“We Believe In...

Reflecting the cultural, ethnic, social and historic diversity of our community as well as expanding it.

Exploring the relationship between art and place, artist and community

Teaching by our example as well as our pedagogy

The power of the arts to enrich the education and lives of young people

The power of theatre to transform artists and audiences

The ability of the actor-creator to make art that reflects the complexity of living, art that is both specific and universal

Ensemble and collaborative practices that place the artist at the center of the work and the organization

The importance of independent cultural production to our society’s health

The value of our work to the field as a laboratory for exploration and development

The importance of play

The seriousness of comedy”

(Dell’Arte International)

The Context

Dell’Arte International, also known as DAI, opened its doors after Carlo, an Italian artist, brought his art style to the United States
from Italy after World War II. Carlo dreamt of expanding his teachings worldwide and was successful in his endeavors, fundamentally reinventing theatre, commedia, and mask work for the years to come. DAI began as a mime school when Carlo opened its doors, and has expanded to encompass many forms of physical theatre since its beginnings. Today, DAI is rooted in the rural town of Blue Lake, California and is the United States’ center for the exploration, development, training and performance of the actor-creator. It is also a key community partner for the region it is located in.

This arts-oriented program uses physical theater forms to explore contemporary concerns, and to promote an array of goals for the benefit of both students and the surrounding communities. Students are able to transform community member’s perspectives regarding the arts and often evoke more positive feelings towards theatre, all while developing their own talents, passions, and communications skills.

Along with existing and previous students, DAI has attracted new students motivated to learn and obtain talents, as well as sponsors motivated to participate in its programs. DAI consistently provides these students and community partners a safe area to learn and grow in various aspects of the arts. Further, DAI provides students the opportunity to learn about the functioning of their community while participating in active engagement with encouraging local organizations.

The programs that make up DAI include a professional touring company, a full-time professional training school offering an Masters in Fine Arts (MFA) and other certificate programs, the DAI Summer Intensive Workshop, the Professional Training Program, annual summer shows (such as the Mad River Festival), the Bali study abroad program, and community partnerships with organizations such as the Blue Lake School, the Humboldt Folklife Festival, and more. There is also a full-year season of the company’s shows and events – these consist of a traveling show, school presentations, and community-school events. DAI has quickly grown into a renowned program, is in its nearly fortieth year of operation, and has an increasing number of students and community partners incorporated each year.

The foundation of Dell’Arte International is the belief in and incorporation of physical art forms in communities throughout the
nation. There are certain competencies required for those that are participating in the programs at DAI. These competencies are imperative to the potential of both the partnerships and programs to thrive and create a healthy atmosphere. They are:

➢ Cultural Competency – being aware and respectful of both community, organization, and audience.
➢ Understanding of the arts.
➢ Intense passion and dedication for theatre and teaching.

There are also essential tools and resources that are imperative to the implementation and existence of DAI programs. Such resources include:

➢ Staff time – a lot of time and energy goes into teaching students and it is imperative that staff have the ability and inclination to be passionate about their students, theatre, and the teaching process.
➢ Staff who can dedicate themselves to traveling with the DAI traveling show.
➢ Knowledge of various art forms - there are many different forms of art utilized at DAI, so it is imperative that those who are working there come from diverse physical theatre backgrounds.

One of the focal programs at DAI is the Rural Residency Program. Each year, DAI students facilitate workshops for participating community members based on the type of training that the student is versed in (puppetry, masks, pageantry, etc.). First year students live in rural towns for 10 days, form relationships with various community members, work with these community members to develop a story line, and then perform a public show based on what they learned about the community they were stationed in. Participating community members are invited to direct the show, as well as participate in it if they so desire.

Another community-related program at DAI is the Community-Based Arts Project. During this project, 2-3 students identify an organization in a rural town that they are particularly interested in, reach out to them, form a relationship with them, and
jointly work with them to devise a performance based on the overall mission of the organization. Partnerships and projects are very individualized depending on both the type of organization and the style of physical theatre that the student is trained in. Following the collaboration, students present a public showing of their chosen organization. However, some organizations that deal with particularly sensitive or traumatic subject matter may opt out of the students performing a public show, and instead have them present the art piece in a private setting to only members of the organization. Examples of previous Community-Based Arts Projects are Food to People and an organization that works with survivors of rape. The Food to People organization collects food donations to give to those in need. Students worked closely with this organization, assisting them in food collection and dispersing. After working with the organization for some time, students developed a story line and the organization opted to have them present it to the public. While the organization was unsure of what to expect due to the fact that poverty and hunger are serious subjects, the members of the organization were surprised by the careful thought that went into making the performance, consideration of the subject matter, and ultimately heartwarming performance that the students put on. The performance also aided the organization by inspiring the community citizens to become a part of the organization and donate to the cause. Another organization, one that aids survivors of rape, opted not to have the performance open to the public. After working with the organization for some time, the students developed a story line and presented a heartwarming performance to members of the organization privately.

Further, the DAI Company Internship takes place during the traveling holiday show. Students are given a story line and must develop a performance based on the topic. The performance must be family friendly and approximately 50-55 minutes in length. Once the students are done creating their performance, they then travel and perform for communities in the surrounding area.

DAI receives funding for programs in various ways. First, students pay a tuition for each program they participate in. Further, DAI receives grants from various organizations and foundations to aid in keeping the program alive. For example, DAI received a $225,000 grant in 2012 from the James Irvine Foundation to support the expansion of the rural arts programs and increase participation opportunities for communities throughout the north coast region of California. The grant supported projects like the Rural Residency program, The Dell’Arte Company’s free annual holiday show tour, and our MFA’s Community Based Arts
Projects. DAI has been awarded grants and other aid from foundations since then and continues to be sponsored in similar ways.

DAI has created strong, fulfilling relationships with community members, community organizations, and students that last longer than a lifetime. This organization brings together new communities, sponsors, and organizations each year, and continues to attract attention from community partners and potential students. It has connected communities and given participating students an opportunity to gain skills, recognize talents, and cultivate meaningful creative relationships that have the potential to transfer to future collaboration. Students are able to transform community member’s perspectives surrounding the arts, and often evoke more positive feelings towards theatre. The manifestation of specific functions of participating community organizations through physical theatre allows for the community to better understand the mission of certain organizations and feel unified due to the coming together of community citizens to enjoy the arts. Since DAI focuses on community and the arts, it sends the message that they value people, community relationships and creative unity.

The programs at DAI are structured in such a way that they are able to be replicated in other rural areas. Such programs place a high reliance on community-student relationships, so a community that may be considering launching their own similar programs need first to consider establishing strong community partnerships and bonds with local organizations. Meaningful relationships with such organizations should be cultivated and maintained regularly to ensure a successful implementation. Further, an emphasis should be placed on student investment. Students participating in the programs are admitted with special focus on their passion for theatre. Thus, instructors should be equally as passionate in order to allow for immense cultural, educational, and skillful growth.

One of the most important aspects of DAI is the ability that teachers, students, and staff have to bounce-back and overcome obstacles. At first, communities and organizations were hesitant to participate due to the unique nature of the subject matter and the abstract nature of the arts. However, the establishment of communication and trust between DAI and participating entities allowed for certain communities and organizations to take a chance in participating in the collaboration. After participating, communities and organizations tended to be
exceedingly satisfied with the results and ready to participate again in the future. As DAI grows, the programs grow, and naturally more obstacles appear. DAI handles such bumps in the road with careful consideration. Faculty at DAI are especially attuned to addressing issues promptly and head-on with the expectation of resolving or alleviating any tensions in the quickest, most considerate way possible. They have found that being honest about problems that arise is the best way to address them appropriately.

The main thing that those at DAI aim to remember when contacting potential collaborators and students is personal touch. Having a personal connection and relationship with communities, organizations, and interns is imperative to the success of the organization. Further, they focus on remembering to always be aware of their surroundings – since DAI draws largely upon physical theatre, it is imperative for all involved to be aware of the surroundings and ready to adapt to the fluidity of the crowd (whether it be adapting to the portrayed emotions, body language, or otherwise). Inclusively, the relationships formed through the DAI programs are what ultimately lead to the success of the organization. For this reason, only individuals that are fiercely passionate about DAI’s mission and cause are involved in its programs.

DAI is international in scope, grounded in the natural living world, and inspired by the non-urban setting in which they operate. It explores theatre making, theatre practice, and theatre training for not only itself, but the entire world and the future. Further, DAI seeks to create resonant works of theatre that are visceral, athletic, and engage the mystery underlying all experience. Such physical art forms, relationships, and community participation taught through DAI programs enables both students and communities to thrive in the creative world and become unified through the universal language of theatre.

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References