



From Scarcity to Abundance

Conference Report

By Ben Pesner

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Big Ideas and Bright Spots

“This is no time for the small. I would rather die trying to change the world, than not.”

—Alison Carey

“Think big.” That was the instruction right from the get-go at the [Arena Stage American Voices New Play Institute’s “From Scarcity to Abundance”](#) conference, held in Washington, D.C. in January, 2011. Funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, this gathering brought together 120 artists and other practitioners in the #newplay sector*, with hundreds of others watching and contributing in cyberspace. “Massive Thoughts from Four Big Thinkers” was the moniker of an early session, but it could equally have served as a motto for the whole event.

There was largeness all around. In overall ambition: to chart out the infrastructure for the support of new work, and ask whether or not that infrastructure is serving the continuum of creative expression in the sector. Of representation: to engage with a broad cross section of artists, producers, and presenters whose backgrounds cover a wide and diverse swath of activity in the sector. Of reach: to expand participation far beyond the physical boundaries of the room that housed the event through online media.

And of scope. Though the three-day agenda focused on a series of specific topics—optimal ways to partner, the relationship between the presenter and the producer, the question of how devised work differs from or is similar to single-author, text-based plays, and so on—participants never shied away from engaging in big thinking. To cite just one recurring theme, they interrogated the role of theater within community while posing fundamental questions such as which American voices are heard in the sector, whose stories are told, and how resources might better be animated to bring those stories to audiences.

The attendees included individual artists and ensemble-members; producers and presenters; delegates from small theaters and large ones; leaders of festivals and laboratory organizations; and observers of the sector, including myself. The whole event was webcast via live video streamed over the Internet, and a staff of writers covered the proceedings on Twitter and through blogging. Dozens of online participants attended watch parties in Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, New York, and other cities.

Some of the sessions were dedicated to presenting work developed through New Play Institute programs and inviting participants to learn about [New Play Institute](#)

* The # sign, or “hash tag,” refers to Twitter. Its use by Arena invokes a series of national conversations occurring around the #newplay tag on the micro-blogging platform, as well as elsewhere throughout cyberspace.

programs such as the online journal [HowlRound](#) and the [New Play Map](#). If this contributed to a celebration of Arena as what Artistic Director Molly Smith called “a center for the production, presentation, development, and study of American theater,” all the better. There was nothing hidden about this agenda. Among the artists in the room were several playwrights in residence at the Arena, as well as the creators of various projects that had received grants from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) New Play Development Program (NPDP) when it was hosted by Arena.

A lively pre-conference session with NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman kicked off a maelstrom of comment in the press and the blogosphere. Despite the sound and fury of the resulting tempest, Landesman’s comments were what one attendee called a “sidebar” to the main business at hand. Though his controversial remarks informed much of the subsequent discussion, few participants explicitly addressed them.

For the rest of the event, Arena Associate Artistic Director David Dower was our MC, our guide, our narrator. From the very beginning, he articulated a commitment to identifying and naming “bright spots,” on the theory that the most effective first step in creating real change is to identify and encourage positive practices, innovative partnership, and success stories.* So, rather than “dragging around too many old stories about the things that are wrong,” Dower urged the group to keep the focus on things that are working well in the field. These included specific programs and initiatives, institutions, and even individuals.

To me, the value of this approach was that it embraced the diversity of aesthetics and practices within the sector, acknowledging conventional dichotomies while also resisting the divisiveness to which they sometimes lead. It’s tempting to dwell on oppositions. Conflict is, after all, the essence of drama; friction creates heat. But while a certain amount of “either/or” thinking was inevitable, participants generally tried to avoid getting tripped up by enforced dualities. Instead, over and over again, they took what Celise Kalke called a “both/and” perspective. So, for example, when a speaker made a sharp distinction between two types of practice, Melanie Joseph said there was room for both. “I’m getting nervous about ‘instead of,’” she warned.

That is not to say that Arena gave short shrift to artists and other theater makers whose work finds its fullest expression towards the edges of the either/or spectrum. Rather, the conference was pitched to turn differences of opinion and approach into opportunities for creativity, rather than smoothing them down or getting bogged down in working through conflicting opinions. Here’s an example: During a break-out session Shishir Kurup mentioned that the built-in tension inherent in a theatrical ensemble—such as his own company, [Cornerstone Theater Company](#)—can itself be a welcome source of creative energy. Similarly, Meiyin Wang lauded the emergence

* Dower credited this principle to the teachings of Chip and Dan Heath in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* (Crown Business, 2010).

of new play festivals because they “create a space for risk, for collisions of different styles, for the artists to come up against each other.”

“Both/and” is not a panacea. There are pitfalls as well as bright spots, and the conference plumbed those too, on the theory that exploring hazards together might help solve at least some of them. Still, both/and struck me as a useful way to think about the wonderfully messy panoply of activity in the new play sector. In fact, a common refrain among participants was that anything that counters sameness of process or product is healthy for the new play ecosystem.

The bulk of the conference unfolded in the Molly Smith Study, a glass-walled space in Arena’s spectacular new Mead Center for American Theater. This unusual chamber is nestled against the exterior wall of the Fichandler Stage, transforming what was once an outdoor plaza into a warm, inviting meeting room. As defined by an aptly-termed glass “curtain wall,” the space is simultaneously within the theater and also outside it. Visually open to the surrounding streets, the Study’s architecture makes literal the concept of “radical transparency,” which has been a guiding principle of the New Play Institute’s work. I found it nearly impossible *not* to think, or at least look, outside the proverbial box. The space encourages reflection, in both senses of the word: it’s a perfect venue for introspection and thought, and from the outside, its angled glass walls also function as a giant mirror for the surrounding neighborhood—an intriguing metaphor for the theater’s aspiration to reflect the community in which it resides.

Arena structured most of the discussions as a set of concentric circles. In each session, the innermost ring generally numbered about a dozen participants seated around a table who did most or all of the speaking. The remaining attendees surrounded them on all sides in a second band—a listening circle. The “third circle” of participants expanded the conference into cyberspace through live video. Dower frequently called out for input from the Twitterverse, and plugged-in commentators from the sector responded with numerous tweets. Large screens carried the #newplay stream. Added to the mix were text messages and emails read aloud by participants sitting at the center table. Between sessions, breakout groups gave participants the opportunity to respond to ideas exchanged in the first circle.

Massive Thoughts from Four Big Thinkers

“Our job...is to create a big space, to...think big.”
—Deborah Cullinan

The conference began with a session moderated by Deborah Cullinan called “Massive Thoughts from Four Big Thinkers,” at which panelists imagined the future

of the new play development universe as it might exist in America in the years to come. Having spent a year speaking about the “downsizing of the American theater”—of productions, expectations, and ambition—in the post-publication tour of *Outrageous Fortune* (Theatre Development Fund’s book-length study on new play production written by Todd London and myself, with Zannie Giraud Voss supervising the quantitative research), I was thrilled by the idea of “big thinking.” Not a small task, but one that laid the groundwork for the ambitious, expansive conversations that followed.

Speakers Kirk Lynn, Meiyin Wang, Lydia R. Diamond, and Marc Masterson invoked many of the themes that resonated in conversations large and small throughout the next three days. One was “diversity,” a particularly fraught term that may or may not do justice to how the theater community embraces (or does not embrace) differences along such lines as race and ethnicity, class, aesthetics, age, and others. Said Diamond,

I think of the many theaters I have been blessed to be produced by, big ones with grand budgets, and thoughtful, smart, passionate artists; and smaller ones with not-so-grand budgets, and thoughtful, smart, passionate artists. I note that usually the smaller ones have had the most generationally and racially diverse audiences, and have been nimble enough to produce my most controversial work.

Although the conference included two sessions specifically dedicated to diversity, the topic refused to be constrained by the agenda. Conversation about diversity ran through the entire event. Whether this is a time of abundance or of relative scarcity, Marc Masterson said, diversity is a source of excitement. “There is a vast amount of work that is happening in the United States, and it’s very diverse. It comes from many different segments of our country. That is the future, that is the thing that I can hold onto for relative optimism.”

Masterson also initiated conversation about community and partnerships that continued throughout the event, and which we will be explored in greater detail below.

Partnerships are at the center of building community. Partnerships between arts organizations, community service organizations, social service organizations, educational institutions—where the energy for what gets created comes from what’s between the margins of those individual things, so that new things can be born that are not defined so clearly. That’s where the new comes from.

Another “big topic” was time. Lynn invited the group to participate in a thought experiment, contemplating a world in which human lifespans are endless, in order to communicate an insight about how theater values its own temporality.

*Time is a great resource because it's the preciousness of this moment, this time we have together, and the choices, that we choose to be together. Like this weekend, when we all chose to come out of our lives and be here together. The limitedness of time is a resource that theater uses incredibly well.**

Later, participants would speak about time as a precious resource for the creation of work. For example, Sabrina Hamilton described one of the values of artists' retreats: “What we constantly hear is that six days in the country, outside the city or just away is worth maybe a month of rehearsal time in people's daily lives.” And Adrien-Alice Hansel said that “the idea that you can rehearse for six hours in a row can be transformational to some [artists]—there are ensembles who are never allowed to take time off from their day jobs.”

Making Place

“Buildings aren't theater; they're just a place for it.”

—Howard Shalwitz

If time is a key element in the cosmology of theater, so is space. From the “Massive Thoughts” session onwards, individual artists, presenters, and leaders of producing theaters spoke about negotiating the politics of place. The ability of a stage performance to conjure particular locations, and even infinite space, inside a closed auditorium through nothing more than a line of dialogue or a lighting cue, is one of the great resources of the form. But how much is theater bound by physical space, by a building, a neighborhood, a city, a region, or a nation? Is it the case that, as someone quipped (echoing Tip O'Neill) that “all theater is local”? What should a theater building be? What responsibilities does “localness” entail? And how do theaters speak to, or with, the communities in which they are embedded—in balance with the other communities, as defined by cultural experience, shared experience, aesthetic tradition, and so on—that they operate in?

Meiyin Wang's “Massive Thoughts” contribution came in the form of a prose poem,[†] beautifully rendered, though perhaps more aspirational than predictive. In this section, Wang spoke about place.

And as water has to always take the shape of its container—theater will become increasingly about place.

* Indeed, the “Massive Thoughts” session was in part a meditation on the passage of time via the impossible yet seductive task of imagining the future. Mark Shugoll, a past chairman of the Arena's Board of Trustees, startled the group with an arresting prediction. Though many of the participants had only just experienced the Mead Center for the very first time, it will one day be old, he said, and at some point in the future there will be another new Arena Stage building.

[†] You can read the entire text of Wang's “[The Theater of the Future](#)” on *HowlRound*, the journal of the American Voices New Play Institute at Arena Stage.

Theaters will have to turn into cultural centers, gathering places for the community. They will continue to open their doors to the outside world and deepen the dialogue between arts, culture, and society, bringing the arts back to the table of civic discourse, leading the conversation in society, instead of having a conversation with ourselves....

Theater buildings will change, they have to. People will create theaters that can respond creatively and organically to the art that goes inside it. More and more—bars, museums, parks, living rooms, roof decks, libraries, basements, galleries, cars, will become sites for performances. Theater will be taken to the audience, a way to interrupt their daily perspectives, a way to see a space anew.

Theater will be local. We will no longer casually import theater makers from big cities into other cities to make work that artists in their own city can.

Jim Lasko confronted similar questions when he mused on how the word “theater” does double duty, denoting both live performance and the venue that contains it—even as he argued for a theater detached from its relationship to buildings. Implicit in his words are questions about how theater will adapt as live entertainment and cultural expression become less and less tethered to physical location in the wired (or wireless) future.

It's a strange thing in the theater: we have one word for [both] the space and for the thing we make. I hope we begin to dissolve that, and we come up with new words. The fact that we have to go through doors and pay for tickets and make plans in advance, and create this precious, insulated community in which this interaction occurs seems to me to be one of the major obstacles. In the future I hope we can have theater without theater.

The conversation about the local-ness of theater began in the pre-conference session with Rocco Landesman. Here is how the NEA Chairman responded to a question about keeping the art form relevant in the face of dwindling audiences:

One of the things that theater does is convey a tremendous sense of place, because it's live, physical, palpable, in real time, in front of you in a particular place, in a particular community. Producers at these resident theaters need to be mindful of that, much more than they probably are....What happens to the identity and mission of a not-for-profit theater and its role within the community when carpetbaggers come in from out of town, selecting every creative element of the show, and take it out of town again?

Deborah Cullinan took up this challenge by speaking of theaters' ability to “make place.” She said, “We do it well inside our theaters—beautifully. But how are we

doing it in terms of our relationship to the world around us?” From Scott Walters came a reminder that localism is a matter of identity for the regional theater movement. He recalled that pioneers like Margo Jones in Dallas envisioned a theater of “regionally-based artists who lived in a community and had a relationship with that community.” Now, he said,

We have a situation where everything is centralized in New York. We extract our young artists from their homes, send them to New York, and then re-export them back at a higher price. In a lot of ways the regional theater continues to be an extension of New York City, whether it's [for] profit or non-profit. That disconnect from the community comes from a lack of roots for the artists as well.

There was a spectrum of opinion about the specificity of place. Jason Loewith quoted a concern (not his) voiced in one of the breakout sessions that focused on partnerships: “If you create something for a specific place, artistically are you in a rush to partner to push it out into the world? Are you doing a disservice to that piece of art by [producing it elsewhere, and thus] pushing it beyond where it was intended to be [seen]?” And Dominic Taylor described theater as akin to “making a sand-painting...So when [a show] moves to Seattle or wherever..., that becomes a problematic moment, because then it becomes something else.”

But Mark Valdez pushed back on the notion that “we are creating plays about place.”

I don't know that we are. I'm not saying that we're not. A lot of the shows that we are talking about that are moving from other places aren't about place. Cornerstone did The West Hollywood Musical; it's not going to go to Denver. But Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo is going to go a lot of places. It's a wonderful play that should go. There is a desire to explore place, and that's what we're hearing.”

If theater (buildings) is local, theater (activity) should not be, argued Masterson. He lamented the insularity of the American theater community:

All theater is local, but we also live in a global world. How does the international begin to creep its way into our very parochial American way of thinking? What can we do about that? How can we welcome that part of the conversation onto our stages, into our community dialogue, into our art?

Others echoed his call for more internationalism. Later, Trey Lyford pointed out that “diversity is part of the blood” at international festivals, and said that U. S. companies could learn a great deal from them.

The conference embraced performance as well as discussion, including stagings of pieces that had been supported by NEA NPDP grants. One of those is, in some ways,

a meditation on the notion of place that pushes the boundaries of how location and community can be performed. [The Foundry Theater's](#) *The Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue* created by Melanie Joseph and Claudia Rankine took place on a tour bus that brought audience members on a narrated journey through the South Bronx, with the streets themselves becoming the stage. The piece provoked a conversation of hot-button issues including the politics of cultural observation, gentrification, arts elitism, racial difference, and socio-economic privilege. Arena invited conference attendees to a version of the piece created for touring, a hybrid of theater and film that synthesizes high-definition video and live performance. Instead of boarding a bus, we watched the piece unfold on screens in a theater, guided along by an embodied “tour guide” seated in the front row. By taking its show on the road in an altogether different way, the Foundry added another complex twist on the relationship of theater to place.

A Visit from the Chairman

“It’s insane. It defies all logic. Attendance is declining precipitously, and yet the number of [theater] institutions is growing exponentially. At some point there is going to be a disconnect.”

—Rocco Landesman

The NEA Chairman’s appearance had been timed to take advantage of the confluence of two events: the speech was scheduled right before the “Scarcity to Abundance” kick-off, and also functioned as a coda to The Broadway League’s Biennial Conference, which had taken place over the preceding few days. Unfortunately, because of an approaching winter storm, only a few of the Broadway crowd remained in town, most high-tailing it to the airport and Union Station to avoid getting marooned under what turned out to be an icy blizzard.

During his opening remarks, Landesman hewed close to the subject he was billed to address—the intersection of the commercial and not-for-profit theater. Later he touched on the hot topic of supply and demand in theater. However favorably or not his remarks were received—some vehemently disagreed with certain of his conclusions—one thing is sure: the Chairman did no handholding. Those who expected Landesman to rally the troops during a time when Federal arts funding is being threatened were disappointed.

Landesman began with a history lesson. In a nutshell, he argued that the regional theater movement founded a half-century ago was energized by an “adversary culture,” which has since given way to a success-based ethos. Its original project was to create a protected environment for theater to flourish outside of the pressures of the box office. He described the movement’s founders including Joe Papp, Gordon Davidson, the Arena’s Zelda Fichandler, and their peers as “not only working outside of the popular culture, they were in opposition to it. They wanted an

alternative to what they were seeing in the marketplace; they aimed to create a protected environment in which they could do work that otherwise wouldn't exist.” Since that time, he continued, “there has been a change in the ethos in our culture altogether. We've gone from an age of idealism to an age of success.” This coincided with an influx of commercial money in the sector, as Broadway producers turned to the not-for-profit theaters as a source of product and a developmental stream to replace the out-of-town tryout.

By in the 1980s, he argued, “success was its own justification” in the culture at large, and, to an alarming degree, in the theater as well. Institutional leaders became enamored of a new set of metrics including “box office; audience [numbers]; critical validation, preferably national.” The temptation to produce work that might have commercial potential became nearly impossible to resist. Once enhancement money and the prospect of a commercial transfer enter the picture, theater leaders “are going to choose work that is going to have a broader appeal, and in particular, a commercial appeal, which is different from the original mandate of creating a protected environment in which you can experiment and do work that is..bold.” This situation is especially acute in the theater, Landesman explained, because unlike the other performing arts, it involves both commercial and not-for-profit sectors, which are now deeply intertwined.

Landesman called for a wholesale rethinking of the metrics of success, on the part of theaters' leaders, boards, and, most notably, funders.

I'm not here to advocate for failure, or to turn the clock back. But I would submit that maybe we could have a reset on the metrics, the standard of success as we evaluate the work of a lot of resident theaters....What is required from the funders...is a different set of methods that we are increasingly starting to adopt. We have to look at the nature, as well as the quality of the work. Is the work adventuresome? Is it taking risks of any kind? And secondly, what is the relationship between these theaters and their communities? Theater only happens in a particular time and a particular place. What is the relationship between the theater and its place, especially if a theater has its eyes on another place?

A possible caveat, gently suggested in the Q-and-A session, was that Landesman was referring primarily to the larger not-for-profits, and that this analysis generally doesn't apply to smaller and mid-sized institutions, whose work seldom attracts or is affected by commercial interests. However, it's clear to me that in certain environments, particularly New York City, even smaller companies routinely court enhancement money and other forms of commercial collaboration.

The assertions that unleashed a torrent of comment in the press and among bloggers came primarily during the second, unscripted part of the session. Diane Ragsdale was Landesman's on-stage interlocutor. In response to questions from her

and from the audience, he staked out a controversial position: that there are too many theaters for the current arts ecosystem to support. Here is his exact formulation—which some would later call “fighting words.”

We're overbuilt. There are too many theaters dividing [up] too little money and too little in the way of resources.... It's very difficult to increase demand.... In the long run, I think you also have to right-size the supply to the demand, and maybe there should be fewer theaters.

I won't attempt to recap the supply/demand discussion here, or the responses it engendered. It's a lively debate well worth delving into, both on the NEA website where Landesman expanded on his unscripted remarks and invited comments from the field* and on many performing arts blogs.

Many of his supporting arguments came to percolate throughout the conference, even when they led to different conclusions. Some of these were already on participants' minds, and would inevitably have come up anyway. These include connection to community, the sense of place, institutional conservatism, and more. It's worth noting the context in which Landesman first mentioned the supply/demand imbalance: “There are too many theaters to be able to support the artists who want to work in them, and that is a shame. It is a shame when you hire actors, designers, and directors and you cannot pay them a living wage. I think that's disgraceful, and we have to look at all kinds of ways to try and address the problem.” The inability of institutions to adequately compensate artists, though voiced in different terms, resonated throughout the discussion in the days that followed.

Identifying Bright Spots

“We were in a moment where a lot was happening, and it wasn't clear what was going to come of it...[We had a] sense that our work on the book was not isolated. It was a part of a lot of people asking similar questions.”

—Todd London

The emphasis on identifying and celebrating the positive—naming “bright spots”—began in an early session which Dower and Todd London called “*Outrageous Fortune: One Year Later*.” London offered a survey of positive developments in the sector that have come about since the book's publication. Rather than focusing on our premise, that a “crisis in collaboration” exists between playwrights and artistic leaders, he and Dower catalogued a series of welcome changes (and even inklings of changes) in the field during the time that London and I wrote the book, and in the year since. London was careful to note that while some of these developments are a

* Search under #supplydemand on <http://www.arts.gov/artworks>.

direct result of our work, most were part of a larger movement in the field, maybe even a zeitgeist, made up of numerous conversations, actions, and other publications in the past few years.

London’s litany came largely in headline form, like this: “The National Theater Conference Makes Three-Year Commitment to Produce Plays by Women,” “Bay Area Pushes Community Efforts on Behalf of New Work.” He gave a brief description of the action or innovation behind each one. Then he and Dower invited the room to call out additions to his list, and third-circle participants tweeted a number of additions as well.* The group had no shortage of bright spots to share, many of which, as Dower pointed out, involve little expense. At this session and throughout the conference there was horn-tooting, to be sure; but I especially enjoyed hearing participants crowing about things happening at *other* people’s theaters.

Beyond simply numbering them, London highlighted the values that informed these bright spots.

The thing that is so moving about some of these examples...is that their purpose is simply to enrich the field, simply to serve the artists who are creating the energy in the field. They are not bringing a lot of money or success into theaters on the matrix that Rocco [Landesman] described. They are the kind of pure service that we as theater people do best.

London distilled from this catalogue of the positive a list of “principles or precepts these seem to live under.” Thus even if specific institutions and programs are not easily replicated, the philosophy and values behind them might be. According to London, these include efforts that

- Sustain the life of the writer
- Develop plays through production
- Build networks and partnerships, or what John Clinton Eisner calls “movements”
- Achieve honesty and authenticity in dialogue and relationships
- Create equity for artists, and among institutions
- Build the future of the sector
- Grow a new economy for the production of work and the livelihoods of its creators
- Acknowledge that “it’s the relationship, stupid” between artists and institutions
- Make possible do-it-yourself productions for interested playwrights.

* While London’s use of newspaper terminology was decidedly old-media, it also fit nicely into to #newplay spirit. Using Twitter with its 140-character limit is akin to blogging in headlines.

Questions of Definition

“I have no idea why we are so interested in always boxing ourselves in, which is one of our greatest problems..... I heard consistently in every conversation that we need to work against strictly defining ourselves, from titles to size—what’s big, what’s small, who is successful and who’s not—to where the work lives and breathes and has impact.”

—Deborah Cullinan

Creativity resists boundaries. Given the wide and diverse spectrum of the theater makers present and the panoply of practices, aesthetics, and cultural backgrounds represented, it was hardly surprising that much of the conversation dwelt on what we mean by the words we use to speak about theater. Such definitions are a matter of convention, and art so often involves bending or breaking convention. I noted a healthy tension between the need to define terms—theater is in its essence a form of communication, so to both create and talk about theater requires some kind of shared vocabulary—and a strong desire not to be boxed in by classification. Ed Sobel summed it up nicely:

There is tension between acknowledging that this is an idiosyncratic art and that we are idiosyncratic artists and have idiosyncratic processes, and how that aligns with the notion of a model and trying to codify what we do. Part of what we’re struggling against is how to make those two things mesh.

The words themselves are suspect. Although terms like “diversity,” “devising,” and “community” achieved universal currency in the convening, participants bristled over their inadequacy and imprecision. “I wonder if the word ‘diversity’ is not killing us all a little bit,” opined Lydia R. Diamond. “It just feels slippery, it feels a bit like screaming into the wind. It feels overused and undervalued.”

Some called these terms “funder-speak,” empty jargon that swings in and out of fashion. “The word ‘diversity’ and the prior word, ‘multicultural,’ were so useful, and then they became constraining,” Aditi Kapil said. It was widely acknowledged that funders tend to lead the push towards sharpening definitions in the field, for better or worse, perhaps to demonstrate a degree of objectivity in their grant criteria.

It isn’t just funders who cling to, and depend on, a shared, common vocabulary. In talking about devised work, Michael Rohd described his company’s experience in getting a particularly unconventional piece up on its feet. The challenge was that they couldn’t articulate precisely what they wanted to do in a way that fit in with other companies’ mindsets.

The thing that gets lost sometimes, as we try to use words to define for the sake of funding and scholarship ... is that most of the work that we talk about when we talk about collaboratively-created work was born because some people

wanted to do something and didn't know any other way to do it; or they did not have access to a way to make the thing and distribute the thing that they wanted to. When we try to find a singular methodology, it is as dangerous as imagining playwrights write the same way about the same things for the same audiences.... I want us to be having the conversations about the “Why?” and the “What for?” and the “Who with?” and the “Who for?”

In the end, action triumphed over talk. “That was not an easy conversation to have about how to imagine ways to do that with partners and institutions,” he said. “People were open to talking to us, but we couldn't articulate it in ways strongly enough, early enough, to make sense of it in an institutional context. So we just did it.”

To be sure, the goal of the Conference was not to promulgate or enforce definitions, essential though they may be in the right context. Dower linked the “fuzziness” of language used in the sector to an “authenticity gap” between artists and institutions.* In a session on the relationships between artists and institutions, Dower called for clarity, pointing out that institutional language frequently talks about being “artist-focused,” while at the same time artists often feel isolated from those companies, or relegated to their fringes.

It was interesting in that context to think about the Arena's [New Play Map](#), which had been unveiled just weeks before. It's an open-source information resource designed to make visible all the organizations, activity, and generative artists that comprise the infrastructure for new work. Arena leveraged the collective intelligence of the conference attendees to brainstorm about enhancements for version 2.0. Jeni Mahoney pointed out that the map enforces a degree of taxonomic uniformity. For example, when you submit an entry to plot on the map, you describe the event through choices located in fixed pull-down menus populated by predetermined categories (“reading,” workshop,” etc.). There is no fill-in-the-blank ambiguity, or flexibility—whichever you prefer to call it.

Said Mahoney, “What we do doesn't necessarily fit into all of the names [on the map]—is it a reading, a workshop—what is it? What I do [does] not fit into those names. But...maybe [the map] will help to define the language of new play development, and we have to start finding ways to name, not necessarily define or box in, the entire journey that is a new play.”

* Dower has written and spoken extensively on this topic. See his 2007 report “[The Gates of Opportunity](#),” which was funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Risk-Taking and Risk-Aversion

“If the audience doesn’t respond to a new work—and audiences and presenters are afraid of new work because it’s untested, it’s a risk—then the failure of a new work because it is not finished for a presenter can burn that relationship forever, and can also burn the presenter’s relationship with their audience to be receptive to a new piece coming in. It raises a lot of complexities about the triangular relationship between the institution, artist, and the audience.”

—MK Wegmann

The complexities surrounding the problems of definition and the impulse to categorize are not just theoretical. I was struck by an insight from Pete Miller during one of the breakout sessions. He spoke of how hard it can be for funders to support the part of the creative process that involves “sitting together in the ‘maybe place.’” He was talking about the time spent exploring possibilities for a work or a relationship, a collaborative state that begins before plans are firmed, scripts are written, commitments are made. Because the “maybe place” can’t be rigorously defined—in terms that meet funders’ grant guidelines—it’s nearly impossible to find support for it in the current funding system.

Or, to put it another way, definitions are useful to theaters and funders for managing risk.

Many participants alluded to a creeping conservatism among theaters—perhaps an unintentional side effect of the institutionalization of theater. “How can we lead the change, and get out of our corporate model?” asked Sandra Gibson. Rocco Landesman complained that theater boards of directors have become dominated by “business people who are in love with metrics,” who undervalue the creation of opportunities for boldness, risk-taking, and experimentation. In a breakout session, Miller, a Woolly Mammoth Board member, warned of large organizations “saving themselves to death” through an obsession with their bottom lines. He would rather they prioritize their mission over their own survival.

Of course, it’s complicated, particularly when the funding pie is sliced so thin. The audience is inevitably part of the equation. Here is Neil Barclay’s take, from the point of view of presenting organizations:

It’s not often that we are able to just do work because we love the artist and we love what they are doing. It has to do with how that work will resonate with the particular community we feel we serve. It’s partially because our runs are shorter, and the opportunity for exchange is a little more truncated. We don’t have the ability to do things that are not going to draw an audience. We think a lot about the ideas embedded in the piece. There are things around resources to [think about] as we begin to consider the relationships of the playwright and collaborators, to the audience we think we can find for the work.”

Deborah Cullinan made the case that valuing process is inherently more risk-friendly than valuing the output. It can also build audience and community, she said.

This idea that process is now valued by institutions and funders is very significant. What we do when we talk about devising also can happen in a community setting, alongside the play. We can take process and open it up and put it out into the world. That needs to be equally valued.... To make great theater that resonates in the world, that turns things around so that theater is an utterly valued part of life in this country and elsewhere, we have to have great process. Maybe we don't need to define it, but we need it to be empowered.”

Artist and Institution

“An artist must have a certain single-mindedness and faith that need to be independent of the institution's realities.”

—Amy Freed

In some sense, the conference was a collective exercise in trying to close the “authenticity gap,” and sorting out how an institution-based theater can thrive in ways that make the most sense for both the artist and the organization, not to mention the audience. Where does the power reside? Who gets a seat at the table? What voices are heard?

The two sessions at the conference specifically devoted to the relationship between artist and institution were titled “Artists and Institutions: Frisson or Friction?.” Despite the overt suggestion of conflict, participants proffered bright spots aplenty. To list just a few:

- Lydia R. Diamond mentioned her experience at [Chicago Dramatists](#) with her play *Stick Fly*, and the “non-hierarchical” way of making theater there.
- Amy Freed told of being offered a second commission by [South Coast Rep](#) even before opening night of her first commissioned work there—an example of a relationship based on trust and commitment.
- James Still valued the flexibility of a workshop at [GeVa Theatre Center](#). What he needed most was time, not a proscribed play development format.

And there were many more examples cited. Later, others tried to parse some of the challenges. Mara Isaacs implicitly invoked the balance of supply and demand, though not in the sense that Landesman indicated. Rather, as a function of the limited supply of artistic opportunity any given institution has to offer.

The reality is you do five shows a year, you do one or two commissions a year—if you are commissioning to produce, and not just seeding larger work. We have an artistic staff of four people... How many deep, thorough, meaningful relationships can you be cultivating over time? Not a lot. If we are doing our work well, and defining our success as giving people the time that they need, giving the support that they need as they define it or maybe as we define it together, who are the people that are getting left out? Are those the people who feel they are not at the center of the institution? I would like to think that the artists who we are either commissioning, or engaging in a process that's leading towards production, or engaging in a process that's about experimentation, we're all pretty clear with each other about what our purpose is. The people who feel mystery are the ones who haven't figured out how to get to that place in the process.

With so few opportunities, what happens when, as Lydia R. Diamond asked, theaters chase after “the hot person of color”?

I have a complicated relationship with this notion of theaters producing the hot person of color—and I am “hot”....I also notice that theaters produce the hot playwright of any color, and those of us with melanin stand out, and yes, we are vying most often for one slot, but certainly the phenomenon is not limited to us.

There is always friction between artists and institutions, according to Lisa Kron. “Theater at its best is anti-institutional,” she said. “An artist needs something to push against.” She added that although the sector does not always acknowledge this inherent tension, it is a source of creative energy. Much exciting work takes place when the door to the institution is neither flung wide open nor slammed shut, but rather cracked open just enough, she said.

What follows logically is a fundamental paradox. Artists need to push against something, but what if that something turns out to include the theater institutions that bring their work to the stage, or an ecosystem that can't support its own artists? And what happens when theaters back away from the ethos of opposition that has been an element of the aesthetic and political identity of the not-for-profit theater over the past half-century?

As MK Wegmann pointed out, with almost no grant monies flowing directly to artists (as was the case in past decades) and a commercial theater that has largely abandoned the development of new plays—though not musicals—or subcontracted that development to not-for-profits, playwrights are left to depend on those very institutions to shepherd those works to production.

One of the aspects of our system in the United States is that resources are over-weighted on the side of institutions and not shared equitably with artists [because of the funding structures].... Artists perceive that institutions are

privileged because they have easily-gotten resources, but of course our organizations, our institutions, struggle just as much the individual artists, and so the relationships aren't there in a strong way. There has been deception over time because people are protecting their own turf, instead of understanding that we're all on the same side, and that the intention is to create artistic work that enriches the cultural life of our communities. It's a big structural problem.

At the end of the panel on artists and institutions, Jennifer L. Nelson responded to Dower's question about why artists so often perceive themselves as at the edges, rather than the center, of so many theater organizations. “I want to respond from an ethnic perspective,” she said, and spoke about being one of the “artists of color who work in the mainstream theater world,” both as a freelancer and more recently as a staff member of a theater company whose leadership is all white. “Whether or not we want to remain on the outside, we are *de facto* relegated to the edges.”

Devised Work and the Author's Voice

“We're having this little moment when it's cool and sexy to be devising.”
– Kirk Lynn

One of the agenda topics that generated the liveliest areas of conversation was devised work. As with so many terms, the meaning of “devised” is fluid and imprecise. It's a catch-all word that embraces theater pieces created through collaborations involving actors, directors, designers, and others, including writers. Work of this nature is often (but not always) created by ensembles and collectives, and participants also tossed around phrases like “ensemble-based work” and “collective creation.” Generally speaking, devised work does not originate as a script created by a single author at the typewriter or computer, which has long been the meat-and-potatoes of the American theater. Of course this distinction may be more a convenience than a truth. Here, too, it's useful to speak about a spectrum, rather than a strictly defined set of categories.

This is a golden moment for devised work, several of the participants suggested. In his “Massive Thoughts” remarks, Kirk Lynn expressed that he was looking forward to a theater community that deepened its embrace of devised work—while at the same time pointing out that this is not a new idea. He imagined

a future that returns to a love of ensembles, and companies, and collectives, resident companies. In the same way we long for great scripts, that we look for iconoclastic visionaries, we [will] also find a way to honor great relationships. When you know that two people work well together, or four people, a group of people work well together, to find a way to make art with them, not just for a singular script or a singular vision, but a way to honor that relationship, because

I think it's a healthy way to make art. There's every indication that it's already happening.

A question to consider, given the excitement devised work has generated in the new play community, is how will this moment play out vis-à-vis artists who create in other modes and among those who collaborate in the development and production of devised work?

Lana Lesley of Rude Mechanicals pointed out that her company has been around for fifteen years, and has survived the inevitable “authorship fights.” She described how the company created *I've Never Been So Happy*, which was supported by a NEA NPDP grant. “I am one-twenty-third of the creative team. Everyone who has been working on this project has been with it from the beginning, and has had as much agency as anyone else once [dramatists] Kirk Lynn and Peter Stopschinski handed over the goods.” The collective approach is not just about authorship or direction, but about collective creation. Writers and designers and directors and actors take on the function of creating work together in a model that is altogether distinct from the resident theater/independent artist system of the regional theater.

Theater is a collaborative art, and to some extent all plays are collaboratively created. And furthermore, as Mark Russell pointed out, “All theater is devised.” Still, listening to the attendees it was clear that, perhaps more so than at other times in recent history,* many in the sector are looking at theater making through a devised-work lens, taking for granted that the definition of a generative artist extends beyond the playwright to include many other collaborators, and even audience members. A phrase first used at the conference by Kristin Marting quickly gained currency. She said that she prefers to think about a project’s “lead artist,” who may or may not be a playwright. Sometimes the lead artist is a director; or for other new work it’s a choreographer, an actor, or a designer.

For some this was unnerving stuff. Dower wondered aloud whether writers would feel under siege: “One of my big fears in this whole scarcity mindset is that in the development of new ways of creating work, writers I talk to worry that it is becoming sexier to devise work than write a play.” Jack Reuler reported that “a playwright pulled me aside and said in confidence, ‘Would it be heresy if I said I don’t think collaboration is necessarily a great idea?’” Later Amy Freed spoke about the centrality of the individual voice, saying that theater at its best has the spectator asking, Who is that voice? Who is that person? “When the singular voice is given true platform, all of us are touched, universally, by it.” No doubt speaking for many writers, she said that although the attractions of devised work are exciting to many, the notion that the writer might be supplanted as the center of authorial voice is “terrifying.”

* I am generalizing. Many companies and artists have been devising work for decades. I don’t mean to suggest that the concept of solo authorship has had universal currency throughout the history of the theater.

An interesting moment occurred during one of the artist/institution panels. Howard Shalwitz spoke of applying the lessons he has learned from working on devised pieces to his process with playwrights. Putting playwrights in the driver’s seat has its downsides, he said, arguing that genuine collaboration results in other collaborators feeling as though they too are generative artists participating in the creation of the play, rather than being shut out of the work. Lydia R. Diamond countered with a strong assertion of the centrality of the playwright’s vision when it comes to new plays; other collaborators are interpretive, rather than generative artists. Later, Lloyd Suh observed that Shalwitz and Diamond were speaking from extremes. In the real world, he said, most playwright/theater relationships fall somewhere in the middle.

But before anyone writes the obituary of the sole author, or tosses the singular vision of the playwright into the waste bin, it’s important to note that many participants joined Suh in refusing to frame this discussion in either/or terms. Sandra Gibson summed up a breakout conversation this way: “When it came to devisers, we talked about the continuum, and not all these definitions. How do we keep ourselves from defining and scrutinizing all of it?” She plumbed this idea further:

Language around this is problematic, but it’s a “both/and.” When we started out with the Ensemble Theatre Collaborations Project—it was independent artists, ensembles—we had a hard time defining what this was, even the definition of “ensemble.” We knew there were individuals doing this work. The partners were producing theaters and presenters, and there were even definitional problems there. But at the end of the day, it was about this alignment of resources that came from a variety of contributors and collaborators that had something different to offer, and what we were after was new ways of working, new partnerships, new mechanisms, new organic generative ways to get this done.

Marting made the case that rather than standing in opposition, devised work and other kinds of new play work can nourish each other.

... there is not one process, there are multiple processes that need to be examined and explored, that feeds back to new play development too, because writers also have different processes. This is a two-way street of influence, of how it can change all of the way[s] new work is being made. The climate is too complex today to have any reductionism at all in the way we are approaching this. The funding is a really big issue because developing a work that is complex and hybrid or devised or whichever terms we are going to apply takes two to three years of an artist’s life, and we don’t have a climate that supports two to three years of an artist’s life.

Marting was not the only participant to suggest that conventional funding models need to adapt to support devised work. Celise Kalke brought up the need for further exploration on the business end. She asked, “If you are hiring an actor who is part of

a devised ensemble, how exactly are royalties going to work?” She also called for standardized agreements with Actors’ Equity that would better cover situations when producing organizations employ performers who devise work. “If there were an industry standard it would be much easier on everybody, and much fairer.” Jim Nicola added the following caveat: “As long as that standard was something to vary from.” Kalke agreed, rephrasing as follows: “Models of collaborative agreements that you can use as research and inspiration.”

What is sexy about this moment for devising is not just about collective (or participatory) authorship. It’s even broader. For some groups, artistic leadership is a collective endeavor. “I swear that we can run a more efficient meeting with five artistic directors than most other organizations,” Lynn quipped about the Rude Mechs. That remark elicited a laugh, but it’s worth noting that the five are called “co-producing artistic directors.” Said Lynn, with the Rude Mechs there is “pride of ownership of artistry” which is spread out among the ensemble: “The whole collective is recognized,” he said, not just the “titles.”

This may be a step towards Meiyin Wang’s vision of the theater of the future, as she articulated during the Big Thinkers session:

There will be no titles of playwrights, directors, actors, designers, managers, producers. There will be theater makers. That will be all that is allowed on a name card. “Theater maker.” People you meet will include a writer/designer. A director/electrician. A sculptor/actor. A film editor/musician. A cook/dramaturg. A plumber/poet. I think about the work of Richard Maxwell, Young Jean Lee, and Guillermo Calderon in Chile, who are at first glance writers/ directors. To me they are instead theater makers—creating total experiences of theater that cannot be recreated anywhere else, in any other setting.

Michael Rohd articulated another aspect of some (though by no means all) devised work that is important to many of its practitioners: “It is another way of engaging community in the building of the work, not just the dissemination.” This is especially important to acknowledge in the context of the societal moment, when the lines between the creator and consumer of theater are blurred through new media. Lynn pointed to a “growing trend and a great resource we can pull on is the audience as a generative artist itself. We’re going to see more and more of that.” American entertainment of the twentieth century assumed that audience members are consumers, not creators, of the art; that is changing, said Lynn, referring to the hugely popular world of online gaming.

Others cited the work of such companies as [Cornerstone Theater Company](#) and [Campo Santo](#) that involve both playwrights and deep community-based creation for new work. Jim Lasko also linked devised work to a trend toward democratization in the creation of culture. Flash mobs, he argued are a form of devised work. It’s an

area that is full of new and exciting thought, laden with possibilities, and as of yet, more questions than answers.

There was also the sense that some ensembles work in alternate systems to the hierarchical, institution-based regional theater model. Steve Sapp spoke of how his ensemble, [Universes](#), has moved in and out of the regional theater world, also working in poetry houses and other venues that are sometimes labeled (but not by him, presumably) “non-traditional.”

Someone said to me, “You do devised work,” and I said, “We do?” We had to work really hard to be considered an ensemble. We had to work really hard to be considered a theater company. And now we’re “devised.” We have learned how to create work for ourselves outside of the quote-unquote structures, outside of the institutions. That’s where we come from.

On Partnerships

“Partnerships and networks are so critical for strengthening the work, not just moving it around.”

—Sandra Gibson

“Know thyself, and know thy partner.”

—Farrell Forman

With two sessions devoted to networks and partnerships, the variety of institutional collaborations discussed was immense, from co-productions to multi-theater networks to resource-sharing arrangements and more. A few noteworthy subtopics and general principles follow.

Discussion focused primarily on how partnerships function in two often overlapping areas: the creation of work, which might involve formal or ad hoc collaborations among a few or many developmental organizations, producing entities, and other groups; and the work’s dissemination, involving networks, touring productions, and relationships between theaters and presenters. A number of participants stressed the value of partnering with non-theatrical organizations, which many presenting organizations have long been doing as a matter of course. Several participants called for closer collaboration with universities (this is second nature to many presenters), particularly if partnerships are scheduled around the academic calendar. Neil Barclay spoke about how practices borrowed from the museum world can be brought to bear on theatrical presentations.

Barclay and other participants mentioned that despite some progress, there is still a persistent lack of communication and collaboration between producing

organizations and presenting ones, on both a national and local/regional level. Similarly, Robert Martin gave voice to some of his frustrations along these lines.

One of the big breakdowns is the relationship [between] a presenting house and theaters in that [area], whether it's regionals, or small [theaters], or whatever. [It's] one of the threads that is not there. If my premise is that for a presenter there is a not a lot of product, then why isn't that presenter figuring out what theaters within a 60-mile radius are working on? Or why don't the theaters in a 60-mile radius say, "We'd like to bring something in; we can't do it as part of our season, let's bring it there." Talk about alignment! It's the disconnect in the arts in general.... It's territorial, I guess; but it's also just not thinking....We could actually work on something [together], bring in something bigger together than we could ever do separately.

Several participants mentioned that the line between presenters and producers is not a sharp one. Producers present; presenters produce. Examples abounded. Marc Masterson pointed out that he has presented work by the [SITI Company](#), Universes, and others in the [Actors Theatre of Louisville's](#) Humana Festival. “I don't see it as presenting,” he said. He deals with these companies in the same way as other generative artists, with individual partnerships taking different forms based on the needs of the artists involved. The key question, he said, is what can the producing organization bring to the table? Rehearsal space and dramaturgical support, were two examples. And “understanding the ecology and knowing when it's right to step in.”

Howard Shalwitz stressed the value of partnerships in fostering a national conversation within the sector:

There's a notion that as a field, we collectively can find ways to capitalize on those special shows that will cross from one community to another, that can move around the country, other than necessarily going to New York.... Of course we have proactive co-productions happening, but I mean reactive co-productions where something special emerges, and then creating networks can take advantage of those, and using that as a way to create more of a national conversation in the new play field, and in some cases, to reduce the burden on so many new shows so that we can all focus on the ones that have the most meaning and the most purpose for us.

Robert Martin spoke of *The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later* as a recent bright spot. “It happened in 100 theaters and presenting houses all across the country, all across the world. We were video-connected. We knew why we were all doing it. ‘Let's unite people in different places, different spaces.’ There were regional theaters, there were presenters, and for that one night, ‘We have this commonality, we're doing this event.’”

Other kinds of partnerships can create a national stage for new work. Their value is not just for increased dissemination, said Sandra Gibson. “Networks and partnerships don’t just *extend* the life of the work through touring. It’s about *strengthening* the work, too.”

That’s one of the guiding principles of the [National New Play Network](#). NNPN Executive Director Jason Loewith spoke about re-production vs. replication. Unlike a tour or a co-production, where a specific production plays multiple venues, the NNPN’s Continued Life of New Plays program involves a predetermined set of *different* productions of the same work.

We’ve talked a lot about abundance. The flip side of that beautiful coin is replication.... In this moment of abundance, it’s even more important to hook up resources with the networks that can put those resources out in the field to avoid replication, which is so expensive and draining and unhealthy.

In the *Outrageous Fortune* follow-up session and elsewhere, participants spoke of how partnerships, big and small, can be extremely valuable even without involving significant expense, such as through sharing scenic and costume shops, offering dramaturgical assistance, etc. Howard Shalwitz pointed out that institutional size matters. There are things he said he could do early in career that he can’t do now—because one of his theater’s priorities is to pay artists more money. It’s a trade-off. Still, he was interested in how to use resources to create longer rehearsal and deeper collaborations.

There was a lot of talking about sharing resources and space that doesn’t involve money, but I actually think most often it does involve money, because we want to pay people for their time. How do we use resources to get out of the box of how we operate? Target money to places that are exploratory, experimental. Let’s just try something, let’s get some people in a room and see what happens, let’s have a longer rehearsal period, let’s have more cast members in a given show, rather than focusing on perfecting what we are doing in the box that we are already in, recognizing that it has its limits, and trying to funnel resources to get outside of the box rather than just asking, “What are the best practices inside the box?”

Loewith observed that partnerships work best when they complement rather than duplicate. “Partnerships among people who know each other and each other’s resources are essential.” This theme was repeated several times in different forms. Here is Chip Walton:

As this becomes a wonderful way to work in the sector, keeping a level of discernment about who you partner with and how you partner is important, particularly in balance with growing trends in the funding community, so that

you don't just partner with organizations or on projects or with artists because of the lure of additional funding. Even within the National New Play Network, we are twenty-six theaters and we know each other pretty well. Frankly, there are organizations within the network I would partner with and those I wouldn't. Not because I don't like them or their work, but because we work in different ways. The DNA is just different.”

Or, as Farrell Foreman put it, “One of the most important things you learn is that you can't work with everybody, nor should you. And the second thing is, not everybody wants to work with you.”

Jeremy Cohen gave this advice: “You have to articulate for yourself the difference between partnership and relationship. Those can mean, and they have to mean, different things.” Part of doing that is clarity. Partnerships take a lot of work, advised Michael Robertson, but taking time to align expectations in advance can be essential—and can help turn a relationship into a partnership. “The best thing you can do is ask, What are your strengths? Why are you at the table?” He elaborated,

The key is to make sure you're aligned on the art you want to support together. Do you all believe in it, whether or not your production will be the same, or the director. Your artistic take may be different, but you believe in that play, and you are going to do all that you can within your resources [to support it]. [And you need to talk about] What are your resources? Does one theater have more resources than the other? Does the arc, the trajectory make sense? Is it better [to begin] at the smaller theater or the bigger one? Does it need more development at Lark? Does it need to come back to Lark between two productions? Does it need to be part of that writer's fellowship at New Dramatists? And you can't not talk about money up front. You have got to be really honest up front, all [parties] agreeing.

Over and over, participants spoke of partnerships as bright spots. Yet many warned of specific pitfalls to look out for. Dominic Taylor spoke of situations where the tail wags the dog—when a company is tempted to do work primarily because of a partnership opportunity. This may have to do with money, or the “potential to have a national profile.” Or the fear that “when you say, ‘We don't want to [work with you on this one], can you come back to us with the next project?’ they don't come back.”

Later, in a breakout session, a participant pointed out that “not my idea” can be an obstacle. If there are limited resources, companies want to focus on the work they generate or originate, not necessarily on a project from elsewhere.

Participants generally agreed that red flags should go up when the impetus to partner becomes financial rather than primarily artistic. Jeremy Cohen said, “I spent a lot of years talking about partnerships from a business-model standpoint. [But] partnerships have to start and be centered on artists.” The problem is exacerbated

when money is especially tight, such as now. It was universally acknowledged that in a poor revenue climate, organizations are more likely to partner. As Farrell Foreman quipped, “It’s always sexy to talk about partnerships when ain’t nobody got no money.”

The business arrangements involved in partnering can be complex, so it was interesting to hear Marc Masterson’s take on financial involvement between his resident theater company and the ensembles whose work he has presented.

In a lot of these partnerships that have developed, we are blind financially to what other institutional partners do. This has been true of every ensemble [I have worked with]. I don’t know what money they have raised to support their developmental process. They can raise as much money as they want....I am not interested.... I want to support [an artist/institution’s] capacity to go out and [find developmental support]. Transparency can be dangerous. Someone may be double-funding something—I don’t want to know. It’s really useful to not have a financial stake, so that the partners can do what they need. I am spending what I would normally spend to produce. I’m not doing it to save money. I am doing it because I’m interested in that artist.”

A dialogue between Jim Nicola and Michael Rohd made it clear that the sector has far to go to in hammering out some of the questions about the economic models surrounding collaborations between resident theaters and companies in residence.

Jim Nicola: *This is a conflict between presenting and producing and what’s in between...We have a companies-in-residence policy, which is very low-cost. Essentially we give space. But when we get to the producing part of whatever comes out of that, we often end up paying to the company or the ensemble an administrative fee, which is not an insignificant amount of money. We’re paying a lot of administrators, and not putting that money toward artists.*

Michael Rohd: *In a way you are putting it towards artists. When we work with institutions, that administrative fee is what allows us to keep our managing director, our one staff member, a part of the company.*

Nicola: *Sure, but we have a managing director we pay for, and you have a managing director you pay for, and it’s not going for the playwright or director.*

Rohd: *Understood, but I don’t know that in an ensemble setting you can distinguish between the managing director and the artists.*

In the session on devised work, Katie Pearl championed a kind of partnering that plays out on a regional scope. Her bright spot was the dynamic theater community in Austin, Texas. There is “a lot of energy of theater makers coming there just

making their own work and forming groups to do that. Devising is what lots and lots of us do. Because there is not the traditional support, we have this term, ‘loosely affiliated mutually supportive group of artists.’” Pearl was, in some sense, describing the entire city as a loose ensemble.*

It’s worth noting that this homegrown ecosystem has sprouted in the absence of a LORT theater to “anchor” the community, as Pearl put it. Many other factors might be relevant in Austin: a renowned music scene, the presence of a large university, and so on. Still, it’s a case where collectivism extends beyond a specific group to encompass a patchwork of interconnected artists and institutions spread across an entire urban geography. In fact, Pearl explained, a group of Austin-based companies recently applied together to the Mellon Foundation for a grant to sustain the entire local theater community. The question posed in this unconventional funding request was, as Pearl articulated it, “How can this community that is built on conversation and mutual interest and support create an infrastructure for this kind of work that the institutional model, which isn’t in Austin anyway, doesn’t seem to be able to provide?”

It was surprising to some participants that throughout the conference and especially during the session dedicated to collaboration and partnerships, there was little talk of collaboration with commercial producers. This was especially striking in light of Landesman’s speech, in which he takes it as a given that the commercial and not-for-profit sides of the sector are deeply entwined. While no one countered this perception, few of the participants chose to dwell on it.

Collective Creation

“It’s not that rare to put your little play in your little suitcase and take it to a lot of places.”
—Aditi Kapil

Here’s a fable: A playwright has an idea. She writes a first draft during a residency at a writers’ retreat in northern Minnesota. The script gets a reading at the [Lark Play Development Center](#), followed by workshops at the [Playwrights’ Center](#), [InterAct Theatre Company](#), and the Lark. There is another workshop at the Playwrights’ Center, then a reading at Arena Stage. The play enjoys a NNPN “rolling world premiere” in separate productions at [Mixed Blood Theatre](#), [Long Wharf](#), and [Borderlands Theater](#). Along the way come grants and fellowships that support the work on its journey towards production.

* This kind of thinking is hardly unique to Austin. I have heard play-makers in the Chicago area describe the vibrant theater scene in their city and its environs as an organic, ever-changing ensemble.

This is not a made-up story. It is the real-life trajectory of Aditi Kapil’s *Agnes Under the Big Top*, a tall tale, as recorded on the New Play Map. Kapil and others repeatedly and enthusiastically pointed to this journey as a bright spot, a case study of a process that works. It’s a marquee example of a play that received the support it needed—the support that the playwright believed it needed—to move from idea to the page, through development and on to multiple productions. *Agnes* may be exceptional with its relatively large cast, numerous languages and many locations. But as many at the conference acknowledged, its journey is typical. Many plays with fewer complex technical demands similarly bounce all over the map, as it were. Substitute [Sundance](#) or [New Dramatists](#), add in [South Coast Rep](#) or [Center Theatre Group](#) or any number of companies and you have a fair picture of the journey of any number of plays through the current regional theater ecosystem.

A half century ago the mechanism for birthing new plays shifted from commercial production to stagings at resident theaters, from an entrepreneurial model to an institutional one. This transformation has long been a subject of discussion within the sector, and at the conference there was much healthy discourse around how others, including presenters and self-producing artists, fit into that equation.

Agnes’ journey illustrates a more recent change. It was taken for granted at “From Scarcity to Abundance” that production now seldom takes place under the supervision of a single theater. More often than not it is spread out among a constellation of organizations and individuals with numerous organizations owning different, often overlapping stages of a new play’s journey. Sometimes there are planned partnerships; more often the trajectory is an ad hoc series of sequential encounters between theaters and a particular work or artist.

The fact that it takes a village to produce a play—or at least to bring it to first production—is hardly news. It’s pretty much the way of things in the sector. But hearing the conference participants talk about partnerships and networks, devised work and cities-as-ensembles, suggested that this change is perhaps another field-wide reconstitution of the role of the producer. Neither impresario nor institution drives this new model of production. Rather, it is a form of collective creation on an intra-institutional level. The impression was that many attendees implicitly view the entire sector as a kind of loose, informal ensemble made up of companies that, in a best-case scenario, can shepherd a new play through development, production, second production, and beyond.*

Even the NNPN’s rolling world premiere program is an iteration of this phenomenon. Participants widely praised NNPN, and part of what makes this program so intriguing is that each staging of the play is a *different* production, with new collaborators in each city. It is a twenty-first century version of the out-of-town tryout system, which once offered playwrights, and especially the creators of musicals, the opportunity to

* It seems clear that the sector’s embrace of ensembles and devised work reflects a flourishing of collective creation not just in authorship, but in producing as well.

develop their work through production before it was frozen with the Broadway opening. That system has been defunct for some time, and there seems to be no nostalgia for a return to the days where a New York production was the ultimate goal for the play. This bright spot comes along with an unspoken message to playwrights: under the current system, plays can have a healthy life outside of New York; but the act of producing is now a diffuse, collective activity, with no single vision at its core.

Left largely unspoken at the conference was where this it-takes-a-village reality of theater production—that involves numerous steps through many organizations over time and geography, but, crucially, through multiple production and developmental organizations—leaves the generative artists involved. If some worry about a splintering or devaluing of the single authorial voice, what are the consequences of this parallel dissolution of the role of the producer? One thing that an old-school producer, commercial or not-for-profit, brought to the table—at least in the ideal scenario—was consistency. To be sure, others sometimes played this role.* At the risk of nostalgic yearning for the days of Joe Papp and Zelda Fichandler, it strikes me as fair to ask who is driving the bus. Writers may be overwhelmed when there are “too many cooks in the kitchen,” as Polly Carl put it. Craig Peterson pointed out that the writer is often forced to act as his or her own producer.

What happens is that artists are functioning as middlemen between organizations. The idea of partnerships would be to alleviate that difficulty or stress. Maybe five of us here are presenting the same play over the next eighteen months, but we don't talk to each other. The artist is constantly trying to negotiate when they are going to be in residence here, when they are going to be there. We're not talking. If we could develop better models for partnerships among institutions, it would take that whole element out of the artistic process that is so draining and exhausting.

Given the current funding climate, few individual theaters acting on their own can support the kind of long-term developmental work followed by multiple productions that Kapil said she needed to realize the successful trajectory of *Agnes*. Nor, perhaps, should they be expected to. Collective support through partnerships and institutional specialization made sense in this case. Kapil explained that part of what made her journey with *Agnes* a bright spot was the intentionality provided by the NEA NPDP, which helped make sure there was forward motion during each development opportunity.

The frustration with my first play was that I'd go somewhere, and it was such a complex play with so many different languages and things, that by the time I'd explained myself and got everyone on board, we had a reading and I said

* One notable example was talent agent Audrey Wood, an early advisor to Tennessee Williams. She was the Morgan Jenness of her day.

goodbye. Actual process and progress didn't happen. Forward motion didn't happen.

[With Agnes], our idea was to be really purposeful about [the journey], and know in advance when you get to have these opportunities, rather than jockeying for them while you're trying to write your play. The idea here was we get everyone involved from the start. We all converse from the start. Everyone knows what the play is, what it's about, what the ideas that I am trying to capture are.

Indeed, Ed Sobel said that bright spots tend to occur when playwrights feel in control of the development path of the play. Todd London said that if a writer at any stage of a development journey knows that he or she has a next step in place that can be enormously valuable because it takes a lot of pressure off of the current stage.

For Kapil, having a single person collaborating with her the whole time, despite the ever-changing venue was essential. “I have my trusty dramaturg with me, who can help me make sure there is always forward motion for each development opportunity.” That dramaturg was Liz Engleman. But most dramaturgs work for institutions, not individual writers.

It's important to note that many authors and other generative artists have embraced self-production, empowering themselves to create and seize opportunities for developing and mounting work, with or without institutional collaboration. Participants called out such individuals as Taylor Mac, Richard Maxwell, and Young Jean Lee, trumpeting their success in producing their own work by marshaling resources available to them both within and outside the institutions in the field as they oversee not just the script but the production. Todd London's list of values represented in his catalogue of bright spots included the ability to foster self-production. Kirk Lynn described how, in his teaching, he has come to believe it is essential

not only [to] teach the craft of how you write a play or direct a play, but also how you produce theater, including artistic and technical production, but also business management....I want all of us to increase the access that people have to the tools, to the budgets, to the transparency, to what the work actually costs, and what people donate to those things.

Some artists, of course, are not as interested in taking on the burden of production.

Two final notes about collective creation. Participants welcomed Arena's New Play Map as a useful tool to make visible the kind of journey along which a play like *Agnes* travelled through the new work infrastructure from idea to multiple productions. Said Brad Erikson,

Part of the value [of the map] is being able to show people, like funders and donors, who may not be as informed, what the journey really looks like. They can actually see [how a] play bounces around the country, over time, and the [number] of years that went into that development [process]. To be able to show that story to people who can make a difference, because they've got money, perhaps, because they've got influence. Or [to ask], “Why did it take so long? Is there a way to condense that process? Maybe that play needed five years, maybe it could have taken eighteen months, and here's a way we could have streamlined that process?”

The map brilliantly demonstrates that plays are borne out of complex journeys across the field. But as the Arena's Vijay Mathew mentioned, it tends to privilege plays with long development odysseys because it foregrounds the visual display of information. The longer the journey, the more zig-zagging across the map, and the more to look at.

Second, some present argued that there is a lack of understanding concerning artistic leadership in the sector. This may be a good moment to pause and reflect on what institutional leadership, and, in fact producing, should be—particularly vis-à-vis new plays. Here is Jim Nicola:

It's shocking to me the ignorance of what an artistic leader does, and how he or she functions. [There] seems to be a lot of misconception.... A next step would be to have a field-wide conversation about artistic leadership. How is an artistic leader made? What goes into that? Mostly, if you talk to any of us [artistic directors, you'll hear that] it's entirely by self-directed accident. Maybe that's a good thing, but it would be great to have some focus and clarity on that process. If we want to choose that as the way an artistic leader is created, then great. But it's very unconscious and unstandardized. There is no real distinguishing in the field, except very indirectly, about what is good practice and what is bad practice as an artistic leader, and maybe we need to focus on that—some recognition of good leadership, what's exemplary, what's defining, looking to the future.

A Question of Alignment

“There are all different ways of alignment, and it's about what questions need to be asked at the outset and through the process.”

—Liz Engleman

Aditi Kapil and her dramaturg, Liz Engleman, both stressed a key point about the experience of *Agnes* that made it a bright spot. In Engleman's telling, Kapil was able to define her needs at every step of this lengthy and complex journey, and that she

then consistently received the support that enabled her to “look at that play through different lenses at each stop along the way.” At one moment, the focus might be on text; at another, design elements were front-and-center in Kapil’s mind. “We could put on different lenses because we knew intentionally what we were looking at. So there was the alignment of process,” Engleman said.

Engleman was tapping into a conversation that has taken place in the sector over the past two years about alignment, which some have described as a core value for the field. The thinking goes that organizations should focus their resources on what they do best, and collaborate with other companies when plays and artists need other kinds support that falls outside their area of expertise. To put it another way, better alignment among theater organizations would create increased concordance between purpose and capacity, vision and strategy to best marshal the sector’s collective resources on behalf of the field.* Can complementary parts of the field collaborate in new ways? Is there a need for new linkages between artist development opportunities, product development work, and production?

For Engleman, there is much value in alignment on various levels, from the production team to the sector as a whole.

There is aligning the right people in the room to work on the play in the first place. There’s getting that play’s team in alignment. And then there is the trajectory of that play...What are the needs? How do you have conversation around the intention of those needs, and how do you line them up [i.e., aligning the needs of the play with the available resources].

So, organization A is good at commissioning, B at development, C at workshops, D at getting a premiere going, E at mounting a second production, and so on. In its simplest sense, this thinking suggests that some companies should focus on production while others take on development, for example, instead of any single company being tasked with a soup-to-nuts approach to being responsible for the gestation and production of work.

Engleman also spoke of alignment of producing organizations. She described how NNPN configures various organizations’ resources to support multiple productions of a new play. Finally, she took a global view of the sector: “Then there is the alignment of the field. How do we in the field continue to develop work on a larger scale, and getting the right people in the room—a large cast, for the American theater? There are all different ways of alignment, and it’s about what questions need to be asked at the outset and through the process... Which deep questions do we need to ask at each step along the way?”

* David Dower initiated, or at least named, this line of thinking with “The Gates of Opportunity.” I am quoting Gigi Bolt, who moderated a convening sponsored by the Mellon Foundation at the Actors Theatre of Louisville’s 2009 Humana Festival of New American Plays. She picked up on Dower’s use of the word, and the term stuck.

Tory Bailey linked alignment to the life cycle of a producing organization. She said that the idea of alignment seemed “totally liberating” to her, particularly when it applies to “vertical integration,” i.e., collaboration between organizations working together to focus on different stages of the development and production of a play.

The idea that you could be as an institution very honest about what you do not only allows for the right things to happen at the right time, but it also allows organizations to grow. Some mature organizations don't seem to be able to liberate themselves from what they were doing ten years ago. Maybe there is nothing wrong with saying, “This is what we do now. We are in a position to pay our artists more than [we did] ten years ago, but [as a result], we're not able to do the same kind of work.”

Bailey was referring to aspects of play development, the kind of down-and-dirty, flexible support many smaller companies and lab organizations are better suited to provide than their larger counterparts. Vertical alignment could help theaters and funders deploy their resources more effectively.

Ours is an era of crowd-sourced cultural creation—of flash mobs, multi-player video games, and online collective art-making. A new play isn't the same thing as Wikipedia. It's not folk art, which is an old-school version of crowd-sourcing: work created collectively by many individuals over time. But if partnerships are a form of crowd-sourcing, alignment can create efficiency in collaborative creation—or, perhaps more precisely, maximize the impact that a collection of organizations can bring to bear in the development and eventual production of work.

Alignment is no magic bullet, Meiyin Wang said in a breakout session. “We are all jumping on the bandwagon of, ‘If we align our resources right, it's all going to be magical.’ It's not.” What's more, one might argue that some theaters are outsourcing the developmental element of the traditional role of the producer. In any case, it is a compartmentalizing of the producer's function: one organization sees to the reading, another to a workshop, a third to a developmental production, a fourth to a premiere, and so on.

Still, the upsides are many. To paraphrase David Dower, if institutional collaboration is going to happen, let's make sure the infrastructure is in place to support the artists and institutions. And let's encourage the creation and growth and deepening of relationships across diverse geographies and cultural experience.

On Diversity

“I wonder if the conversation is not as much about our philosophical commitment to diversity, but rather the doling out of resources, the making good on promises to funders and artists about an institutional commitment to diversity—racial, cultural, and aesthetic.”

—Lydia R. Diamond

At least some participants insisted that diversity was a relevant and indeed essential aspect of every facet of the larger conversation, in every session of the convening.

Some broached the topic gingerly, others with zest, but over and over participants took pains to point out that “diversity” is a buzzword of questionable utility. Shishir Kurup mentioned that people of color often have a hard time with the word. It is the latest in a series of terms he said that were “handed down to us,” following, most recently, “multiculturalism.” In the context of the Arena gathering, the term “diversity” embraced differences across numerous spectrums, including not just race, but also cultural experience, aesthetics, class, geography, age, career status, and the like.

But race remained central to the topic, and participants made it clear that in this area, the sector comes up short. One of the two sessions on diversity was supposed to focus on bright spots. Yet nearly as soon as the conversation got underway, a number of the participants questioned the premise, pointing out that whatever positive developments are at hand, there are still vast structural problems. Diane Rodriguez, for example, spoke briefly about recent, welcome strides toward aesthetic diversity. That said, she continued, “I wish I could be positive about ethnic diversity, but I can’t.” She went on to say that the real issue is one of power, not how many plays by people of color are produced or what percentage of the audience is non-white. There has been no movement among “the people that have power and money,” i.e., the leaders of larger theaters, long-tenure fixtures who are overwhelmingly white, and who are in no hurry to step aside (it occurred to me that these words might also describe the funding community). And when they do so, boards seldom look for persons of color to fill their jobs. “This is the crucial issue,” she said. “All of the other stuff doesn’t matter to me. We need to put this at the center of what we are talking about.”

There was palpable frustration in the room. Participants of color made it clear this is a road they had traveled before; but the scenery has shifted little. Here is Lydia R. Diamond:

I continue to be discouraged and confounded by how long this conversation has been happening, and how little I see things changing.... Is there a level of genuineness? Is there a point at which we have to acknowledge that we don’t want some of our institutions to change?...Because otherwise I can’t figure out

how so many brilliant people can't figure out how to make the demographic of the audience reflective of the demographic of the city.

No one challenged the centrality of diversity to the overall conversation. But different participants came at it from different places. For example, Marc Masterson looked to the future, to the composition of the audience. “Demographically, this country will not look like me in a few years. It will look radically different. It will be much more diverse,” he said. “That is the future, that is the thing that I can hold onto for relative optimism.”

For Kristoffer Diaz and other artists of color, it's not just about programming or slots in a season, or reaching out to urban audiences (though those are important). Diaz reiterated the critique made by Rodriguez and others that the sector's leadership, although at least outwardly committed to the value of diversity, remains near-completely white. The conversation needs to be about power, he said, about who is making artistic decisions. Not just about marketing, but also play selection and even dramaturgy. “It's not just a question of diversity for the sake of diversity,” he said. “It is a question of exploring the new American play and being able to explore the new American play on the terms of those plays.” It's a fundamental paradigm shift about who gets to ask the questions—including, “What is the play about?” Diaz spoke to this point when he described aspects of his experience with his play *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity*.

*I wrote a play a couple of years ago that in my mind was about a young person of color who had a dream in the United States of America and had trouble fulfilling it because [he] was a young person of color in the United States of America. It's a play about privilege, white privilege, economic privilege, all kinds of privilege. It's a play about dual consciousness, the struggle of being an immigrant. That play, in the minds of some of the people who produced it, some of the people who reviewed it, and some of the people who saw it, was a light comedy about professional wrestling....The arc and the structure of *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* is about a young person of color trying to tell his story. If you do not get that it's a play about a young person of color trying to tell his story, you then come back to me and tell me that its structure is flawed.... In some of those situations, the conversations that I have with the artistic staff, they come in and say, “Here is a set of cuts that will help you tell your story better,” and they do not know the story that I am telling. [That] is a direct outcome of a disconnect at the level of an American-play and an American-identity.*

Diaz is identifying fundamental blind spots that the white theater establishment has yet to confront. Lisa Kron later picked up on Diaz's words but changed the context somewhat.

American political theater often deals with race and class issues, which are completely invisible to the two lead critics of the New York Times. As Kris described, what happens is that you get reviews that say, “This play didn’t add up. It didn’t make any sense.” Because it’s invisible to them. There is a very clear narrative, but it doesn’t add up for someone who doesn’t have the ability to see the connectors of that narrative.

Did defining diversity broadly let some of the leaders of so-called “mainstream” organizations off the hook a bit? Was it a dodge of the issues of race? Perhaps. Jack Reuler reported hearing the following comment during a breakout session: “It’s a bit of an indictment of the field to be discussing diversity of process and style with race and culture, as though it was one conversation.” But it also provided space for discussion of diversities within specific communities. Many participants of color spoke about bumping up against the inability or unwillingness of the white theater establishment and their audiences to see a spectrum of experience, a diversity of stories to tell, within specific communities of color. Katori Hall explained that when her work depicts a certain amount of diversity within the African-American experience, it becomes much harder to get produced. What stories, she asked, are we comfortable sharing?

Jennifer L. Nelson spoke about navigating within a theater community when she often finds herself to be the only person of color in the room, and about the white theater establishment’s tendency to marginalize artists of color, ignoring them except when considering “ethnic” plays.

The brilliant, crazy, wonderful playwright Han Ong gave me a quote many years ago. He felt that being a person of color, a person who was “different” in the mainstream theater world, meant that you always had to be the oracular representative of your race. We laughed about it then, but every day of my career it becomes more and more true....[When planning work at her theater] the question of designers, directors, etc. is mentioned, it’s never, ever a person of color. There is never a person of color in that conversation. The only time that it might come up is if I bring it up. And the [response is,] “Oh, sure, we don’t know that person, but we’re willing to hear about them.” Basically it’s that liberal response: “We want to do that but we don’t know people who can do that.” And then when we are talking about people of color, we are talking about people of color doing plays about people of color, not, “We’re going to do a play about Abraham Lincoln, and who would be a good partner for a playwright to do this?” Of course there are other extenuating circumstances, but bottom line, it’s an archetypical situation that a lot of artists of color find themselves in, working in the institutional theater world.

* Again, imperfect terminology. The terms “mainstream” and its counterpart, “culturally-specific” are hopelessly problematic, but they are the best the field has come up with so far, and were generally used by the participants, even as experience dictates many consider them to be inadequate.

The conversation embraced diversity within communities of color. The set of questions around how so-called culturally specific organizations conceive of diversity were different from those of theaters often referred to as “mainstream.” Said Shay Wafer, “Diversity is not just black and white. It’s broader than that.” She continued,

When you work at an all-Black institution and you have to fill out the government form about diversity, what do you put on there? We know that the intent of the form was to look at race, and maybe economics, and maybe at community. I remember working in these organizations, and you were challenged to identify how many non-Black board members you had, or non-Black audience members you had. It’s such a charged conversation. There’s a responsibility for every organization to define what that means for you. There’s a diversity of aesthetic, a diversity in age, a diversity in community, it’s diversity on all levels. I hope the conversation elevates beyond just race, because it takes culturally-specific organizations off the table. We have some responsibility in diversifying things that are happening within our organization.

Shishir Kurup evoked a set of fundamental questions raised by participants of color when he asked, “Where is the American story being told”? People of color, he said, are the new American story, but their voices are subsumed by a regional theater system that considers cultural diversity a box to check off on a grant application.

Here is how Neil Barclay parsed this complex topic:

We have to be intentional, particularly as people of color, frankly, about not always talking about ourselves in terms of the racial lens, so that we can begin to talk about our work in terms of the aesthetic underpinnings of it, or in terms of the fact that even within our own audiences there are divisions of class and aesthetic interest. The responsibility is for artists of color to begin to frame their own work and contributions in ways other than racial, and not just for themselves, but for the audiences they are trying to serve. In some ways our audiences are reflecting what we’re interested in. A lot of our plays are charged with racial issues or history or a particular cultural tradition, and until we can begin to talk about ourselves in ways that animate issues of class and internationalism, then we are putting ourselves in that box.

As Barclay spoke that last sentence, others in the room called out from the audience, expanding his list by adding gender, geography, age, to class and internationalism.

Community Building

“Theaters should get out and around in their communities. They shouldn’t be these temples on a hill that people are intimidated by, and don’t feel welcomed at.”

—Rocco Landesman

For some, the artist vs. institution conversation was slightly beside the point. Lisa Kron stressed that while it’s seductive to forefront the relationship between artist and institution, the real work of theater is to create a shared culture between artists and audience. How, she asked, do theaters create and connect with community? This question ran like a refrain throughout the whole conference. It is, after all, one of the organizing principles of this social art form. It may be particularly relevant during what Scott Walters called a “time of great homogenization as far as stories are concerned.” Shishir Kurup invoked the Arena’s glass-walled Study as a metaphor:

There used to be walls. Now we can see into the building. But is that enough? How do we go beyond the glass, open up the glass, go through [it]? It’s about this flow that happens. Ownership of the space by the community around, and then connection of this space with the community, so the flow goes that way too. Senior staff, the money people, going out there; and the folks coming in here.

What makes place specific is not so much geography as community. In his “Massive Thoughts” musings, Marc Masterson probed the responsibility of major regional theaters to engage with their communities, and the peril in store if they do not.

Large institutions like [mine] have to redefine their role in the community or they will go away....I have spent a lot of time thinking, What can that role be for a larger institution? How can a larger institution be important in shaping the future of new work? It’s by opening the doors and letting people in. It’s by getting out of the building. It’s by a thorough investigation of what community is and means. It’s about how we can change an idea of the art form by bringing people who maybe aren’t in what we think of as our art form into the collaboration, whether they’re visual artists, or community members, or audience members who might have something to say and do to change our way of things.

Rachel Chavkin pointed out that touring work depends on local organizations to build and maintain connections to community.

There’s this sense of landing, like a fly, in a community, being there for a moment. Maybe that theater has a deep relationship with its community and so

they trust the stuff that comes there, maybe they don't have that. It can be unsatisfying for us to land in a place and not have any infrastructure helping us reach out to the people we're talking with while we're there during a production.

The very notion of community in the arts (as elsewhere) is defined in so many ways. Lydia R. Diamond pointed out in her “Massive Thoughts” remarks that the communities with which regional theaters engage often do not match the population that surrounds these institutions.

When I go to the theater, let's even say to a Black play, an American play written by a black person inhabited by black actors, and I'm in a town that is reasonably diverse, where at the bus stop or the drugstore or a high-end restaurant I see lots and lots of people who look like me, but the demographic in the theater is startlingly not the same, I am concerned. I wonder how the subscription system makes room for audience expansion. I wish for us to acknowledge a certain elitism, and address how that figures into our floundering around diversity and audience diversification; funding of culturally-specific, non-white theaters; and selection of plays produced.

As an area of discourse, elitism was something of a “third rail” at the conference. It was often evoked but, as with aesthetics and quality, seldom explored.

Power Politics

“There are huge populations of people who don't get counted, who go to theaters that don't get counted—or funded....It is really important that we continue to broaden our sense of what a legitimate audience is, and what a legitimate play is, and maybe learn from some of those audiences that are coming out in droves to things that we sometimes discredit.”

—Lydia R. Diamond

Whatever one makes of Landesman's premise that there is an oversupply of theaters, there is no denying the fact that the number of theater companies in the U.S. has exploded in the past decade. Michael Robertson and Diane Ragsdale hinted that one reason for the increase might be the overabundance of academic training programs. With so few career opportunities at established theaters for newly-minted MFAs, no wonder so many new companies spring up each year. That may be another way of describing an ossified institutional establishment.

Whether the sector's economics can support this proliferation is an open question. Given the scarcity of resources available to support this abundance of theater making, the question of how those resources should be deployed is a vital one. As Jim Lasko argued:

Who gets to ask the questions, where the power sits, is the issue. There is a dominant paradigm, and there are kingmaker institutions, be it [Steppenwolf](#) or Arena, or wherever, who are saying, “This is the work that we value, and here are the people we will give our plentiful resources to.” Why are there 500 theater companies in Chicago? [Because] there are 475 companies who believe that paradigm is not working. They are coming up with their own responses to that, and those people are not so well voiced here.

Lasko was one of many participants who invoked the unheard voices of those not present in the room. Neil Barclay was another.

I do think [this] is an abundant time in terms of the amount of work, the quality and number of ideas that are engaged in the sector. But if we had a different group of voices around the table, they would have a different impression of how and where these resources are being used, and who is allowed to play and who is not allowed to play. There is a whole other discussion around both the voices who are not here in terms of other parts of our sector, and even the peers of ours who are not here who might also have a different perception around these issues. I don’t want us to forget that.

To whom do those voices belong? Jennifer L. Nelson mentioned the first [DC Black Theatre Festival](#) in August, 2010, which had “nothing to do with” the theater establishment in Washington. We need to begin thinking differently, she said, or our theaters will be bypassed by people who have been on the outside and have “given up” on the theater community, as well as by young people who are seeking different kinds of performance experiences [that theaters are not willing or able to provide.

The question of who gets to play—in other words, where the power lies in the sector—was on the lips of many. In a community that prides itself in empowering voices, in which nearly all stakeholders articulate a commitment to diversity, some saw hypocrisy. Kristoffer Diaz quoted Pete Miller’s comment during a breakout session that “it’s more important for [theaters] to accomplish our mission than to survive.” Diaz took theaters to task for not living up to their own mission statements, and funders for not holding them accountable.

So many theaters whose mission it is to make plays that reflect the United States of America, or to make plays that reflect the cities they serve, aren’t actually doing that. [Yet] they are receiving funding on behalf of that, by putting that kind of language into their mission that they aren’t necessarily following through on or believing in.

Deborah Cullinan picked up on Miller’s words, adding that “the mission of making theater is more important than the structures we know, than anyone in this room, no matter how talented we are. That is more important, and we drive against that by being concerned about our own success...We need to work against strictly defining

ourselves, from titles to size—what’s big, what’s small, who is successful and who’s not—to where the work lives and breathes and has impact.” Whether or not she was referring back to Landesman’s opening remarks, she went on without pulling any punches, calling for a “radical disruption in our large institutions and our funding structure.”

Who are these institutions and who are they being funded by? And why is this perpetuating? A necessary radical disruption has to happen, but it’s bigger than that. There is a paradigm shift happening all over. The marginalized must be the mainstream. We see it everywhere, and it’s on us to change what is big. What I see every day is enormous. How much can we change huge institutions and huge structures, many of which are no longer successful?...We need new structures, and the change is in the grass roots....That’s what must be funded and supported. That’s where we should focus our energy.

This was hardly a consensus opinion. Leaders of the companies present seemed to recognize that change is necessary, though perhaps not so radical a form. I noticed a palpable sense of responsibility on the minds of the institutional leaders. For example, the idea of a “kingmaker” institution referred to above first came up in a comment from Polly Carl, who was speaking about her move from the [Playwrights’ Center](#) in Minneapolis to Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theater Company. “The incredible responsibility of being at an institution that is a kingmaker for an artist, can at times be overwhelming, and to figure out how to bring an artist responsibly into that with a certain amount of respect for the danger of it is daunting.

Tip-toeing Towards an Interconnected Future

“We are curators of the slow.”
—Amy Freed

In every session, participants expressed optimism about the medium and its capacity to evolve while at the same time reasserting and redefining the essential qualities of the form that make it so rewarding. Yet there was inevitably a sense that we need to reckon with the rapid changes in the overall culture, lest they overtake us, and the sector becomes marginalized as audiences fade away and our artists’ voices remain unheard, or find expression elsewhere. Deborah Cullinan suggested change is afoot:

There’s a great democratization of creativity and artistic expression. This is happening whether or not we know how to handle it. We’re going to figure out how to handle it. There’s stuff happening in basements and garages and everywhere, and on the Internet. It’s not only that we can use these processes to engage people to reconnect or connect for the first time with the relevance of what we do, but also if we don’t embrace it, it’s already ahead of us.

Jim Lasko gave a qualified rave to the sector’s efforts to broaden its outreach, and to embrace the ever-shifting new media; yet questions still remain.

Within the rhetoric of theater companies there is a greater sophistication about what community means, what does public space mean, and how do we engage those things. And there is a greater interest in actually getting to that stuff. I’m not sure that we’re actually doing it yet, but the fact of us being here talking about it speaks to a shift in the tone, an embracing of the processes that devised work seems to be involved in. Social media in general offers a greater democratization of the process of making work and putting that work forward on a platform of high visibility.

Ed Sobel warned against excessive navel-gazing, urging the group to focus on the social and communal aspects of the art form as a resource for shepherding it through cultural shifts.

We have been really terrific about [being] internal, talking about our processes and mechanisms. [But] the challenges we face are inseparable from the notion of where theater sits in our culture, and the fact that only a very, very small percentage of people have an understanding of or an appreciation for this thing that we do is part of the environment in which the challenges we face gets created. So any conversation about next steps, or how to meet those challenges, or new models, or new processes has to in some way account for that fact, that it has to do with not only with looking inwards at our own work, but also about how do we amplify or adjust or talk about the way in which the theater plays a meaningful and substantive role in people’s lives.

These are heady times, and the excitement in the air was palpable as artists, presenters, and theater leaders talked about the ways they are bringing new technology and new social structure to bear in what may be the world’s oldest art form. And yet, other voices called for continuing to focus on fundamentals. One of the most arresting moments of the Conference came during one of the wrap-up sessions when Amy Freed spoke about the qualities of the theater that make it unique in the crowded cultural marketplace.

Part of going forward is also going backwards a little bit, as well....In all of the assets and speed and facility afforded by technology, I hope it doesn’t turn into more theaters losing their literary departments, more theaters reading less.

Writing is slow. Reading is slow. Absorbing is slow. We are curators of the slow, the last holdouts for the slow. Rather than rushing to lure the young, we also need to be respecting the young, and preparing a space for them that we think is a good, humane space for them to occupy as mature people, so we’re

mentors and teachers and protectors, also, in a culture that wants to commodify. We're the last holdouts against commodity.

Theaters need a space that is religious, that guards and protects the brave and the institutions. I am struck by the bravery of all the people who produce theater. That has never quite hit me before. This was a powerful few days for me, because of the courage and the thanklessness of the true believers that produce theater, and how much they love it. There is a kind of in-the-trenches philosophy that can't be forgotten if the art is to stay vital. So before we hold hands too happily with everything that promises a connective future, I think we have to stay a little prickly about it.

As Freed ended and quietly signaled that it was time for the next person to speak, applause erupted throughout the room.

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“From Scarcity to Abundance” Participants

Aaron Carter	Literary Manager	Victory Gardens
Aaron Jafferis	Playwright	
Abel Lopez	Artistic Director	GALA Hispanic
Aditi Kapil	Playwright/Actress/Director	
Adrien-Alice Hansel	Literary Manager	Studio Theater
Aimée Hayes	Artistic Director	Southern Rep
Alan Tumusiime	Actor	
Alison Carey	Associate Artistic Director	Oregon Shakespeare Festival
Alli Houseworth	Convening Tweet-Master	
Amy Freed	Playwright	
Amy Mueller	Artistic Director	The Playwright's Foundation
Anthony Werner	Writer	Howround
Barclay Goldsmith	Artistic Director	Borderlands Theater
Ben Cameron	Program Director of Arts	Doris Duke Charitable Foundation
Ben Mauer	New Play Map Web Developer	Quilted
Ben Pesner	Convening Reporter	
Brad Erickson	Executive Director	Theater Bay Area
Celise Kalke	Literary Manager	The Alliance Theater Company
Charles Randolph-Wright	Playwright	
Chip Walton	Artistic Director	Curious Theater Company
Christopher Hibma	Associate Director	Sundance Theatre Institute
Claudia Rankine	Playwright	
Colin Sagan	New Play Map Web Developer	Quilted
Craig Peterson	Director	Live Arts Brewery
David J. Loehr	Blogger	2AM Theatre
David Shiffrin	Board President	Arena Stage
Deborah Cullinan	Executive Director	Intersection for the Arts/Campo Santo
Derek Goldman	Artistic Director	Davis Performing Arts Center, Georgetown Univ.
Diane Ragsdale	Moderator	Rocco Landesman Panel
Diane Rodriguez	Associate Producer & Director of New Play Development	Center Theater Group
Dominic Taylor	Associate Artistic Director	Penumbra Theater Company
Edward Sobel	Associate Artistic Director	Arden Theater Company
Emilya Cachapero	Director of Artistic Programs and International Theatre Institute-US	Theatre Communications Group
Eric Ting	Associate Artistic Director	Long Wharf Theater
Erik Carter	#NewPlay TV Producer	
Farrell Foreman	Co-Founder and Director	Bear Arts Foundation
Gabor Barbaras	Artistic Director	New Jersey Rep
Gary Hill	Playwright	
Greg Reiner	Executive Director	Tectonic Theater Company
Gus Schulenberg	Convening Tweet-Master TCG New Generations: Future Leaders	
Hayley Finn		Resident Dir. & Lab Producer, Playwrights' Center

Heather McDonald	Playwright	
Howard Shalwitz	Artistic Director	Woolly Mammoth Theater Company
J. Holtham	Convening Blogger	
Jack Reuler	Artistic Director	Mixed Blood Theater
James Nicola	Artistic Director	New York Theatre Workshop
James Still	Playwright	
Jane Preston	Director of Programs	NEFA
Jason Loewith	Executive Director	National New Play Network
Jeni Mahoney	Playwright/Artist/Director	Seven Devils
Jennifer Kiger	Artistic Director	Yale Rep
Jennifer L. Nelson	Director of Special Projects	Ford's Theater
Jeremy B. Cohen	Producing Artistic Director	Playwrights' Center
Jim Lasko	Core Artist	Redmoon Theater
Jonathan Moscone	Artistic Director	California Shakespeare Theatre
Kamilah Forbes	Artistic Director	Hip Hop Theater Festival
Karen Evans	Executive Director	Black Womens Playwrights Group
Karen Zacarias	Playwright	
Katie Pearl	Co-Artistic Director	PearlDamour/ Austin New Works Community
Katie Steger	Program Associate, Performing Arts	Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Katori Hall	Playwright	
Keith Josef Adkins	Playwright	
Kirk Lynn	Co-Producing Artistic Director	
Kristin Marting	Artistic Director	HERE Arts Center
Kristoffer Diaz	Playwright	
Lisa Adler	Artistic Director	Horizon Theatre
Lisa Kron	Playwright	
Lisa Steindler	Executive Artistic Director	Z Space
Liz Engelman	Dramaturg	Tofte Center
Lloyd Suh	Playwright	
Lydia Diamond	Playwright	
Mara Isaacs	Producing Director	McCarter Theatre
Marc Masterson	Artistic Director	Actors' Theater of Louisville
Mark Russell	Artistic Director	Under the Radar Festival
Mark Valdez	National Coordinator	Network of Ensemble Theaters
Megan Wanless	Executive Director	SITI Company
	TCG New Generations: Future Leaders	
Meiyin Wang		Associate Artistic Producer, Under the Radar
Melanie Joseph	Artistic Producer	The Foundry
Michael Robertson	Managing Director	Lark Play Development Center
Michael Rohd	Playwright	
MK Wegmann	President and CEO	National Performance Network
Molly Murphy	#NewPlay TV Producer	
Molly Smith	Artistic Director	Arena Stage
Neil Barclay	Executive Director	National Black Arts Festival
Octavio Solis	Playwright	
Patrick Flick	Artistic Director	Orlando Shakespeare

“From Scarcity to Abundance” by Ben Pesner

Paul Meshejian	Artistic Director	PlayPenn
Pete Miller	Board Member	Woolly Mammoth Theater Company
Polly Carl	Director of New Play Development	Steppenwolf Theatre
Psalmayene 24	Playwright	
Quinn Bauriedel	Ensemble Member	Pig Iron Theater Company
Rachel Chavkin	Artistic Director/Ensemble Member	TEAM
	Director of Theater and Musical	
Ralph Remington	Theater	NEA
Richard Montoya	Co-founder/Playwright	Culture Clash
	TCG New Generations: Future	
Richard Perez	Leaders	Associate Artistic Director, Chicago Dramatists
Robert Martin	Executive Director	The Lentic Performing Arts Center
Ryan Rilette	Artistic Director	Marin Theater Company
Sabrina Hamilton	Artistic Director	KO Festival
Sandra Gibson	President and CEO	Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP)
Scott Walters	Cradle Project	
Shay Wafer	Producing Director	Colored Girl Productions
Shishir Kurup	Playwright/Actor/Director/Composer	
Stephen Earnhart	Director	
Steven Sapp	Artistic Director/Ensemble Member	The Universes
Susan Clampitt	Board Member	Arena Stage
	Program Officer for the Performing	
Susan Feder	Arts	Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Susan Feldman	Artistic Director	St. Ann's Warehouse
Susie Farr	Executive Director	Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at Maryland
Tanya Saracho	Playwright	
Todd London	Artistic Director	New Dramatists
Tory Bailey	Executive Director	TDF
Trey Lyford	Actor/Ensemble Member	
Trisha Mead	Convening Blogger	
Wendy C. Goldberg	Artistic Director	O'Neill National Playwrights Conference
Yuri Urnov	Observer	
Zelda Fichandler	Founding Artistic Director	Arena Stage