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In survey, arts groups cite struggles they still face

By Malcolm Gay
GLOBE STAFF

Roughly one year after live indoor performances resumed in Boston, area arts groups face a stubborn thicket of impediments as they seek more secure footing in a city transformed by the pandemic, according to a recent survey conducted by ArtsBoston, the arts advocacy and service organization.

The survey, which included open-ended interviews with more than 20 area arts groups, found that many continue to struggle with funding, lackluster attendance, staffing, questions of diversity, and other issues. It included a wide range of respondents, including area theater, dance, music, and visual arts groups, whose annual budgets ranged in size from smaller than $500,000 to greater than $50 million.

"Last year at this time we were saying arts groups can't simply turn on the lights and be ready to go on day one after 18 months without live experiences," ArtsBoston executive director Catherine Peterson said in a statement. "Now the lights are on and the reality of being back in business is more clear."

Peterson said she wanted a snapshot of the local arts landscape following her group's work on the Audience Outlook Monitor, a survey that sought to better understand audience preferences and behaviors during much of the pandemic.

"The challenges we knew would come are taking shape," said Peterson. "AOM gave us indications that audiences in Greater Boston were eager to return, but also they would be cautious in that return."

But while the Outlook Monitor suggested audience sizes would shrink roughly 15 to 20 percent, ArtsBoston's latest findings indicate an even starker reality: Many respondents report audiences are down 20 to 40 percent.

The survey found that, for many, reduced ticket sales are contributing to an already challenging funding environment, as inflation depresses individual philanthropy, COVID-relief funds dwindle, and fears of a recession persist.

Meanwhile, the survey indicated that many organizations struggle to maintain adequate staffing levels, pointing to a competitive job market and the area's high cost of living. Remaining staff is often overworked — and inexperienced: Some organizations report that as much as half of staff are new.

Understaffing has also meant organizations are deferring audience research and analysis of fund-raising data, the survey found, which in turn makes it difficult for arts groups to reach new audiences and potential donors.

The survey also revealed that many arts workers feel "racial justice goals can feel unattainable due to other structural issues." It added that a number of factors were contributing to their frustration, including concerns that audience diversity efforts must be more than mere marketing and that staff lack time to concentrate adequately on social justice issues.

"Organizations of all sizes realize they can't allow themselves to conclude that structural racism is 'too hard to tackle,'" said Peterson. "They know it involves difficult conversations and a commitment to using time and resources'"

Peterson said the open-ended survey enabled ArtsBoston not only to better understand the ongoing challenges faced by arts groups, but also to uncover issues that are below the radar, and, perhaps, point the way toward solutions.

"Arts groups are telling us they need more time and more resources to get where their business models and revised mission statements are pointing them," she said. "Governmental recovery money over the past two-plus years was crucial to keep artists and workers employed, and maintain theater spaces. But local, regional and national funders, and service organizations like ArtsBoston must move into the next phase of helping the sector."

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