

AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISTY EDMUNDS

Democratizing the Performing Arts

by GREG KASTELMAN, Editor in Chief



Kristy Edmunds, Executive & Artistic Director of CAP UCLA

Just a few miles down the road from UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance is a neighborhood called *Silicon Beach* – a palm tree-decorated homage to the Silicon Valley. The Silicon Beach is now one of the largest tech hubs in the world, hosting office space to multinational companies whose profitable purpose is to aggregate huge amounts of data about the purchasing and downloading decisions of all of us. When those of us in the live performing arts field are asked to contemplate how internet has impacted our field, I imagine a lyric from the classic 80's tune "Video Killed the Radio Star": "*in my mind and in my car: we can't rewind we've come too far*". If you're familiar with Los Angeles, you know how quintessential the automobile is for both its transportation, and for its culture. Mind-numbing traffic patterns divide this city more than any other natural geographic feature. Since we cannot rewind to an era when ticket-buyers had just a few options to access live performing arts content, how do we continue to engage the audiences to whom we seek? When almost every adult has access to a seemingly infinite variety of virtual performing arts choices on their mobile devices – how does the live performing arts sector compete for attention? How do we (*can we? should we?*) democratize and increase access to the live performing arts?

To help answer these complex questions, we turned to the accomplished and dynamic Kristy Edmunds, Executive and Artistic Director of UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance. As an artist, curator, artistic director, and frequent advisor, Edmunds holds a reputation for innovation and insight within numerous art practices. Kristy is responsible for the artistic vision, programs and creative initiatives of the Center as part of the UCLA public mission. Under Edmunds' leadership since 2011, the Center has evolved as one of the nation's most respected and versatile organizations for contemporary performing arts across all disciplines. She is widely regarded for championing the role of artists in a dynamically changing world, and for her depth in the presentation of their work.

Through her tenure to date, she has dramatically expanded and diversified the organization's public engagement, including a new and buzz-worthy partnership with the Theatre at Ace Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, where it was announced that CAP UCLA intends to bring a third of its programming to the thriving and revitalizing center of the city. When interviewed by the Los Angeles Times, Kristy explained: "If there's a barrier that makes the goodness of what you do difficult for people to reach, you have to change something." In effect, Kristy is describing here an initiative to democratize the performing arts, creating more access to CAP UCLA programming in spaces not confined to a college campus, nor taking place in a part of the city made separate by insurmountable traffic patterns eastward and westward.

In June of 2017, the *Cadenza Magazine* staff arranged an interview with Kristy Edmunds. We dove in:

Greg:
Kristy, it is a pleasure to be interviewing you for our third issue of the biannual *Cadenza Magazine*. Thank you so much for making the time.

Kristy:
I'm really happy to. Thanks, Greg.

Greg:
In reading through your bio and learning more about your numerous positions within the international arts sector, one of the lines that stuck out to me the most is when you referenced championing the "role of artists in a dynamically changing world". In your opinion, what is changing most about our world right now, and what is the role of performing artists today in helping us navigate that change?

Kristy:
If I get right down to the deepest kernel of what I'm starting to see in our larger world, it is that the changes taking place are not just incremental, but exponential. Entirely new fields of knowledge are fueling incredible growth, while other fields of knowledge have become completely obsolete. For artist populations, and to all those who are working in live performance, we're facing a dynamic of increasing "restricted mobility" and a lack of access to resources. The cost of life itself seems to be outstripping the ability for a world's majority to afford it. When I think about it, as it is related to my job, and how I work against restricted mobility, I am trying to create the conditions to work against this dynamic.



Kristy *(contd.)*:
In my case, I see this dynamic play out with artist visas, working across Homeland Security's increased pressure points, and working through increased restrictions regarding travel, freight, shipping, and all of those different areas necessary for the work we do. There's a way to look at those challenges and say, "Okay, I'm going to put that in the 'too hard' basket and just bypass it" - but that isn't my natural inclination. Instead, my inclination is to say: "How do I stand shoulder to shoulder and use the whole weight of the organization that I'm running to make sure that we are able to keep that kind of mobility happening?" Similarly when it comes to restricted access to resources, it's harder and harder in many cases to find those resources such that we can spread them across the number of projects we're working on, and so that presenting the work itself isn't overladen with high ticket prices, etc.
The other part of your question, regarding the role of performing artists in today's dynamically changing world, is not that different than it probably always has been: being awake to the world and really tending to our inner compass points. Artists tend not to make work around the immediate condition of a moment. They make work that a couple years later lands in front of us. To me, that's really important. If they were making work exactly in tune to the time that we are living in, there wouldn't be enough time for reflection. Artists tend to leap out into the future of where that project or their practice may land. You end up finding, very dramatically, how awake they are to the conditions of the world, and how their inner sense of care finds its form and is given out into the community.

The other piece that I see a lot right now is the ways in which artists are activating as pure human beings, and showing their solidarity and using their identities to craft compassion and insight, in order to be participants in various kinds of movements. For example, sharing their studio spaces, or creating public gatherings, or crossing into the areas of how to unite activists, activism knowledge, arts education practices, and more. There's the act of an artist as citizen and the act of artist as maker.

Greg:
The dynamic between what has always been and what is revolutionarily different about 'right now' is tricky to tease out. I love what you said about the immediacy of our times being refracted by the process of creating artistic work, and how artists are often "leaping out into the future".

From your perspective: Has anything changed in the last six to seven months? We don't need to go into the nitty-gritty of politics, but certainly I think anybody looking at our political situation here in the United States would see that some pretty big and momentous things have been happening. I'm curious: in your work as a curator and as an incubator for the arts: Have you seen any mobilization of that kind of activism and that kind of personhood within the artist community?

Kristy:
Absolutely. I mean, it's like a parallel full-time job for all of us.

Artists are actively putting themselves out there to express solidarity with that which feels to be under siege, or what causes fear, or even what may yet become untethered. Artists are putting themselves in front of our democratic institutions for things that we value deeply, and engaging like many of us in mobilizing and expressing compassion, concern, and

Kristy *(contd.)*:
activism. I absolutely see this happening with artists. I also see it happening with a general public. In my case, the theater and the concert hall that I run is increasingly needing to be a place that open for people to have panel discussions, talking through the practices of what can we do together, and in what way, and on what day, and how best to do so, and so forth. There are population groups that are coming into our venues now, not just to see and experience the work of the artists that we present, but also on the intermediary days when the hall is often dark. We've had to open the space up to student mobilization groups, leadership from Planned Parenthood and LGBTQ centers, etc. We have needed to enable the public to talk about what these different areas of our culture are experiencing, and what they need.

Greg:
Well, this is something I think we are keenly interested in exploring, especially given the changes we're seeing in the world around us in terms of demographic shifts, and demographic needs. In this issue of the Cadenza Magazine, we're exploring what role democracy place in the live performing arts sector. Or more specifically, what does it mean to "democratize the arts"? Do you feel that the performing arts field is currently democratic?

Kristy:
Well, when I think of the word "democracy", literally what is it? Democracies are where people elect their government leaders. That's what happens. I mean, that is the premise of governmental leadership: the people elect the government. The state of our current democracy in the U.S. is that we don't have a majority of our populations electing their leaders in government. I think we are feeling a deep societal and cultural malaise around government being incapable of generating the kind of results that the public is seeking. At the same time there's a lot of pressure on the economic side of our cost of living. I mean, people are on a kind of gerbil wheel just to keep their head above water. That prevents from having the amount of time to reflect, care, and advocate; all necessary acts for functioning in a democratic culture. This isn't exactly how it works in the performing arts. In the performing arts, while we're running ourselves into states of glorious exhaustion, we have to keep things moving. But we don't exactly elect such that there is democratic process in what the performing arts centers are presenting. In terms of the performing arts, if people were required to vote, literally, they would probably lean towards familiarity. You'd have some outliers that were leaning towards seeking discovery, and then probably a small base that would fall into the kind of party lines of disciplines. You know? Theater, or dance, or so forth. Probably, among genres of performance, music and film would kind of "win" elections because they have much larger kinds of distribution and footprint.

When I think about this particularly in the role of not-for-profits, what we do is work towards creating many different tributaries of access points, across a lot of different communities, cultures, and groups of people. While we don't, as one organization at a time, affect a large swath of people over the entire demographic, we do carry a very large footprint across access points around the whole country. I think democratizing the arts is a huge topic. The idea of it is indicating that access for the public to the arts is of high importance, and also that the makers of art can thrive in the context of their own creative pursuits and journeys without having to be part of a pedigree of absolute training. From the hobbyist to the most mammothly trained artist, that whole body and range is the democracy of practice.

Greg:
It's interesting to me what you were saying in regards to the democracy of practice as another way of thinking about democracy inside the performing arts, as well as democracy demanding the creation of access points to the performing arts. Would you speak to some of the recent changes that CAP UCLA has made regarding "access points", and creating mobility for and access to the live performing arts? What has changed for your organization, and and what led to that change?

Kristy:
At the Center for the Art of Performance, we're housed within UCLA campus. UCLA is as a massive research university that also has what are called 'public art units' that are public-facing arts practices. It includes the Hammer Museum, the Fowler Museum, and also our Center for the Art of Performance. Our role is not only to fuel the capacity of another generation's access to the arts at very high levels, but also to engage a community. To engage with our community, you think: okay, UCLA is within Los Angeles. Los Angeles is a pretty massive city, and one of the great divides in the greater Los Angeles community is on a East-West line.

In moving to Los Angeles, as I got to know the city more and more, I started to reflect deeply on one of our main presenting spaces: Royce Hall. This hall is quite iconic historically in Los Angeles because it's almost nearly 100 years old, and has been standing every since, as a place for the secular gathering of a public inside of a university. It stands on what used to be pasture land. It was one of the first things built in the founding of UCLA. Now, around UCLA - the west-side of Los Angeles - we have a lot of different kinds of neighborhoods, population groups, publics, etc. And yet, with the gentrification of various other pockets of Los Angeles, a lot of the contemporary artistic community is now living in areas on the east-side, or in Silver Lake, or Los Feliz, Echo Park, Highland Park, etc. Many from those community will want to come to see performances at Royce Hall, but that physical distance is long (editor's note: not in mileage, but in terms of time to get from east to west). The other fact is that there's a psychological distance felt for some communities in the East side.

In contemplating these realities, after already moving some of our programming and into other venues on campus, I began to think towards the relationship that I've had with the Ace Hotel, and its original founder Alex, and others. The Ace has created a brand that is artist-centric and associated with a high level of creativity, for lack of a better word. I've had that relationship with The Ace for a long period of time, from when I was based in Portland, Seattle, New York and elsewhere. That theater there that they renovated is astonishing. It was originally built by Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks, when they ceded from the Hollywood studio system and created United Artists, and then they built this theater as the gathering and networking points for screening and performing their new ventures.

When the Ace renovated the space, I knew it was going to be fantastic. As such, what I wanted to do with the center was say, "How can I take a large footprint, as in literally a third of our programming if not more, and over the next several years migrate it directly into a collaborative partnership with the Ace?". And as a result, that's what we're doing.

To begin this migration, I'm starting mainly with music, but also Taylor Mac's massive project, *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* (March 15, 2018 - March 24, 2018). Putting this work at the Ace ensures a middle distance between South LA , the Eastside, the downtown community, and so forth. I'm absolutely keeping a lot of



(Left) Taylor Mac in *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*
PHOTO | Little Fang

Kristy *(contd.)*:
projects at the Royce as well. This is a pretty big undertaking, and it's meant to be. The shortest way to describe it is this: if part of who you're seeking to be engaged with is struggling to get to where you are bringing the work, then you have to find that point where it is no longer a struggle for them to get there.

The UCLA leadership has been great because they also embrace this idea, and they can see where it intersects with discussions of where UCLA should be, which already has different satellites (mainly medical areas and clinic)s, that are not on the main campus. This new initiative now takes a footprint of the arts offerings from UCLA and this campus and contributes it outward into a downtown civic dialogue, into the wider Los Angeles population, etc.

Greg:
Well, I think it's even connected with another topic pertaining to this conversation of how we are democratizing the arts. What is the need for physical spaces and theaters in the 21st century, as we move more and more to a digitally-engaged world?

Kristy:
I think that the digital world, and our screens and our devices, are absolutely astonishing miracles of human ingenuity. There's no doubt about it. In a certain kind of way, these inventions allow artists and organizations to reach people more directly, which is great. But I definitely think that what happens in a live experience is a kind of highly public exploration of ideas; from the sublime to the provocative, and everything in between. We are social animals, and we do gravitate towards wanting to be together. In fact, it's been very interesting over the past couple few years to notice the number of times I will stand on a stage and need to acknowledge something horrific that happened on the very day that we're about to have a performance, from the Paris bombings, to various other kinds of horrific human catastrophes.

When that happens, I stand there in front of a public of mostly strangers and see that they are in attendance now with a very different emotional apparatus, trying to find the vehicles through which there can be an experience of human belonging. People want to be able to be together across lots of different kinds of divides. And we in the arts community have a ways to catch up. In fact, I think we could utilize digital technology in more effective ways. I think that we could work with our counterparts in Google and YouTube and various other kinds of highly future-minded migrations of what's coming next, and be part of that dialogue moving forward, artistically and creatively. I think there's a lot more that we could be doing, and I also think there's a lot we are already doing. But protecting a secular space for public gathering to encounter ideas and foster our artistic population is absolutely primary.

I believe we can be entrepreneurial about how we make more efficient the dissemination of ideas and possibilities. There's a really big difference of how we, in the words of Taylor Mac, "dream the culture forward" or carry the culture forward by being together in a common experience with multiple different responses and reactions to it. Being in our "screen bubbles" often, I really think that that the physical spaces, especially over time, will become increasingly important.

Greg:
That's a heartening idea for all us to look forward to!

Speaking of, what are you most looking forward to in the coming year?

Kristy:
Well, I'm obviously looking forward to the programming that's happening here. But I'm also really looking forward to what is going on behind the scenes, the shaping of the programming content that's going to happen over the next several years ahead of us. What's interesting too is that we have an entire artistic and cultural community that is very, very awake to what's going on. Our complacencies, if we have them, are being radically disrupted, and we in the performing arts community are mobilizing energy, attention, compassion, solidarity, and care towards truly taking a greater leadership role. I'm looking forward to the way this mobilization increases ties across the fabric of our communities. That's what I'm looking forward to. That's what I see is already happening.

Greg:
Thank you so much for speaking with us, Kristy.

Kristy:
It has been my pleasure, Greg.



After this interview, I kept thinking back to the subtle and important point that Kristy Edmunds made: while the virtual world may create democracy through more direct access between artists to their fans, the performing arts practice creates democracy through the physical congregation of people united by a common purpose: sharing a live artistic experience together. Organized religion also thrives by people congregating together. And if organized religion has endured for thousands of years, perhaps we can remember that performing arts field will, too. As other presenting organizations like CAP UCLA continue to think about creating more access to their programming, perhaps our theaters and arts spaces will be better able to thrive in an era of exponential change. In the Merriam Webster dictionary, one less-known definition of 'democracy' defines it as: "the absence of hereditary or arbitrary class distinctions or privileges". When we as arts organizers are behaving in ways to increase access to the "goodness" of what we do, as Kristy Edmunds put it, we are fighting against hereditary and arbitrary class distinctions (like traffic patterns!). And when we do that, we are not only democratizing the arts; we are building our democracy.

For more information on Kristy Edmunds, or CAP UCLA, contact Holly Wallace, Communications Manager Center for the Art of Performance: hawallace@arts.ucla.edu

To learn more about upcoming performances in the 2017-2018 season of CAP UCLA, visit: http://cap.ucla.edu/

Information on Taylor Mac's "A 24-Decade History of Popular Music", are referenced here in this article, visit: cap.ucla.edu/calendar/taylor_mac.php