

Legal Name

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company

Project Title

To host Nilaja Sun at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company to imagine and explore new approaches to demand building for theatre among African Americans age 18-25

Project Progress and Successes

The majority of young African Americans we worked with over the course of this grant were not familiar with Woolly Mammoth. Through contact and face-to-face time with Nilaja, they were able to form a relationship with Woolly Mammoth, and look to this theatre as a site for exploring issues that are pertinent to their lives. As a result of this project, Woolly Mammoth has strengthened relationships with the University of the District of Columbia, Howard University, Georgetown University, and the non-profit Real Talk DC. Through participatory workshops, Nilaja Sun worked diligently with the young African American demographic at these schools to make connections between the work on our stages and what is going on in their lives. Nilaja's workshops also encouraged them to feel like American theatre makers, not just audience members, and to find their own artistic voice. These young people had the opportunity to see the many facets of theatre making and storytelling, and envision a world where they can create and tell their own stories. Furthermore, we have now developed strong relationships with their group leaders that we know will extend long after this immediate project is over. These leaders are constantly forming relationships with young people who are a part of this demographic, and they are committed to working with us to find ways to introduce Woolly to their spheres of influence.

All told, Nilaja Sun made 10 trips to DC to conduct 15 workshops at Howard University, University of the District of Columbia, Georgetown University, and Real Talk DC, as well as 2 focus groups.

Claytia G, one of the workshop participants had this to say about her experience: "As a facilitator, Nilaja made certain to pay attention to the needs in the room. She encouraged the shy to open up, and the energetic to find focus. The pace of the workshop was fun and lively, without being draining. Using her personal experience as a motivator, Nilaja made it easy for us all to create and execute our one (wo)man shows."

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

There were three main challenges that we faced. One challenge we encountered was that our artist-in-residence Nilaja Sun is NYC-based, and we found that it takes a great deal of time to become familiar with Washington, DC and its many stakeholders, and to build trusting (and transparent) new relationships with local stakeholders. Because of this limitation, particularly early on in the project, we had difficulties identifying the right contacts who perceived mutual self-interest, and could introduce us to their circles. In time we were able to find community partners who believed this project had value for their circles, and could galvanize those individuals, however this was a time consuming process.

Another obstacle to the long-term success of this project is that with the exception of UDC, many of the university students we worked with are not local to DC, and will leave the city at the end of their undergraduate programs. In the future we would incorporate more community colleges and/or schools with larger DC resident populations. In addition, whenever Nilaja was not a preset and active part of the theatergoing experience, attendance seemed to wane. The students came to know and connect to Woolly through Nilaja, and in her absence we must find a way to ensure that that connection doesn't dissipate.

The last challenge we faced was not bringing in an outside evaluator to oversee surveying, and other quantitative assessment measures. We attempted to manage some surveying and focus groups on our own, but without a strong skill-set in that area, we saw uneven results.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

We learned it was incredibly important to find groups with a pre-existing infrastructure, and a group leader with genuine shared interest and investment in the project who is able to communicate the value of the project and partnership to the larger community.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

N/A

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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