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FUNDRAISING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

BY HALLIE STEINER

GOOD THEATRE brings us an unexpected connection. Two young lovers connect despite their feuding families, audience members connect with the saints, murderers, and rock stars on the stage. In a digital world, the connection between those who create a show and those who watch it grows closer and closer, click by click.

Crowdfunding, an online tool for collaborative fundraising, allows the playwright to “speak directly to the potential backer and... tell the story of the show, as the artist, that otherwise would not have been heard,” according to Guild member Yvette Heyliger. Playwrights and production teams create campaigns that pitch definite projects to the public, then pray to the theatre gods that people will believe in these projects enough to fund them. Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and

RocketHub are some of the most visited crowdfunding sites for artistic projects, according to the Global Alexa Rank.¹

“The idea of a musical funded by its future audience is a pretty exciting one,” said Catherine Noonan, a blogger for *The Guardian*.²

The Dramatist published an article in November of 2011 about “The People of Godspell,” a large collaboration of small investors who came together to fund the Broadway revival of Stephen Schwartz’s classic. Ken Davenport, the producer of the “community-produced” musical, said of the project, “We’re all part of this one family. The investors, the band, the cast, the audience—we’re all one group.”³ If theatre is a family, crowdfunding is a Thanksgiving potluck.

¹ “Alexa Top 500 Global Sites.” <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>.

² Noonan, Catherine. “Crowdfunding and creativity: giving a little can make a big difference,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2012.

³ Tepper, Jennifer Ashley. “The People of Godspell,” *The Dramatist*, Nov/Dec 2011.

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"It's such a remarkable thing to me, the generosity that can come from people when they know you're passionate about your trade," said Guild member Becca Schlossberg, writer of *Cal and Grey*, a post-apocalyptic orphan love story. Becca and her production team raised more than \$1,800 through Indiegogo and used it for the show's run at the Thespis Theater Festival in Washington Heights. "I connected with a lot [of donors] that I didn't expect," Becca said. "These were people that I used to play with in elementary school! It was cool to know they supported me."

Through online fundraising, Guild member Vinnie Favale found real connection with people he had never *really* met. When asked whether he felt a sense of community between creators and backers, Vinnie answered,

"We feel that 1000%... by the time they came to see the show we all felt like we already knew many of these complete strangers." Vinnie and his writing partner Frankie Keane wrote *Hereafter Musical*, a story about life after death for both the living and their lost loved ones. They raised \$71,000 for the production on Kickstarter in September of 2011 and were able to put it up for a run at Theatre 80 in April of 2012.

However, the creative community of crowdfunding is not all love, rainbows, and Facebook pokes. Vinnie said he and his team spent upward of 40 hours per week keeping up with their campaign—giving progress updates and show information, highlighting donors via social media, and following through on backer rewards. One of the staples of the crowdfunding economy is stellar swag. If



KICKSTARTER	indiegogo	RocketHub
Creative projects only	Any type of fundraising campaign	Any type of fundraising campaign
>75,000 projects as of October 2012	>100,000 projects featured as of July 2012	2,040 Projects currently on site 441 live projects + 1,599 successful projects
No one is charged until campaign ends and you have reached or exceeded your goal.	Donors get charged right when they pledge.	
TYPE OF FUNDING All or nothing <small>(if you don't reach your goal, you don't keep the funds you raised).</small> If project is successful, Kickstarter charges a 5% fee. If not, no Kickstarter fee and no one makes or loses any money. Credit card processing fee = 3-5%	TWO TYPES OF FUNDING FLEXIBLE: Indiegogo keeps 4% if you make your goal, 9% if you don't but you get to keep the rest of the funds you raised, and 3% goes to credit card processing. FIXED: Indiegogo keeps 4% if you make your goal and 3% goes to credit card processing. But if you don't reach your goal, all backers get refunded and no one makes or loses any money.	TYPE OF FUNDING RocketHub keeps 4% if you make your goal, 8% if you don't reach goal (but you keep the rest). Credit card processing fee = 4%

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you want people to be on board financially, you have to make them part of the show any way that you can. For the *Hereafter* team, the pressure to deliver on promised perks (t-shirts, CDs, virtual shoutouts, and, especially, ticket reservations) was “INSANE.” There was more work to be done *after* they exceeded their financial goal. Don’t worry, folks, they did deliver on their promises. But Vinnie warns that the Kickstarter process is “a lot more work and time consuming than you could ever imagine.”

Another concern with crowdfunding is that it may be *too* popular. “Kickstarter and Indiegogo campaigns seem to be proliferating at a steady pace — and the worry is that our friends have reached Kickstarter Overload,” said Guild members Tira Palmquist and Kyle T. Wilson, co-executive producers of Fell Swoop Playwrights’ Collective in Los Angeles. Tira and Kyle are developing their

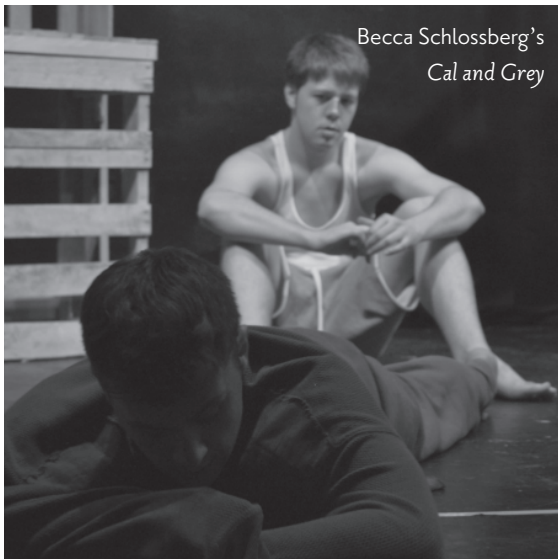
collective and hoping to use crowdfunding to take some of their playwrights’ work to the Hollywood Fringe. But as they noted, at this point

people may be running out of altruism.

Vinnie echoed this concern, saying, “You can only go to that well of friends, fans, and family so many times... at a certain point you have to grow up and play with the big boys (real investors).”

On this topic, Becca, who is a recent MFA grad from The New School for Drama, was just grateful to the Indiegogo campaign for “getting [her] work seen in some capacity.” While emerging playwrights usually do not have the same resources as well-established ones, Becca felt that the campaign “made [her] visible to a lot of people that [she] wouldn’t have been before.” In this way, crowdfunding provides a more even playing field for getting work up on its feet. “It’s a really cool beginning. That’s certain,” Becca said.

And, as Guild member Jennifer Maisel noted, the crowdfunding process is not always about ground-up fundraising to get a show produced. Jennifer and her playwrights collective, Dog Ear, collaborated with other collectives and fundraised through a site called CrowdRise to put together a panel at the 2011 TCG National Conference in Los Angeles. She also pointed out that some



Becca Schlossberg's
Cal and Grey




Yvette Heyliger's
*White House Wives:
Operation Lysistrata!*

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theatre groups, like Epic Theatre Ensemble, use crowdfunding in order to offer cheaper tickets, making theatre more accessible and inclusive. The collaborative fostering of the theatre community is “a bit magical, in a way,” Jennifer said.

Yvette Heyliger raised more than \$4,000 on Kickstarter for her production *White House Wives: Operation Lysistrata!*, a story about the wives of the Bush administration getting together to prevent the Iraq War with a sex strike. “I think crowdfunding sites are very empowering to self-producing artists, giving them a vehicle and structure with which to focus and maximize their efforts,” Yvette said. “To me, the crowdfunding phenomenon feels very much like ‘the American way,’ in that anybody can get a shot at making their dream project come true.”

In her campaign video, Yvette (appropriately decked out in stars and stripes) quoted John F. Kennedy: “If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him.” Though crowdfunding has its limits, it is a means of setting artists free. If you are able to navigate the waters of the perfect pitch and people respond with their hearts

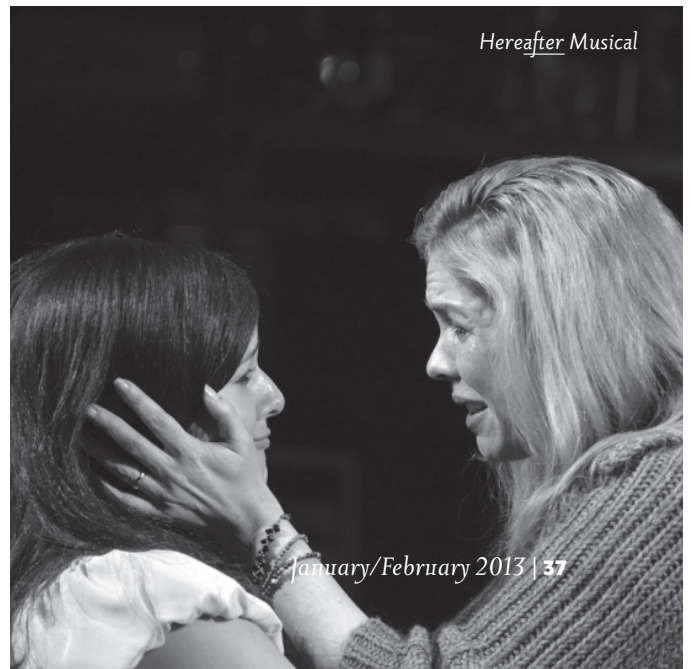
and their wallets, you are given a mandate to create. Donors are given the chance to see something come to life from your vision and their support. And the (inter)web of theatre makers and watchers grows stronger. 



Vinnie Favale and
Frankie Keane's
Hereafter Musical



Hereafter Musical



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