FIRE which shed light on the scapegoating tactics of history’s bullies.

When we opened our theatre as a rest stop and meeting place for the Women’s March on January 21, 2017 – and nearly 5,000 people came through – I think we felt that Woolly had reached a new level of purpose, a true alignment between the work on our stage and our engagement and trust with our community. This purpose flowed directly into a new version of

our mission statement – an attempt to express our deepest goals and values, crafted by dozens of artists, staff and board members, subscribers, supporters, and community participants:

To create rousing, visceral, enlightening theatre experiences that galvanize diverse artists and audiences to engage with our world in unexpected and often challenging ways.

We are a radically inclusive community—across race, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical ability, socioeconomic background, and political viewpoint—in which all are encouraged to exchange ideas freely and reach for new understanding.

We are a supportive home for creative risk-taking by our company and guest artists, staff, board, volunteers, audiences, donors, and colleagues.

Through relentless inquiry and experimentation, we strive for world-class excellence and innovation in every aspect of our work.

This mission, in turn, informed our search for a new artistic leader. It clarified our intentions, shaped our process, attracted amazing candidates, and led us to a brilliant human being: Maria Manuela Goyanes. She knocked us over with her exuberance and intelligence, her depth of experience and love for new plays, and above all her complete identification with Woolly's mission.

Arriving in September 2018 after 15 years at the Public Theatre in New York, Maria inherited a season I had already selected; she produced it brilliantly. She opened the theatre's 40th season in the fall of 2019 with Jackie Sibblies-Drury's FAIRVIEW, a genuinely path-breaking play that exemplifies everything our theatre stands for – experimentation, provocation, originality, relevance, urgency. At the opening night, I knew that Woolly Mammoth was in remarkably good hands.

At my farewell celebration on June 4, 2018, I shared a final statement about the continuity of Woolly's history and mission:

“Woolly Mammoth is not a set of plays or a building, but an idea, an inquiry, an experiment transmitted from person to person over time. Our company members and other artists are at the center of this inquiry, but the moment they step into our building, they absorb the mission and the values and the expectations that all of us have created, and this encourages them to stretch their skills and enlarge their sense of purpose. We all play a role in sustaining this virtuous cycle between artists and the community. Finding the resources is a big part, but resources only come from our collective act of will and belief.

My belief is that the highest calling of theatre as an art form, since the time of the ancient Greeks, has been to lift up and comfort the afflicted, to trouble and afflict the comfortable, and to speak truth to power. No one should ever leave the theatre feeling they have been congratulated for the good and moral things they already believe. They should be ruffled enough to want to become better human beings and better citizens. If theatre presents itself in a comfortable, simple-to-digest package, it asks little of us. If it comes with surprising shocks of language, action, or form, then it asks us to participate and respond.

So Woolly Mammoth offers you both an invitation and a warning. We welcome you with originality, excellence, and theatrical razzle dazzle, and we discombobble you enough that you're forced to think about it in relation to your own life. Or, as Robert O'Hara said of Woolly: everyone is welcome, no one is safe.

We are all guardians of this vision, and I suspect there are enough possibilities packed inside it to last all our lifetimes."