

## Community Discussion - Rethinking the Gala

### 34 in attendance

Manhattan Theatre Club had a documentary about them which they tied to the Gala, including ticket sales just for movie attendees

Pasadena Playhouse made their Gala more community-focused and made the event a street party. Dinner was in the street, and performers were actors from the coming season. There was a DJ in the courtyard and a library space was used as a lounge. Planning did take months due to the need for permits, and there was a significant increase in expenses. They ended up with 240 guests with a base price of \$1,250 per ticket.

Brooklyn Academy of Music held their Gala across multiple spaces, which incurred more costs when activating all of the spaces.

The Colorado Ballet decided to make their Gala a night of partying. They made it very low-pressure by getting rid of the auction and paddle raise so that the team could focus on other things. They created a Wishtree as part of night-of fundraising, an interactive display of philanthropy. Gifts support various education and wellness initiatives, and can be in honor of retiring members. Those who donated to the Wishtree got a special bracelet, which helped encourage giving, and they had a board member match to the Wishtree **only for giving from other board members** (which encouraged greater support from the board). To keep things moving they used square app for night-of gift input.

They grew their goal by \$100k and exceeded it. The strategy for engaging guests was to get contact info before the event and include staff being around the night-of to talk about the importance of support. They did have a live auction, mostly with internal offerings (walk-ons, Nutcracker experience).

The Irish Arts Center uses Donate2 for silent auction, so it goes straight into Tessitura. It was also suggested that you can use the Contribution Import Utility for mass info upload.

The University Musical Society has decided not to do Galas anymore because the events weren't bringing anything of value to them.

The current general gala structure doesn't fit the changing times. One idea is to have a kick-off event in conjunction with the Gala to appeal to the younger demographic. Recruiting younger people to the board will also help give them a voice and allow them to shape the future of fundraising (including Galas).

Papermill Playhouse recruited new board members to bring their friends so that there would be new faces at the event. They had a celebrity chef do BBQ, so while they still kept it elevated it allowed them to switch things up.

Hartford Stage didn't have a dinner or program, but had a live band and turned their event into a dance party. They have a kids program called Breakdancing Shakespeare and had those kids perform at the event. They also gave a lower price point option to entice more folks.

One suggestion was to solicit corporate support based on who the honoree is. Another suggestion was to tie the honoree to some sort of a mentorship program to keep the focus on accessibility and your mission.

We also discussed luncheons, including an organization that frames their luncheon as a volunteer opportunity for local high school students and asks corporate partners to mentor them through networking and training.

The Grand in Wilmington had a 1200 person Gala where they took over a hotel with themed-rooms. You could sponsor a room, a table, etc. The room themes were based on upcoming shows, including a music and variety room.

Another organization discussed having their props onsite with a 3D printer to do live demos, as well as set designs on display. They also focused on raising corporate funds by putting the focus on the corporation's marketing funds (rather than their philanthropic funds).

Someone mentioned OZ Arts in Nashville which has an event called Conversations. It's a seated dinner and each table has a community leader with a specific topic. The hosts are announced and people can buy tickets based on which table they want to sit at.

Someone mentioned that The Art of Gathering (by Priya Parker) is a great resource for figuring out the purpose of your event, which can better guide your planning!

Starlight Theatre had their event targeted at their Young Professionals group and tied it to a show. There was a pre-party (with food trucks or small tables) themed on the show so folks could see the show, enjoy an open bar and snacks at intermission, and then enjoy a post-show event with a band and dance party.

Another organization had a Hat Luncheon tied to the Kentucky Derby. Music students play for guests and it's framed as a "see and be seen" event, especially once attendees were encouraged to wear outlandish hats for the event.

The Tennessee Performing Arts Center had a Family Day fundraiser which included a lot of opportunities for interaction, as well as a story time.

The San Francisco Ballet had a Nutcracker Luncheon which included a build-a-bear workshop, ice cream bar, and VIP tickets to go on stage and experience the on-stage snow.

We discussed that there is success with lower-level family events, but does it make enough money to make it worth it (and should that even be the focus?) One organization talked about having an impact partnership with a local corporate partner to allow families to attend for free.

Another organization talked about their Baby Grands program, which brought kids on stage to see professional pianos and meet the artists. It encouraged their parents to also get involved and helped create those relationships.

The Goodman talked about their Education Luncheon which is held in conjunction with a Keynote (with the intention being to tie it in with someone who is making an impact. People will buy tables, but not fill them allowing the organization to fill the tables with community partners.

We also talked about campaign-focused special events. One organization discussed the idea of a progressive dinner, where each course would be in a different location (in this case each course would be at the house of a different board member who all live near each other), but the fear is that you may lose folks by walking all around.

Another organization took donors and prospects to spaces which were going to be renovated and shared renderings to help them imagine the future.

Other organizations have board and high-level donors hosting dinners in which they would pay the costs and invite friends they felt might support. The important thing to remember is that your team needs to set expectations with the host and keep control (since it's still your event!)

One final piece of advice for any event was to lean into support from small business and work out deals for them to provide in-kind goods and services as a way of keeping costs down.