

Staff Q&A with Christopher Gruits

Text by [Lauren Hertzler](#)

Christopher Gruits, the new executive and artistic director of the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, talks about his first few months on the job, his goals for the years ahead, and some highlights of the upcoming season.



Photo by Peter Tobia

Although a vocalist at heart, [Christopher Gruits](#) knew that he didn't want a performance career. Instead, when it comes to arts programming, he's always been drawn to the behind-the-scenes, managerial work.

"I've always loved music, and although I loved performing, I was more interested in producing and managing the product," he says. "I've also been very interested in theaters, what they do and what their role is in a city or a culture. It's such an important part of the urban fabric."

This passion led Gruits to study arts management early on. He hasn't looked back since.

Last year, Gruits, originally from Detroit, packed his bags for what has quickly become one of his new favorite cities: Philadelphia. He took the reins as the [Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts'](#) executive and artistic director this past September.

In a mere seven months, Gruits has locked in several premiere performances for the 2017-18 season, developed new artists-in-residence programs, and has made himself known around [Penn's](#) campus as a collaborator. His goal? To take Annenberg's programming to the next level.

Gruits sat down at the Annenberg to discuss his background, how he hopes to better integrate the Annenberg performances with the student curriculum, why he wants to "bring dance back in a big way," and some highlights of the next season.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your background. How'd you get into this type of work?

A: I have an undergrad from Michigan State University and had very much a core liberal arts education there. I came out of an interdisciplinary humanities program, but with an arts management focus. It was a great program. It allowed you to take a mix of business and fine arts classes. Senior year, I did an internship at The Metropolitan Opera Guild at Lincoln Center.

Q: And you went back to school for your MBA too, right?

A: I started working at the Seattle Symphony right out of undergrad, in fundraising and later in operations. I really learned the core business of programming. Then I worked at Carnegie Hall the first time as an artistic project manager when they opened Zankel Hall, which is their smaller venue in the basement and that was really focused on more contemporary programming across music. I worked there for about four-and-a-half years, then got my MBA at the University of Edinburgh.

Q: What were you doing right before you came to Penn?

A: For about three-and-a-half years, I was vice president of Presentations at Interlochen Center for the Arts. Interlochen is a national art center, summer camp, and boarding school for really all of the arts. I headed up a division that produced 600 events a year and also oversaw the classical radio station.

Q: What sparked your interest in the Annenberg Center?

A: When I heard about the Penn opportunity with Annenberg I was really intrigued. Annenberg has always had a really important role in Philadelphia, across dance, music, and theater, but I really saw an opportunity to transform the Center to really take it to the next level and further integrate what it's doing with curriculum and the student experience. The role of a university presenter, which is how we kind of refer to ourselves, is to support and enhance curriculum in partnership with faculty and staff. So, coming to faculty and saying, 'How can guest artists help enhance your curriculum, and support the student experience?' I also feel strongly that the students at Penn should have a basic understanding and experience with a range of important artists of our day.

Q: In your first few months here, what have you been up to?

A: It's trying to get to know everybody at Penn and in Philadelphia. To really get to know the staff and understand how the Annenberg works. From the morning till the evening, it's a place that's really running all the time. Concurrently, I've been putting together the Children's Festival as well as the programming for 2017-18. We'll announce the next season on May 4.

Q: What's the theme for the next season?

A: The Annenberg has always filled the role as an innovative presenter, a presenter that's bringing in artists that are a little bit more on the cutting edge, more diverse. Artists that are frequently performing in New York and D.C. but then maybe skipping Philadelphia. There's a big opportunity there for the Annenberg to continue with that. A big thing for next season is we are bringing dance back in a really big way. For instance, we'll bring Mark Morris Dance Group, one of the finest choreographers today. Based in New York, they haven't been to Philadelphia in about 14 years. He's returning and he'll be the first Annenberg artist-in-residence. What that means is he will be performing at the Annenberg, working with students a little bit, and then also we're looking to establish some collaborations with Penn Medicine as well.

Q: That's cool. Why are these artists-in-residence programs so important?

A: The Annenberg is here to support artists and to connect artists to the Penn community and to Philadelphia. What we want to do is create and facilitate opportunities for artists to get a little bit more in-depth. This structure allows them to look at a theme in a little bit more of a detailed way, and also cross disciplines. So in the case of Mark Morris Dance Group, the dance ensemble uses live music for all their performances. Morris is very, very interested in music and film. So not only are we presenting one of the world's premier dance ensembles, but he's also curating film, he's also looking at music, he's looking at things in a deeper way.

Q: Any highlights of the next season you'd like to share?

A: We're having a Cuba festival in the spring featuring a range of Cuban artists, many of which will make their Philadelphia debut. Another big highlight is that we will have the first orchestra-in-residence program with the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia. They will do a series of three concerts at the Annenberg's Prince Theatre. The seating will be in three-quarter round, and the musicians will talk between pieces. It'll be very informal; people can have drinks. It'll be a different format for classical music. Also, in September, we're having a really big production. It's a world premiere of a piece by Pig Iron Theatre in Philadelphia and it will be an anchor event for the Fringe Festival. It's also in collaboration with Penn's Environmental Humanities program. The piece is called 'A Period of Animate Existence.' It's a multidisciplinary musical theater piece that's going to be in the Zellerbach, and it involves the choir The Crossing, a contemporary choir based in Philadelphia that has a fine national reputation. There will also be an orchestra. It's a huge production and it's based on the work that happened with the Environmental Humanities program and their artists-in-residence program.

Q: How is the Annenberg the same or different from places you've worked before?

A: Well, one, it is a university presenter. We have this great advantage in that we can leverage the assets and resources of the University. We can bring faculty in to give pre-concert talks to give context for a lot of the programs that we provide. We're here to try to support what the student experience is and to support curriculum. The other thing is that we really are a place that has a long tradition of presenting very innovative, cutting-edge work across dance, music, and theater. We like to think we have a balanced curatorial vision. People can come here for indie music or folk music or blues or gospel or jazz, but we also have a slant of more innovative things that you wouldn't be able to see elsewhere in Philadelphia.

Q: What are some of your big goals for the Annenberg?

A: Financially, we want to make sure it's a very healthy institution moving forward. Increasing attendance, increasing fundraising, and increasing engagement with Penn faculty, students, and staff is a primary goal. We want to try to bring students in beyond just having them perform in the Center for their groups, which is great, but we want to have them integrate with the guest artists that are coming here, too. We want to serve Penn's campus in a big way in terms of hosting programming outside of the Annenberg, such as bringing small programs across campus, to the Pennovation Center, for example. For the building long term, we'd like to see more food and dining options here, more students in the building during the day in a cafe setting, transforming our space with a different entrance and exterior lighting, perhaps a small restaurant or club where we could put more small scale programming. So, increasing activity and business in the building and also thinking about this concept of a performing arts center for the 21st century, which is more open and a little bit less formal. One of the big, exciting things we have coming up is the Sachs Arts Innovation Hub that's coming into the Annenberg after the University received the largest gift for the arts. That gift will create a space for the Hub and its director, and will upgrade some of the spaces and signage and serve as a central space for information about arts and culture on campus.

Q: I was able to talk with Mike Rose, who served as the Annenberg's head for nearly 20 years, before he retired last year. Has he helped with your transition?

A: He's been a great resource for me. I was on email with him. We've had lunch, been in touch. He's been very helpful and supportive, and I think he's obviously very eager to see the Annenberg succeed after his long tenure here.

Q: Why are performing arts centers like the Annenberg so important for our country, and our world?

A: Performing artists have always commented on and created work in reaction to current events. That's an important thing that needs to be ongoing no matter what is happening in the world. They are carrying the conversation forward about art and society, and addressing those fundamental things of what it means to be human, which is vital. I think performing arts centers are asking people to step out of their day-to-day when they come into the building. We're asking you to sit in a theater and be quiet for a period of time, put your phone down and experience something outside yourself and also connect with people who are experiencing an event. That's a very special thing. It's hard to get people to commit the time to it but once they do, a vast majority of people have a very positive experience. We also want to make sure we are supporting artists to make sure they have a platform and they are able to communicate with audiences.

Q: In, say, 10 years, when people look at the Annenberg, what do you hope they see?

A: I'd like them to think of the Annenberg as the place for innovative programming. To look at University City and West Philadelphia as a destination to see more interesting work. I think that as University City changes and grows, it's becoming a really dynamic part of the city with so much energy. We do have this opportunity to be the arts and culture hub for this part of town. It's kind of akin to, in New York City, people go to BAM in Brooklyn for more innovative programming. It's a destination, but that took a long time to develop. Philadelphia is kind of lacking that and I think we have that role to play.

Q: How often do you go to shows?

A: All the time. I try to go to almost everything here at the Annenberg. I do have a four-year-old, so sometimes I can't make it. I also try to go to a lot of events across the city and support colleagues at other institutions. I'm pretty sure I have something different going on every night this week.

Q: So it's not really a 9 to 5 gig?

A: It's more a 24-7 job. I have to work hard not to work. It's a small staff. But all nonprofits are like this. Everyone is working this way, with limited resources and so much to do. But I think if you enjoy it, it doesn't really feel like work.

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