The 2013 WAA Conference in LA was WAA’s largest gathering since 2007, with Presenter attendance up 11% over 2012, and the highest since 2008. How did WAA get to LA and what can we learn from this year’s gathering? Laura Ricker, WAA’s Conference Manager, gives us her in-depth review of this year’s conference from the Board selection of the location more than three years ago to the post-conference attendee evaluations.

Laura’s Conference Report to WAA Members

Every year, the Western Arts Alliance Annual Conference brings presenters, artists and agents to the shared goal of programming live performances. The conference offers exhibits, showcase performances, networking, speakers, classes, workshops, and more. Planning for each conference starts more than three years prior to the actual week we come together. And the work is by no means finished after the Closing Party—we seek in-depth member evaluations and carefully analyze every aspect of the conference, always seeking to improve, evolve, and innovate.

Part of that process includes a detailed analysis from the Conference Manager delivered to the Board and Conference and Host Committees. This article draws from that analysis.
Choosing the Conference Location

Each year, when meeting to select the conference location three years hence, the Board reviews a detailed comparison of criteria that compare and contrast costs, potential programming, general schedule, and much more, striving to ensure that WAA’s members can focus on conducting business affordably, comfortably, and productively.

Forty-seven points of comparison across multiple venues are assessed, ranging from total exhibit space square footage, hotel room rate, rental fees, food and beverage minimums, and food outlet options and costs, to offsite performance venues, ambience of the city, local WAA membership, airport statistics, and local, hotel and state sales tax. The WAA Board makes as comprehensive an evaluation of venues as possible when they determine the conference location three years in advance.

Assessing the Conference

Once the conference closes, culminating over three years of planning and preparation, we ask our Presenter and Exhibitor members to share and evaluate their experience. Evaluations are a tremendous source of information and help put the conference, program, schedule, and professional development in perspective. The Board reviews all the evaluations and discusses them in-depth during the fall Board meeting.

In addition to the evaluations, staff keeps careful count during all events onsite of how many people attend programs so that we can closely track participation. This gives us a keen eye on traffic flow, Presenter participation, hour by hour exhibit hall entries by Presenters, and much more. Between the two approaches—evaluations and counts—we achieve a very clear picture of the overall success of the conference as well as any particular advantages or challenges experienced.

So, what do we see when we look at the evaluations and counts from the 2013 Annual Conference in LA?
Sponsorship

The generous sponsorship Western Arts Alliance receives from our members is fundamental to the success of the Annual Conference, and we take great pride in our Sponsorship program. Sponsorship helps WAA defray conference fees for attendees and provides tangible promotion benefits to artists, agents, and presenters alike.

Prior to the recession, WAA sponsorship focused on mid-size and larger packages that offered substantial marketing benefits and conference amenities. Since 2008, with money being so tight, we’ve inverted the pyramid–still offering a few larger packages (the opening reception, luncheon, closing night event) but greatly expanding opportunities for mid-size and small sponsors.

The strategic shift has been very successful! Since 2009, WAA sponsorship has increased 38 percent. We have gone from 20 or 25 members contributing to WAA for the conference to 80 contributing sponsors. This year, at the opening reception, WAA celebrated our many sponsors with a special Step-and-Repeat photo opportunity before a backdrop featuring all 80 organizations. One thing that hasn’t changed? WAA’s packages are tailored for every sponsor to best meet their marketing, advertising, product placement, or performance objectives.
Presenter Activity

Presenter attendance in 2013 was up nearly 11% over 2012 and was the highest it has been since the recession began. The total registration for the conference was also the highest it has been since prior to the recession, coming in at just under 800 participants.

A count to which we pay particular attention is how many Presenter entries we have into the exhibit hall every hour. This year we had approximately 1,751 entries by Presenters over the three days — the highest entry count we have had in six years. More than 90% of Presenter respondents told us in evaluations that they visited exhibits, 10% of whom visited more than 50 exhibits. Some Exhibitors, however, have commented that there is less “browsing” foot traffic than they would like to see. The high entry numbers together with Exhibitor feedback suggest that many Presenters enter the exhibit hall for scheduled meetings rather than for on-site, unstructured “shopping.” This conclusion is bolstered by evaluation data that tells us approximately 80% of delegates, both Presenters and Exhibitors, are choosing to have meetings outside the hall. Presenter and Exhibitor utilization of the exhibit hall continue to evolve, and the WAA Board, Conference Committee, and staff will continue to monitor and evaluate this changing business dynamic.

Education, Leadership & Professional Development

Terence Blanchard’s Keynote Address, the Special Plenary Conversation, Bridging Difference: The Arts & Civic Engagement, and the Workshops and Roundtables were all well attended and the overall feedback about the varying content was positive. Congratulations to our Award Winners:

Leadership Award: Randall Kline | SFJAZZ
Service Award: Rick Farrell | ICM Partners
Mentoring Award: Ally R. Haynes-Hamblen
Distinguished Service Award: David Fischer | Broadway Center for the Performing Arts
The Mentoring and New Colleague program were well received, according to attendee evaluations, but will benefit from continued work, with information delivered earlier to the Mentor/New Colleague pairings and more attention paid to the webinar, which was very helpful to those that participated. The onsite New Colleague session saw a large attendance, yet this meant the room was over crowded, loud and challenging for intimate conversations. Mentors are a wonderful support mechanism for our new members and their participation onsite during the orientation must be bolstered for this program’s continued success.

The two Speed Lead sessions were attended by 50 Artist Managers and 45 Presenters. The sessions continue to be successful, yet each year we experience a number of Presenters who sign up for the sessions but do not attend. We will continue to work on educating Presenters about their importance to the success of these sessions. We will also continue to develop and expand the session topics.

**Hospitality & Enhancing Member Connections**

One of the criteria the Board reviews for conference sites is the availability of locations for hospitality events. With its grass lawn, pools, and outdoor bar and lounge, Board and Staff were very excited about the outdoor options the Hyatt offered. It is a rare opportunity that we have to spend so much time together outside during the week and the Hyatt provided this in abundance. All of the hospitality events were well attended, with over 400 at the Opening Reception, over 250 at the Awards Luncheon, and nearly 150 at the closing night Bollywood Banquet. Increasing the opportunities for our members to network and socialize is something we continue to expand upon.
**Performance & Discovery**

In a large city such as LA, it is understandable that there were many offsite evening events which some Artist Managers felt reduced attendance for Independent Showcasing onsite. The WAA Board, staff, and Conference and Host Committees all carefully review Independent Showcasing each year, and will continue to do so.

Several evaluations expressed concern about the policies and guidelines for Performance West and there continues to be a difference of opinion among attendees regarding the overall value of this program. Responding to these concerns, the Board is currently reviewing this program.

Responding to concerns expressed in prior conference evaluations, over the past several years the Board, Conference Committee and Showcase Committee have restructured and revitalized Juried Showcasing. Attendance continues to increase, and feedback is very positive. An important component of the Juried Showcase, and thus of conference venue selection, is the location of the Juried Showcase performances. Experience has shown that having a partner on-board with WAA and a location that is close are paramount to a successful Juried Showcase program. This year the Theatre Raymond Kabbaz at Le Lycee Francais de Los Angeles was a fantastic partner. We had 170 attendees with 103 Presenters.

**Exhibiting**

During the evaluation process of the locations for 2013, the Board reviewed the options for exhibiting at the hotel. The large ballroom and foyer could have been used for exhibiting, but would have meant an extreme reduction in pipe and drape booths and a loss of 20 exhibits and therefore an increase in conference registration costs for exhibitors. With the guidance of the Conference Committee and the Board, the choice was made to keep all exhibitors together in the California Showroom rather than splitting...
up the group among three rooms and having some placed in the Showroom while others were in the large ballroom.

Both Presenters and Artist Managers felt the California Showroom was drab, the wings were unbalanced in traffic flow, the temperature was radically different in each wing, and the below-ground location lent a heavy mood to the room. The poor environment of the exhibit hall is particularly disappointing when the positive Presenter activity is recalled. The impact of our highest Presenter attendance and hall-entry since 2007 was undercut by the negative experience of the hall itself. Should WAA return to this property, the Board will thoroughly review alternative options for exhibiting.

WAA’s Future in LA

In 2010, the membership voted to approve a three-year conference site rotation among Los Angeles, Seattle and a “wild card” city. LA has a number of locations that are plausible for our conference. We have history with three so far: The Millenium Biltmore (2007), Long Beach Convention Center (2003 & 2010), and now the Hyatt Century Plaza—all of which have pros and cons. WAA will be back in LA in 2016. In selecting the 2016 location, the Board will continue its history of thorough conference evaluation review, diligent and in-depth site comparisons, and listening to and learning from WAA members.

Seattle and Vancouver!

Before we return to LA, however, we are hard at work preparing exciting conferences in Seattle, at the Sheraton Seattle Hotel, 2014, and Vancouver, BC, at the Westin Bayshore Hotel in 2015—our first conference in Canada! Ensure you get all the coming announcements about the conference and other member news by signing up for our newsletter.