

*Lighting The Way: Reimagining the Obsidian Theater Festival's Future Through Collaboration  
and Funding*

Erin Courtemanche, Ashley Daigle, Rohan Rao, Deyalyn Sosa & Julianne Tejada

HNR 344

Professor Worthington III

April 29, 2025

## A. Executive Summary

The purpose of our project is to boost recognition, collaboration and funding opportunities for the Obsidian Theater Festival (OTF), a Detroit-based, non-profit organization that provides a platform for Black artists to conceive and tell authentically Black stories using live theater as a medium. Throughout the course of our research, we aim to gather a thorough understanding of the history of Black theater in Detroit, as well as produce a thorough analysis of OTF's current operations, history and mission. We will do this by conducting a SWOT analysis and identifying key stakeholders relevant to potential collaborations and funding opportunities for the Obsidian Theater Festival.

Moving forward, we aim to develop a strategy focused on creating a stakeholder engagement plan that targets local restaurants, Black-owned businesses, and the wider Detroit community by making OTF a more community-oriented entity. Additionally, we will identify leadership and collaborative opportunities that will lead to increased funding and business avenues for OTF in the larger theater market both in and outside of Detroit. Some of these initiatives will include potential collaborations with other artistic organizations – both theaters focused, and non-theater focused – both to alleviate financial burdens and to curate long-term, sustainable partnerships with organizations that share similar values as OTF. To achieve this, we will design a detailed implementation plan for our proposed strategies and initiatives that include timelines, budgets, and resource allocation that are reasonable for OTF to accomplish. Lastly, we plan to develop metrics to measure the success of our recommendations for the Obsidian Theater Festival.

## B. Introduction and Structure

It is no secret that theater is one of the most volatile and thankless industries one can be involved in. Producing shows is incredibly expensive, and the theater industry in general is currently facing a massive downturn in patronage. This is only made more difficult for non-profit theaters, who don't even have ticket sales to cushion their day-to-day costs. The Obsidian Theater Festival is a non-profit theater organization currently facing these funding challenges along with the added difficulty of federal cuts to grants that would normally go towards the arts and DEI initiatives. Additionally, OTF is currently looking to increase their relationships with other businesses in the immediate Detroit area as well as other theaters both in the Detroit area and beyond. This paper outlines three strategies for how these goals may be achieved. The first strategy focuses on the funding challenges being faced by OTF. It focuses on using email campaigns and newsletters as a way to break into previously untapped donor markets in the wealthier Detroit suburbs. The second strategy focuses on increasing collaboration with local businesses through a weekend long event called "Main Street Meets the Main Stage". The third strategy focuses on collaboration with other theaters that are in alignment with OTF's mission using co-productions. All these strategies include a detailed implementation timeline, as well as an outlined allocation of resources and the expected cost of implementing each strategy.

### **C. History of Detroit and Black Theater**

When you think about "Detroit", what comes to mind? Regardless of what may be said about this city, it unfortunately does have a negative reputation tied to its name. In a recent study done by WalletHub, Detroit was compared to 182 cities across 41 key safety metrics and was ranked the "second least safe city in the U.S." (McMurtrie, 2024). A lot of this reputation is rooted in years' worth of fearmongering that was exacerbated with headlines of murders, shootings, carjackings, abandoned buildings, bankruptcies, and more. And though "Detroit's homicides dropped below pre-covid levels", the city still carries around this reputation

(Gallagher, 2024). Even so, Detroit has a truly rich history that these preconceived notions couldn't even begin to comprehend. For example, this city underwent bankruptcy in 2013 due to declines in the once glimmering automobile industry and a population exodus that saw large decreases in population. This negatively impacted tax revenues and an increase in costs for public services. However, through numerous revitalization efforts and programs throughout the city, Detroit is seeing a large boom within their tech sector, as well as recent population boosts (Starr, 2025).

The art scene in Detroit is also another facet to Detroit that is constantly overlooked. They pride themselves on the murals and art that decorate their entire city, as well as the countless musicians that have come from the city such as Aretha Franklin, Eminem, Stevie Wonder, and Lizzo, just to name a few. Additionally, Detroit ended up serving as the cultural hub for black theater. Up until this point, the black community had very limited access to mainstream theaters. It wasn't until the 1960s where Concept East Theater was created by black artists who were seeking more autonomy in this art form and away from the more traditional white institutions. Motivated by the social and political unrest of the day, visionaries like Woodie King Jr. and Cliff Frazier sought to establish Concept East and the same way that people associated New Orleans with jazz, is the same way Detroit was associated with black theater in terms of pushing it into the limelight ("The Rise, Decline", 2011). And while Concept East is long gone, the impact in which that theater has impacted the black theater industry and Detroit is undeniable. The focus of this report is on the Obsidian Theater Festival (OTF), whose main function is to uplift black voices, so again we see those glimpses of how art and the rich history of Detroit's rising from their hardship reflected once more. OTF is a nonprofit theater, and the main difference between nonprofit theater and for-profit theater is that nonprofit theaters are a lot more mission driven and centered around community engagement and primarily rely on funding

and donations in terms of finances. That brings us to today: nonprofit theater is experiencing financial hardships because of lack of financial support for the arts overall.

#### **D. History of the Obsidian Theater Festival**

The Obsidian Theatre Festival (OTF) is a Detroit-based non-profit theatre organization that is centered around providing a strong platform for Black artists and stories to take the stage in a new light. While the festival held its inaugural season in 2021, the idea for OTF was conceived in June 2020—a time of widespread social unrest that emphasized the crucial need for Black artists to have a platform to express their voices and stories. Since its founding in 2021, OTF has remained persistent in its mission to uplift Black artists and foster more opportunities for their stories to be told in theatre. (Obsidian Theatre Festival, n.d.).

The festival debuted in 2021, showcasing a weekend lineup of original plays, panel discussions, cabaret performances, and more. These performances are simultaneously filmed so that later they could be made available as on-demand streaming content allowing people who could not attend the festival in person to still have access to OTF content. In 2024 OTF added the Detroit Impact Arts Conference to their schedule, a three-day conference that has programming ranging from workshops to panels and screenings related to previous festivals. This conference described by Garlia Jones Associate Artistic Director of OTF “gives students the start of some training of some technique if they have not been exposed to it before” (Graham & Austin, 2024, 35:20). It allows students that have an interest in the arts to have a place to learn and make connections in the industry.

A core value of the OTF is accessibility, ensuring that everyone can experience their powerful storytelling, regardless of financial barriers. By offering both its in-person festival events and online streaming at no cost, the festival is committed to making its content widely

available to all audiences. This dedication to free access fosters inclusiveness, broadens artistic reach, and allows diverse communities to engage with thought-provoking and inspiring performances. Additionally, OTF promotes inclusivity with its blind submission process, allowing each piece to be evaluated on talent instead of potential biases. Another value of the organization is the community and having the ability to give back to it. An example of how OTF has done that over the years is the dedication to the youth, in their second season the OTF launched the Youth Playwrighting Competition where teachers in participating schools were able to submit plays written by students with prizes going out to the winner and semi-finalists. Through this program it fosters more engagement and encouragement for the younger generation with this heightened. This program has since been reconfigured to be from a youth playwrighting competition to a young artists workshop which allows for more hand on learning for students.

OTF is growing steadily to be an impactful space for Black artists of in American theater world. With values such as accessibility, authentic storytelling, and community OTF displays a remarkable model of an inclusive community-focused theatre.

## E. SWOT Analysis

OTF rapidly became a cornerstone of Detroit's art scene. Now in its fifth year, OTF is a key platform for Black playwrights, composers, and performers. We sought to use a SWOT analysis to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of OTF.

To begin, OTF's key strength is its mission and measurable social impact. The festival has produced over 100 pieces of content since its start in 2021. This includes plays, musicals, cabarets, interviews, and educational panels, all reflecting the depth of Black experiences (Rubinowitz, 2024). Moreover, the festival already makes a significant community impact. The festival receives over 125 submissions annually from Black playwrights and composers. Its

hybrid viewership model (in-person and streaming) increases the reach of Black voices. Its streaming platform already accumulated over 220,000 views spanning across 48 states and 28 countries (Wild, 2024). The Detroit-based organization's impact spans far beyond the metropolitan area.

Despite its successes, OTF faces challenges common to emerging arts organizations. The organization relies heavily on a small core team with limited capacity. This often leads to a tradeoff between programming, production, and outreach. As such, the festival's funding model is still developing. Although OTF received support from institutions like the Mellon Foundation and the Community Foundation of Michigan, it lacks a robust recurring donor base (Wild, 2024). Moreover, while OTF's brand recognition is strong locally, it is still growing in the larger Detroit area and nationally. OTF competes with more established festivals for attention and resources. Lastly, the festival is limited in its use of technology for donor segmentation and audience analytics. This could hinder more targeted fundraising and market efforts.

OTF benefits from large opportunities to expand its impact. The festival streaming platform enables geographic expansion. OTF can tap into markets outside Detroit and even reach national and international audiences (Rubinowitz, 2024). Also, strategic partnerships with other theaters, educational institutions, and businesses could augment new funding streams. In addition, corporate sponsorships and increased community partnerships could provide new ways for financial growth. This is especially true as corporate giving to the arts rebounds post-pandemic (Wild, 2024). Lastly, OTF could expand educational initiatives to foster the next generation of Black artists, solidifying OTF's role as a leader in Black theatre.

OTF operates in a volatile non-profit arts sector, which lost an estimated \$17.97 billion in revenue nationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even now, the pandemic recovery remains

uneven, especially for smaller organizations (Wild, 2024). Also, the festival's reliance on annual events for visibility creates vulnerability to seasonality. Furthermore, the growth of virtual events leads to increased competition for donor attention, raising the risk of donor fatigue. Political and social trends, like the rise of anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) sentiment, could impact funding and partnerships. Finally, as OTF grows, it could face scalability challenges that may arise if operational capacity and funding do not keep pace with expanding programming.

Overall, OTF's strengths are its clear mission, community engagement, and innovative hybrid model. Yet, its continued success will depend on addressing internal capacity, diversifying funding, and leveraging new opportunities. OTF must do this while navigating the broader challenges facing the nonprofit art sector.

## F. Key Stakeholders

For the purposes of this assignment, we are aiming to focus on stakeholders that will aid with our three main goals of collaboration, funding and recognition for the Obsidian Theater Festival. The first key stakeholder group that we will be exploring is the donor base for OTF, more specifically the more affluent population that live in the Suburbs surrounding Detroit. Through our strategies, we are hoping to engage with a new market, while also creating mutually beneficial relationships with potential donors.

The next stakeholder group that is being focused on is potential collaborating theaters, specifically theaters outside the Detroit area. Using our outlined strategies, we hope to foster collaboration, reach new customer markets, spread OTF's mission outside of Detroit, and cut production costs.

The third group of stakeholders that we are aiming to increase engagement with are local businesses within Detroit. More specifically, we want to ensure that OTF collaborates with local

businesses that understand their mission and vision statement, increasing non-traditional collaborations to increase their recognition and potentially increase funding.

#### **G. Strategy #1: Increase funding with higher income demographics outside of Detroit**

The Obsidian Theater Festival is currently looking to expand its donor base and increase its rate of repeat donors. To do this, we recommend outreaching into previously untapped donor markets for OTF located in the Detroit suburbs. When looking for candidate suburbs, important factors to look at are the median income of each town to ensure they have spare money to donate as well as the values and psychographics of each area to see if the people living there are likely to donate to OTF. We have identified three suburbs that are good fits for this initiative.

Farmington Hills has a median income of \$90,598 (Bureau, U. C.) and its residents tend to value authenticity and quality when making purchases and investments, both of which are traits offered by OTF (MRI Simmons). Farmington Hills also offers a variety of activities, some geared towards children and families, but also a lot of them oriented towards adults and the elderly (*Winter/Spring 2025 activities guide*). This is different from many towns that only have family-based programming, reflecting their older demographics. West Bloomfield has a median income of \$144,406 with 70.4% of households in this suburb being families (Bureau, U. C.). Due to the high number of families in the area, they adhere to many family values and programming, something that OTF is currently looking to offer more of after the success of their family-friendly show *Golden Loc*. This is a very wealthy neighborhood where people have a strong focus on philanthropic pursuits and leisure, both of which are categories fulfilled by OTF. Lastly, Troy has a median income of \$119,299 (Troy City, Michigan - Census Bureau Profile) and these residents tend to enjoy the status associated with their purchases. Because of this, factors such as status and exclusivity can impact purchases made by Troy residents (MRI Simmons). Additionally, spending behaviors are encapsulated in Troy Michigan's official website where

many of the activities listed are centered around shopping centers and marketplaces (About Troy). Demographics Now reveals that these suburbs cover three demographic categories; Booming with Confidence, American Royalty, and Philanthropic Sophisticates (Gale Business: DemographicsNow). While these demographic profiles reinforce our earlier assertions regarding these suburb's values and spending behaviors, they also reveal that these suburbs all utilize email as their main form of communication. As such, we recommend that OTF leverage email as their principal way of reaching these donor bases. Emails have a very low cost while simultaneously reaching a lot of people, meaning email campaigns have a very high ROI. Additionally, 44% of frequent email users, which all of these suburbs would be classified as, check their email at least once a day, putting a lot of eyes of OTF content (Love, J). Additionally, allowing donors to choose where their donation goes through these emails makes them more engaged in the donation process. It also gives them assurance that their donation is going to a place that they believe will have the most impact on OTF, making them more likely to donate. Utilizing a newsletter is one way to keep donors engaged and to get them to continue donating without feeling used ("10 Low-Cost Donor Engagement Strategies..."). Email is especially good for spreading brand awareness since it is consistent in both viewership and provided information. This is especially important for a company like OTF that is mission-based since email provides a platform for them to educate potential donors on their mission.

### ***Implementation Plan***

Just to reiterate, the purpose of these monthly newsletters is to better engage with OTF's donor base in an attempt to receive large and more consistent donations. Donors do not just give because an organization has needs; they give because an organization meets the needs of a community that aligns with their values. These monthly newsletters are an attempt to reinforce a shared value, in hopes these donors feel a sense of conviction as it relates to giving to OTF.

The newsletters would begin in September, which is when the OTF Season seems to begin. This implementation would take place first by sending a mass email to OTF's existing mailing list, as well as those in the Encore mailing list. The small company "Encore" was acquired by John Sloan III earlier this year, and that acquisition came with their own separate mailing list. As an initial advertisement of the inception of this newsletter, an email would be sent out to both mailing lists with an option to subscribe to the OTF Newsletter. Additionally, anyone who has donated to OTF in the past should also receive notification about this new newsletter, in an attempt to better engage that donor base.

From then on, a newsletter should be sent out every month until the festival in June; this should only be sent out to those that have subscribed to that newsletter. Every 2 months, the newsletter should be plugged into that massive mailing list with OTF and Encore audiences to keep growing this engagement. In addition to those newsletter promotions, donor impact reports should also go out every 2 months to those that have sent in donations. These impact reports will detail just how the donor's money is actively being used within the organization, ultimately promoting agencies within donors to feel like their donations are genuinely impacting the organization positively. Please refer to **Appendix A1** for mock newsletter designs and **Appendix A2** for 10 months' worth of newsletter content.

### ***Resource Allocation***

In terms of splitting up time and resources for this new strategy, a small "Newsletter Team" would need to be formed, which would be comprised of three people. The first would be some type of "Newsletter Head", who would ideally be someone within the OTF board who is knowledge about the organization and its current operations. This person would draft all of the core content that would go into the newsletter in terms of where OTF is in terms of their different

projects and what could make it into the newsletter for the month. Two options for this role could be Breon Canady, who is the OTF Company Manager or Garlia Jones, who is the Associate Artistic Director. They should expect to dedicate about 3-4 hours a month collecting information to include in the newsletter. The second addition to the Newsletter Team would be a “Marketing/Communications Intern” who would oversee the creation and editing of the newsletter. This intern would also be in charge of scheduling the release of these newsletters every month. They should expect to put 4-5 hours a month into these tasks. And the final person in this team would be some sort of “Financial Liaison” whose primary function is to report and manage how the donation money gets used, and then compiling the impact reports that end up going to the donation follow up messages. This position would probably require 2-3 hours a month as it relates to their primary function on the team. With all proper software and labor accounted for, this strategy would cost OTF about \$4,000 a year to implement. Please refer to **Appendix A3** for a detailed breakdown of the final budgeting of this strategy.

### ***Key Metrics***

We aim to measure our three key goals: increasing donor retention, growing our base of recurring monthly donors, and improving overall donor communication and brand loyalty. To measure our progress, we recommend tracking several key metrics. The open rate will show us if our subject lines and timing are effective, aiming for 30 to 40 percent. Click-Through Rates (CTR) will show whether people are engaging with our content. We target a 5 to 10 percent range. Conversion Rates measure the number of people who donate after clicking. We hope for around a 1 to 3 percent range. All these metrics should give insight into the Revenue Per Email, which helps us understand the ROI of each campaign. These numbers will help guide both our creative and strategic direction moving forward, ensuring that every email we send builds deeper

relationships and drives sustainable funding. Please refer to **Appendix A4** for a more detailed breakdown of our key performance indicators.

#### **H. Strategy #2: Explore co-production opportunities with other theaters**

Our second strategy aims to reduce production costs, expand resources, and create long-lasting relationships with theaters that are outside of the geographic area of Detroit. Our recommendation is that OTF explores co-production opportunities with these theaters. Simply defined, a co-production is “a partnership between two or more theatres, where each theatre splits the cost of the physical “stuff” that makes up the play (props, costumes, sets, etc.) and contributes to the creative aspects of the show. The play then goes on...to all of the theatres involved and each organization pockets their own revenue” (Forlenza, 2025). Exploring co-production opportunities for OTF would provide budget relief but also creating long-lasting business relationships with other theaters across the United States. Throughout this strategy, it is important to first recognize the benefits and risks of co-productions:

There are numerous benefits that arise from co-productions among theaters. First, and most obviously, is the ability to cut production costs by nearly 50%. But there are numerous other benefits as well. An article from American Theatre talks about benefits such expanding audiences, “allowing companies to take on artistic challenges that might otherwise be beyond them” (American Theater). Additionally, the article discusses how co-productions allow for theaters to “engage talent in other communities”, booming the job market for actors in different geographic areas. In turn, theaters have access to a larger artist pool, and access to several theaters’ resources. Lastly, co-productions with other theaters hold potential to create long-lasting relationships with theaters that exist in a different geographic market.

Though co-productions have many different benefits, it is also important to recognize the risks and challenges associated with co-productions between theaters. One of the main challenges that occurs is with the creative side of putting on a production. As the Denver Center for the Performing Arts discusses, “[t]here’s the risk that, with so many creative voices vying for input on a play, one might water down its artistic quality. It’s a classic case of ‘too many cooks in the kitchen’” (Forlenza, 2025). Co-productions require an enormous amount of trust and collaboration, as all theaters involved should have a say in the different aspects of the show, such as casting, hiring a director, sets, props, etc. This can come with interpersonal challenges that can be extremely difficult to navigate. Additionally, it can be challenging logistically, as the venues are different sizes, and so problem-solving is required to find solutions that work for multiple venues. The marketing risks that are associated with putting on a production are also still present for both participating theaters, and by performing a co-production you are asking another theater to take on risks that they may not otherwise be pursuing if they were only putting on their own season. Lastly, and most importantly for OTF, is finding the *right fit* for collaborating theaters. Because OTF has a very clear mission and vision statement, dedicated to uplifting black stories and storytellers, it is crucial to find a theater that respects and uplifts these values while working closely with OTF.

The Alliance theater is in Atlanta, Georgia. This theater holds potential for OTF to collaborate with because it is in a completely different geographic location, however, Atlanta has a population that consists of 46.9% black people, meaning its demographics are like Detroit’s (US CENSUS atlanta). The Alliance Theater’s mission and vision align with OTF, as they state, “The stories we tell, the artists who tell them, and the programs we deliver are deeply rooted in, reflective of, and responsive to our community” (Alliance, n.d.). The alliance theater’s artistic director from 1990-2001 – Kenny Leon – was “one of the first African American artistic

directors in United States theater. Under his leadership, the alliance would begin to produce more work by artists of color, telling stories that truly reflected the diversity of the city around it” (news.exrress). Additionally, the Alliance Theatre is a well-established theater, having produced several shows that have made it to the Broadway Stage, including *The Color Purple*, *Sister Act: The Musical* and more. This indicates that the Alliance Theater has more resources than OTF. All the above factors indicate that the Alliance Theater could have potential for a future co-production with OTF.

Additional theaters that OTF could collaborate are the Penumbra Theatre, located in St. Paul, MN and the Public Theater in New York City, NY. Penumbra Theatre’s mission is to “nurture black artists, promote racial equity, and inspire creative resiliency” (Penumbra Theatre, n.d). Additionally, The Public Theater located in New York City is another potential collaboration opportunity for OTF. According to their mission statement, “The Public has long operated on the principles that theater is an essential cultural force, and that art and culture belongs to everyone” (About The Public, n.d). The Public is also well-known and has produced many shows that have since been successful on Broadway, such as *Hamilton*, *Hell's Kitchen*, *Suffs*, and more. Due to the broader access to resources, the aligning missions, and the success of these theaters, we believe that they could be potential collaborators for OTF in their co-production endeavors.

### ***Implementation Plan***

To gain access to these co-production ventures OTF will have to begin first with reaching out to other theaters to build relationships with them before going into production together.

This specific outreach implementation plan follows a timeline of 3 months starting around September as well when OTF begins planning for the upcoming season. The first two

weeks will consist of putting together an outreach team made up of individuals who have a deep understanding of OTF's mission, values, etc. to be able to relay that to others. When the team is set up then messaging points should be created to prep for outreach that includes an elevator pitch of OTF, "why" behind the outreach as well as OTF's position and vision for partnerships. Also, within the first two weeks should be spent researching potential theaters that OTF would like to collaborate with and a target list of about 10-15 theaters should be created that includes contact information and the reasoning behind selecting the certain theater.

From there Weeks 3-4 will include the first outreach where members of the team will reach out to their assigned theater introducing themselves as part of the OTF team, explaining who they are and how they are open to collaboration. At the end of the call a question would be raised if the theater is willing to have another meeting to exchange ideas to see if theaters can align. If there's any interest a secondary meeting would be scheduled that will take place during Weeks 5-6. The secondary meeting in those weeks will be known as the discovery conversation period that is focused on relationship building with the other theater. The meeting would also include learning more about the theaters including their priorities, challenges, also sharing a couple of prospective ideas for collaborating, but nothing set in stone the main priority of the meeting is to get acquainted with the theater. After the discovery conversation Weeks 7-8 consist of following up with the theater sending personalized messages after each meeting and discussing further. Concurrently the outreach team should debrief the executives of OTF on the status of relationships with the theaters and notify if there are promising leads within the list of theaters. It is important to note that during this whole process there should be tracking in a spreadsheet of the position of each theater regarding relationship, summary of meeting, etc. By the end of the three months Weeks 9-12 should be spent brainstorming ideas for prospective

productions, projects for the theaters that show potential. This can be done at this stage with executives of OTF to support the next steps and help bring these ideas to fruition.

### ***Resource Allocation***

This implementation would require an outreach team of at least two individuals who, as mentioned before, should have deep-rooted knowledge of OTF to be able to speak on behalf of the theater. The outreach team's main job will be doing the main outreach in building relationships with the theaters, spending around 3-4 hours a week dedicated to the 3 months' timeline. Additional to the outreach team there would be a communications intern whose role would be focused on creating the initial talking points for the outreach team and assist in researching target theaters. The intern would also keep track of the responses of the theaters during the outreach in a spreadsheet, updating periodically during the process. The expected hours would be 2-3 hours a week for the 3-month period.

Regarding the budget for this implementation plan, on top of accounting for the labor, one thing that would be utilized is handwritten thank you cards. Thank-you cards when used on customers have established an emotional connection as the action gathers warmth within the customers (Kühn, 2024, p.12). This can similarly be used on potential collaborating theaters as it displays authenticity and can be used to build relationships as it shows the relationship is not solely transactional. The budget for this would be around \$50 to put this into the plan. In total, including the thank you cards as well as labor, this strategy would cost around \$2,000 to implement. Please refer to **Appendix B1** for a detailed breakdown of the final budgeting of this strategy that includes the labor.

### ***Key Metrics***

Our main goals with co-productions are to reduce production costs, expand our audience reach, and enhance our artistic collaboration. We identified several key metrics to track our impact. Cost Saving per Show is a major focus. We hope the co-production reduces costs by 40 to 60 percent compared to an independently produced show. Press Mentions are another important tracker of visibility. Successful co-production should increase media coverage by at least 50 percent. Lastly, we aim to increase the number of creatives we engage with by 10 to 15 percent. Together, these metrics ensure that our co-production is not just about cost savings but also aligns with our long-term mission. Please refer to **Appendix B2** for a more detailed breakdown of our key performance indicators.

### I. **Strategy #3: Increase collaboration with Detroit local businesses**

Our third strategy aims to build upon one that OTF is already pursuing as a part of their current operations: Increasing partnership with local businesses. It is no secret that the theater industry is struggling, with high ticket prices (higher than most sporting events) and decreasing attendance, it is crucial to find alternative business models. One of those ways is to partner with local businesses. Partnerships with businesses are crucial, because attendance at live performances and sporting events generates increased economic activity. According to the Harvard Business Review, “[e]conomic impact studies have shown that for every dollar spent on a performing arts ticket, another \$5 to \$10 is spent on related businesses such as restaurants, parking facilities, and even dry cleaners” (Scheff & Kotler, 1996). As both local businesses and the performing arts themselves are garnering revenue and attention from these events, partnerships make logical sense, as it is a mutually beneficial relationship. This does not mean that OTF must put all their effort billion-dollar businesses, in fact “three-quarters of spending for the arts is by small to midsize companies with annual revenue of less than \$50 million, and 93%

of the money goes to local arts organizations" (Scheff & Kotler, 1996). Therefore, collaboration with *local* businesses would be most effective for an organization such as OTF.

It is important to stress that monetary contributions are not the only example of a business partnership. Companies can donate other resources, such as time, people, or services. For example, the same Harvard Business Review article discusses the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's partnership with a software company: EDS. It states, "EDS was seeking to develop its community involvement as a strategic marketing tool. The orchestra, expert in making and marketing music, was struggling to upgrade its information systems without much success. In the strategic collaboration, EDS agreed to serve as the orchestra's information technology department" (Scheff & Kotler, 1996). This is an excellent example of a partnership that is mutually beneficial but has little additional cost to both the business and the nonprofit. These are the types of partnerships we encourage OTF to pursue.

A partnership among a nonprofits arts organization and a for-profit business can also benefit the for-profit in more ways than one. The human capital in nonprofit organizations, specifically arts organizations, can offer unique and creative perspectives and solutions to problems that businesses face. An article titled "The Benefits of Collaboration Between For-Profit Businesses and Nonprofit Arts- or Culture-Oriented Organizations" points out, "today, we see much of the global economy is evolving from an information age in which well-educated workers manipulate information into a conceptual age where creativity, empathy, and originality are more desirable employee attributes" (Weinstein & Cook, 2011). These are values that are usually at the forefront of nonprofit organizations, and the creative nature of a theater company specifically holds potential in aiding for profit organizations with company workshops, improving human resources, and more.

The challenge also arises for OTF to find business collaboration opportunities that coincide with their mission and vision. However, since Detroit has a predominantly black population, most of the businesses owned in the Detroit area are black-owned businesses. These businesses would be the target demographic of potential collaborators for OTF.

### ***Implementation Plan***

One way OTF can implement the previous strategy is through a weekend-long event titled “Main Street Meets the Main Stage”. During this event, OTF will partner with local, predominantly black-owned businesses in Downtown Detroit. The participating businesses will keep a QR code linked to a Google Form inside their stores. Visiting players that enter the business can scan this QR code, gaining access to a Google Form that allows them to input their preregistered team name, which provides them with one point. Additionally, the Google Form will display a pop-up graphic, text bloc, or photo displaying some main aspect of OTF such as their mission, spotlights for artists involved in their creative process, images and promotional materials for past shows, or statistics regarding their past seasons, as well as a link to donate to the festival. This will allow OTF to host this event while still spreading awareness of their organization. If players choose to purchase something from a local business, an employee will give them access to a second QR code that has the same functionality as the first, providing the team with an additional point. The participating businesses may also choose to offer discounts to their patrons during this event period in order to incentivize participation in the event and increase the number of visitors. This type of event benefits everyone involved. The team with the most points will win an OTF merch basket, a behind-the-scenes look of the festival, and an assortment of gift cards donated by willing local businesses. Regular participants who do not win have the chance to participate in a fun activity and take advantage of the various discounts offered by businesses during this period. Local businesses get an increase in foot traffic during

the event and an increase in sales and recognition in the long run, incentivizing them to participate. More importantly, OTF benefits from the opportunity to establish partnerships with local businesses that may provide mutual benefits in the future. They also gain exposure to potential audiences and donor bases. It is important to note that the donor bases discussed earlier all have very family-oriented values. Since this would be a family-friendly event, one of the hopes is that it would attract wealthier residents from these suburbs who may end up donating larger sums to OTF.

This event is expected to take about seven to eight weeks to put together. Seven to eight weeks out, OTF will focus on outreach by contacting potential businesses for the event. They will explain the event during this time and gauge interest. As businesses agree to participate, OTF will start to keep a log of these businesses as well as any discounts they are planning on offering during the event as well as any gift cards they are willing to offer as a prize for the winner. Five weeks out from the event, OTF will open up team registration and select the dates for the event. Four weeks out from the event, they will start to design the necessary QR codes for all participating businesses, creating Google Forms to go along with these QR codes, and setting up data collection methods for the campaign. Three weeks from the event, the focus will be marketing. OTF will send marketing materials to participating businesses for them to post in their storefronts and on their socials. OTF will also start to post on their own socials and post physical ads downtown. Lastly, during the actual event itself, OTF will post the QR codes in the businesses, track activity on Google Forms in real time, and determine the winning team.

### ***Resource Allocation and Budget***

This event will require two outreach heads that ideally have lots of connections and a large network in the Detroit area, specifically with local businesses. One of these heads should

be someone who understands the logistics of such partnerships and the mutual costs and payoffs of such partnerships. Both heads are expected to work an additional 6-7 hours of work in the 7 weeks leading up to the event. A marketing lead will also be necessary to create marketing materials to be given to participating businesses to post physically and on their socials, as well as materials for OTF to post on their own socials. This person is anticipated to work an additional 3-4 hours in the 4 weeks leading up to the event. Lastly, we will need an event head who understands the logistics to set up the QR codes and Google forms, coordinate team registration, and track the points and winners on the actual day of the event.

QR code designers can be found for free online, especially if they are only needed for a few days. Google Forms is also a free platform and is very easy to use. The OTF merch basket being offered as a prize for the winning team is expected to cost OTF about \$150, and the additional hours worked by OTF employees are expected to increase overall salaries and wages by \$1500. It's worth noting that because participating local businesses are also benefiting from this event at a low to non-existent cost for themselves, they may be willing to provide some form of financial backing for OTF to run this campaign. On the higher end, however, we expect this event to cost around \$1650 for OTF.

### ***Key metrics***

This final solution aims to strengthen our roots right here in Detroit. Our primary goal is to increase community engagement, bolster local economic ties, and attract new donors or attendees through cross-promotion with Detroit business. We will track this solution across several measurable outcomes. First, we will track the number of participating businesses. We target at least 15 to 30 partners, including restaurants, shops, and service providers. QR Code Scans will be another valuable tool, directing users to our site or donation page. We aim for 200

to 500 scans per cycle to gauge interest. From there, we will measure the conversion rate. This shows the percentage of people who scanned the QR code and visited our donation page. Our goal is around 30 to 40 percent. Finally, we will track social media mentions and tags. We hope to garner at least 50 posts that tag both OTF and our partner businesses. Together, these metrics will prove our ability to engage the community, not just culturally but economically. Such an impact expands our reach and likely increases our donor base in a tangible, trackable way. Please refer to **Appendix C** for a more detailed breakdown of our key performance indicators.

## I. Conclusion

OTF's leader John Sloan III gave us a tour of Detroit during our visit. We learnt about the legacy of black theatre in Detroit. From the pioneering days of Concept East Theatre to the impactful contributions of Plowshares Theatre Company and Detroit Repertory Theatre, Detroit has long been a crucible for Black artistic expression. This makes the OTF's impact even more valuable. OTF stands on the shoulders of these giants, channeling their spirit to invigorate the present and inspire the future. Through strategic partnerships, community engagement, and innovative programming, OTF preserves the narratives that have defined Detroit's cultural landscape. Moreover, it amplifies new voices that reflect the city's resilience and diversity. In doing so, OTF ensures that Detroit's rich tradition of artistic innovation continues to thrive.

## Appendix A

**Appendix A1:** Mockups of OTF Newsletter. Designed by Julianne Tejada

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>The Spotlight</b><br><small>ISSUE 1:<br/>September 2025</small>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <h1>Lights Up On<br/><b>OUR NEW ISSUE!</b></h1>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <p><b>WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS SEASON'S NEWSLETTER</b></p> <p><b>BEHIND THE SCENES:</b> Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Sed consectetur urna volutpat molestie consequat. Ut in finibus lorem, in dapibus eu ex vel vehicula. Pellentesque blandit risus quis orci accumsan lobortis. Pellentesque blandit risus quis orci accumsan lobortis.</p> <p><b>IMPACT STORIES:</b> Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Sed consectetur urna volutpat molestie consequat. Ut in finibus lorem, in dapibus eu ex vel vehicula. Pellentesque blandit risus quis orci accumsan lobortis. Pellentesque blandit risus quis orci accumsan lobortis.</p> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <p><b>FEEL FREE TO CONTACT NEWSLETTER HEADS</b></p> <p>EMAILS: <a href="mailto:jsmith@falcon.bentley.edu">jsmith@falcon.bentley.edu</a><br/> <a href="mailto:cjames@falcon.bentley.edu">cjames@falcon.bentley.edu</a></p> <p>LINKEDIN: <a href="#">John's LinkedIn</a><br/> <a href="#">Cameron's LinkedIn</a></p> | <p><b>SAVE THE DATE: SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4<br/>THE OTF KICKOFF GALA</b></p> <p><small>"MORE DETAILS TO COME IN OFFICIAL INVITE"</small></p> <p><small>LOREM IPSUM DOLOR SIT AMET, CONSECTETUR ADIPISCING ELIT. SED CONSECTETUR URNA VOLUTPAT MOLESTIE CONSEQUAT. UT IN FINIBUS LOREM, IN DAPIBUS EU EX VEL VEHICULA. PELLentesQUE BLANDIT RISUS QUIS ORCI ACCUMSAN LOBORtIS. QUiSQUE AC RISUS SCelerisque, PuLvinar Massa In, ViVerra TELLUS. FUSe NON TOrTOr TRISTIQUE MAGNA RUTRUM CONGUE ET Ue NUNC. CRAS NEC VULPUTE PURUS.</small></p> |
| <b>COMING SOON</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>* LOREM IPSUM DOLAR *</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>COMING SOON</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <p><b>SEE YOU NEXT MONTH FOR OUR OCTOBER ISSUE!</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

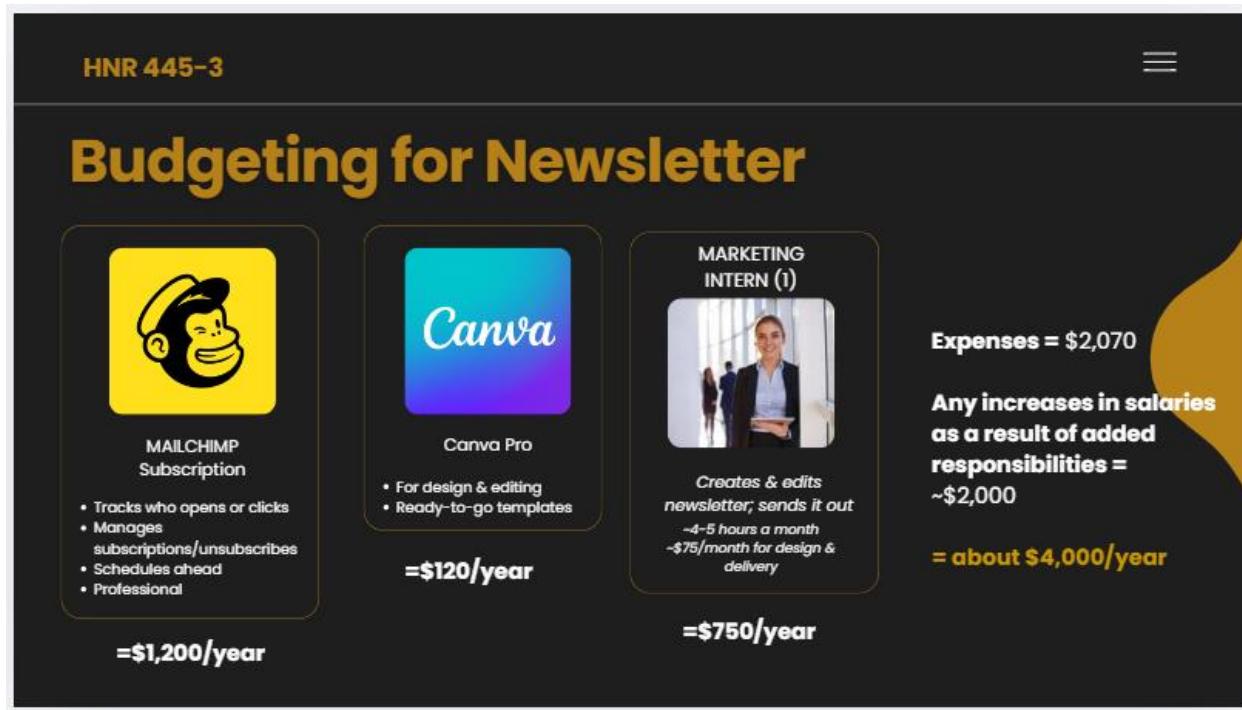
## Appendix A2: 10 Newsletters Worth of Content for OTF

*Ran this in ChatGPT with the prompt “Give me 10 topics for a newsletter for a black nonprofit theater with the following events throughout the year: company starts in September by the collection of submissions, then announcing the shows around January, casting calls around February-March, then rehearsing until the festival in the end of June”*

| Month            | Focus / Theme                                                                                          |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>September</b> | 📅 <i>Season Kickoff</i> – Announce submissions are open; share last year’s highlights                  |
| <b>October</b>   | 📝 <i>Behind the Scenes of Submissions</i> – How the selection process works; highlight a script or two |
| <b>November</b>  | 💬 <i>Meet the Readers</i> – Interviews with committee members reading submissions                      |
| <b>December</b>  | 🎄 <i>Season Preview Tease</i> – Holiday message, teaser that shows are being picked soon               |
| <b>January</b>   | 🎭 <i>Official Season Announcement!</i> – Spotlight on each selected show                               |

| Month    | Focus / Theme                                                                                      |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| February | 🎭 <i>Casting Call Begins</i> – Share the casting timeline + past actors' stories or quotes         |
| March    | 💡 <i>Rehearsals in Motion</i> – Sneak peeks into table reads, director thoughts                    |
| April    | 🛠 <i>Creative Process Spotlight</i> – Costumes, set design, tech team, etc.                        |
| May      | 📝 <i>Festival Coming Soon!</i> – Ticket sales, volunteer calls, community events                   |
| June     | 🎉 <i>Festival Month</i> – Hype it up, behind-the-scenes sneak peeks, and a post-festival thank you |

#### Appendix A3: Budget Summary for “Email Engagement” Strategy



#### Appendix A4: Key Metrics for “Email Engagement” Strategy

| Metric                   | Description                                          | Target                                       |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Open Rate                | % of recipients who open emails                      | 30-40% is strong                             |
| Click Through Rate (CTR) | % who click a link in the email                      | 5-10% is good                                |
| Conversion Rate          | % who make a donation after clicking                 | 1-3% for regular emails                      |
| Unsubscribe Rate         | % of people who opt out of emails                    | Under 0.5% is healthy                        |
| New Subscriber Growth    | Growth of the email list via website, social, events | 5-10% growth per campaign cycle              |
| Recurring Donor-Rate     | % of donors who set up monthly giving                | Aim to increase this rate by 15-20% annually |
| Donor Retention Rate     | % of previous donors who give again                  | Aim to increase this rate by 15-20% annually |
| Revenue Per Email        | Amount of donations generated per email sent         | Useful for ROI tracking                      |

## Appendix B

### Appendix B1: Budget Summary for “Co-production Outreach” Strategy

HNR 445-3 ≡

# Budgeting for Collaboration Outreach



**Thank You Cards/Gifts**

- Helps build strong partner relationships
- Displays appreciation

= \$50/year



**Marketing Intern**

- Tracking responses, update spreadsheets
- Help draft/customize talking points for calls
- ~2-3 hours a week

= \$504/year

**Expenses = \$554/year**

**Any increases in salaries as a result of added responsibilities = ~\$1,500**

**= about \$2,000**

## **Appendix B2:** Key Metrics for “Co-Production Outreach” Strategy

| Metric                | Description                                               | Target                                        |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Cost Savings per Show | % reduction in production costs vs. solo production       | 40-60% reduction in co-productions            |
| Audience Reach        | Combined attendance across locations                      | Aim for 2-3x reach                            |
| Partner Satisfaction  | Feedback from collaborating theaters (survey or check-in) | Aim for 80%+ satisfaction                     |
| Press Mentions        | Quantity and quality of media attention                   | Increase media mentions by 50%                |
| New Donor Acquisition | # of new donors from partner theater audiences            | Track where new donations come from by region |
| Repeat Collaborations | # of returning co-pro partners in future years            | 1-2 recurring partners indicates success      |
| Artist Pool Expansion | # of new creatives added via partner networks             | 10-15% increase in talent outreach            |

## **Appendix C**

## **Appendix C: Key Metrics for “Increase Local Business Collaboration” Strategy**

| Metric                             | Description                                                                | Target                                    |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Number of Participating Businesses | # of stores, restaurants, etc. involved                                    | 15-30 per campaign                        |
| Foot Traffic Increases             | Reports from businesses on customer activity during campaign               | Aim for 20-30% increase during event days |
| QR Code Scans                      | Total number of QR interactions tracked                                    | 200-500 scans per event cycle             |
| Conversion Rate from QR Code       | % of people who visited OTF’s site or donation page                        | 30-40% of scans                           |
| New Donors from Campaign           | # of first-time donors sourced from business campaigns                     | 10-20 per event                           |
| Event Attendance Uplift            | % increase in festival attendance from neighborhoods involved in campaigns | Aim for 10-15% boost                      |
| Social Media Mentions / Tags       | # of posts mentioning both OTF & partner businesses                        | Goal: 50+ mentions during campaign run    |

## **References**

"10 Low-Cost Donor Engagement Strategies From the Engage Conference." *NonProfit Pro (Online)*, 2014. ProQuest,

[http://ezp.bentley.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/10-low-cost-donor-engagement-strategies-engage/docview/2791984192/se-2.](http://ezp.bentley.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/10-low-cost-donor-engagement-strategies-engage/docview/2791984192/se-2)

About the public. (n.d.-a). <https://publictheater.org/about/About-The-Public/>

*About Troy*. Welcome to City of Troy, Michigan. (n.d.).

[https://troymi.gov/community/about\\_troy.php](https://troymi.gov/community/about_troy.php)

Bureau, U. C. (2025, February 10). *Farmington Hills City, Michigan - Census Bureau Profile*. Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?searchType=web&cssp=SERP&q=Farmington+Hills+city%2C+Michigan>

Bureau, U. C. (2025b, February 10). *West Bloomfield Township, Michigan - Census Bureau Profile*. Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?searchType=web&cssp=SERP&q=West+Bloomfield+Township+CDP%2C+Michigan>

Free design, photo, and video tool - design made easy | Adobe Express. (n.d.-b).  
<https://www.adobe.com/express/>

Gale business: DemographicsNow. (n.d.). <https://www.gale.com/intl/c/demographicsnow>

Gallagher. (2024). Detroit crime rates improve, but reputation hasn't recovered | Crain's Detroit Business. <https://www.crainsdetroit.com/crains-forum-public-safety/detroit-crime-rates-improve-reputation-hasnt-recovered>

Graham, T. & Austin, N. (Hosts). (2024, June 24). Impact Arts Conference, Obsidian Theatre Festival descend on Detroit this week [Audio podcast episode]. In *The Metro*. WDET.  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-metro/id1730997591?i=1000660101244>

Kühn, S.,W. (2024). The human touch: 'Thank you' notes and gifting as relationship-marketing tactics in the digital age. *Management Dynamics*, 33(1), 1-21.

<http://ezp.bentley.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/human-touch-thank-you-notes-gifting-as/docview/3156612129/se-2>

Love, J. (2025, April 1). *Email marketing for nonprofits: The ultimate how-to guide*. Bloomerang. <https://bloomerang.co/blog/email-marketing-for-nonprofits/>

- McMurtrie, L. (2025, April 27). *Detroit ranked second least safe city in the U.S.* Detroit Metro Times. <https://www.metrotimes.com/news/detroit-ranked-second-least-safe-city-in-the-us-37548343>
- Media.* Penumbra Theatre. (n.d.). <https://penumbratheatre.org/racial-healing-press/#:~:text=Based%20in%20the%20historically%20black,equity%2C%20and%20inspire%20creative%20resiliency>
- MRI Simmons.* MRI Simmons. (2024, December 3). <https://www.mrisimmons.com/>
- Obsidian Theatre Festival.* (n.d.). <https://www.obsidianfest.org/>
- Scheff, J., & Kotler, P. (1996, January 1). *How the arts can prosper through strategic collaborations.* Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/1996/01/how-the-arts-can-prosper-through-strategic-collaborations>
- Starr. (2025, January 4). “*it’s buzzing here*”: *Detroit’s revival takes shape after decades of decay.* The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/04/detroit-revitalization>
- Strange, J. (2023, September 28). *Better together: How co-productions spread The love (and risk) around.* AMERICAN THEATRE. <https://www.americantheatre.org/2023/09/28/better-together-how-co-productions-spread-the-love-and-risk-around/>
- The rise, decline and potential of black theater in Detroit.* BLAC Detroit. (2011, June 30). <https://www.blac.media/news-features/the-rise-decline-and-potential-of-black-theater-in-detroit/>
- TJ Forlenza. (2025, February 5). *What is a co-production?*. Denver Center for the Performing Arts. <https://www.denvercenter.org/news-center/what-is-a-co-production/>
- Troy City, Michigan - Census Bureau Profile.* US Census Bureau. (n.d.). [https://data.census.gov/profile/Troy\\_city,\\_Michigan?g=160XX00US2680700](https://data.census.gov/profile/Troy_city,_Michigan?g=160XX00US2680700)
- U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Atlanta City, Georgia. (n.d.-c). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/atlantacitygeorgia/PST045224>
- Values, engagement, and Service.* Values, Engagement, and Service | Alliance Theatre. (n.d.). <https://www.alliancetheatre.org/content/values-engagement-and-service>
- Weinstein, L., & Cook, J. (2011). The Benefits of Collaboration Between For-Profit Businesses and Nonprofit Arts- or Culture-Oriented Organizations: Quarterly Journal. *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 76(3), 4-9,2.

<http://ezp.bentley.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/benefits-collaboration-between-profit-businesses/docview/905224411/se-2>

*Winter/Spring 2025 activities guide.* calameo.com. (n.d.).

<https://www.calameo.com/read/0055012436bbbda99c657>