

The State Department's *Center Stage* Program
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2013

Aim: As articulated by the U.S. Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, the Center Stage program is intended to “[demonstrate] America’s respect for other cultures by providing unique opportunities for international performing artists to engage with diverse communities throughout the United States and [offer] Americans the chance to grow in understanding and appreciation of other nations.”

Context: In 2012 the U.S. Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the New England Foundation of the Arts and various regional arts organizations and private foundations, launched Center Stage, a groundbreaking new cultural diplomacy initiative using the performing arts to connect diverse artists, cultures, and communities. As described by the State Department, Center Stage “builds on [then] Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton’s vision of ‘smart power,’ which embraces the use of a full range of diplomatic tools, in this case the performing arts, to bring people together and foster greater understanding.”

Center Stage took on an ambitious mandate to reimagine the role of the performing arts in the U.S. government’s approach to cultural diplomacy. Traditionally, international tours and artist exchanges are costly, large-scale endeavours with a high bar to entry for artists and a fairly elite audience. Center Stage, however, turned its focus away from big cities and major venues and hosted performances in small towns, mid-sized cities, and rural communities that are generally overlooked in international tours. In doing so, the program aimed to reach an American audience that may tend to have less direct contact with international cultures.

In line with this vision, visiting artists were chosen from countries that are often marginalized in American understanding and dialogue. Courtney Reilly, Assistant Director of Cultural Arts at the University of North Carolina, noted that the inclusion of Haiti among the countries represented in the 2012 tour was particularly appealing because of its narrow representation in the U.S:

It’s a country that is geographically quite close to the Southeast, but has little representation in our region other than through the national media (which focuses primarily on the earthquake, poverty, and AIDs). While we didn’t want to ignore these realities, we wanted to explore these and other issues within a larger context of the country’s history and current day arts and culture.

The performers selected were chosen for their enthusiasm as well as their artistic merit. Lisa Booth, director of Lisa Booth Management, which helped organize the tour, explained that in selecting artists Center Stage was “looking for creative minds and a younger generation of artists who could develop new viewpoints about America.” Artists were envisioned, therefore, as artistic ambassadors for their own country to America, but importantly, also as ambassadors back to their home countries who would share their personal experiences and help to spread positive impressions of the U.S. This is the crux of the Center Stage vision: a program that aims to be genuinely mutual, that remains vigilant to American image abroad, but does so by facilitating dialogue and fostering respectful, collaborative relationships rather than simply projecting a one-way message.

Program Activity: Center Stage launched in 2012 with tours by artists from Haiti, Indonesia, and Pakistan. Long before the tour actually began, Center Stage staff conducted advance trips to each country to establish personal relationships and share the program’s vision with local artists and

communities. These visits also provided staff with “a more nuanced perspective on each country” that helped to shape relationships and discussions throughout the program. Nominations were then submitted by artists and their representatives, U.S. embassy personnel, regional arts organizations, state arts agencies, or other individuals in the U.S. and abroad familiar with arts in the three countries. Applications were reviewed by a panel of artistic advisors and ultimately approved by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.¹ The inaugural 2012 tour included 10 artistic ensembles, ranging from traditional and contemporary music and dance groups to comedy troupes and masters of puppetry. These artists participated in month-long tours throughout the country, conducting dance, music, and theater performances. Formal performances were complemented by a range of related events and resources designed to deepen audience understanding and interaction. Center Stage offered a wide selection of resources about each country online, including curated literary collections of nonfiction, fiction, and multimedia for audiences of different ages. In addition to staged performances, artists also participated in lectures, demonstrations, classroom visits, workshops, master classes, and artist-to-artist exchanges. Offstage, Center Stage participants were encouraged to engage with Americans in informal activities, from joining in basketball games, meals in local homes, open mic nights, and interacting with community members at coffee shops, malls, farms, and festivals.

The program was widely considered a success. By the conclusion of the tour, Center Stage had visited 49 communities in 27 states, covering a total of more than 34,400 miles. 63,004 people attended live performances, and more than 100,000 more connected to the program through web content and social media. Artists responded with overwhelming enthusiasm and positivity, crediting the program as a rare opportunity to move “beyond ordinary interactions, stereotypes, and the difficulties of the political moment.” When asked to reflect on his experience, Ali Hamza, a Pakistani musician, expressed a sense of real connection with the local audience, saying, “when you hit that positive interaction with the audience, it’s not about where I come from, or where you come from; it’s about what we share; it’s about what we share in a fundamentally human way.” Hamza went on to reflect on the impact of the experience on his own perception of the U.S.:

I got to see Americans in a different light altogether. I found those certain people, especially among artists, who think and feel beyond borders, who believe in the reality of a human collective. Artists have the ability to think outside of the box, they have the tools to connect on a deeper/ emotional level that not only eases communication, but allows an exchange of ideas where one can appreciate and be receptive to new dimensions of everyday life.

Center Stage is set to continue: a 2014 tour, with artists from Pakistan, Morocco, and Vietnam, is currently in development.

Analysis: What makes Center Stage groundbreaking is not simply the strategic use of the arts for foreign policy: the U.S. government has a long history of using the arts to project American culture around the world, particularly during the Cold War. Center Stage is unique, however, in turning the model on its head, and focusing not on sending American artists abroad, but on bringing foreign artists to the U.S. In the framework of Public Diplomacy, Center Stage shifts away from “telling” and plants itself firmly on the side of “listening,” a perspective that, sadly, is shockingly rare. The program addresses what Kathy Fitzpatrick has called Public Diplomacy’s “neglected domestic mandate;” to not only promote U.S. image abroad, but also to “increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.” In bringing foreign performers to the U.S. rather than the reverse, this program emphasizes mutuality and dialogue over the one-way messaging strategy that has perhaps been more typical of PD initiatives in recent years.

It is worth noting, however, that much of the 2012 program's impact was defined in terms of the artists' experience. From this standpoint, all indicators point to the program being a tremendous success, with participant artists enthusiastically supporting the program and suggesting that it helped to improve their impressions of the U.S., impressions that they will hopefully share with others in their home countries. This itself is a great victory of Public Diplomacy, but it falls short of answering the question of whether Center Stage really does succeed in shifting focus towards PD's domestic mandate to the extent envisioned. This may simply be a function of limited evaluation resources – cultural diplomacy initiatives are notoriously difficult to evaluate, and it is, after all, far easier and less expensive to interview a handful of participants than it is to comprehensively assess the impact of the program on thousands of audience members. It would be interesting and valuable to see, however, how audience members and locals who interacted with Center Stage performers were impacted: whether it was simply a brief encounter, that, while interesting, left little lasting impression, or whether the experience fundamentally impacted impressions of the countries represented. It is perhaps unfair to demand too much too soon of Center Stage, considering that it only just completed its inaugural tour last year, and the program deserves tremendous credit for its ambitious launch and vision. However the program develops, let us hope that Center Stage marks the beginning of a turn to cultural diplomacy as a truly two-way, mutually-beneficial exchange that prioritizes respect and dialogue over self-promotion.

Learning Points: Center Stage reaffirms the power of live performance to open the door to dialogue and foster personal relationships. Furthermore, the initiative asserts the need to turn the lens of American Public Diplomacy back towards the U.S. to both teach and learn from diverse countries and cultures for the mutual benefit of national and global citizens.

Key Sources:

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