

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
New Plays Initiative

New Play Development Programs in US Theaters
*A foundation changes its practice of support for
commissions, readings, workshops, and premieres*

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Bill Ivey, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and author of the recently published *Arts, Inc.* (2008), conjectures that the health of the arts and culture system can be evaluated by looking at two processes: “nurturing” and “gate-keeping.” As Ivey put it in a 2004 keynote address at the Grantmakers in the Arts conference,

Do arts leaders—the heads of record labels, film studios, art galleries, and performing arts centers—possess the resources and the creative flexibility required to invest in the work of artists; to nurture new or established art of quality? And are the gates sufficiently open: are paths of distribution, wholesale, and retail sufficiently broad and clear to allow a diverse variety of art and artists to readily connect with audiences?

There are many theaters whose artistic directors, dramaturgs, and literary managers do excellent work, often in collaboration with others, shepherding new plays to successful premieres and helping to assure they have a continued life. These theaters also find large and diverse audiences for the new plays that they produce. However, by-and-large, in the current system for developing and producing new plays, artists are not nurtured, the gates they confront are narrow, and the paths of distribution are neither broad nor clear.

Too few artistic directors, too few Master’s playwriting programs, and too few critics function as gatekeepers for the entire system—thus, a relatively small number of playwrights inevitably receive the vast majority of commissions and production opportunities. Because too much rides on the success or failure of each new play, many excellent plays die with their premieres, and many good works are not given the opportunity to continue to evolve and improve. Fear of alienating subscribers, critics, and donors leads many to produce “do-no-harm” seasons, which lack artistic or regional distinction. And, at some theaters, commissions, readings, workshops, and new play development programs have become a way to reduce the risks associated with producing new work; these close the gates while appearing to hold them open. They do not provide authentic paths to full production or serve as tools for nurturing and investing in playwrights.

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The Mellon Foundation’s support for the nation’s theaters dates back to 1974, when it made an initial round of grants to nine major American regional theaters—organizations that were, at the time, dedicated to the preservation of classical theater and to the encouragement and performance of new plays. Early support was directed to testing new artistic ideas and approaches and to the support of classical repertory, which required larger casts, longer rehearsal periods, fees for adaptations and translations, and other expenses that were often beyond the reach of these theaters. At the time, theater support from all sources was greater for new play production than for producing classics. Beginning in 1990, the Foundation’s program shifted to focus on helping theaters address the diverse and specific obstacles that discouraged their artistic or administrative development. By 2006, Mellon’s National Theater Program was providing ongoing, multiyear support to approximately 35 resident theaters, whose budgets ranged from

\$1 million to more than \$45 million (50 percent had budgets of more than \$10 million). While the program aimed to be flexible and responsive, the Foundation generally awarded three-year grants of \$150,000 to \$250,000 in support of three areas: new play development, ambitious classical productions, and training/resident acting companies.

Recognizing that small, artist-driven companies were a critical part of the general ecology of the theater field, in 1997 the Foundation also began a program for Off-Broadway theaters. These companies were seen as increasingly important resources for experimentation, development and production of new work, and training of artists. In the most recent round of the New York Theater Program (2008), three-year grants (ranging from \$30,000 to \$150,000) were awarded to 33 theaters (producers, ensembles, and incubators of new work), whose budgets ranged from \$300,000 to \$3.5 million. Since 2000, the Foundation has also provided major support, in partnership with the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, for Theatre Communications Group's *New Generations* program. This initiative has three components: a mentorship program to support the development of theater practitioners, an audience development program to strengthen the efforts of theaters to engage younger and more diverse constituencies, and a travel grant program to support exchanges among theater colleagues in the US and abroad.

In 2004, the Foundation held a meeting with leaders in the performing arts field to discuss the current priorities of the Performing Arts program and possible future directions. The discussion was far-ranging, but one headline stands out in the final report: **Creativity continues but our structures, systems, and nomenclature are not keeping up with the changes that are happening.** Many at the meeting attested to the creative energy of emerging artists but observed that much of that energy was not being used in the existing formal system of nonprofit performing arts (which did not seem capable or willing to support the development of these artists); that younger/emerging artists were increasingly ambivalent about working within organizations; that the creative process was underfunded and did not honor the way that work truly gets made; and that work was being presented that was neither as complete nor of the quality it could have achieved with adequate resources and time, and sufficiently flexible structures to support the creative process, which differs from artist to artist, and which must allow for false starts, as well as failing and starting over.

The Foundation held a second convening in 2005. It focused specifically on understanding the access younger artists had to the current arts and culture system, the influence of their artistic practices and innovations on the system, and how they were defining, making, and supporting their work. Once again, the discussion was far-ranging, but participants were adamant and united in one recommendation: They encouraged us to support “the swamp” (the fertile stew of small organizations they believed took risks and did innovative work) rather than “the mall” (major institutions that were perceived as increasingly risk averse in their programming).

Among the important observations made at the 2005 meeting was that many emerging and even midcareer artists were reliant upon one of a very few “independent producers”—individuals who were passionate about the talents of particular artists and who invested substantial time, energy, and resources in these artists over time. They helped artists develop their work and access and navigate the rather “artist-unfriendly”

system. Some of these producers were operating within arts organizations, some in management companies. Others had no formal ties to a company and were, in a sense, free agents.

This vivid depiction of the challenges facing this relatively small group of artists, primarily based in New York City, left open a number of questions. How did emerging artists in other cities access the system and how did it work? Did the same swamp versus mall situation exist outside of New York? Did independent producers exist as well? What were the pathways available to artists? Did some cities have more resources than others? Were there networks/collaborations/models that were working particularly well in some cities, but not used in others?

The Gates of Opportunity, which is available on the Foundation's Web site, is an abridged version of the paper David Dower prepared for us to help us answer these and other questions. Dower traveled to 15 US cities and spoke with more than 300 artists and practitioners about the infrastructure available for supporting new works and new artists. He assessed current practices and identified outstanding efforts.

Dower's 2007 report is thoughtful, provocative, and simultaneously hopeful and sobering. The report speaks for itself. We do, however, underscore three key findings:

- The extent of artistic activity is robust, however, the quality of the results is unpredictable. Artists are flooding the system, and a great deal of work is being created, but there is a concern that the field may be "silting up"—the glut of artists choking the gates make it difficult for real talent to be identified and promoted through the system; thus, the overall quality of what is presented is declining.
- Support for the development of new work seems to be directed at one-size-fits-all approaches, even though the process of artistic development is idiosyncratic and calls for a case-by-case, artist-by-artist approach.
- Language describing the development of new work is ambiguous. Terms like *artist-focused*, *workshop*, *residency*, *development*, *new work*, and *emerging* mean vastly different things to different people. There is often a lack of transparency and clarity in communication between artists and institutions, and between funders and institutions, owing to the amorphousness of these terms. This has the effect of creating confusion, frustration, and disappointment when expectations are not met.

While Dower was conducting his field research, we met individually with playwrights, dramaturgs, artistic directors, and heads of playwriting centers. From those conversations, a disconcerting picture of new play development and production in the US emerged. We heard about often unhelpful practices which, by now, have been recited time and again at conferences and meetings, and covered in the mainstream media. A few of the most commonly noted include: stepped commissions from theaters, usually based on the assumption that all scripts will require revisions before they are finished;

workshops as substitutions for full productions; readings as a tool for “test marketing” a play with audiences, or for cultivating donors; feedback sessions that are heavy-handed, invasive, and detrimental to artists and the artistic process; the failure of large and small theaters, playwriting labs, and MFA programs to collaborate for the benefit of the play and playwright; the increasing influence of marketing departments of theaters on the development of plays; the influence of enhancement money on the production of new plays; the unwillingness of theaters to commit to second and third productions of plays that have premiered elsewhere; new work being limited in scope and size by financial circumstances of theaters willing to present them and by the physical constraints of the small 99-seat black box theaters in which they are often produced; and a lack of investment over time in playwrights—their having an artistic home.

In September 2007 we convened a group of distinguished playwrights, dramaturgs, and artistic leaders of organizations perceived to be leaders in the field of new play development and production to consider that topic. Our goals were to: (1) understand the underlying structure of causal relationships that affect how new plays are developed and produced in this country; and (2) determine whether the Foundation could intervene and provide support that would help improve the current system in some modest way. It was not to espouse or create a new “model” for play development; we recognize that there is no single approach that could work for what is by nature a creative and highly varied process. The Foundation’s intention was to be constructive rather than prescriptive. We asked these leaders to help us identify where new play development and production was effective, and sought to understand how the practices of those organizations were distinguished from others in the field.

Ben Pesner’s summary of that conversation is also posted on the Foundation’s Web site. Four comments noted in his report resonated particularly strongly with us, and have informed much of our thinking over the past year.

The first by a playwright, discussing the **development** process:

The tricky thing is that the two worlds, the public and the private, don’t stay separate. The public development process begins to affect how [writers] think about their plays and the kind of plays they begin to develop, and what kind of ideas they have about what’s possible and not possible, and what’s worth writing and what is not.

The second by the head of an MFA playwriting program about **commissions**:

The danger with commissions is that they encourage the writing of ... plays that playwrights don’t really care about and plays that the theaters don’t really want to see. It’s basically a \$20,000 greeting card. If you are going to create something that isn’t going to be done and doesn’t matter to anybody, you should write some TV... You shouldn’t use your precious craft to do the work nobody really wants. We need to find a way to ask for the urgent play, and then reward that with a production.

The third by a leading artistic director about **artists' compensation**:

Something pernicious about the whole field that has changed in my adult lifetime is the nonprofit theater has decided to get out of the business of supporting artists. The underlying assumption is that artists will not make their living in the nonprofit theater, [or] for the most part in the commercial theater either, that you'll make your living in television or teaching, and that you'll slum with us. We are going to limit who writes plays for the American theater to that segment of writer who can write good TV shows or maybe musicals. That would be a horrible limitation of what our field is.

The fourth was a reflection in the report on a general conversation of the practice by regional theaters of quarantining new works to their **secondary black box theaters**:

...the danger is that this [practice] will lead to a self-perpetuating cycle, in which writers tailor plays for ever-smaller venues and shrinking casts because they know they won't be produced otherwise; and theaters in turn program ever-smaller plays because no large ones are being written. Audiences are then implicitly trained to expect that new work means smaller, second-class work.

Participants suggested several areas of support for the Foundation to consider. The following recommendations were uniformly endorsed by the group and considered by program staff to be relevant to the Foundation's aims:

- (1) **Support playwrights.** Whether through residencies at theaters or playwriting centers, or through larger commissions, travel grants, or fellowships, playwrights need greater financial resources and the time in which to write their "urgent" plays.
- (2) **Support productions, not development.** Plays need to be produced. One playwright observed that when funders make grants to theaters to "develop plays" rather than to "produce plays," they inadvertently provide the wrong incentive. Funders would do better to support theaters in the production of new plays rather than play development.
- (3) **Support artistic risk taking.** More forces undermine artistic risk-taking than support it. Artistic directors are expected to have box office successes with every show they produce. Funders, sponsors, and boards who emphasize the use of metrics such as the number of tickets sold and earned income ratios, almost invariably encourage theaters to place financial success above artistic risk-taking, integrity, and vision. Nonprofit funders should enable theaters to produce works of size, ambition, and scope that would not be produced commercially.

- (4) **Support playwriting centers and small theaters.** Playwrights value the “artist-focused” resources that writing centers and labs afford them. Most get their first productions from small theaters that are committed to new work and to playwrights. The majority of funding for new work, however, goes to large resident theaters, rather than to these types of organizations.
- (5) **Support interdisciplinarity.** The nature of theater, as an art form, is changing as artists are increasingly working in an interdisciplinary fashion. As a result, theaters need resources to support collaborations among artists from various disciplines (such as dance, music, and visual art), as well as with theater ensembles that create devised, rather than text-based, new works.
- (6) **Support collaboration.** Funding should shift away from an emphasis on “world premieres” and recognize that artists and projects need various types of support throughout the development and production process. Funding should enable large and small theaters, playwriting centers, and universities to bring together their complementary resources and capabilities in support of playwrights and effective development and production trajectories for new work.
- (7) **Support audience development.** One barrier to investment in new work is the perceived intolerance audiences have for artists and fare they do not know. Participants made two key recommendations: First, that funders should underwrite ticket subsidy programs, because ticket prices at large theaters are generally very high and audiences may think attending new plays is a financial gamble. Second, funders should support audience development programs that are aimed at providing deeper engagement with playwrights and their work. They felt that theaters rarely do enough to introduce audiences to contemporary artists in context.

Finally, in March 2009, the Foundation supported a convening of playwrights, artistic directors, dramaturgs, directors, and other theater practitioners at Actors Theatre of Louisville’s annual Humana Festival. The purpose of the meeting was to encourage broader discussion of both David Dower’s report (*Gates of Opportunity*) and the findings from a recent study by Theatre Development fund on new play production. The opinions expressed at the meeting were by no means uniform and Ben Pesner has captured very well the various points of view in the room in a report, which may be found on the Foundation’s Web site.

In response to our four-year inquiry, and all we have learned, we have changed some of our practices. For instance, we no longer privilege the premieres of a new plays over subsequent early productions—we are more interested to encourage theaters to work together to assure that excellent plays do not die after their premieres and good plays have the opportunity to become better plays. We are no longer inclined to support commissioning programs at theaters that do not have a demonstrated track record of producing works they have commissioned, or reading series that do not lead to future productions or that appear to be used principally as ends for marketing or development. We no longer consider stand-alone “new play development programs” at theaters to be a

sufficient way of supporting playwrights, or their new works. In short, we are less interested in how many new works a theater develops or premieres, and more interested in the quality and depth of its relationships with playwrights and other artists, and the quality and ambition of the work that it is producing. We observe that nonprofit organizations that do exceptional work in supporting the development and production of new works share certain characteristics. Among them:

- They have strong, sustained relationships with playwrights and other generative artists (the relationship is with the artist, not the play), and they involve playwrights centrally in the culture of their institutions;
- They are flexible in their approaches and tailor the development process to the specific needs of the playwright and work, rather than the institution;
- They are actively engaged in the development and production process. They have frequent, substantive communication with leaders of other theaters, playwriting centers, and labs and willingly and enthusiastically champion and advocate for the artists with whom they work;
- They take artistic risks, produce ambitious works, and have a distinctive artistic vision.

Our current goals are to help artistic leaders who are “swimming upstream” (to borrow the phrase used by one artistic director), to continue to take artistic risks; to support processes that will improve the quality of work being produced; and to support collaborations between organizations that develop, premiere, and mount second, and third productions of a work. We will also endeavor to support meaningful commitment to artists by institutions (e.g., long-term residencies, or providing an artistic home where their next several works can be produced). In addition to continuing to support large and mid-sized theaters, we are now also providing direct support to leading playwriting centers, labs, and small theaters (sometimes through intermediary associations such as the National New Play Network) because we recognize that they are critical to the development of artists and new work.

It is worth noting, perhaps, that our efforts are not exclusively focused on *new work*. We recognize that such activities as remounting difficult or rarely done classical works, translations, and international collaborations are important and challenging; we are equally interested to support organizations that have a track record in these areas.

With regard to future planning in the theater program, we have recently begun to turn our attention to several new areas. We are seeking to understand better the issues surrounding the development and presentation of works by ensemble theaters through collaboration and touring; royalties and enhancement money and the effects of certain practices in these areas on the field; and leadership models, succession planning, and the need for training or mentorship opportunities for aspiring theater producers. Finally, we are keenly interested in David Dower’s call to the theater field (discussed in the report *Today and Tomorrow* from the Humana Festival convening) to more effectively

coordinate available resources and reduce duplication of efforts. We will likely continue to hold discussions encouraging visionaries from across the arts and culture sector to come together to discuss how work is created and distributed and how the system could be improved.

Comments and queries may be sent to PAresponse@mellon.org.

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All documents from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's investigation of new play production and development may be found in the Performing Arts section of the Foundation's Web site, which is located at www.Mellon.org.