A CELEBRATION of Wisdom and Achievement

USITT Fellows on collaboration—MYTH or REALITY?
The USITT fellows sat down at the 2015 conference to discuss collaboration. Theatre professionals are known for collaboration. These words are used constantly—to tell us what’s good about a person or a firm. But the question is still there: Collaboration is good, and essential but do we really collaborate? When it does happen, how does it happen? Is there a magic formula for collaboration?

This illuminating conversation included USITT distinguished fellows Len Auerbach, Laura Crow, Michael Ramsaur, and USITT Fellows Chair Randy Earle.

- **Len Auerbach** is design director and chairman of Auerbach, Pollock & Friedlander Theater Consultants in San Francisco, founder of the firm and a leader in the world of theatre consultants.
- **Laura Crow** is a professor at the University of Connecticut and an internationally known and recognized costume designer, with hundreds of productions and many awards.
- **Michael Ramsaur** is professor of drama at Stan-
ford University. He also serves on the executive committee of OISTAT and is past president of the organization.

• Randy Earle is professor emeritus at San Jose State University. He is a USITT Past President and currently serves as Chair of the Fellows.

Earle moderated the discussion, and excerpts follow.

RANDY EARLE: We all say collaboration is good. It’s essential to our work, but do we really need it? As I look through websites, read CVs, go through grant requests, I see the words, “I collaborate with others.” These words are used constantly, to tell us what’s good about a person or a firm. Do we really collaborate? When it does happen, how does it happen? Is there a magic formula for collaboration? We cannot do our work creatively without collaboration, whether it’s two people or a team of several dozen. I’m not certain the number of people collaborating is as critical as the fact it occurs.

LEN AUERBACH: I think it’s important that we understand what collaboration really means. As a theatre consultant with all the various disciplines that we have to deal with, I’m sitting here, as usual, in the middle. The theatre consultant is always in the middle and I express that to my clients when they get a little bit concerned with each other, and when I say “each other,” I mean the members, other members of the design team, the architect, the owner, the production company—and when they become a little bit out-of-sorts, it’s the role of the theatre consultant to take a collaborative position of bringing all of the parties together to get an end result. Once we all feel that we can do it, we can do what we do very well. We all have talent and skills and we feel very confident, and confidence is a very important part of collaborating, but you have to realize no matter what your skill is, you can’t do it alone, whatever we’re doing.

We were talking this afternoon, a soprano can’t do it without the libretto. The actor can’t do it without the playwright, neither can the designers. And there is a certain aspect of higher hierarchy that in any kind of assemblage of people that are trying to get to an end product, whether it’s doing a production or planning and building a new theater, or a complex of theaters, whatever it might be, and it’s different almost in every situation.

LAURA CROW: It’s interesting being a costume designer, because I not only collaborate with a scenic designer or lighting designer, a sound designer, and director, I collaborate also with the actor, which is a very big part of my job. I’m actually a psychiatrist at heart. One of the main things I do is take the director’s vision into the actor’s life because the actor often doesn’t know what the director wants from them.

I did a production with Linda Lavin years ago and Mike Nichols was directing. Mike Nichols happens to be married to Diane Sawyer, and at dress rehearsal, Diane Sawyer comes over and says, “You know, I don’t think..."
that 1950s look is good on Linda. I saw this thing over at Bloomingdale’s the other day.” Everybody thinks they can design modern dress, and you get it from every single person. It’s much easier to design period clothing. I enjoy collaboration.

Some of my favorites are actually lighting designers and I actually don’t understand why lighting designers aren’t the first people to work with the director because lighting is most closely aligned with direction. You create the emotion, you create the nuance.

I did this production of *Magic Flute* years ago at Connecticut Opera when hazers were first in. The lighting designer had done all this beautiful, kind of cathedral ceilings with light shafts through the haze and we had “the Queen of the Night” sort of emanating light. She became this and sort of appeared from behind this light curtain and everyone went, “Ah.” A performer walked on and had on a copper cape, I went and talked to the lighting designer. I said, “What’s with the copper cape? And he said, “Isn’t it beautiful? I love that color.” And I said, “Well, it’s nice, but it was black. It was meant to be black.” It was my first encounter with synthetic fabrics, which turned things into very different colors. Anyway, he taught me about additive lights. Those of you lighting designers know that term. I never have heard of that before, and he made it so that the coat was actually black but, actually, I liked the copper after I saw it. We did both ways sometimes it had this copper aura and sometimes it was black.

**MICHAEL RAMSAUR:** Color and costume. I remember well a costume designer talking to me about this peach-colored costume, and we had a paragraph of conversation before she said, “But of course it’s not peach, it’s apricot.” The problem is it looks peach.

There are all sorts of different collaborations. As a
lighting designer, you work really closely with directors and develop the design, often late in the rehearsal period. In particular, what is important is the relationship of trust and the ability to accomplish design objectives. Thinking about this, there are a couple of instances from last year where it worked particularly well. There were two things involved. One is trust. You believe, in my case, the director is going to do things, perhaps as of yet unknown, that will work with what you’re going to do. The reverse is also true. The director has to believe that even if it’s not looking like what they think it should look like right now, maybe tomorrow or the next day it will, and you choose your elements of conversation that relate to those specifics. You have to have respect with the people you’re working with in order to really collaborate well, and part of that is giving the people the time and space to really do their job. As a lighting designer, much of the creativity comes together in that last week, and, as an artist, you have to believe that what you will come up with will be good, and the people you work with have to believe that also. Many times it comes with trust and humor.

As we’re talking about collaboration, what does collaboration mean to us? I was interested to see when I got here that the title of this event is actually “Experience and Wisdom,” and I happen to believe that with experience comes wisdom. And that experience is often very hard to explain to someone else.

I work with many young people as well as many colleagues of my superior age and experience but certain things come up. In addition to lighting design, I’m a production manager, for the want of a better word, production director. I oversee and decide, in a way, what can be done and what can’t be done early on. I’ve been designing lights for over 50 years, from the time that it started with circuit breakers and some handles to more advanced times, but all of that adds together with the view of our business, our craft, and our art of listening to ideas from creative people who get together to do something and, in a way, from a managerial point of view, believing that people can do that. And often it’s really hard to define all of the details that support what experience, at least in my view, tells me about how to guide things that are happening.

LAURA CROW: You know, producers used to be more committed to trying to get us all together to collaborate, but since the price of travel has gone up, they’ve been less and less so. There was, when I first started, always a separate designer meeting that was way before the production even started. That no longer exists. And I say, “Well, can’t you meet by Skype?” You’re like the odd person in the room, you know, during that Skype. You feel like you’re...
interrupting people when you actually say something on Skype.

**LEN AUERBACH:** It’s interesting when you’re dealing with three different languages on Skype. Michael, your comment about wisdom and experiences is interesting because there are situations you get into where you are not respected for your experience, and it becomes a financial situation and doesn’t matter how much wisdom you’re trying to bring to bear. We are working on six major theaters, including the permanent Circus in theaters in Las Vegas and one in Macau. We’re working on some Chinese projects now with another production company, and what happens is there’s a budget, an agreement that is made by decision-makers very early on, that has nothing to do with the process of putting a building together for their creative entity and there are limitations that are set from the beginning. What is interesting in the beginning—call it a collaborative process—you’re setting a process that may run four or five years, depending on the project. The creative team doesn’t come on until much later. You’re just working from early storyboards or a concept, and then it’s time to change because their creative process and collaboration is a lot different than that of the architectural design team. You’re dealing with engineers who are meeting their deadlines and they want to get in the ground. You’re saying, “If we go this direction, it’s going to cost X-number of dollars more.” As I said in the beginning, we’re in the middle. We have to communicate these crazy differences to people in a way that we can come out in the end with a product that satisfies the owner, the architect, and the show producer. It has been for me one of the most challenging and stimulating experiences I’ve had in all these years. You have to respect each other. You have to know when to sort of give way.

**RANDY EARLE:** Let me bring up a question for all of you: the element of time. You have to be in on a project at the right time. How often are you brought in on whatever projects you’re working on at the appropriate time, the required time?

**LAURA CROW:** It’s kind of interesting because often you’ll be presented with a set design and the director has something already set. They’ve created the firmament that you have to put the people into, and I think that’s really too bad. As I said, I think it should start with lighting, if anything, and then costumes and scenery last.

**MICHAEL RAMSAUR:** Not the way it works. Although, Len, what you described reminds me I’ve been doing a number of devised theatre works lately, which follow the kind of problems that you just described. In traditional theatre, you create some ideas together, yet working separately. Then, you work through to accomplish them, and you’re flexible to change and so forth—but my experience with theatre is it can change on a dime and from black to white or to anything. Some elements that were totally never spoken about all of sudden can become important.

“This relates to time and to what you can accomplish over time. The later decisions are made, the less you can do with it. In the collaborative process, being positive about those potential changes and realistic about ability to accomplish, given the amount of time left, is just a process. It’s difficult not being able to accomplish what’s desired only because it came about two weeks before the show and not two months before the show.”

—Michael Ramsaur, USITT Fellow
LEN AUERBACH: I have a situation right now. We completed our schematic design deliverable on a major production theatre and the owner finally came to grips with the fact that the excavation for this project was going to be horrendously expensive, mainly because of the site that they were providing. And so, here everything is done and the schematic designs. We have all the theatre systems pretty much conceived and everything. We got an e-mail two days ago. We want to raise the building five meters out of the ground. Well, actually, the public spaces don’t work and the entry points getting access to the audience, all the exiting changes, the level of the stage and servicing would change. But this is within days of completing a deliverable. So what do you do? You have to go along with this and make the changes or devise a compromise that is a better solution. But these dictatorial things that come from this hierarchal situation can require the utmost skill of collaboration.

LAURA CROW: I love chaos. I love last-minute decisions. I love thinking on my feet. It makes me feel completely vital and alive. It’s my favorite part of theatre. It’s always spontaneous and you know, budgets don’t really matter. You’re only as good as your stock or, you know, whatever you can dredge out of the streets, whatever you can pull out of your closet. It’s amazing how you can manipulate a budget if you just have a lot of creative thinking about putting things together out of nothing.

RANDY EARLE: Do you use the word “no?”

LAURA CROW: Never, you’re not allowed to say no to the director. You can try to nudge “no” to the actor, sometimes. But actors then go behind your back and talk to the director and say, “I want,” and then the director comes back and says, “Now come on, you’ve got to do what the actor wants in this case.” So, the actor always wins.

MICHAEL RAMSAUR: I preach that you never say no. An idea wants to be, to happen, so the answer is always, “Yes, we can do that! We need to bring in four more people to work all night tonight and to be ready tomorrow. Talk to the money people to get this done. Let’s do it.”

LAURA CROW: You find it, you say yes and find a way. That’s everything in theatre. They say, “Can you do this?” “Yes,” and you do! You go back and study all night long and figure out how you’re going to do the next day. That’s how you get ahead. Nobody’s going to tell you exactly how to do everything. You have to be a creative thinker and move forward on your own.

MICHAEL RAMSAUR: I’ll change the subject a little bit because lately in my teaching I’ve decided that collaboration in teaching is one of the most important aspects. The consideration of the group being a bunch of students
“It’s interesting being a costume designer, because I not only collaborate with a scenic designer or lighting designer, a sound designer, and director, I collaborate also with the actor, which is a very big part of my job. I’m actually a psychiatrist at heart. One of the main things I do is take the director’s vision into the actor’s life because the actor often doesn’t know what the director wants from them.”

— Laura Crow, USITT Fellow and professor at the University of Connecticut

and me, as collaborators, working towards something. And in my case, it’s particularly important. In many of the things that I’m doing with the students, they actually have more knowledge and more technical ability to accomplish what we’re talking about on a project. I’m not talking about designing lighting for a show, but I’m thinking about a large-scale project that is the building of a video wall that includes a whole lot of computer programming and data distribution and things that the students, in fact, know better than I. Because I have some wisdom and some experience, I can advise on how to get a project done and I can force them to organize their thoughts and present them in a way that they can refine what they need to do, but it comes through mutually having to understand what each person is required to do. I have to respect what they bring to the table and what they’re going to be able to do. They have to listen to me and do a flow chart or a block diagram or the information that helps them solidify their thoughts in a way to really accomplish it. I’ve come to believe strongly in teaching group projects and the basic concept of collaboration.

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LAURA CROW: A production manager at the Children’s Theater Minneapolis years ago told me about something called the stage mentality. Have you heard about this? The Army trains people in a theatre so that they learn that they all have to work together to get to a goal. That’s how they work in the Army. They can only do it if they all get together. That’s true of theatre. It’s one of the few things in the world where you can’t reach your goal without each other equally pushing toward the same goal and it’s magnificent for that reason. I think you bond with people in a way that you don’t bond in any other profession. Maybe with buildings you do?

LEN AUERBACH: Well, I don’t know. You talk about the military. There is a hierarchy and you do what you’re told. And it’s one of the things that when you’re in business, you have a client, you’re expected to do what you’re told and it’s not correct in your mind, you have to find a proper way of negotiating and a process that will allow you to be in a strong position when negotiating. There’s a martial arts philosophy from the founder of judo that means giving way. It puts you in a stronger position and you can do that in your daily life as a way of understanding what the situation is. It becomes a conflict but can turn it into something that’s very positive.

LAURA CROW: I think it’s always smart to compromise early on and pick our battles. I know nobody says that, but there are things that are very important to each designer in their own situation and you need to hold on to those and you can bend a little on the other things. I’m very happy to leave some costume decisions until later. Start on the other ones earlier and be flexible.

In Salt Lake City, the Fellows of USITT will continue to conduct conversations in the Network Nexus booth on the Stage Expo show floor. Three distinguished Fellows will converse about their careers, experiences, thoughts, and more with interviewers in a very informal, casual environment. Fellows Dick Durst, Joy Emery, and Gordon Pearlman will each be featured during one of the “Stage Expo only” time slots and all interested persons are invited to attend these conversations. The conference program will have specific information regarding dates and times for each conversation.