

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
New Plays Initiative

*2007 New Play Development and Production Summit
Summary and Analysis*

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*The viewpoints expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.*

Introduction

As part of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's ongoing exploration of the ecology of new play development and production, Susan Feder and Diane Ragsdale invited a group of playwrights and artistic leaders in the new play field to a day-long meeting in New York in September 2007. The goals of this colloquy were 1) to understand the underlying structure of causal relationships that effect how new plays are developed and produced in this country, and 2) to determine whether the Foundation could intervene and provide support that would help improve the current system.

David Dower moderated a guided discussion that touched on many of the pressing issues identified in his report, as well as on topics raised by the participants in a pre-meeting questionnaire. The stated purpose of the convening was not necessarily to achieve consensus, but to create a forum for an open exchange of ideas among individuals who, in many cases, are themselves exemplars of best practices. I attended the meeting and prepared a summary for the Foundation, a version of which follows.

The Participants

The focus for this gathering was on text-based plays, as opposed to pieces created by ensembles, devised work, performance art, solo shows, or other genres. The composition of the group was generally representative of that segment of the field. Nearly half of the 21 participants were playwrights. Male and female, they ranged from early- and mid-career writers to a pair of Pulitzer Prize-winners.

There were also artistic directors of nonprofit producing organizations; leaders of play development centers; and new play specialists whose titles include associate artistic director, director of new play development, literary manager, and the like. The theaters represented included small, mid-sized, and large organizations. Their geographic distribution comprised both coasts and the Midwest.

Inevitably, many of the individuals present fit into more than one category. For example, nearly all of the writers also run theaters, administer university-level training programs, or direct.

What Was Said

Generally speaking, the conversation converged around how to support the risks, taken by both playwrights and theaters, associated with developing and producing new work. A largely unspoken sub-current in discussion concerned the nature of the relationship between playwright and institution. Where does the balance of power lie? How can this dynamic be adjusted? Should it be? And what is the impact of other factors, including the current state of theatrical criticism, ticket prices, and funders' priorities, on the ecosystem of new play production?

Playwrights emphatically argued for more production opportunities, and were wary of commissions and other play development activities that do not culminate in getting their work on stage. They were generally critical of theaters' marketing efforts while offering specific advice on how to go about attracting new, younger, more interested audiences.

Theater leaders, not surprisingly, focused on the role of institutions in both supporting playwrights and providing a focus for the work of play development. They emphasized how theaters foster fertile collaboration among artists, and invest in ongoing relationships with writers. Leaders of lab organizations spoke of how their groups support writers both within and outside of producing institutions.

Throughout the discussion, participants grappled with the question of how funders can best devote their resources to seeding and sustaining exemplary efforts in the sometimes elusive alchemy of new play work. They articulated a set of values that include flexibility, innovation, emphasis on true collaboration, prioritizing of production, and, for the writers at least, emphasizing artist-driven initiatives.

While participants were not shy about expressing their opinions, this was a discussion, not a debate. Outright disagreement generally remained unvoiced. It is likely that the presence of funders and potential collaborators in the room inhibited verbal sparring to some extent. However, breakout sessions organized by professional category (playwrights, artistic directors, etc.) gave participants an opportunity to speak more freely, and representatives of each group did their best to incorporate a wide spectrum of opinions in their report-backs. As a result, certain controversial topics were touched on, but not tussled over.

This was, in part, by design. Rather than dwelling on differences of opinion, Dower kept the focus on collective responses to issues of concern throughout the field. Participants enthusiastically applied their experience and expertise to confronting, and even offering tentative solutions for, some of the knottier issues bedeviling the field. By the end of the day, Dower elicited both wide-ranging insights and numerous specific recommendations for future action, particularly pertaining to funding strategies.

Of the many specific opinions and recommendations that were voiced in report-backs and throughout the discussion, some were universally embraced (or at least no one spoke up against them). Others resonated primarily with just a few or even a single participant. For that reason, nothing mentioned in the report should be interpreted as representing a consensus of the individuals present—or, for that matter, the viewpoints of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The Discussion

What Is New Play Development?

A playwright writes a play, they rewrite it—that's development.

When moderator David Dower asked the assembled participants to define the nature and purpose of new play development, the playwrights distinguished between private and public processes. There is “that pure, more private time in the creation of work” on one hand; and “the rough-and-tumble of actually getting it before an audience” on the other. One writer explained that the former takes place when she is alone at her computer, as well as through conversations with colleagues and in private readings. In the public phase, which involves interaction with theater companies through readings and workshops, work on the play itself is secondary. Instead, her prime motivation is more “to forge new relationships both with the institution and potential collaborators.”

An artistic director agreed that the artistic side of play development happens outside of theaters. “Plays get developed even if nobody else is involved...Most of play development is not readings or workshops. Most of development is the relationship with usually one trusted artist, usually a director or dramaturg, at a theater with a playwright. That's where the work gets done.” So why do theaters do it? “We focus on readings and workshops because that is what is structured and fundable.”

A colleague agreed that funding these processes is inherently tricky. “The challenge is to find a process that is sufficiently definable for the Mellon Foundation, or whatever funder I am trying to get money out of, but also has enough room in it to allow us institutionally to meet the needs of the writer at any given moment.”

Theater leaders spoke about the various reasons to engage in play development, beyond shepherding projects toward production. These include creating and deepening relationships with writers, supporting individual playwrights who are not being produced, and audience/donor cultivation.

The writers were not interested. They generally agreed that theater-based development processes cater to the institution's needs, rather than focusing on what would best serve the writer or the play. “All this stuff about development makes you [the theater] feel very, very good,” said a veteran writer. “It doesn't mean anything to me.” A younger colleague carved out an exception for the career-building aspects of development. Still, the writers argued, institutional play development is no substitute for production.

If play development has different primary goals for artists and theaters, it is reasonable to ask about the effect of institutional agendas on plays and playwrights, particularly for less-experienced writers.

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 not worth writing and what is. That's really dangerous, when the world that has another agenda altogether begins to affect a writer whose only goal was to speak that great shouting thought at the sky.

When a playwright takes a script to a theater, a writer said, “It’s really a political calculation, wending your way through good intentions which may kill the script, or changing the play to the point where it is no longer the intention of that one single vision in the first draft.” At least one theater leader worried about the effect of the “systemization” of play development at institutional theaters. “Are we inadvertently changing the plays even though we don’t want to, just by the fact that we invite them in?”

For one playwright, this occurs before the writer even steps through a theater’s door:

It happens the moment the individual starts to engage with the marketplace....As soon as we become aware that there is this larger culture that produces plays, we start to engage with our perception of [theater leaders'] taste. We start to engage with the gender issue, the race issue, the content issue, the reviews, our peers, who says what about what gets done and why. All these voices start to participate in the process. It's unavoidable, so we have to be really mindful [of it].

But an Off-Broadway artistic director privileged writer-theater interaction as the key engine driving the creation of vital new work:

In my experience, the best theater has been created not when the playwright has their vision, and then a theater signs on and says, “Anything you want, let’s do it,” but [when] there is a dialogue, in a relationship, and that the other artists in the theater—the artistic director, the director, the actors—all end up having an influence. Over time you have longstanding relationships, but you have to start somewhere. Dialogue between the theaters and the writers is essential to the creation of the vision. I am not trying to interfere with anyone’s creative rights. The fertility of that [dialogue] is what makes this a social art form, and not fundamentally an individual art form, although it always starts with the writer.

Lab organizations present a different situation because they support artists’ growth without the goal of production under their own auspices. At one such organization the challenge is to help the writer get the play ready for the rehearsal process, while “delaying institutional influence on the work so [writers] can actually ‘play,’” working towards a “beautiful, supported journey” for each project.

The Lives of Writers

Playwrights need to have lives. These people can change the world for us, and we don't know how to support them.

The economics of playwrights' lives are, by all accounts, problematic. Many participants cited the difficulty of earning a living wage, and the lack of affordable healthcare for independent artists. Both affect the ability of new writers to enter the field, deny playwrights the space and time to practice their craft, and ultimately drive writers away from the theater. One writer pointed out that most of her colleagues begin their careers working at smaller companies, which she called the equivalent of economic hazing. Statements from a pair of artistic directors:

We have a profession of mid-career writers in crisis....You can only live under those kind of circumstances for so long and continue your art. How do you give people an opportunity to make a better decision about how they enter the marketplace because they are empowered at least that much—so they're not desperate? I work in a total desperate culture with artists.

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, and 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. [Thus] 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 our field.

Sustainability should entail more than just financial support, a playwright argued. She linked economics to *production*:

In order to make a living, what [playwrights] absolutely need more than any other thing we have to offer them is production. That's the door they have to get through. When they walk through the door [of a theater], what they are looking for is, "What do I have to do to get a production?" That's all that they want, and they will do what they have to get it. That's the central issue for writers.

An artistic director strongly agreed. "We have got to be much smarter and better about how can we increase the number of productions, and therefore lower the bar that the playwright has to jump over to get to an audience....[We need to] put a playwright directly in relationship with an audience, and let what happens happen." Another playwright concurred, but specified that "writer-driven" productions are key. She went further: "I would like to see a theater [producing] first drafts, and developing audiences for those first drafts." This proposition went unchallenged, though it would no doubt

provoke disagreement among theater leaders who have publicly complained about submissions of “unfinished” plays.

A moment of sharp disagreement occurred when the artistic director of a small-budget regional theater pointed out that the vast majority of new play theaters are small- or mid-sized institutions. But while those companies have enthusiastic audiences and more flexibility than large institutions, they are not, he said, the theaters at which playwrights want their work to be produced.

Several writers chimed in to express disagreement with this statement. One playwright/director said that writers he talks to would be satisfied with productions in 15-seat theaters. Their key concern is “Is there an offer on the table?” And, more important, “Is the theater appropriate for the play’s artistic demands?” But, as a West Coast associate artistic director pointed out, some writers or their representatives hold out for the most prominent venues: “I know many writers whose agents say, ‘If you are going to get a premiere in Florida, your work will end there.’”

Commissioning Plays

Money is nice, but the sense that there is a production at the end of the road is key.

The topic of commissioning elicited a great deal of unease on the part of writers about the relationship between artist and institution. They were uniformly skeptical of commissions that do not lead to production. One playwright emphatically stated that he would prefer the guarantee of a production that would earn him \$2, rather than a \$20,000 commission for a play that won’t be produced. “It’s a no-brainer that you want to get produced. That matters more than the money.... I’m a playwright when I see a production. That’s all that matters.” Others joined in stressing production as the ultimate goal. “I have had a lot of different commission experiences at a lot of theaters, and the ones that are the happiest marriages are the ones at which production is at the end of the line. They have faith in you, and it’s genuine.” A veteran writer warned that commissions may generate “unnecessary plays” rather than “urgent” ones.

The danger with commissions is that they encourage the writing of unnecessary plays, plays that the playwrights don’t really care about, 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 or do something that makes more money. 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.

Artistic leaders in the room saw this in a different light. One stressed that writers share the responsibility not to create unnecessary plays. Another defined commissions as “seeding new plays by giving playwrights money to write”; a colleague offered, “Putting

some money in the pocket up front doesn't seem to me to be necessarily a bad thing.” That money, he pointed out, could be used for health insurance, travel, or to fulfill other needs.

An artistic leader explained that commissions generate value for individual theaters, not just for writers. His institution began its commissioning program “because writers didn't know who we were. It was a way to put ourselves on the map.” Not all commissions result in producible work. Some are simply not good enough; others do not “fit the specific needs and desires” of the theater. “One of the reasons we give out more commissions than we can possibly produce is that we want to improve the odds of generating enough producible new plays to feed our appetite.”

It is not clear that this disjunction between playwrights and artistic leaders is universal. The head of a lab organization quoted one of his playwright members, who advised him, “When they talk about throwing out money for dead-end commissions [that do not culminate in production], don't throw the baby out with that bathwater. We need that money to live on.” More on commissions came in a theater leader's follow-up note to the Foundation.

We may have heard a somewhat skewed point of view from the senior writers [at the table].... While the money associated with a commission might not mean much to [them], I think it's a different story for the typical emerging writer, recently out of grad school, working temp jobs to pay student loans and make the rent every month. Most of [my theater's] commissioning money goes to writers in that category, and frankly I wish we had more to give out.... A commission serves as a vote of confidence (which can mean a lot to a young writer) and a career boost. We consider a commission not just a way to lay claim to a specific project: more importantly it's an investment in a writer's career, and in that sense it cannot fail to serve its purpose, because it allows and encourages a writer to take the next, necessary artistic step, whatever that step may be (and even if it turns out to be a false step).

Marketing New Plays

It's not about marketing a new play, it's about marketing the whole notion of hearing new voices in our community.

The dramatists present took a keen interest in the details of how theaters market their work. “It's not just that you want to have your work done at [a high-profile venue]. You want people to *come*,” said a writer who professed skepticism of theaters' success in this area. “There is great marketing wisdom in America, and we do not use it in the theater.” Another writer commented that theater marketers need to listen more to playwrights. “We know who our audiences are. We have ties with our communities. We just want to bring the theaters with us.” A third playwright asserted that “playwrights know the communities they are writing for, and they should be in on the conversation from the get-

go... This is not just a one-play conversation; it is a conversation that involves a community over years.” However, she said, rather than drawing on playwrights’ ideas and insights, theater marketers often view the author with “hostility.”

An artistic director responded by noting that not all playwrights have the skill or desire to become involved in marketing their work, nor do they see it as their responsibility.

Ticket prices were seen as a significant barrier to generating audiences for new work.

The investment that audiences are making in terms of tickets is now significant enough that [we] have narrowed the range of audience. You’re buying an expensive product, and you have every right to have a product you like. We have gotten very quiet and passive as a field and accepted the gradual increase of ticket prices. It’s just wrong.

This artistic director urged theaters to rethink their business models to rely less on earned income, which would eliminate some of the perceived risk of doing new plays. It would also require a significant change in funders’ mindsets, since they often pressure theaters to maximize earned income.

“Have we trained audiences to be fearful of new work?” one participant asked. Audiences are becoming less and less interested in taking risks and prefer known quantities, he said, partially because of cultural shifts, but also because “there is a lack of courage on the part of artistic directors to do new work on a regular basis”—so when a theater does a new play that doesn’t go well, the next one is harder to sell. What’s more, rather than concentrating on selling individual plays, he said, theaters should focus on generating excitement about the experience of seeing new work and hearing new voices. That is what will motivate audiences to buy tickets to plays by writers unknown to them.

Another participant saw powerful untapped marketing potential in new plays. “In my experience, it’s not that audiences don’t want to see new plays. It’s that audiences are hungry to participate. Ways we can find of having audiences participate are some of the most valuable theatrical events.” A colleague described his company’s efforts to “remov[e] a transactional relationship we have had with our theatergoers for so long, trying to make it onto a more engaged and conversational relationship, and build on it.”

Size and Scale

One of the reasons people don’t like new work in this country is that if you did it any cheaper, you wouldn’t have a play.

A number of participants said that much exciting new play work is happening in the smallest of venues, yet attracting the most committed audiences. Many larger theaters, an artistic leader suggested, do new work on the cheap because they perceive it as a hard sell. They relegate new work to smaller, secondary spaces, and produce it on minimal budgets. New plays with large casts are thus few and far between.

An artistic director asserted that he has seen “the most talented generation of playwrights that ever existed in America” being trained by life experience “not to write for more than 199 seats.” That, he continued, “is a terrible influence on what playwriting is.”

The danger is that this will lead to a self-perpetuating cycle, in which writers tailor plays for ever-smaller venues and shrinking casts because they know they will not be produced otherwise; and theaters in turn program ever-smaller new plays. Audiences are then implicitly trained to expect that new work means smaller, second-class work. This is not to say that work produced on smaller stages or by smaller companies is inherently any less worthy. “Smaller institutions can engage in very direct dialogue with audience.” A challenge for the field is how to make sure that direct dialogue, and the sense of investment in the work that accompanies it, can thrive at larger theaters. And how to assure that it is pervasive enough across the community to carve out a place for new plays in the larger cultural conversation.

Some participants spoke of a parallel shrinking of aesthetic ambition due to growing formal conservatism. The head of a lab organization observed that many playwrights view artistic directors as unwilling to produce risky, challenging work, particularly when it comes to formal innovation and experimentation, as opposed to difficult subject matter. Although some took issue with this characterization, a playwright agreed: “You can say anything you want, topic-wise; you can talk about edgy, dark topics, but you have to do it in a very proscribed form, with certain kinds of markers and certain kinds of events, and a male protagonist, and certain kinds of signifiers. We’re cheating ourselves in that way.”

Who Chooses the Plays?

There is no getting around that whoever the artistic director of a theater is, their taste will dictate what plays go on there because that’s their job—to pick, to choose.

We, as a field, have decided we know what audiences want to see, said a playwright advocate. But, she asked, how good are we at making that determination?

So few people make the decision about what gets ultimately produced in this country. Audience development, rather than being an artistic-driven thing that people were getting money for, has become a marketing-driven initiative in the field. Writers get commissions and then companies decide that their audiences don’t want to see the play.... We think we know what audiences want to see. I don’t agree that we know. The whole idea of great art is that it surprises you, right?

Who are the gatekeepers? What factors underlie their selections? Are there enough quality works to choose from? How do these selections expand or circumscribe the field?

The “love affair” between an artistic director and script is an essential factor in play selection, a literary manager offered. “Every artistic director has his or her own personal tastes, aesthetic predilections, sense of humor, emotional buttons, etc. . . . Those personal quirks will determine whether or not that artistic director connects with a given play.” That, he suggested, is, and should be, the basis for the decision to produce.

Various artistic directors spoke of grappling with the responsibility that comes with exercising their own taste. One participant cited as a best practice the “deep engagement of the artistic director around any kind of developmental work that happens in the company.” Too often, she said, there is a disconnect. This is why readings series run by literary departments can become “endgames,” as a playwright put it.

Several artistic leaders lauded certain theaters’ decisions to “subcontract”: by inviting other companies and festivals into the building, they presented work that the theater might never have programmed otherwise, and brought new artists to their attention. These efforts extend companies’ artistic reach by creating new relationships between the company and other theater organizations, as well as with their audiences.

Another factor in play selection widely acknowledged by the writers in the room was the marketability of the play. If some plays are perceived as unmarketable and therefore go unproduced, at least one writer wondered whether the right people are making decisions on behalf of the audience about what work the public does and does not want to see. (Note: Neither she nor anyone else suggested that marketing departments dictate programming. The perceived connection is far more subtle.) To make matters worse, said another writer, “the perception of unmarketability is sometimes way more powerful than any actual unmarketability.”

First Production, Second Production

If we are trying to create leading voices that are playwrights, then are we killing those voices without second productions?

The problem of “premieritis,” i.e., the reluctance of theaters to mount second productions of new works, persists. How, one literary manager asked, can new plays foster a national conversation if they are produced only once, in only one city? A different literary manager said that the message has not filtered through to boards and funders—who, he suggested, tend to over-privilege first productions. His company is trying to move away from the language of “world premieres” to emphasize instead “new plays.”

David Dower asked if premieritis is mostly a question of money, including the loss of future royalties. An artistic director felt it rather has to do with artistic leaders’ desire for creative relevance: “If you have a limited number of slots and you are going to take on the risk of a new play, you have a lot of artistic stuff you want to get into that slot, and so your feeling of involvement in the creation of the work is a very big deal.”

There was discussion of the efforts of the National New Play Network (NNPN), a national consortium of two dozen mostly small to mid-sized theaters which is trying to redefine the idea of the world premiere. NNPN has championed the concept of the “rolling world premiere,” under which three or more theaters commit to mounting separate productions of a new play, and then share the world premiere credit. Said one of the NNPN’s founders,

We don’t think it is a problem that so many plays are being given premieres; what is bad is that so many of them die on the vine. In many cases they are very successful in the first production; in some cases they are not successful because the play still needs to evolve, in which case it should get another chance.

New York, New York

The very last place should be New York in terms of developing new work, because it’s so unforgiving here.

There was general agreement about the inhospitable conditions under which new plays are produced in the Big Apple, and that negative reviews in the *New York Times* too often kill prospects of second or subsequent productions (more on this below).

A regional artistic director argued for a wholesale change in the conventional New York-oriented production ethos that has long dominated the field:

Playwrights are still operating on the old Broadway model. Education needs to go on with agents and playwrights to stop thinking about the “New York or bust” or the “major festival or bust” model, and to be willing to try your play in a vast array of settings, both for the play’s sake artistically, and also to gain critical momentum, [so as] to not have it die right away because of one critic. This does not happen enough.

A playwright imagined an alternate scenario to premiering new plays in New York: “You have one production, you have a cool-down; you have another production with different artists, you have a cool-down. It’s going to take a couple of years—why not do that in Minneapolis and San Francisco, or wherever?” Likewise, an artistic director outlined a scenario that involved partnerships between New York companies and out-of-town theaters and labs designed to provide a “planned trajectory” for a show’s journey to New York. The roadmap would necessarily be different for each show. The goal would be to provide for continuity, so that the play is not lost by being pulled in different directions.

But an Off-Broadway artistic director asserted that New York theaters should not shy away from presenting first productions when the circumstances warrant, lest they end up “capitulating to the endemic problem in our culture of not making our decisions for our artistic communities.”

On Critics

We have all abdicated our responsibility to try to figure out how to get around the critics.

The group spent much time decrying the current state of theatrical criticism, in which they perceive reviewers dismissing new work with “hostility and indifference.” One artistic director went further, suggesting that whether or not audiences care about reviews, one paper in particular has an outsized influence on the artistic choices of theater leaders: “It is shameful that people are programming their seasons in America based on *The New York Times*’s second-string critic.” He condemned a system that, he argues, both overvalues a single opinion, and also creates a lack of willingness on the part of artistic leaders to produce work that the *Times* dismisses. A participant called on the theater community to counter the *Times* critic being “the artistic director of the entire country.”

How can we improve this situation? One artistic director maintained that positive engagement is possible, and warned against abandoning efforts to work with critics. Another called for theaters to shift their focus from reviews themselves to how audiences respond to them—and learn how to create new, stronger channels to connect with audiences. He lauded Steppenwolf’s First Look 101 program, which “creates advocacy [for new plays] from your own community.” He said that when an artistic director “creates a passionate response...from communities around multiple productions,” that builds the capacity for audiences to let a leader offer choices that they can support.

What Playwrights Need (Beyond Production)

You have to ask the writer what she or he needs at the beginning of the process.

There was general agreement that writers would benefit from increased production opportunities. But what else? A veteran playwright sounded a cautionary note about the ways in which theater institutions proffer support for individual writers, besides putting their plays up. “Help engenders helplessness,” he said, invoking Richard Nelson’s recent Laura Pels Foundation Keynote Address for the Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York. Though they gained little traction in the meeting, his words are worth repeating.

If you want to make strong playwrights, don’t help them so much. If you want to make strong plays, help all you want, but when they are all done, they have a long career ahead of them where nobody is holding their hand. So be very, very careful when you think about how good you are being to them. You may be just eviscerating and weakening them for the rest of your career.

Other participants focused on playwright residencies. In addition to addressing the isolation many writers struggle with, residencies may also help recalibrate the relationship between the institution and the writer by bringing him or her inside the door.

An artistic director imagined a scenario that would obligate every LORT “B” or larger theater in America to have “a resident playwright on staff, on a salary, with health benefits, with no obligations on their work, like a university has chairs for philosophy” for a five-year term. A colleague added that residencies empower playwrights not just to do their work, but more important, “to be part of the dialogue of what’s happening in the producing world of theater.”

Participants also cited travel as a key means to counter isolation and insularity among writers. “There is a need for artists to get out and see things around the world. Americans overall, including artists, are isolated and don’t feel any compulsion to engage culturally outside our borders.” Said one writer, the destination is not as important as the opportunity to get out from behind the desk, to observe. Travel is also valuable for artistic leaders. “For the most part we don’t know each other well enough to be able to help each other find plays [and] establish new relationships with artists.”

Taking a large-picture view, several participants agreed that theaters and funder-driven new play programs too often tell artists, “This is what we have to offer you,” instead of assuming that the author might be able to describe what he or she needs. One playwright criticized cookie-cutter programs by stressing that the specific need depends on the project. That might mean travel, six months without a day job, a half-dozen actors in a room, funding for exploratory writing, or support for other aspects of the private side of play development.

An associate artistic director recast this notion from an institutional point of view.

There are times writers are looking for support on the generative side of that process, and there are times when a writer is looking for support on the refinement side.... Part of when we get bollixed up is when there is confusion about where we are on that spectrum, or when an institution can be most helpful along that spectrum.

Best Practices and Warning Signs

Toward the middle of the gathering participants formed breakout groups organized by affiliation (playwrights, NYC theaters, regional theaters, lab/developmental organizations). Each group reported back on indicators of best practices in the field, as well as warning signs of substandard practices. The list below includes those and other indicators mentioned over the course of the day. They do not necessarily represent consensus by the participants, or the views of the Mellon Foundation.

Indicators of Best Practices

- Strong, deep relationships between artists and institutions, including plentiful intermingling between playwrights and theater leaders; relationships that persist over time
- Active involvement of playwrights in the culture of the institution
- Open, abundant, two-way communication between playwright and theater personnel, with both advance and retrospective discussion of expectations, motives, intents, personal styles, hopes and dreams; honesty about fears, concerns, and ownership
- Flexibility of approach: creation of a process tailored to the specific work, rather than vice versa; methodology that is shaped to the project, as opposed to a set model into which playwrights are shoehorned
- Desire of both artist and institution to participate in another project together
- Feeling of investment in the process on the part of all parties
- The continued life of a play in any capacity—an excellent indicator of a successful collaboration
- Work that broadens the context of play development for audiences and artists, so that the process has larger meaning for both
- Creation of deeper connections with the theater's community; tapping into and augmenting the community's creative fertility
- Cities that support a local ecosystem capable of nurturing artists and the arts
- Intergenerational mentoring, which allows emerging and established artists to learn from one another
- Frequent, substantive communication among leaders of different theaters.

Warning Signs

- Shrinkage of average cast sizes
- Over-reliance on earned income
- Over-reliance on enhancement money from commercial producers
- Marketplace success as a key indicator of institutional achievement, without countervailing measures to account for artistic excellence
- Disjunction between the amount of new play *development* vs. *production*
- Agents who distance artists from theaters
- Institutional theaters that are too staff-oriented, rather than writer-oriented
- Hostility to writers in theaters' marketing departments
- Festivals that dangle prizes as an incentive for submission
- Low percentage of funding that goes to actual production (vs. overhead)
- Theaters whose seasons do not reflect the diversity of their community, or of the nation
- Insularity or “clubbiness” – the exclusion of new artists and audiences.

An Off-Broadway artistic director characterized public readings series as both a best practice and a warning sign. While they can be a valuable tool for increasing stakeholder involvement in the culture of the institution, it is important, he said, to make sure that new play development does not become an end in itself, with no productions ever happening; it is also dangerous to do events that can be seen as “auditions for productions.”

Recommendations for Funders

The gathering ended after a final breakout session in which David Dower asked participants to brainstorm on specific recommendations for possible funding initiatives. The first list below includes elaborated recommendations from the sub-groups, as well as suggestions offered by individuals throughout the day. I have attempted to capture as many ideas as possible, regardless of whether or not they were embraced by more than one participant. Individual opinions inevitably vary.

(1) Support for Playwrights

- **Artist Residencies** – Create “marriages” between artists and institutions, lasting from one to three years, or as many as five years. The writer would receive a cash stipend as well as benefits, including health insurance. He or she would live within the community of the theater. The fellowships would be tailored to the specific circumstances of a given relationship, and they would be flexible, affording the writer productions, development time, mentorship, etc. as needed. The writer would not be obligated to create work specifically for that theater.
- **Commission Adaptations** – Offer emerging writers the opportunity to adapt large-cast classics in translation so they can gain experience with large-cast dramaturgy on plays that may be less risky to market.
- **Direct Grants to Individual Artists**
 - A. Award fellowships to writers at various levels in their career, i.e., to support both emerging and mid-career writers. These grants would give the playwright time to write without having to concentrate on making a living. They could be administered directly, via a re-granting organization, or through a theater.
 - B. Provide “big money” to playwrights, of which 60% would serve as a wage over several years. The balance would be used as various investives for theaters: A playwright might bring money to fund a specific production or a residency, or to involve another playwright in the theater. Though the funds would be connected with an institution, they would be awarded through the individual, which would change the power equation.
- **“Homes Away from Home”** – Create multi-year grants for playwrights. The applicant would choose a resident company; reside in the city in which the theater is located; and receive health insurance and an office in theater. A travel grant in the second year would enable him/her to spend time in another country, or at another institution. In year three, the playwright would bring the work back to the theater, and receive additional production support. In years one and three, a service component, e.g., being a liaison with other artists at the institution, might be included.

- **Reevaluate Commissions** – Assess what about commissions is not working (including “dead-end” commissions), but do not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Explore whether commissions can/should be more formally linked to production.

(2) Audience Development

- **Artist/Audience Mutual Enrichment** – Reassert the theater’s role in the community as a vital platform for free expression and discourse. Offer monies for theaters or lab organizations that have showed sustained commitment to new play work and to serving artists, funding programs that create new conversation and mutual enrichment between artists and audiences.
- **Ticket Price Reduction** – Enable theaters to increase access by reducing prices on all or part of their ticket inventory.
- **Ticket Subsidy Programs** – Offer funds to underwrite tickets for people who are not currently theatergoers and who may not be able to afford tickets, e.g., students, union members, artists, etc. Tickets would not be free (which might undervalue them). The goal is to support institutions’ community-building efforts over time by creating new stakeholders and deepening mutual understanding within the community.

(3) Professional and Institutional Development

- **Career-long Support** – Encourage programs that relate to the practical training of playwrights, as well as development and production of new plays to make sure that the fabric of a playwrights’ experience is covered through various steps over time. This may involve relationships among institutions.
- **Leadership Training** – Encourage initiatives designed to prepare the next generation of theater professionals for artistic and management leadership. Educate agents about different theaters’ missions and aesthetics.
- **Non-traditional Funding** – Help theaters leverage incremental funding from non-traditional sources.
- **Post-MFA/PhD Year** – Make funding available for artists to remain on campus as teaching mentors, creating liaisons with local institutions and younger students.
- **Support Pre-existing Programs** – Rather than always starting from scratch, identify and support current under-funded programs that work well but do not have adequate resources, e.g. Jerome Foundation grants in Minneapolis.

(4) Support for Risk Taking Associated with Producing New, Ambitious Work

- **Large-Cast Support** – Provide funds that would enable theaters to produce works of a large size and scope. This would encourage writers to create larger-scaled work and give them production experience in larger settings.
- **Production Support** – Support actual production of new plays, rather than play development. These funds would enable theaters to produce more work, and work that they might not otherwise consider, as well as enable projects to move more quickly towards production, when warranted.
- **Risk-Reduction** – Encourage theaters to take artistic risks. This funding support would help remove box-office pressure, so that if a new play doesn't sell well the theater does not suffer financial consequences, or become reluctant to produce risky work in the future. It would reward companies for doing a new play well, for successful marketing efforts, for building frames of reference for the audience, and getting back into the business of taking risks on new work.

(5) Collaboration and Communication

- **“Articulated Road Trip”** – Make grants that would support a specific, pre-arranged trajectory for a new play. Work might start with a developmental phase at a lab organization, followed by participation in a university residence, etc., culminating in one or more full productions. The grant would be administered to a consortium of four to five partners who would work out the steps collectively, so that all parties are aware of past and future.
- **“Come to Our Home”** – Support programs that encourage and reward larger institutions to host smaller institutions in same city within their walls.
- **Dialogue Among Funders** – Increase channels for communication within the funding community, particularly between large and smaller organizations, to encourage dissemination of values.
- **Encourage Second Productions** – Shift funding emphasis from “world premieres” to “new plays,” and encourage theaters to do the same. Support travel initiatives that allow playwrights to be present at first post-NYC productions; for first-production artistic directors to go subsequent venues to visit and speak about production; and for artistic directors to see work produced at theaters in other cities, so they do not have to rely on reviews to become aware of new work.
- **Extended Dialogue** – Fund initiatives that increase communication among theater leaders, particularly assuring that there is interaction between younger companies and medium-sized ones, in a context where there is no inferred power investment. Encourage gatherings that promote artistic and professional exchange, trust-building, and an augmented national dialogue about play production.

- **“Home Inside Home”** – Support multidisciplinary work. The playwright would receive funds that would seed writer-driven collaboration between an institutional theater and a smaller collective or an ensemble that would be invited in, as well as between companies in various disciplines.
- **Institutional Collaboration** – Encourage theaters and lab organizations to partner around shared enthusiasm for specific work; support collaborations among theaters of different sizes, but in a way that does not undermine the autonomy of the smaller companies.
- **Universities and Colleges** – Support initiatives that create closer connections between theaters/labs and educational programs.

(6) Research

- **Exploration/investigation Phase** – Support writers in the time before they are ready to take their work into production, or even into development: research, experimentation, writing time, etc.
- **Translation** – Support the translation of American works into foreign languages, and of foreign work into English.
- **Travel** – Provide grants for writers and/or artistic leaders to visit other cultures, to conduct research in other parts of the country, and to see other companies’ work. Reciprocal travel would enable theaters to bring writers from other countries to the US.
- **“Worldly Grants”** – Offer funds for writers that would allow them to become part of or closer to the world they want to write about. These funds would provide time, insurance, and support for artists to live within specific communities.

Values

In addition to asking participants to make specific recommendations for the Foundation, David Dower offered them the opportunity to articulate values they hope would inform funders' grant programs.

- **Artist-Driven Funding** – Make sure that grant programs meet artists' needs, not just institutions'. Support playwrights, not plays.
- **Assessment from Artists** – Get written follow-up from artists who receive grants to work with theaters; reports should be blind to protect the writers; theaters' reports should come from the artistic director and not the literary office.
- **Audience Engagement** – Encourage theaters to find new ways to make audience engagement part of their process.
- **Eclecticism** – Do not limit institutions to a particular style or genre.
- **Flexibility** – Programs should accommodate the specifics of each project; do not shoehorn projects into grant guidelines, or take a “cookie-cutter” approach. Funds should be applied in different ways to different configurations of artists, projects, and institutions, as each process is different.
- **Go Beyond Critics** – Help theaters create critic-proof communities, but support efforts to create dialogue with critics.
- **Inclusiveness** – Make sure that doors are open for people who are not part of the “club”; guarantee inroads for new artists who may not have pre-existing relationships; combat “closed-circle” insularity.
- **Individual Vision** – Invest in individual artistic leaders' visions, and make sure they follow through on their vision.
- **Learn from Smaller Institutions** – Embrace their innovations, and the artists they support.
- **Mid-career Support** – Do not limit support to emerging artists; fund initiatives that make it possible for writers to sustain careers as playwright.
- **Mission-based Support** – Reward theaters for doing what they do well. Steer clear of grants that will encourage theaters to create fundable programs that stray from their core missions. Provide general operating support.
- **Multi-generational Scope** – Look out for “young rebels”; do not restrict funding to “institutional behemoths.”

- **Pan-ecosystem Funding** – Fund entire ecology of the community, not just theaters or labs or writers, etc.
- **Prioritize Production** – Shift funding towards production support, structuring grant programs to encourage production rather than development. Be wary if the list of plays developed by a theater is longer than its list of plays produced, or if there is much disjunction between those lists. Avoid theaters that have “guilty conscience” programs for writers, in lieu of a commitment to actually produce their work.
- **Qualitative Judgments** – Embrace assessments based on qualitative measures, including taste. Support leaders with track records distinguished by quality work. Avoid quantitative, corporate-style measures when they do not apply.
- **Regionalism** – Support theaters that exhibit a strong sense of place, so that we do not have a homogeneous national theater culture. Encourage healthy, sustainable theatrical ecosystems in various cities. Move away from a New York City bias.
- **Reward Sustained Integrity and Excellence** – Support pre-existing programs that work. Do not engage in flavor-of-the-month funding.
- **Risk-Taking** – Help theaters take risks, and not depend on tried-and-true work; encourage them to explore new methods of production and marketing.

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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.