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**Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' Efforts to Reach Younger, More Diverse Audiences  
Explored in Written and Video Accounts**

*Fourth in The Wallace Foundation's Building Audiences for Sustainability (BAS) Stories series on how performing arts organizations attract and retain new audiences*

**NEW YORK, November 29, 2018** – The story of an opera company's progress in attracting and retaining younger and more diverse audiences, to replace losses within its core audience, was released today by The Wallace Foundation. Written and video versions of *Think Opera's Not for You? Opera Theatre of Saint Louis Says Think Again* is the fourth installment in the foundation's Building Audiences for Sustainability (BAS) Stories series.

The written story, by Judith H. Dobrzynski, and the video, produced by Stephanie Carter of WNET, are available at [wallacefoundation.org/operatheatre](http://wallacefoundation.org/operatheatre).

Central to the story is how Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (OTSL), through market research, decided to approach an underlying problem: newer audiences are not spending enough on tickets to replace the losses of those departing. Based on its findings, OTSL is making greater strides in identifying more precisely the challenges facing the company.

Like most U.S. opera companies over the past decade, OTSL has seen its core audience aging and dwindling, earned income dropping and expenses rising. Audience building has become OTSL's top strategic priority, with a focus on targeting Gen X-ers and millennials, as well as people of any age in the region's racially and ethnically diverse population.

"The accessibility of opera to new audiences and building a strong local community is a vital part of Opera Theatre's mission, and the research we have undertaken in this process has helped us find new approaches to this important work," said Andrew Jorgensen, General Director, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. "We look forward to continuing to integrate and evaluate the impact of these strategies and programs."

"We've learned that for each long-tenured household we may lose due to age or health, we need to bring in multiple new households in order to replace them and their ticket buying impact," said OTSL Director of Marketing and Public Relations Joe Gfaller. "So we need to think more broadly about what it means to bring new audiences into the fold and avoid a narrow mindset about who the perfect new audience member might be."

OTSL had observed what it called the "leaky bucket" problem; that is, a slow net loss in total attendees. Older audience members were leaving at a faster rate than younger people coming in, resulting in a net loss that could adversely affect the company's future.

Before conducting any market research, OTSL developed two new programs to fix the leaky bucket. Opera Tastings provided a casual, low-stakes environment, introducing newcomers to opera by pairing food samples with operatic excerpts. Young Friends, for people under 45, offered a pre-performance buffet and open bar in OTSL's outdoor garden area.

OTSL's market research from focus groups and ticket-sale analysis helped them discover that the problem was more complex than the "leaky bucket" as traditionally understood: newcomers are purchasing less frequently and less expensive tickets than the core audience; meaning, the company needs multiple new households to replace each household of longtime patrons lost.

"We had hunches about what was going on, but having market research to back up our assumptions proved essential; not only did it save our lean organization substantial time and money, it was also liberating to base many key decisions on data," said Gfaller.

OTSL adjusted programming, expanding certain activities while halting others that did not work. Not only focused on cultivating new audiences—in part through Opera Tastings and Young Friends—the company also aimed to convert them to repeat ticket buyers. While both programs have shown promise, OTSL is looking for ways to make these efforts more sustainable through sponsorships and donations. They will continue to experiment, analyze results based on market research and make adjustments, as they seek to resolve unanswered questions.

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**The BAS Stories series** aims to capture preliminary insights from performing arts organizations who seek to build audiences in ways that can be sustained. In written and video formats, the stories especially focus on the use of market research to help leadership make more informed decisions about what is effective in reaching and retaining the audiences they desire. All stories in the series can be read and viewed on the Wallace website. A fifth story on music and dance presenter, World Music/CRASHarts, will be released in early 2019.

Accompanying each story are discussion guides, produced by national arts service organizations, to aid arts professionals in considering which of the strategies are relevant to their own audience-building efforts. These resources, which can be used to lead group discussion or for individual reflection, can be found on the foundation's [Building Audiences for the Arts page](#).

[Ballet Austin](#), [Seattle Symphony](#), [Denver Center Theatre Company](#), and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis are four of the 25 performing arts organizations participating in **Building Audiences for Sustainability**, the foundation's six-year, \$64-million initiative aimed at developing practical insights into how arts organizations can successfully expand audiences in ways that contribute to their financial health. Independent researchers commissioned by the foundation are documenting and analyzing the work across the cohort to provide lessons, insights and information for the entire field; the first of a series of published reports will be available later in 2019.

For more information on **Building Audiences for Sustainability** or on other Wallace arts initiatives, please visit: [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

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## About The Wallace Foundation

*Based in New York City, The Wallace Foundation is an independent national philanthropy dedicated to fostering improvements in learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and*

*the vitality of the arts for everyone. It seeks to catalyze broad impact by supporting the development, testing, and sharing of new solutions and effective practices.*

*At [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org), the foundation maintains an online library about what it has learned, including knowledge from its efforts aimed at: strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement; making the arts a part of many more people's lives by working with arts organizations to broaden, deepen and diversify audiences; exploring whether and how children benefit if schools and afterschool programs work together to align and improve experiences and climate to build social and emotional skills; expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens; better understanding the impact of high-quality summer learning programs on disadvantaged children; and helping selected cities make good afterschool programs available to many more children.*

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