

CEO to CEO: How Tom Gabbard Turned Blumenthal Performing Arts into a Cultural Destination

5 MIN READ



Tom Gabbard, President and CEO of Blumenthal Performing Arts in North Carolina since 2003, has transformed the organization into one of the country's most important cultural destinations.

Blumenthal manages multiple theaters, hosts thousands of events, and presents the largest Broadway touring season in the area. From being among the first venues to host the Immersive Van Gogh exhibition to managing the Charlotte International Arts Festival, Blumenthal is at the forefront of theatrical innovation at a time when things still seem precarious.

In this interview with AudienceView CEO Eric White, Gabbard talks about the organization's vision, impact, and commitment to community engagement.



Tom Gabbard
(© Chris Edwards)

This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

For those who don't know, what is Blumenthal Arts?

We are a Performing Arts Center. Currently, we manage four theaters and there's a fifth that we rent. We host everything from local resident companies to touring productions. We are a top 10 market in the touring Broadway touring business. There are few cities that bring as much touring Broadway to this region as we do. Typically, it's 17-19 titles a year, most of which are at least four-week runs, most of which are Equity. And so, people in Charlotte have access to more high-quality touring Broadway than most cities around the country, and we're very proud of that.

Over the last four years, we have also plunged in on this new world of immersive experiences, and we manage the Charlotte International Arts Festival. Over time, we have been very serious-minded about finding ways to continue to enlarge our audience. We talk about being here to serve everybody and the way you do that is to identify new products that help expand the market that you serve. I'm very proud of the fact that we've done that intentionally and have had a lot of success.

Tell me more about the Charlotte International Arts Festival.

We've had three seasons of it, so we're still relatively new at this. But in three seasons, we've had a little over half-a-million people visit over the course of 17 days. Most of it is free. Most of it is outdoors. What we've seen over time is that the local international element has really become more and more important. Yes, we bring cool things from around the world, but we've really engaged local international communities, and particularly existing international festivals that have moved their dates to fall under our umbrella. It's really a celebration of international cultures here in Charlotte, and a way for us to acknowledge that we've become a global community.

A lot of people didn't think of Charlotte as an international community at one point in time, but now we are a global center for commerce. Banking is a big deal here, but over 1,000 companies from around the world have set up their headquarters in the region. We're embracing these cultures and respecting the traditions that make us an even better city.

You mentioned that you want to serve “everybody.” How do you define “everybody”? Is “everybody” the Charlotte metro area, or communities from other states and regions?

We are easily a multi-state organization. South Carolina is only 12 miles away. We have staff that live in South Carolina. We consider our core market a 16-county radius. And in those 16 counties, there are nearly three million people. We're trying to offer very distinctive things that people have a reason to travel a distance for and to spend the weekend, hopefully. And because Charlotte is such a vibrant city, there are people from smaller towns for whom this is their Manhattan experience.

Even on the Broadway side, shows typically try to get here certainly within the first year of their tour. There are a lot of things that go into figuring out a touring route, but it's not just geography. In the first 12 months, producers generally like to play in the markets that are historically going to deliver the best profit. We're very active as an investor. We manage a group called the Independent Presenters Network that consolidates investment money in a lot of shows. We've done over 200 Broadway shows, national tours, and shows in the West End (London). I look at it from the vantage point of the producer seeing the financial statements. If you've taken a big loss in New York, the first thing a producer wants to do is go out on the road and make some of that back. They want their investors to see some decent profit in the first six to 12 months. Charlotte is generally among the most profitable stops on a national tour, we play these shows very early.



Inside Blumenthal's Belk Theater
(handout image)

So New York becomes a loss leader?

Historically, 70 to 75 percent of these shows never recouped in New York and it is really worrisome. If Broadway turns into a place where it's just a loss leader, but then you go out and make it up on the road, that won't be healthy, but that's ultimately where we're headed.

Do you see a world where shows start to skip New York altogether?

Frankly, we've been a huge advocate of that for a while. That's why we've cultivated strong relationships with London. Every other year, we take our IPN members to London to network with our colleagues over there. A few years ago, we had a meeting with David Ian, the British producer. He produced *The Bodyguard*, which I was a fan of and had seen, and he decided not to play Broadway. I said "David, there's a different way to do this. Come over to North America, skip New York, and just get out on the road." That's exactly what he did. The tour was out for a year-and-a-half and it did very well.

We're experiencing that currently with *Mrs. Doubtfire*. It was a total loss in New York, didn't get good reviews, goes out on the road, and it's beloved. It got good reviews and it made [money](#).

There's also a middle model, which is what *The Wiz* did, where a show will stop in New York, but it won't originate in New York, so it truly is part of a tour. Financially that can make a lot of sense, and I think we'll see it more and more.

How many of your shows have been up for Tonys?

We've been involved with shows that have won 14 Tony Awards. I always remind people that we put our own investment plus organize our peers as a way for us to take care of our city. We're a mid-size city that plays in the big leagues because we do things like organize investments in shows. It's not just the money, but it's having a seat at the table to influence decision making. We've gone from mainly being valued for the money to more and more of these shows wanting us involved as a strategic advisor because we bring some real savvy to the road. The next chapter after New York becomes an important part of the business model.