

Graduate Research Study:

Application of Human-Centered Design to Identify and Address Challenges in the Baltimore Theatre Community

By: Alan Brian Long Jr. (student researcher), Dr. Bruce Parsons (thesis advisor), Dr. Joan Dickinson (thesis committee member), and Ms. Kathleen Sullivan (thesis committee member).

26 Baltimore Theatre Community stakeholders, representing 9 theatre companies and many independent artists, participated in this research study.

Introduction

Most people are familiar with the trope of the struggling artist, but what specific challenges do they experience and how might we help them address these challenges? Brian Long, a Baltimore City resident and local theatre enthusiast, decided to focus his graduate school thesis on helping the Baltimore theatre community formally document address the challenges they experience.

When reviewing existing theatre industry research, he found information about the community in local newspapers, but he was surprised to find out that there were no formal research studies focusing on the vibrant Baltimore theatre community.

The purpose of this research study was to determine how theatre industry challenges were experienced in the Baltimore theatre community by engaging with the people that organize, create, and perform theatrical works to ensure the challenges were articulated from their perspective.

Methodology

Pursuing an MFA in Design-Thinking (DT), Brian crafted a research study comprised of human-centered DT methods to ensure data was driven by community stakeholders. The first phase of the research study consisted of an online survey designed to gather data about theatre challenges from community stakeholders in their own words. In the second phase of the research study, survey data was used to populate a virtual collaboration space called MURAL. Within this space, Brian guided stakeholders through sequential DT activities designed to categorize, frame, and characterize these challenges.

Findings

- 1. Lack of published research on challenges faced by the Baltimore theatre community made addressing these challenges more difficult.
- 2. Long-term sustainability of the Baltimore theatre community is threatened by complex and interrelated challenges.
- 3. The Baltimore theatre community lacks a centralized organization to facilitate communication amongst theatre companies, collective problem solving, partnership development, and long-term planning.



Recommendations

A centralized organization comprised of theatre community stakeholders should be established to address challenges.

Future research should: Ideate central organization structure & function, examine how federal, state, and city funds reach theatre stakeholders, and examine why theatre professionals leave Baltimore to document retention challenges.



4. The Baltimore theatre community lacks affordable rehearsal and performance spaces.

5. Due to severe resource restrictions, Baltimore theatre community stakeholders struggle to effectively promote performances and develop audiences.

6. The Baltimore theatre community is not able to pay staff and artists a fair wage, which results in theatre professionals leaving the city to pursue theatre careers in other cities.

