



## A scrappy New York theatre company draws inspiration from farming in order to attain sustained nourishment

BY ELIZA BENT

**“WE’RE NOT RUNNING A RESTAURANT HERE!”** This was my mother’s standard refrain throughout my childhood to any moans and groans that emanated from my sister and me over dinnertime selections. Quite simply, my mother is a dreadful cook. Though she can tell a story packed with *picante* punch, my mom’s culinary stylings are stale. Salt? No need. Broccoli? Cooked to mush. Cumin? Never heard of it. Whenever people wax poetic about maternal meat loafs, wonton soups or eggplant parmigiano, I have a standard refrain of my own: “Great mom, awful cook.” (It’s considerable consolation that my dad is a great Gallic chef.)

Theatre people don’t run restaurants, and (as my mom might chime in) why should they? There are plays to satisfy the tastes of all kinds of theatregoers. Shakespearean tragedies tickle different taste buds than American dramas of the ’50s, while Gilbert and Sullivan musicals have fluffier consistencies than plays by German expressionists. Today one can easily choose the play, movie or media source that most suits one’s taste range. But what about broadening your palate? Sometimes a play—or a dish—pleasantly surprises.

That’s the thinking of Jon Stancato, co-artistic director of **Stolen Chair Theatre Company** in New York City and an inveterate and adventuresome foodie. He’s a longtime member of his local Community Supported Agriculture program, in which, at the start of growing season, members pay a lump sum to farmers and then, throughout the summer, reap the harvested benefits. While picking up his farm-fresh fruits and vegetables, Stancato chats with other CSA members and his local farmer. “I’ve found myself proselytizing about my CSA in various social circles,” Stancato admits. “I’ve become totally attuned to the farmers’ struggle and what was ripe or not.” Last summer Stancato was not surprised when he and many CSA members in the Northeast missed out on tomatoes,

### CHALLENGE

To cultivate income that pays for the play-development process rather than borrowing against box-office intake.

### PLAN

Create a membership model akin to Community Supported Agricultural organizations (CSAs).

### KEY PLAYERS

Economic Revitalization for Performing Artists, CSAs, volunteers and donated goods.

### WHAT WORKED

Presenting works-in-progress, cheap eats, thematic programming (lectures, movie nights, museum outings).

### WHAT DIDN’T

Social networking, RSVPing, finding space that accommodates theatre plus food and drink.

### WHAT’S NEXT

A clarified mission statement and finding new members.

which had a poor crop due to rain. That gave Stancato the chance, however, to discover a love of graffiti cauliflower and enjoy the ways CSAs force one to get kitchen-creative.

Stancato got to wondering what would happen if a theatre company were to model itself after a CSA. He proposed the following to Stolen Chair colleagues and grant-givers: “Instead of going home with a bag of sometimes imperfect but always exciting veggies, our [Community Supported Theatre] members will get glimpses of our sometimes imperfect but—we hope—always exciting works-in-progress and related cultural events.” Put into action, the CST concept means that at the start of the theatre season participants

pay a fee that funds the development of a Stolen Chair play; that work is subsequently presented at the end of the season. This year, that play is *Quantum Poetics*, which the company describes as “a science experiment for the stage.” CST members attend monthly meet-ups to view in-progress snippets of *Quantum Poetics* and share dinner, drinks and some other cultural component, like a movie or lecture. Rather than subscribing to a season of five or six fully realized productions announced and marketed in advance, CST members purchase a yearlong pass to see thematic works-in-progress—with the bonus of eating well, being educated and socializing with fellow members. By the time *Quantum Poetics* is mounted this June, CST members will not only be experts on the play and its themes, but will also have a deeply vested interest in the work. In short, CSTers are cultivated audience super-fans, not just bums in seats.

With a \$5,000 grant from ERPA, Stancato and Stolen Chair studied CSAs to get a better sense of what potential CST members might want. A subsequent \$20,000 grant, again from ERPA, helped get the CST program off the ground and running. “Before this, our model was to develop a show for 7–12 months and then self-produce a one-month run,” says Stancato, explaining that the process often meant that by opening night the company was in debt to vendors. Stancato believes that the CST model better positions Stolen Chair to apply for grants to fund full productions because the work has already had the time and support to properly marinate. “The membership fees basically serve as a cash grant for this developmental stage,” he explains.

Membership costs vary and are tax-deductible: Artists and students pay a fee of \$175, while regular individual membership runs at \$200, with discounts for signing up early. There are also corporate memberships (\$1,000), group memberships of up to three people (\$350) and “e-memberships” for people who live outside of the metropolitan New York area and want to follow goings-on via the web (\$75). Asked if fellow artists balked over the membership prices, Stancato calculated, “If you stretch the early-bird artist membership of \$150 over nine months it breaks down to about \$15 every month. That includes an event with free food, free theatre, free wine and some other free cultural component.” A recent CST meet-up featured a lecture by Yeshiva University physics professor Gabriel

Cwilich, a Stolen Chair artistic presentation and a decadent-on-a-dime dinner. Stolen Chair spends only \$15 to feed more than 25 people; mac-and-cheese with truffle oil was the latest serving, and wine is donated.

At the moment, Stolen Chair’s CST program boasts upwards of 40 members, with pro-rated prices for late joiners. Generally about 25 people show up to the monthly events. It can be tricky garnering an accurate headcount, as RSVPing via social media sites no longer carries the same weight as such commitments did pre-Internet. Membership also includes a private social-media website that Stolen Chair hosts via Ning.com (where members find message boards about rehearsals, short videos and impromptu invites to museum field trips). Stancato estimates that only about half the 40 members are signed up for this service. “I had hoped that everyone would join the network and we could blast all the information about upcoming events and about rehearsal that way,” he says, but that hasn’t been the case. Other challenges have been the monthly deadline for presentations and the continual hurdle of finding spaces that are friendly to theatre, food and drink.

CST, still in its first year, will not fully fund the development of *Quantum Poetics*, but Stancato believes in future seasons the CST model will help the company wean itself off grants and generate stronger individual giving and corporate funding. One current CST member is a documentary filmmaker who has been shooting footage that the company plans to turn into a short video to attract new members.

Stancato recalls a season-opener event at which members of Stolen Chair were still shaky on the logistics of their own model. “We still need to clarify what it means to be a part of our CST and define how we talk about it with our community,” he concedes. Next year a new play will mean a different theme, and that means different members. “None of us really know where this ship is going,” Stancato continues. “But with each event, we’re surprised to find that it seems to be working, and that 25 to 30 people who didn’t know each other previously show up, have fun and learn from each other.” Stancato may not be running a restaurant, but as the monthly CST events multiply, the atmosphere at Stolen Chair may start to feel like home. 