

**DENNIS:** Hello, my name is Dennis Barrett, the Local Arts Services Associate with Americans for the Arts.

**CLARE:** And I am Clare Sherlog, I am the Membership and Fundraising Associate with the Arts Action Fund at Americans for the Arts.

**DENNIS:** And today we have the pleasure of speaking with Abel Lopez, the outgoing Chair of the Board of Directors at Americans for the Arts and talking about his time as board chair. Abel Lopez, associate producing director of GALA Hispanic Theatre, is Treasurer of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters. He is a former chair of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and immediate past chair of the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC). Mr. Lopez is also a member of the Boards of Directors of the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, NALAC, In Series, and Black Women Playwrights Group. He has directed productions at GALA, Horizons Theatre, DC Arts Center, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Source Theater, and In Series in Washington, DC, as well as many other theaters across the nation. His productions have also been presented in Venezuela, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Cuba. In 1991, Mr. Lopez was named a Washingtonian of the Year.

Welcome Abel, thanks so much for talking with us today.

**ABEL:** Good afternoon, it's great to be here with you guys.

**CLARE:** Abel, I know you've served on the Americans for the Arts Board of Directors in various capacities since 2003 and then as Chair of the Board since 2013. How did you first get involved with Americans for the Arts, and how did that lead you to your role as Chair?

**ABEL:** Well I first got involved with Americans for the Arts by attending the Annual Convention and I served in several capacities both as facilitator at sessions and panel discussions as well as a speaker on certain areas. Then I was a consultant on a project which was, at the time, the Animating Democracy Project. So, I've had a long history with the organization, and then Bob asked me, while at the time I was serving on the board of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies and Bob and I had a conversation about possibly joining the board here at Americans for the Arts, which excited me a lot because I have always really respected the organization and admired the work that it conducted, not only in Washington but across the country and communities that are of particular concern to me. I was asked to join the board and got involved in the board business by serving on committees and then chairing a couple of committees and task forces, then became Vice Chair and then was asked to serve as the board chair. It was a natural progression, I think.

**DENNIS:** That's actually something really good to hear from your perspective. As an emerging leader, to know that there are always opportunities here at Americans for the Arts.

**ABEL:** The opportunities are there and I think that Americans for the Arts does a good job of engaging various communities, and by communities, I mean not just racial or ethnic communities, or artistic communities, but the community at large whether they are emerging leaders or young people as well as people who are committed patrons and funders. So, I think there is a wide pool by which to draw and there are various portals by which you can enter and get engaged with Americans for the Arts. As large as an organization that it is, the connection is personal and allows the individual to engage in ways within the organization to get involved and

get engaged. I think not only at the national level, but actually at the local level, which I think is really important to make that connection between the national and the local level activities and work.

**DENNIS:** So you've seen over the years so many great things during your tenure at Americans for the Arts, but can you talk about what you are most proud of accomplishing here during your time as Chair?

**ABEL:** I don't think that they are necessarily my personal accomplishments, as they are I think in working with the board and engaging in a process that has reached consensus around various things like activities or projects, one of which was early in my term was making certain that Bob Lynch was going to stay with us for another few years, which meant going through the contract process and making certain that Bob is here for these last five years. I view that as an accomplishment because I think Bob is such a natural leader and has been an effective leader and spokesperson for the arts and Americans for the Arts in general, that it was important that we continue to maintain and sustain that leadership at that level. Again, I considered that not necessarily my accomplishment, although I was heading and initiating the effort as chair of the board to negotiate that contract. Secondly, the achievement of the current strategic plan, which will expire at the end of 2017. I think the success we've had in reaching the goals, perhaps not every goal that we set out was not necessarily impacting as widely as we had hoped, and that's to be seen, I'm not the best judge of that, but from my perspective the organization and the board was committed to engaging in that strategic plan as well as engaging the staff and the staff being of high quality to be able to formulate the specifics and implement the specifics of the strategic plan and its objectives and goals. So I also consider that an accomplishment and thirdly, I think the adoption of the [Statement on Cultural Equity](#) on behalf of the board. I started working on that area, even though I was not the chair, [Margie Reese](#) really carried the load the last two years as chair of the task force, but I've been engaged with that issue since I came on the board. It was really important during my tenure that we really explored the idea, discussed it, formulated the statement, and adopted the statement. I think I would have been disappointed had we not. I think the statement is not only important for the organization, but I think it's important for the field, and it's important for our peer organizations if you think about the work of our peer organizations, they are also as engaged with this and are adopting their policies. We may not have been the first ones, but I think we are a leading organization in doing so, therefore a model for not only the field, but also the communities across the country.

**CLARE:** I was speaking a little bit more to the statement on Cultural Equity. You mentioned that a lot of organizations have adopted a similar model and I just wonder if you could speak a little bit more about how you think that this might affect the field at large and if this will maybe carry on in any other ways or help in any other capacities.

**ABEL:** Well I think that the statement is only the first step in this whole process, I think it's about systems change and it's looking at how can we affect change in these systems by which we operate whether it's the artist operates or the arts organizations, or where the funders operate. So I think a systemic look at this, but an adoption of the statement and the values that are embedded in the statement are really important and is the first step. I think our work in local communities this past year with [Clay Lord](#)'s leadership in looking at [conducting a survey](#) as to who has the policies, is gathering the information necessary in order for us to implement more

specific strategies as to how to make that systemic change. So I think that's important and I think the conversation is engaging and the conversation is really important. The policy statement says it's not only an idea, but it's a policy statement of values for the organization and it's a statement of action for the organization. Not only externally but also internally, and I know that the staff has been engaged in the process by which they are looking at these issues internally as well. So, we're approaching it from an internal and external perspective and not only in one area of the organization or the work of the organization, but the route. More importantly, looking at how society addresses it because I don't think we can divorce ourselves from what happens in communities across the country and how the communities and the nation are changing, and how that will affect the arts and culture histories of this country.

**DENNIS:** It's really great to have you here to talk about a lot of that great work. We're going to take a little bit more of a pivot and ask a little more about you. Are you an artist yourself at all?

**ABEL:** Yeah, I practice the arts, I am a theatre director and my background is that I have a business degree from Texas A&M University in South Texas. I grew up in a town of about 400 people, so I always wanted to be a lawyer, so I structured my life when I was a kid growing up, wanting to become a lawyer so I went to college to study business thinking that would make me prepared to be a lawyer. I graduated from law school and moved to D.C. to practice law before I went back to South Texas to practice, and after two years I decided I wanted to do something for myself and I always remembered how I enjoyed performing when I was growing up, so I looked for a theatre class, and got into the theatre class, and I was really bad. I would go in with a three-piece suit, expect to be taught about art and how to act, which was contrary to the whole process; it was more about personal exploration, but I stuck it out and finished a two year program and then got involved in the local community programming and theatre programming in the city, that's how I became engaged. I've been directing for the last 30 years, both locally and across the country. Some of the productions I did have been presented in several Latin American countries as well. I want to add one thing about how I wanted to be a lawyer. I realized when I was much older that it wasn't a lawyer that I wanted to be, but the actor Perry Mason who I was growing up with. My parents wish I had figured that out before I had gone to law school because of the cost of the expenses, but more importantly, I think the reason I wanted to go into the law is the same reason that I ended up getting involved in the arts organizations that I've led and in the art work. It's not just about directing, but the role that the arts play in society and communities. Because the law was about seeking to change the social order, to better the social good. I think that the arts do the same thing, so I realized I was doing what I wanted to do, but not in the ways that I thought that I was going to be doing it in the first place.

**CLARE:** As someone who is so active in the theatre community here in DC, I'm wondering if you have noticed any specific trends, either within theatre or the arts in general, and how you think that might, as you just mentioned, reflect societal trends in the United States.

**ABEL:** Two things: one is that the local theatre community first of all has changed with respect to what gets presented on the local stages. When I was president of one of the organizations, one of the boards that I chaired was the League of Washington Theatre. My second year as chair was when we did a symposium on nontraditional casting at Arena Stage that I led as far as looking at the issue. From that point on, not because again, because of my personal efforts, but because of the fact I was interested in pursuing that idea, because of my work with the [Alliance for](#)

[Inclusion in the Arts](#), which is based in New York and looking at the whole issue of diversifying American theatre, I started to work on locally here. The same kind of values that my other work with Americans for the Arts was also exhibited there with theatre work I was doing in Washington. If you look at the theatre community in DC has not only grown in size, it has also changed in its emphasis of what it's looking at. There is currently an equity, diversity and inclusion effort that is being looked at by other local theatres as well. It is also more strange to go to a theatre production at a local theatre and not see multiracial casts, that are not defined by what the character is perceived to be, but by the visionary approach that people are taking to opening up opportunities to reflect American societies and communities across the country. So it has changed in that we are looking at diversity, equity, and inclusion locally as well. But also from an aesthetic perspective it has opened up what people consider, and changed what people think that culture is, what aesthetics are, because we're hearing stories that have not traditionally been told on an American stage, and that begins to change the perception that it's not an "other" but it's part of the American fabric. I think that's really an important change. I also think there's more new work that's being produced locally which also will encourage new voices to come forth that have not historically been included on American stages.

**DENNIS:** Abel, I just want to say thank you so much again for coming in and chatting with us today. It's been an absolute pleasure to hear your story. It sounds like a lot of your past experience has led you up to this point and we're just so grateful that you took the time to be the Chair for the past four years and for being a part of Americans for the Arts for quite a long time. We are so thankful for your leadership and we're really excited for [Julie Muraco](#) to come in as your successor to see all the great things that continue at Americans for the Arts.

**ABEL:** I'm confident that Julie is going to be doing a terrific job and carry the organization to even greater heights. I also feel that I am looking at the future leadership of Americans for the Arts and I'm sure there will come a day when I'll be listening to an interview about you guys and how you're leading the organization as well. Thank you!