



STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

Dezart Performs was founded in 2008 to present readings of new plays, one of which was staged in the Dezart Gallery each year. When the gallery closed in 2011, Dezart Performs moved to the Pearl McManus Theatre in the historic Palm Springs Woman's Club and began offering fully produced plays by established, contemporary playwrights. Over its 12-year history, Dezart Performs has seen steady growth in its audience, its fundraising and its status in the Coachella Valley as one of the top two theatre companies in the region. In 2019, Dezart Performs became an Equity-sanctioned small professional theatre.

In order to sustain this growth and better serve this region, Dezart Performs embarked on a Strategic Planning process, thanks to a grant from the Inland Empire Community Foundation, in the summer of 2019. The goal of this process was to chart a course for the future that involves smart growth, guided by a clear vision and clear objectives.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the world as we know it. While Dezart Performs is financially well positioned to weather these uncertain times, no one really knows how long our lives will be disrupted and what the "new normal" will look like when we emerge from this unprecedented period. Therefore, the Strategic Planning Committee has extended the period of time to achieve its stated goals from three years to five. And the Strategic Plan is considered a living document that will be continually reviewed and updated, depending on the circumstances of any given period and our ability to shape them to our advantage.

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INTERVIEWS

Beginning in July 2019, the Strategic Planning Consultant Janet Levine and Dezart Performs staff conducted a series of interviews that would help to prioritize the Company's goals and better understand its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges as we pursue those goals. Those interviewed included all of the Board and Staff of Dezart Performs, plus twelve community leaders who are Dezart Performs patrons and/or donors. (See Addendum for list of participants.)

Overall, the Board and Community Members were highly positive about Dezart Performs. Comments from community members included:

- Dezart Performs really does deliver exceptional professional productions: The quality of work is “amazing,” “excellent,” “professional.”
- Michael Shaw has an uncanny ability to choose fantastic plays and get superb performances from actors.
- The performances, which have always been excellent, continue to improve and exceed expectations.

In short, the consensus of both groups was that Dezart Performs provides great value to the community and, especially, to its audience.

Issues of concern included the need to bring on additional board members, particularly those more beneficially connected in the community, involve board members more in the organization, increase marketing and outreach, and find a new, more professional venue. Both Board and Community Members expressed concern about what would happen if Michael Shaw left. Consensus among both groups was that not only was there a need for a succession plan but, more urgently, Michael needs staff support.

The information gained from the interviews helped to shape the discussion for the Retreat.

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING RETREAT

On Saturday, September 14, 2019, a day-long retreat was facilitated by Janet Levine. The morning meeting was a Board Retreat, which addressed the roles of a board and explored ways to strengthen and increase the size of the existing board. Ms. Levine led the Board through the steps to becoming a highly effective board and there was vigorous discussion about how to reach out to potential new board members. The group also explored the Board’s role in fundraising and talked about things members can do to introduce potential donors and board members to Dezart Performs.

The afternoon retreat began with looking at Dezart Performs’ purpose (mission) and vision. We then broke into four groups for a SWOT Analysis of Dezart Performs. After each team identified what they felt were the internal Strengths or Weaknesses and external Opportunities or Threats, the rest of the group added, amended, or agreed with the list. The results showed:

Strengths

- Dezart Performs’ leadership - Artistic Director Michael Shaw and Board President Clark Dugger;
- The sophisticated theatre audience in Palm Springs;
- Booming ticket sales over the past three years;
- Bold, edgy, relevant programming;
- The friendly environment;
- The intimacy of the venue;
- Convenience of the Pearl McManus Theatre’s location;
- Fiscally responsible management;
- Equity sanctioned;

- The professionalism of the productions;
- Opportunity to showcase local talent, as well as artists from outside the Valley;
- A good relationship with Palm Springs High School Drama Department, which gives students an opportunity to work with a professional theatre company;
- The ability of the Company to attract outstanding talent and guide them to exceptional performances;
- The loyal base of more than 40 volunteers who return each season to work behind the scenes and at the front of the house and the benefit they receive from forming lasting personal relationships while making a valuable contribution to an important cultural institution;
- A newly acquired large warehouse space that has been converted into a storage facility and shop so that, for the first time, the Company has a space large enough to build and store sets and props all in one place.

Weaknesses

- Lack of professional staff:
 - A staff would build on existing programs, provide outreach to the community and assume many of the administrative responsibilities that will allow the Artistic Director and others to focus on further enhancing the quality of DeZart Performs' productions;
 - Much of the important work of running a theatre is performed by volunteers or, in the best case, contract employees. While these people are talented and dedicated, their part-time involvement limits their ability to fully serve the growing needs of the organization.
- Lack of a permanent home:
 - The business of the theatre is primarily conducted out of the Artistic Director's home;
 - Productions are mounted at the Pearl McManus Theatre in the Palm Springs Woman's Club and the Company's time in the venue is severely limited by the Woman's Club's busy schedule and the performance schedule of another theatre company, Desert Ensemble, that also uses the space;
 - DeZart Performs also have very little control over the physical site, so that issues such as added lighting, changes to the venue to accommodate a particular production, and other physical issues, must be approved by the Woman's Club members.

Opportunities

- A permanent home would:
 - Enhance the Company's brand;
 - Provide flexibility in scheduling and programming that doesn't exist now;
 - Ideally, include structural amenities and operational conveniences typical of a professional theatre.
- A regular, substantial increase in subscription sales:
 - Once the Company began offering assigned seats, sales ballooned in record numbers, thus increasing loyalty and predictable revenue;
 - A larger theatre would make it possible to sell more tickets, thereby increasing revenue even more;
 - A larger audience presents opportunities for a larger donor base.

- Opportunities for partnership with other theatre companies are being explored, such as:
 - Shared venues; and
 - Shared resources, such as volunteers.
- New ways have been identified to increase the Company’s outreach into the community. These will be shared in a resulting Communications Plan.
- The Company’s strong relationship with Palm Springs High School provides a platform on which to expand the Company’s educational outreach into other schools down Valley.

Threats

- Competition from other local theatres for limited philanthropic resources;
- The large number of theatres in this relatively small community can make it hard for potential audiences and donors to distinguish between the various theatre companies;
- The lack of a permanent home was seen as a destabilizing factor in the future of the Company;
- There was a concern expressed that the Company needs to do a better job of reaching out to audiences “Down Valley” and not be seen as primarily a Palm Springs-focused theatre company;
- Concerns were expressed that, with a larger venue, there would be a loss of intimacy and focus would shift to supporting the space rather than the art;
- Many people expressed concern that, without more professional staff support, the Artistic Director will be stretched too thin.

GOALS

The above analysis helped the retreat participants identify FOUR PRINCIPAL GOALS for the next three years:

1. INCREASE REVENUE - all other goals depend on our success in this area
2. Realize a MORE PROFESSIONAL VENUE
3. Develop HUMAN RESOURCES
4. Grow EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

A Strategic Planning Committee was assigned to collect all the material from the retreat and interviews and develop a plan for moving forward.