Looking for Brooklyn cool? Adventuresome spirit meets old-school attitude 

…at BAM, the anchor of a revitalized neighborhood

Over the last 10–15 years, Brooklyn has become a global, cultural magnet. It attracts newcomers and tourists alike seeking the hard edge of New York together with more space and sense of discovery than other parts of the city. Standing at the crossroads of downtown Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) embodies this spirit. Since coming to BAM over three decades ago to develop the Next Wave Festival, executive producer Joseph Melillo has been the creative force driving what many see as New York’s most exciting center for theater, dance, and cinema. Over that time, the borough as a whole has blossomed with revitalized neighborhoods, new jobs, and businesses. Here, Melillo is joined by Keith Stubblefield, BAM’s chief financial officer, as they discuss the relationship between culture and community, as well as the artistic and business sides of the organization.

What are a few of the memorable moments in your 33 years here at BAM?

JM: To begin with, Einstein on the Beach being reconstructed in 1984: That was a very important accomplishment by this institution because it was the second year of the Next Wave Festival. The Next Wave Festival threw the gauntlet down in autumn of 1983, while, in 1984, we undertook the reconstruction of Einstein on the Beach, the mythic work by Robert Wilson and Philip Glass, which we sold out for 10 performances in what is now the Howard Gilman Opera House, a 2,000-seat venue. So, you know, that’s the context [for what we were doing] in the city of New York. It was not Manhattan where the reconstruction occurred. It was here at BAM.

Reconstruction in terms of?

JM: Einstein on the Beach was seen at the Metropolitan Opera House for two performances in 1976. So it had a mythic quality to it. The Next Wave Festival meanwhile was the first contemporary, nontraditional performing arts festival for the city of New York that this institution had committed itself to craft, produce, and create. By the festival’s second year, the city was being offered this exceptional reclamation of these two New York artists, who had created this extraordinary work of more than four hours in length on its stages—with 10 performances selling out and nearly 20,000 tickets being sold for a contemporary, nontraditional work of duration.
BAM became the place to be in December 1984. It was thrilling. You couldn’t go anywhere… without someone asking, “Have you seen Einstein on the Beach?”

So BAM became the place to be, here in the lobby of 30 Lafayette Avenue in December. It was thrilling. And everyone was talking about it. You couldn’t go anywhere where contemporary culture was being experienced or considered without someone asking, “Have you seen Einstein on the Beach? Did you go see Einstein on the Beach?” It created word-of-mouth momentum.

That was 1984. Then, in 1987, the Next Wave Festival opened the nine-hour Mahabharata, Peter Brook’s legendary epic for the theater. But what was different then was that not only do you have this extraordinary artistic work being acclaimed but you discover what is now called the Harvey Theater, which, at that time, was considered a radical architectural experience. We call it a state-of-the-art ruin. The theater is a model of Peter Brook’s theater in Paris, Des Bouffes Du Nord, and was the former Majestic Theatre, which was a part of the city of Brooklyn’s entertainment area, which was only a block and a half away from here. So not only were people talking about Peter Brook’s theatrical production, the other discussion was about this theater and the experience of it. And that, again, added to the conversations about having been to the Mahabharata or “surviving” the Mahabharata.

These productions became iconic and contributed to BAM becoming a destination—a destination, certainly for those people in Brooklyn who were innately curious about what was happening in these two theaters but also for Manhattanites, to come across the bridges and tunnels to have this artistic and cultural engagement in the borough of Brooklyn and at this institution.

So then we move into the ’90s, in which, again, more of this kind of work was being programmed, but during which we also started to focus on our winter/spring (January to June) artistic program in order to balance out the season, and we added cinemas to our identity.

We thus changed our institutional mission to include both performing and cinema arts, and then promoted initiatives such as, for example, Next Wave Down Under, in which we brought 145 Australian artists and scholars to reposition Australia in the city.

And then, most recently, in 2012, we built a brand new theater complex called the Richard B. Fisher building, and changed our portfolio of real estate. Now, we have a 250-seat, completely flexible theater to augment the beauty of the 2,000-seat opera house and the 850-seat Harvey Theater. This has also allowed us to move aggressively into education—educational services and programming, as well as training regarding the curatorial process—and that’s where we are today.

How would you describe your philosophy of programming? Why are you so experimental and global, as in non-Eurocentric?

JM: First of all, we’re not experimental. This institution is interested in innovative, progressive ideas in the performing arts. Our mission is Des Bouffes Du Nord-like adventurous art, audiences, and ideas. We are an epicenter of attraction for individuals from the nontraditional community in the performing arts who’ve done their experiments at other locations, whose identity is to be responsive to experimental art, and who we now judge to be mature in their aesthetic—and, for that reason, are given an opportunity to work on a much larger scale.

Brooklyn has fundamentally changed. So our demographic is more robustly Brooklyn because this is the place for young, creative talent in all possible disciplines of culture.

Does that adventurous approach grow at all from the spirit of New York or Brooklyn?

JM: Two words that I always use to describe New York City, and specifically Brooklyn: tenacious and curious. I think if you cut our veins, Keith’s and mine, you would see tenacity and curiosity.

Do you think BAM could exist in Manhattan?

JM: No. I’ve had this thought for a long period of time, and this question has been addressed to me. No, because we were allowed to do a kind of work here that, under the cloak of darkness, allowed us to get up onstage and surprise the audience, those who were smart enough to buy tickets to come to that surprise.
Do you see any danger of the neighborhood getting too rich and popular to nurture an institution that’s as curious and adventurous as you are?

JM: No. You see, the issue here today is that Brooklyn has fundamentally changed. So our demographic is more robustly Brooklyn because this is the place for young, creative talent in all possible disciplines of culture; they’re here, and they want what I just said. They want to purge their curiosity.

KS: Can I just add a point here? We survey our audiences pretty thoroughly every three years, and I think that about five years ago, we tipped from being majority Manhattan visitors to majority Brooklyn visitors. In 1983, 80% of our audience came from Manhattan and 20% from Brooklyn and the other boroughs.

To Joe’s point, it’s all to BAM’s good. Now, the audience is coming to us, in essence. You see all these towers that are being built all around here. Yes, it’s going to take away some of the edginess of this neighborhood, but I think some of that edginess will not be missed. I think we can retain the spirit of this neighborhood. It’s not going to become Chelsea [the gentrified neighborhood in downtown Manhattan], and frankly, the people that are going to be moving into these towers are going to be BAM’s customers. So it’s really a boon for us.

BAM is the oldest performing-arts center in America, with a great history. Yet it was nearly torn down in 1960. What caused the decline and what’s changed to make BAM so successful today?

JM: You have to look at 1960 in relationship to 1945. In other words, the ending of World War II made the Brooklyn Navy Yard moribund. Removing this kind of economic structure based on robust manufacturing meant that the underpinning of the borough’s finances were challenged.

KS: And to be clear, at the same time, Carnegie Hall was facing the same wrecking ball. So it wasn’t just BAM. It was a citywide and probably nationwide problem.

Do you think BAM’s modern growth is driven by Brooklyn’s renaissance or by the energy and concentration of cultural centers in the area ranging from the Brooklyn Museum and Botanic Garden to the Barclays Center to Saint Ann’s and even PS1 in nearby Queens?

JM: I think that, again, the renaissance of this institution began with a man named Harvey Lichtenstein, and because he was a former modern dancer and programmed what he knew, he invited choreographers to use the only space he really had for performance, which was the opera house of 2,000 seats.
How were you affected by the opening of the Barclays Center for sports and entertainment a few blocks away?

KS: I think pleasantly so. I’m going to let Joe talk about a really exciting thing that happened this June, but, from my view, the more people there are in this area, the better off it is for BAM. I see this area as an arts and entertainment district. It doesn’t have to be just an arts district, something so precious, in other words.

So it’s all part of a larger thing, and people are really starting to see that this is just a very exciting place to be. You don’t have to have plans. You can come here, and something exciting is going to be going on.

JM: And again, with the creation of the Barclays, for the first time, we really saw street traffic. People were on sidewalks, walking to the Barclays Center, and you just went, “Oh, yeah, well, that’s a really great, positive thing that happened.” But regarding what Keith was talking about, let’s be clear. We’re an arts center. Barclays is an entertainment and sports center with both basketball and ice hockey.

And what happened is that this identity of being a maverick performing arts center took hold. We were an outpost. We were that place where they do contemporary, strange work. That’s how BAM’s profile became defined in the city. It is important to understand that the performing arts are never static. They just grow and mutate, and this institution learned to grow with the artistic community based in New York City and be responsive to it.

KS: The ’80s, you know, were sort of the nadir of civic life here in New York City. Things were very bad. But as the Next Wave Festival came around and BAM started to really blossom into what you know it as today, it provided an anchor for this very neighborhood, which was in dire straits, from what I understand. And as BAM stabilized and grew, it helped this neighborhood. It took a while, but now you see what this neighborhood has become. It would not be this way without BAM.

Tell me about your connections to the neighborhood in terms of education, arts workshops, and other programs.

KS: There are two business improvement districts that intersect here. One of my staff members, actually, is the chairwoman of one of them. I’m on the steering committee for the expansion of the other one. So, from a very practical level, we are very involved in the street life and making sure the streets are clean and safe and pleasant and inviting. It’s just a very practical thing, and we’re financial supporters of those organizations.

We’re also like the big fish in this pond here, but there are now within, say, a five-block radius, something like 60 cultural organizations, and I say that because there’s an office building that houses most of them. They’re not 60 presenting spaces, but there is some sort of presence of 60-plus cultural organizations.

That growth has happened in the last decade or so. So we’re now creating a very different kind of momentum, and it’s very exciting. You see the commercial real estate that’s popping up all over.

Joe Melillo with choreographers Merce Cunningham and Mark Morris, left to right.

But Bruce Ratner [builder of the Barclays Center and minority owner of the Brooklyn Nets NBA franchise] is a former chairman of our board of directors. And he knew what we did, and he wanted to find some intersection. So, long story, short: David Byrne created a project called Contemporary Color, which we did in partnership with the Barclays Center. It was an extraordinary event, both for the artists, all these indie rock singers and songwriters and musicians, and for all of these high-school students [members of 10 of the country’s elite color-guard teams]. It was a really wonderful exploration of how an arena and a performing-arts center—a profit-making organization and a not-for-profit one—can actually create a partnership to make a very creative endeavor happen for everyone.

**What is the breakdown of your income stream?**

**JM:** Our ratio of earned to unearned income is 40–60, meaning we get 40% of our funding from ticket sales—I’m being very general here—and 60% from fundraising from government, individual, corporate, and foundation sources.

**In a lot of countries, this would all be funded by the government.**

**JM:** Right. Let me be very clear. New York City is very generous to cultural organizations. I think the Department of Cultural Affairs gives away more than $150 million a year in operating money. That is a lot, far more than any other city in this country.

**KS:** First of all, they are our landlords. They own our buildings. So, they pay for our utilities and then, on top of that, give us about $2–$2.5 million a year. Our budget is about $55 million. So that while, as a percentage, it’s not huge, it’s fairly steady, and there are not a lot of strings attached. It’s pretty much an operating subsidy. Given that these are the city’s buildings, they want us to maintain and secure them properly. So it’s probably the easiest money we see every year. So, while it’s not a huge part of our budget, and pales in comparison with European governments, in relative terms, for the United States, it’s quite generous.

And one more thing. The Richard B. Fisher building, for example [BAM Fisher, inaugurated in 2012, is the organization’s most recent facility], was a $50 million project. We got $32 million of that from the city. So, that was very generous.

**But don’t you think a city needs to be rich to have a critical mass of wealthy individuals supporting cultural institutions?**

**JM:** You do need leadership in financing, in contributing revenue to art and culture in your community because we don’t have this kind of governmental involvement the way the European Union has. It is up to private citizens in any community in the United States to offer leadership. Philanthropy is important for art and culture.

*Einstein on the Beach, 2012.*
As BAM stabilized and grew, it helped this neighborhood. It would not be this way without BAM.

Can you estimate the financial contribution that cultural activities make to New York or the neighborhood?

JM: As a number, I can’t. But studies from Americans for the Arts have shown how large the contribution is. I will say that New York gets 55 million tourists a year, and 54 million of those are coming because there is culture and art here that they can’t access anywhere else in the world.

Everybody knows this. Everybody understands it. You’re not coming here for any other reason, really. It’s part and parcel of generating tourism, generating economic activity. I mean, we’re a big employer. We have 240 full-time people here. We’re certainly the biggest employer in this neighborhood.

The Fisher building, like I said, was a $50 million construction project. We kept construction workers busy for two years. It’s a very real economic benefit. I think studies have shown here in New York City that every dollar that’s spent on culture from the government returns $8 back into the tax coffers. So, it’s one of the wisest investments the government could ever make.

Do you think the BAM model, so to speak, is exportable to other cities?

JM: The important thing you need to know is that we’re working on a project to do a Brooklyn-Paris exchange. These will be two projects in the Fisher building’s Fishman Space, a 250-seat, completely flexible theater that we have. Two Brooklyn-based companies, a theater company and a dance company, will make their Paris debut at the Théâtre de la Ville in the autumn of 2016, while two Paris-based theater and dance companies will have their New York City debut in Fishman. Paris is very interested in having a relationship with Brooklyn—not Manhattan but Brooklyn.

Are you surprised that Brooklyn is seen as cool all over the world?

JM: You’re talking to the one person who had to officially log how many days I traveled last year. I traveled 104 days globally, and everywhere I visited, the question is always Brooklyn. Tell us about Brooklyn.

You mentioned that Next Wave audiences are innately curious. Do you think curiosity is inherent in big city life or only in special cities like New York?

JM: Only special cities. I really believe that that is our special quality because I’m connected to our colleagues all over the country, and they struggle to make inroads with the professional world of young adults. They really have a difficult time. That’s not...
People who return have this affection for BAM that seems very genuine—I don’t think they’re just saying it. To his credit, Joe has created a home for international artists around the world, and the staff here has a deep respect for that, and it permeates all of our work.

Is that one of the reasons that famous artists come here from all over the world? Everybody’s equal. It’s a working environment.

JM: Artists feel supported here. We try to make it as comfortable as possible for them.

You said that BAM could not exist in any city. Is that because of the nature of New York and Brooklyn?

JM: No, no. I’ll be a little bit clearer. First of all, Manhattan is considered the citadel of classical culture. You have Lincoln Center, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Carnegie Hall. These are the legacy cultural institutions of Manhattan and the City of New York. And then you have Broadway, as a geographic area: a big, powerful, economic engine, a tourist magnet. And then you have not-for-profit producing organizations, theater companies, dance companies, music organizations, all responding to the great energy. And we’re here. Again, I go back to the Next Wave Festival. I didn’t create the idea; I just gave it life. I was the producer, but Harvey Lichtenstein had the idea. What I did was to make it possible for this institution to not only realize the idea, but to grow it. That was my contribution.

But we could do this extraordinary work because we were under the radar of the classical interests. We were here. We were subterranean. We were the subversive ones. But guess what? We got excellent artistic notices. Audiences loved our work. And this is the way the town worked in the days before social media: talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. This was when people were in bars and restaurants actually being social.

Joe, if you could change jobs with anybody in the world, who would you change jobs with?

JM: No one has ever asked me that question before. There isn’t someone I idolize or envy or whose job I’m jealous of. I don’t think that way.

No is a perfectly fine answer.

JM: Now that I’ve actually thought this through, though, I wish that I could be Bill Gates for art and culture in America because what he and Melinda are able to do is extraordinary in science and medical interventions and education. Even with the generosity of New York State and New York City and the money that they both provide for art and culture, we could do so much more if we had access to more financial resources.
**In and around New York City, what would you do?**

**JM:** There are two things I’ve learned because I’ve been here such a long time. One, you give money to individual artists for them to make and produce their work. It’s attached at the hip. It’s not just giving them money to commission a work. It’s the money to produce the work, to create the work.

To put it onstage.

**JM:** To get it there. And the other side is that you give to the institutions throughout the country that are making the commitment to actually put that art on their stages. If anything, that—art and culture nationally—is the essential need today: money for artists to conceptualize and create and produce a work; and then, funds for institutions like BAM, the presenting organizations and producing organizations that need the finances, the capital, to actually put that work on their stages for their audiences.

**Decades ago, the US was a major funder of artistic education and programming. Has that changed markedly over the years?**

**KS:** In the United States, at a federal level, absolutely. The National Endowment for the Arts’ budget is paltry. They’re not a player.

**But the city of New York is okay?**

**KS:** Yes, it is very, very powerful, and influential, and beneficent. The city’s Department of Cultural Affairs was started in 1976 at the commissioner level and has been very supportive and robust since that time.

---

1. Einstein on the Beach premiered in July 1976 at the Avignon Festival, France’s famous annual arts gathering. Four months later, in November, it was presented at the Metropolitan Opera “by special invitation” for only two performances. See the review by James R. Oestreich of the second production of the work at BAM in 1992, “What’s It All About, Alfie?” in The New York Times, November 8, 1992.

2. New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) is the largest cultural funding agency in the United States. Its expense budget for Fiscal Year 2015 was $159.4 million, of which $5.6 million went to operating expenses and the rest—about 96%—to cultural funding. See the department’s website at http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/funding/funding.shtml, as well as the testimony by DCLA Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl to the New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations during the Fiscal Year 2015 preliminary budget hearings on March 20, 2015, at http://www.dance.nyc/uploads/FY16%20Prelim%20Budget%20Testimony%20FINAL.pdf.

3. According to the organization’s last national report, Arts and Economic Prosperity IV: The Economic Impact of Nonprofit Arts and Culture Organizations and Their Audiences, which surveyed the US economy at a particularly inauspicious time for spending generally, in the midst of the global financial crisis, culture was an ongoing economic resource. To quote the report: “Despite the economic headwinds that our country faced in 2010, the results are impressive. Nationally, the industry generated $135.2 billion of economic activity—$61.1 billion by the nation’s nonprofit arts and culture organizations in addition to $74.1 billion in event-related expenditures by their audiences.” See the national report at http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/research-studies-publications/arts-economic-prosperity-iv/download-the-report, specifically the introduction by Americans for the Arts President and CEO Robert L. Lynch, “The Arts Mean Business.”

---

Photo credit: Courtesy of BAM (page 1); courtesy of BAM Hamm Archives, 1997 (page 3); courtesy of BAM Hamm Archives, 1988 (page 4, top); Robert Boyd, 1987 (page 4, bottom); Stephanie Berger, 2012 (page 5); courtesy of BAM Hamm Archives, 1999 (page 6, top center)