# Power in Sharing

Arts organizations have long been dominated by the singular artistic leader at the top whose vision sets the course for the organization. As society changes and expectations for the sharing of power grow, that model is shifting in exciting ways. The Public Theater in New York is embracing a model of shared artistic leadership, with new voices and perspectives at the top—and is finding fresh success. What might orchestras learn? **Simon Woods** interviews Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater.

Craig T.-Mathew/Mathew Imaging

Simon Woods, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras

Joan Marcus

Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater in New York City

Over the past decade the theater world has been though extraordinary changes as it has sought to refract and reflect 21st-century society in ever more relevant ways. The orchestra world is now entering its own moment of deep re-evaluation about what it stands for and how we interact with the communities around us. And yet we rarely take the time (and I include myself in that failing) to look around us and see what we might learn from other art forms. I recently had the chance to sit down for an expansive conversation with one of the great names in contemporary theater, Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theater in New York City. To say that the conversation was inspiring hardly does justice to how energizing I found it. Eustis is a leader of vast charisma, but his remarks centered on his own journey of learning as he rethought what it meant to be an artistic leader, welcomed other voices to the table, and allowed them to lead the organization in new directions.

The message is clear: the opening up of traditional roles of leadership is a journey into deep enrichment, both artistic and human, and one that none of us should be afraid of.

Oskar Eustis has been deeply involved with bringing some of the most extraordinary works of art of our time to life on his stages, including Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and *Hamilton*. Since taking over as artistic director of the Public Theater in New York City in 2005, Eustis has not only maintained its position at the vanguard of this country's most forward-looking theaters, he has propelled it in bold and influential new directions, onstage and off.

What fascinates me about Oskar is that he is decidedly the leader of the Public Theater—that is not open for negotiation. But he has had the humility and daring to open himself up to a completely different model of artistic leadership at his own institution. This topic is intriguing and important for us in an orchestral world that has traditionally relied on the notion of the powerful, singular artistic leader who wields significant influence over their organizations and is the focal point not only for artistic decisions, but for marketing and fundraising as well.

SIMON WOODS: Thank you so much for speaking to me today! Let me start by asking you to explain how the notion of shared artistic leadership emerged in your organization. When did you realize that the traditional models of leadership wouldn't work for what you hoped to achieve?

OSKAR EUSTIS: There have been discussions throughout my career about collective leadership—my first theater company was a collective. But as my career moved on, so for about the last 30 years, it narrowed into a more traditional structure where I was an artistic director.

Joan Marcus

Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks and director Oskar Eustis in rehearsal for Parks's *White Noise* at the Public Theater, 2019.

I've run two big theaters over the last 25 years. The accepted form was the artistic director as the sole artistic authority, sharing some administrative and executive authority with an executive director. But the artistic director being the font of all artistic decision-making became what I did almost de facto, because it was the standard set by the field.

If I take the example of the Public Theater, it was founded by Joseph Papp, who was a charismatic megafauna if there ever was one. He was the visionary leader at the top. After a brief interim he was replaced by George C. Wolfe, who was also, by any definition, a strong leader. I have always been less focused on my own work as a director and more focused on the playwrights I work with, and a little more distributive, but not entirely. It was still basically the model of all artistic decisions were made by me. I could delegate certain programs, but that was my choice.

I think the demand for change started to rise to a fever pitch after George Floyd was murdered, but the setup for those demands was the seven years before them, when for a number of reasons—my advancing age and seniority—created a bigger and bigger gap between me and the rest of my staff. I was by far the oldest person on the artistic staff. Also, several of my best top leaders were poached to run other organizations. There was an increasing gap between my age, experience, and seniority, and other artistic staff. Additionally, seven and a half years ago, I had a personal tragedy, which among other things made me turn inward, be less social, and drove me back to directing more. The impact of that was that my artistic executive decisions were made more quickly, often more privately, because I was on a rehearsal break and had to decide something.

The uproar of complaints about my privatized decision-making process was based not only on what was unleashed when George Floyd was murdered, meaning demand for greater equity across the field, but also a specific response to my own behavior over the previous years. I had to recognize both of those things at once. It was an enormous questioning of the legitimacy of my authority, and it's what Habermas, the German social scientist, called a legitimation crisis.

> "The Public Theater has been a progressive institution from its founding in 1954. But our internal structure looked like every other theater in the country, and was autocratic, individualistic, and top-down."

Regardless of what your job title is, what your job responsibilities are, you can't actually do your job unless people accept the legitimacy of you having that authority. I was suddenly in a position where a whole lot of my staff and people in other fields said, "Why do you get to make all these decisions? What sense does it make that a straight White man over 60 is making all of the decisions for the Public Theater?" I was forced to acknowledge both realities: that personally I had become more privatized and less collegial, with fewer opportunities for diverse voices to influence me, and that structurally, they were absolutely correct. The Public Theater has been a progressive institution from its founding in 1954. On our stages for over half a century we have been trumpeting values of equality, of democracy, of inclusion. But our internal structure looked like every other theater in the country, and was autocratic, individualistic, and top-down.

I was seeing the correctness of the arguments that something needed to change, and I knew if I didn't change, I could lose my ability to be an artistic director.

George Floyd was murdered on Memorial Day 2020, and our internal discussions began three days later. Huge

Joan Marcus

In addition to his work as the Public Theater's artistic leader, Oskar Eustis is a director. Above, he's in rehearsal with Linda Emond and Nikki M. James for Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day* at the Public Theater, 2019.

"The core principle ... is that we will be improved if there is a diversity of voices entering into decision-making about key things."

confrontations, anger, chaos, as I think happened at many institutions, but perhaps more at mine because of our values. We had a staff of 250 people, roughly half BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color]. We also have values that speak about equality, democracy, anti-racism, and racial inclusion. The staff believes wholeheartedly in those ideals, so they expressed real disappointment. For several weeks, I was lost and blindsided. After a while, I'd gotten my feet under me enough so I could say, all right, what is my job? I defined my job as listening to artists and my staff and my board, listening to their desires, their complaints, their critique with as much seriousness as I can muster, take it in as deeply as I can, then do what I think is right. Out of that, the first set of choices about distributive leadership came.

WOODS: Talk to me a little bit about how it actually works. This extraordinary rethinking that went on in your head: where did it lead, and what does it look like?

EUSTIS: The choice I made in August of 2020 was to try to make the decision-making table at the top of the artistic organization reflect the values and diversity of the Public. I have had one associate artistic director since I've been here; she is a White woman. I added two more associate artistic directors, both of them incredibly talented and people of color. There was an artistic director and three associate artistic directors, each with their own portfolio in addition to being associate artistic director.

I then added to my artistic team the managing director of the theater, who is basically accountable for all the administrative, logistical, financial, production sides of our shows, as well as the director of producing, who oversees the line producers on the shows. We had a table of six people: three men, three women, three White, three BIPOC. The commitment I made was that every serious artistic decision, programming, hiring of directors, creating of new programs, shows, will be made with those six people present after full and frank discussion. The ultimate authority is still mine. I'm still accountable to the board. I don't ever get to say, "I didn't want to do that, but we had to." I'm accountable. You can't separate responsibility from authority.

Once people who respect each other are talking fully and frankly, the gravitational pull towards consensus is enormous. There has not been a moment in the last year where I have had to say, "I hear all of you, I know you disagree with me, and I'm overriding you." There have been occasions where one or two people have dissented, but we've never had a moment where people said, "I can't stand behind this decision." That's been terribly important: all of us stand behind those decisions. So far it's worked. I can see many ways in which it might fail. But it has absolutely allowed more diversity of opinion before we make decisions. And that has changed some of the decisions we make.

WOODS: It's interesting that this is not just an artistic grouping, but you brought in executive leadership as well. What is the relationship between this group and financial and other decisions that might more naturally fall into the executive domain? Do they surface at that table, or is that purely a place where you focus on artistic content and vision?

EUSTIS: Our discussions are entirely about artistic choices, but include how long will it take to build this set, how much is this going to cost. Out of those decisions, budgets are created that then go to another room, where Executive Director Patrick Willingham, who is my co-CEO, and I argue it out and make the final decisions. The group is not all-powerful within the institution, but only within the artistic and production decisions.

WOODS: It doesn't appear to have diluted the creativity of the organization. In fact, quite the reverse. The 2021-22 season is staggering in its plurality and breadth and cultural richness. Do you think that has come out of the discussions that have emerged in that brain trust?

"The choice I made in August of 2020 was to make the decision-making table at the top of the artistic organization reflect the values and diversity of the Public Theater."

EUSTIS: Absolutely. We know from life experience that decisions are influenced in ways that we are not even conscious of—by who we're talking to, who we're spending time with, who we're listening to. For example, there is a play that I had rejected before this group came together.

But everybody in the group except me was enthusiastic about this play. We spent two weeks talking about the play, and by the end of the two weeks I said, "You're right. Let's do it."

WOODS: Was that challenging for you, or did that come naturally? Did it threaten your sense of your identity as an artistic leader? I have a reason for asking that question, which relates to the orchestra field.

EUSTIS: I felt stunningly threatened before I set up this structure, because I felt that the entire staff in the artistic field was telling me I should not be able to make decisions. But creating this group instantly felt more pleasurable, more relieved, because it's a good thing for me to argue about why I like and don't like plays. Mixing it up with people was a gift. I've gotten an education that I couldn't have gotten any other way.

WOODS: In the orchestral world, we are used to quite hierarchical structures with an executive director and a music director at the top of the pyramid. They may be very collaborative with others in the organization, but nonetheless tend to be conscious of their position at the top of the tree. As I think about what lessons there are for us, what I am hearing is that something that appeared threatening initially was in fact deeply enriching to you?

EUSTIS: Absolutely.

WOODS: And that the journey was powerful enough to you as an artist that it might have value for others, too.

EUSTIS: I certainly hope so. The core principle that led to the formation of this group—and has influenced many other practices within the theater—is that we will be improved if there is a diversity of voices entering into decision-making about key things. This is happening on the production level, it's happening in the marketing department. That principle that we are not weakened but strengthened by bringing more voices to the table is proving to be incredibly true.

I think we're going to experience problems as we start producing full-time again. One of the advantages of autocratic decision-making is it can happen very quickly, and sometimes things need to happen quickly. But the gain that we're getting from decisions being made a little more slowly, but more thoughtfully and with more participation of different points of view, is going to far outweigh the gains that we make for speed.

Simon Luethi

*Hamilton* was developed and performed at the Public Theater before becoming a smash hit on Broadway. Oskar Eustis, fourth from left, with *Hamilton* creative team members (from left) Andy Blankenbuehler, Ron Chernow, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Thomas Kail, and Alex Lacamoire.

WOODS: Pinnacle leaders can often be perceived to be blocking the emergence of new talent. In a sense, you're providing service to the field in allowing new names to flourish and the talent pool to become bigger.

EUSTIS: A major plank of our transformation is that we have consciously said for the first time that it is the obligation of the Public to support the career development of every staff member. For many years we were completely focused on the artists—it was our job to develop artists. Now we have to do that for the staff members too. That is a real shift.

WOODS: Let's pivot to Public Works, which is an incredibly inspiring program. I've always believed that working with—not at—communities should be core to how we show up in our cities and regions. I'm very interested to hear you talk about that, and particularly about what you have mentioned before, the notion of the "decolonization" of the relationship with community. What is the relationship between that work and the shared-leadership commitment?

> "Artistry is not a binary that people have or don't have; it's a scale. Every human being has the desire and need to express something artistically."

EUSTIS: One of the important things for me is that the Public Works program was formed out of theory before anything pragmatic happened. Though there's a lot we're doing, we felt we're not completely fulfilling the thing that we said is the most important: are we, with a steal from Lincoln, "of, by, and for" the people? The fundamental idea was to change the theater from being an object, a commodity that can be bought and consumed, back into what it really is, which is a set of relationships among people. It has no object created, it's just different relationships between people. We set up a program with people in under-resourced communities that would make theater, and for a year director Lear deBessonet spent time with community-based organizations around the five boroughs of New York and got to know them. We had identified that what we can't do is community organization, we don't know anything about it, so we needed to find partners who were experts at that.

Now we have ten partner organizations that really have reach and impact on their communities, and who understand that the theater might have something to offer that they couldn't. Lear didn't say, "This is what we want to do." She said, "What do you want the Public Theater to do for you? What do you need that the Public Theater could do?" I have two favorite examples. The Senior Center


Joan Marcus. Black Lives Matter Harlem Street Mural courtesy of Harlem Park To Park.

The company of the Public Theater's Free Shakespeare in the Park production of *Merry Wives* at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, summer 2021. Adapted by Jocelyn Bioh from Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* and directed by Saheem Ali, the production was set in South Harlem amid a community of West African immigrants.

in Brownsville, Brooklyn, an under-resourced neighborhood in New York City, wanted a jazzercise class. We said okay, and started a jazzercise class at the Senior Center. Domestic Workers United, which is the union of nannies, caregivers, and housekeepers, who are overwhelmingly people of color, said that they wanted a classical play-reading group in Spanish. We set up a play-reading group, every two weeks, where we read Shakespeare in translation and also Calderon and Lope de Vega. This was part of trying to establish authentic relationships with the communities.

Pretty soon, the women in the jazzercise class, who we were also bringing to see our shows, got excited about the idea of doing dances like you might do in the theater. Domestic Workers United got excited thinking that instead of just reading these plays, they could say these plays. We came up with the first Public Works Pageant, which was a musical adaptation of *The Tempest* almost ten years ago that starred 180 community members, five professional actors, and five professional musicians.

I knew that this was a great social program, wonderful for the people in it. What I didn't know was it would create the best art that I'd see that year. That has been true for the almost ten years since. The Public Works shows are magnificent artistically. That forced us to realize that the idea of professional artists as opposed to amateur artists, or people who have certification and people who don't, is a false dichotomy. Artistry is not a binary that people have or don't have; it's a scale. Every human being has the desire and need to express something artistically. Some of us get to spend all of our lives doing that, and some of us only get to do it on very rare occasions. Some of us have spectacular natural gifts, some of us don't. But everybody's on a continuum.

> "I knew that Public Works was a great social program, wonderful for the people in it. What I didn't know was it would create the best art that I'd see that year."

If you throw out the distinctions and the barriers, and try to use theater for its full revolutionary value, and not just for the professional part, it can democratize and share in the culture as a whole.

WOODS: In our preparatory discussion for this, you said that caring about politics is about caring about being a human being. There are many people in the arts who believe that our fear of getting involved with politics and breaking the boundaries of our non-profit status has impeded us from becoming more urgently engaged in the issues of our time. Your phrase, that "caring about politics is about caring about being a human being" is an access point into doing work around social justice that has the chance to create much wider meaning for the organization.

EUSTIS: The Public was founded on a basis of inclusion from the very beginning in the early 1950s. Joe Papp, our founder, who never went to college, who had been a card-carrying member of the Communist Party in the 1930s and '40s, believed that Shakespeare belonged to everybody, and that Shakespeare could be performed by Americans in all of their variegated

skin tones and accents. Raúl Julia doing Shakespeare in his gorgeous Puerto Rican accent is central to our heritage. But what changed me deeply was working with Lear deBessonet. I come from a very political, very leftist background. I can talk about social justice in explicitly political ways, and I do all the time. Lear was raised in a different culture, in a religious upbringing. The values in my upbringing of equality, of not privately taking the wealth created by other people, but rather collectively creating wealth that belongs to the collective, are deep values in me. When Lear and I started talking about this, she said, "Oh, what matters to me is the divine spark in every human soul." When she said it, chills went up my spine, and I realized that she is approaching equality from an extremely different direction, but one that, in ways, is more powerful. Lear, for example, had no interest in creating shows that talked about contemporary political issues, or took a stance on the Vietnam War or whatever. She had an interest in creating shows that were about respecting the power and imagination of every person on stage, and the plays tended to be about how communities can empower individuals, not how individuals lead communities. She approached it from a very different political lens than I had, but with a commonality of values that now goes throughout our organization—we try to multiply the different ways that ideas of democracy and equality and inclusiveness can be manifested, so they're not limited to those who agree with us.

WOODS: What advice do you have for orchestras? What have you learned that you would say to us as we contemplate the riches that we might find in the future, were we to think differently?

EUSTIS: I will answer this only with a complete understanding that I am so far from being an expert in your field that it's not even funny!

WOODS: That's why I'm asking you.

EUSTIS: One thing is that the idea of strictly dividing the professional from the non-professional is a dead end. It's a legacy that in this country has been used to divide the educated who can appreciate the arts from the uneducated who supposedly can't. There's an elitist impulse behind it that our society is now rejecting in a very fundamental way. To thrive, any art form has to figure out how to embrace the idea that it isn't for a cultured few, it can be for everybody.

Music a perfect example. Historically, Italian opera was a popular mass art form. Now in the United States, Italian opera is sung in Italian, and the only people who go to it are people who either don't care if they understand the words, or who like reading supertitles. We've deliberately made it a narrower and more elite form. What fertilizes the performing arts are sudden expansion of democracy, sudden expansion of inclusion, moments of saying that we can make music that's for everybody. And it doesn't necessarily just have to be the music we make, we can enable music in people that can revolutionize things.

You don't have to start from what people call an artistic impulse. You can start from a human impulse of how you want your work to be better, how you want your work to matter more. Then you figure out how to do it. There have been great successes in that, and I hope the classical music field embraces that. S