

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
New Plays Initiative

***Today and Tomorrow:
New Play Development Before and After Opening Night***

by Ben Pesner

A report on a gathering of leaders in the
field of new play development and production
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The viewpoints expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

I. Introduction

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation partnered with the Actors Theatre of Louisville in March 2009 to further Mellon's ongoing examination of the state of new play development and production in the American not-for-profit theater. They convened a group of prominent new play professionals during the Special Guests Weekend of the Actors Theatre's annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, one of the nation's leading festivals of new work for the stage. More than 80 artists and institutional leaders attended, including artistic and managing directors, literary managers, playwrights, and directors, as well as members of the arts funding community. Gigi Bolt, former director of the theater program at the National Endowment for the Arts, served as moderator.

The starting-point of the gathering was the presentation of excerpts from a pair reports, both still then unfinished, that focus on this sector of the theatrical field. I have been involved with both of these projects over the past two years, and so I was delighted that Diane Ragsdale asked me to attend the gathering on behalf of the Mellon Foundation, and to report on what was said.

One report is *Outrageous Fortune: The Life & Times of the New American Play*, a book-length study undertaken by Theatre Development Fund (TDF). The book draws on both quantitative and qualitative research to explore what it calls a "collaboration in crisis" between playwrights and producers. It describes "a system of theatrical production that has become increasingly alienating to individual artists and inhospitable to the cultivation of new work for the stage." The lead author and project coordinator is Todd London, Artistic Director of New Dramatists. I am the study's co-author. We had assistance from Zannie Voss of Duke University, who supervised the quantitative research. More information about the book is available at www.TDF.org.

David Dower is the author of the other report, *The Gates of Opportunity*, a lengthy study that documents the available infrastructure for supporting new works and new artists. It also assesses and identifies outstanding efforts in the sector. More than a year after Dower finished his report, the Mellon Foundation asked me to abridge and prepare it for publication, along with smaller paper that I wrote documenting a smaller convening of new play practitioners held by the Mellon Foundation in the autumn of 2007. Both of these documents are available at www.Mellon.org.

At the time of the Louisville gathering, the TDF study had not yet been completed. Dower had submitted his paper to Mellon, but work on its final, public version was still underway. Both TDF and Mellon viewed the Louisville convening as a useful step in the evolution of the documents. The gathering would be a first public airing; the invited guests would serve as an informal sounding board. The Mellon staff also hoped that the conversation would be a useful step in the Foundation's ongoing effort to deepen its understanding of the needs of the field.

The first part of the convening (Friday morning) was devoted to presentation of the two reports, followed by question-and-answer time. Todd London and TDF Executive Director Victoria Bailey talked through various sections of *Outrageous Fortune*. David Dower focused on selected portions of his *The Gates of Opportunity*. A group of a dozen “designated respondents,” each an experienced practitioner in the field, took to the podium on the second day (Saturday). They had been specifically tasked with digesting the material overnight and elucidating their response, along with actionable or forward-looking ideas. It is important to remember that the responses were based on brief spoken summaries of selected portions of the works, neither of which was presented in its totality, and both of which have since been revised.

Although the structure and some of the topics of the two-day event were determined in advance, the format was free-flowing. While many speakers stayed fairly close to the specific issues discussed in the reports, the conversation as a whole expanded to cover many related areas.

At the beginning of Saturday’s session, moderator Gigi Bolt summarized some of the broad themes that ran through both the presentation of the reports and the participants’ initial responses to them. She listed four main ones, all coincidentally denoted by words beginning with the letter “A.” The following list is adapted from her comments, which she later forwarded to the Mellon Foundation in writing.

Abundance. Paradoxically, although we are in a time of economic scarcity, theater today is rich with promise thanks to the bounty and diversity of playwrights’ voices around the country, and to the work and commitment over the years of those who have supported them.

Authenticity. The reports and respondents spoke of the need for authenticity in terms of a theater’s mission and its relationship with artists; in other words, for a relationship based on honesty, truth, and ultimately, respect. This pertains to many area of interaction between artists and institution, and is inevitably connected to the power dynamics behind these relationships.

Allocation of Resources. Both reports encouraged a rethinking and reconsideration of how funders and theaters allocate resources, with the goal of more effectively nurturing and supporting writers, the creative process, and the production of new work. The conversation frequently touched on the nearly impossible economic viability of a career in the theater for playwrights and other artists.

Alignment. Discussion among participants highlighted the need within theaters for a better alignment or concordance between purpose and capacity, vision and strategy. As a suggested core value for the field, alignment also refers to strategic collaboration among theater organizations that would entail better exploitation of resources and expertise.

As the conversation continued on Saturday morning, the designated respondents broadened the scope of the conversation significantly. I have therefore added several

additional themes to Bolt's list. Happily, these can also be represented by "A" words or phrases:

Audience Development and Engagement – Participants discussed how theaters can re-energize and expand their patron bases, both individually and collectively. They spoke of deepening the conversation between institution and audience, and the role of the artist in making this possible.

Authority – Much of the conversation pertained to the power dynamics between writers and nonprofit producing organizations, and whether the structures of relationships in the field serve or hinder writers' interests. Also, participants described a theatrical universe that has, especially in the past decade, moved away from playwright-centric approaches to embrace more and more work created under non-traditional models.

Adaptability – Participants passionately underscored the need for play development processes that are tailored to individual projects, rather than standardized. They queried the extent to which priorities set by funding organizations tend to promote, or to preclude, flexibility.

II. The Discussion

I have taken most of the quotations in this discussion summary from the lead respondents. Others come from other participants who spoke up over the course of the gathering. Some speakers were reporting back on what was discussed in their breakout groups, rather than stating their individual opinions.

Parsing the Notion of “Alignment”

In summarizing his paper, Dower touched briefly on what he called “alignment.” Although he had not intended to dwell on the topic, it immediately generated a great deal of curiosity and excitement. On the other hand, I and others detected a certain amount of apprehension in the room, some of which seemed to dissipate as the group explored the concept more deeply. Dower has since elaborated and expanded on his ideas about alignment, based in part on specific input generated at both the Louisville session and a subsequent presentation at the June 2009 Theatre Communications Group conference. He introduced the topic this way:

This is a period of abundance. There is more money, there are more artists, there are more programs, there are more resources, there is more understanding of the infrastructure than there has ever been. And we’re still talking about it as scarcity. That’s because these resources are not aligned in any rational way on behalf of the field. We are [each] doing our own thing.

In a nutshell, Dower argued that the theater community should focus on creating more efficiency by encouraging more effective collaboration among organizations in various areas of the sector. Each theater organization has a unique degree of expertise in different but equally valuable areas, he argued; there is, however, little coherent matching of artist or project to company over the field as a whole, so that they may be adequately supported over time. “It’s about partnership. How do I connect the dots, on a project-by-project basis? On the basis of a career? Of a community?” Since different organizations do different things well, each should articulate internally and to others where its specific expertise lies, e.g., developmental work, playwright residencies, workshops, high-profile productions, etc. Significantly, Dower spoke of alignment as a core value, not as a prescription or a specific model. It is a step towards more “effective cultural stewardship” of the resources in the field.

“Alignment” quickly became a buzzword that bubbled to the surface frequently throughout the discussion. Gigi Bolt summarized interest in the topic through a series of questions raised by participants:

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? How can we best marshal our collective resources on behalf of the field?

A west coast artistic director pointed out that alignment already takes place in the not-for-profit theater community. “That’s how the creative capital moves through our economy.” The problem, he said, is that while theater leaders frequently communicate with one another and pass projects around on an ad hoc basis, two things are missing: efficiency and intentionality. Few theater leaders have the time necessary to invest in consciously working on making alignment happen, he explained. He challenged theater organizations and funders to work together to incentivize this kind of inter-organizational collaboration by rewarding intentionality, providing incentives for thinking along these lines. He made reference to the green movement: most people think being environmentally conscious is a good idea, but until it made good business sense to “go green,” there was little widespread will for businesses to change their priorities.

This comparison echoed a much-discussed analogy made earlier in the gathering by a veteran dramaturg. This speaker’s take on alignment was to draw a comparison between the current ecology of theatrical production and the local-food movement. She emphasized the organic, seasonal, hand-crafted nature of regional theater: “If you are going to be farming locally in Appalachia, you can’t grow bananas.” Would it be better, she asked, to produce a local crop, a season of locally grown productions, rather than what she and others referred to as the 20 or so “anointed” plays—often the previous year’s Off Broadway hits—that pop up seemingly everywhere throughout the regional theater universe each season? Later, a literary agent concurred: You may not be able to grow bananas, but you still need to figure out where to get the potassium you need. In both theater and agriculture, alignment speaks to more effectively managing local resources for a more healthy ecosystem.

The managing director of a LORT theater in the Midwest offered a different perspective on alignment. She urged the group to consider alignment in as broad a context as possible:

How do we look at alignment holistically, so that it’s not just about sharing in our artistic process, but that it’s also a collaboration with funders, the critical community? How do we identify where we overlap? What forums currently exist? What are the service organizations that help us to connect? How do we find those connectivities?

She offered a very specific suggestion: Fund an individual whose job would be to create connections among theater organizations. He or she would assess aesthetics, resources, strengths, and so on, with an eye toward bringing theaters together around specific projects and processes. This might involve the development and production of individual plays; it might also help theaters learn from each other’s experience and insights into marketing, audience education, and the like.

A California-based artistic director also construed alignment broadly, extending it to embrace “adjacent art forms” such as music and dance. “It would be interesting to see this field look more laterally when it comes to alignment, at interesting, fertile kinds of collaborations that are going on in other disciplines that are more experienced at

collectively creating work than we are in the theater.” She pointed out that the museums in her city house superb auditoriums; is there a way to partner with them and make use of those spaces for creating work together?

Similarly, a colleague who produced Off and Off Off Broadway advocated for better collaboration between theaters and the presenting community. This would be particularly helpful in countering “premieritis,” the tendency of theaters to over-value world premieres. She explained that among presenters, there is less proprietary feeling about premieres, and more willingness to embrace second and third productions.

Playwrights and Theaters

The question of whether and how playwrights are supported within the institution is central to both reports. Dower’s paper dwells on authenticity and honesty of dialogue. The TDF study describes a fundamental perceptual divide between playwrights and the theaters that produce their work, and playwrights’ sense of alienation from what they see as an increasingly corporate mindset on the part of larger institutional theaters. This divide, the authors argue, generates mistrust and missed opportunities.

Several speakers expressed sharp dismay at this finding. Here is what an artistic director had to say:

I am so fascinated and disturbed about this enormous perceived schism between writers and the rest of the theaters. How do we take responsibility for that? If that is what the perception of most writers is, that they are marginalized, how do we look after that?

She questioned the centrality of the playwright, which is the philosophical starting-point of *Outrageous Fortune*. The TDF study concerns text-based plays written by individual authors, which are then brought to the stage by not-for-profit theater companies, with or without being subject to a “play development” process—or, in some cases, mounted by commercial producers. (Dower’s scope is somewhat more broad, encompassing ensemble-based work, work involving presenters, and the like.) The artistic director continued by pointing out that only half of the mainstage works comprising the Actors Theatre’s 2009 Humana Festival were traditionally crafted plays; the others were developed through acting companies or adapted text.

It seems to me these reports are one very narrow part of a much wider ecosystem.... Never in the history of dramaturgy have plays ever been written alone in people’s rooms that aren’t connected to actors in particular, but also other artists. The most interesting work grows out of that. We have to think about why we as a field have totally abdicated our responsibility to performers and other creative artists who are part of the mix.

Another artistic director who has herself conceived and staged many new works argued for a theater that transcends conventional job descriptions:

I realized not so long ago that there is no such thing as a playwright. There is also no such thing as a director. There is also no such thing as a dramaturg. There is actually nobody that's a producer. These are only windows through which you see the thing you're looking at....If one stops thinking of the roles as the person you are, suddenly there's a different relationships in the room. At certain moments, the sound designer might be the best director in the room, and I might be the best actor in the room. Once you realize it's not you, it becomes... a multiplicity of voices, and a much more fecund environment in which one is not fighting for one's territory and who's right and whose point of view [prevails]. You fight for the multiplicity of points of view.

“A lead artist isn’t always a playwright,” a colleague similarly observed. “A lot of work that’s being made right now is being made by other people: composers, choreographers, ensembles.” How, she asked, is that work best served in the structures that currently exist in the field? Through what kind of development and production processes? Following this theater leader’s logic, one might ask, Are our theaters, service institutions, and funders well-equipped to deal with those processes?

This participant also raised a question that applies equally to both unconventional and playwright-driven work. She began with a hypothetical: “If you substitute the idea of a ‘lead artist’ for ‘playwright,’ how does that change how you think of the development process?” Her logic went as follows:

If you had a choreographer as your lead artist, you wouldn't expect them to create work without being in a room with dancers. If you had a composer who is your lead artist, you don't expect them to be making a work without the opportunity to work with musicians, and to go back and do work on their own then go back with the musicians.

Playwrights, by implication, need to be supported in this kind of creative environment so that they can engage with the tools of their craft. This participant went on to say that the bottom line is that plays, unlike novels, are performance texts, and “are meant to be looked at as part of a full collaboration of artists who are making this work come to life.” Too many development processes are looking at them as text without getting them up on their feet with actors, “not fully inhabiting and embodying live performance.” How, she asked, can funders be encouraged to support this kind of collaboration?

Funders and Their Agendas

Inevitably, many questions about funding came up as participants discussed the scarcity of resources in the field, and how best to support the abundance of talent. One of the biggest changes that has taken place since the establishment of the regional theater

movement has been a shift in funding away from artist-driven grants. As summarized by Gigi Bolt, in the 1970s there was a “spotlight focus” on payment of artist fees, even as a component of general operating support; now most funding instead is dedicated to building and supporting institutions, many of which boast extensive facilities and carry large administrative payrolls. She asked whether the field and its funding organizations reckoned with this fundamental shift in the ecology, particularly as it pertains to artists’ compensation, their role decision-making, and, ultimately, the locus of power, which, she implied, is concentrated in institutions rather than with artists.

The aforementioned dramaturg who championed the organic-farming metaphor opened the question of what, exactly, foundations should be underwriting. She took a wide look at the not-for-profit theater community and outlined a best-case scenario, advocating for a “focus on funding the regional ecosystems we have around the country”—a holistic approach that encourages and rewards alignment.

There is time for relationships, incubation, inspiration; there has been a real investment in process and in collaboration that has then resulted in a production....If we look at our regional economies and ecosystems, there are play development centers in those areas that are trying to connect students from universities, which would be next year’s crop, to regional theaters in the community.

She added that it is essential to support “that early step in the process,” when writers and other artists begin work. “It takes a long time to come up with a great idea. It takes a long time for collaborators to find time to get together.” Time, she pointed out, is intangible and thus difficult to fund; but it is essential for artists and their collaborators. “We’re all on our hamster wheels. How do we step back and find time to align?”

A corollary to the question of what funders should fund and how they should do it was a key concern about the consequences—intended and otherwise—of their choices. Todd London addressed this by way of noting that foundations generally favor emergence and newness over maturity. This, along with a tendency of the entire field to repeatedly “throw out a generation” of artists—including actors and playwrights—makes it difficult for writers and others to sustain bodies of work over time, he said. Because there is a little mid-career support, so many writers leave the field at the peak of their working lives.

The director of a foundation that has been a major supporter of new plays and playwrights was candid in self-questioning when it came to funders’ practices. He delivered a report-back from a breakout group populated by grant-makers. “On the one hand, we have met the enemy and it is us.” On the other hand, he continued, “As funders, we are part of the problem, as well as perhaps part of the solution.” He elaborated using premieritis as an example.

By privileging newness, we have encouraged, perhaps, an overexpansion of new play development in areas where it does not belong, and as a result there are 97%

of theaters [in the TDF study] doing new work, and many of them should not be doing that. One of the reasons there may not be second and third productions of some things is that they are not properly developed before production, or frankly, they don't deserve a second or third production.

He went on to wonder aloud about to what extent funders operate in a vacuum. He expressed concern about the unintentional and sometimes unwelcome consequences of funders' choices and how those decisions might impact the lives of artists and the practices of recipient organizations. He called for more gatherings like the Louisville convening that would involve both grant-makers and theater-makers in an open-forum setting, so they could share both anecdotal information and hard data.

Several attendees alluded to the mismatching of the messy, organic process of making art, with the measurable, defined process by which grants are generally made, and by which many institutional theaters are run. One participant noted that the responsibility for matching foundations to grantees rests primarily on nonprofit institutions, which thus have to spend an inordinate amount of time and resources researching funding opportunities and applying for grants. That, he argued, is backwards and inefficient. Instead, he said, grant-making organizations should invest time and dollars into identifying worthy organizations; those companies could then devote more of their scarce resources towards mission-related pursuits. He also suggested that although funders expect arts organizations to engage in strategic planning, they seldom do so themselves.

Flexibility and the “Fuzziness” of Language

Many participants were intrigued by Dower's discussion of the “fuzziness” of language in the theater community, which lies at the center of *The Gates of Opportunity*. For Dower, one obstacle to achieving greater alignment is the imprecision of language in the sector, in which the meaning of terms such as “emerging,” “artist-focused,” “development,” and even “theater” are so fluid that in some cases they barely mean anything. He asserts that it is difficult to achieve the connected collaborative journeys that might best serve plays and artists if organizations don't know, or can't articulate what they do well, and understand what other organizations do.

A playwright offered a hypothetical example: If an artistic director says to a playwright, “I'm going to develop your play,” and that means something different to the writer than to the theater, the result may be disappointment and perhaps hostility. Playwrights and theater leaders need to clarify expectations up front, she said, even when “it's not about disingenuousness, but misunderstanding.”

But for several theater leaders, the talk of precision in language and the repeated mention of terms such as “best practices” in the room were a cause for alarm. Said the artistic director of a high-profile regional theater, “The best practice is the practice that's best for the play, or the playwright. I would argue for less clarity, not more; and more honesty in the conversation.” He elaborated,

I want to come out in favor of fuzziness. The desire to have clear language, I view as a problem. I am much more interested in the areas between things that are defined, than in things that are defined. If we want to get to more clarity, than we should do it by telling the truth to each other. If the inhibitor in our having that conversation is power, than I think we need to deal with that.

His emphasis on authenticity of dialogue echoed a theme at the center of Dower's report, and central to *Outrageous Fortune* as well. He subsequently appealed for playwrights to "look at artistic directors as collaborators, who are responsive to passion." That passion, which bridges the divide, is an essential resource, he said; don't define it out of existence.

The producing director of a smaller-budget company with a long track record of producing new work resisted any suggestion of codifying best practices. "We became artists to *rebel against* best practices," he said. "Can't we be funded and be respected for doing great work, and telling great stories, and knowing we can bring the writer into the room and create work with him in a collaborative atmosphere?" Instead, he said, theaters should value trust and passion.

Speaker after speaker underlined the value of tailoring the process to the project, a concept that figures large in both reports. The downside of championing best practices, some argued, is a tendency to emphasize the standard over the specific. The aforementioned foundation head stressed the need for philanthropic organizations to avoid inadvertently encouraging standardization.

As funders, we need to challenge ourselves to open up the creativity of our processes, so that it allows, rather than a cookie-cutter format for new play development, it allows each organization that is doing this to find a methodology that works for them to get a play from page to stage in a good fashion, and yet still provides accountability to the funding organization.

Artists of Color Speak Out

Several speakers addressed how statistics about race are presented and perceived in the context of the two reports. One playwright responded in particular to the manner in which certain tentative findings in the TDF study were presented at the Louisville convening. Although that section of the book has since been re-written, her critique of the report, and by extension, the community, was sharp. Despite the evident good faith of the Louisville attendees, "We can't get too self-congratulatory....Our profession is not immune to the social and institutional inequalities that are part of the very fabric of our society." How, she asked, can we improve, or even study, the state of writers of color in the American theater if there is so little representation of people of color among the leadership of the community? She exhorted the group, which was overwhelmingly white, to look around the room we were sitting in. "Ask yourself, is it the way it's supposed to be? If the room doesn't look like the subway, it is *not* the way it's supposed to be."

A member of a respected performing ensemble responded to the much-repeated assertion that theaters too often remount the same few “anointed” plays in city after city rather than producing other deserving work. For writers and other theater artists of color, he said, “imagine how that gets even smaller.” He went on to explain why it is so problematic when regional theaters that program works by artists of color in what appear to be dedicated slots each season. “I love August Wilson’s work, but if I see somebody’s season and August Wilson is there, I know [our company] is not getting in there. They’re not going to book August Wilson and us, or Will Power and us, in the same season.” This impulse to assure diversity paradoxically limits it as well.

Supporting Writers

There was near-universal dismay about the state of artist compensation as described in both reports. Few, if any, participants were surprised at TDF’s statistics that depict the harsh economic realities facing playwrights, and their inability (in most cases) to make a decent living as writers; or, for that matter, at Dower’s finding in *The Gates of Opportunity* of widespread complacency about the “appalling” rates of compensation for artists developing work, and a pervasive overdependence in the sector on sweat equity. Both reports capture acute frustration about the field’s inability to sustain writers’ careers over time. Although playwrights’ compensation models typically differ from those of other theater artists, it was clear that the economics of theatrical production on the whole are hardly any better.

A typical response came from a literary manager who was quoting a member of her breakout group: “This is a fairness-and-justice issue. But this undervaluing of the playwright’s work also limits the work and the diversity of voices we are hearing from.” The whole field suffers when low compensation forces the exclusion of so much talent.

What happens to writers whom the field cannot support? “We all complain and lament that young writers are sucked off and go write for television, and don’t come back and write for theater,” said the director of new play development at a theater company in the Midwest. He noted with alarm that it’s not just about money. He pointed out that the TDF study quotes some writers who say not only that television work is more lucrative than theater, they also find it more artistically satisfying. That television may do a better job of supporting writers’ *aesthetic* needs ought to be a wake-up call for theaters, he said. To help plumb the issue, he enumerated some of the benefits, aside from financial ones, of writing for TV.

The first is rapid reward. You spend the week writing the script, and then the script gets shot, and then a few months later it goes on TV. It’s not a year and a half later; it’s not three years later; it’s not “development” later. [Second, you’re] writing for ensembles. You have a company of actors for whom you are writing on a regular basis. [Third,] you’re in a writers’ room. There’s meaningful collaboration going on all the time.

All of these can be hard to come by in a theatrical context. He ended with a challenge to his colleagues to learn from the television industry.

Look at what's attractive about writing for television, and ask how we can translate some of those good artistic impulses that are promoting creativity within that crazy industry. How can we incorporate that into a process that is going to serve the theater?

After the gathering, I was chatting with a playwright advocate about these remarks. We agreed on yet another potential lure of TV work: Because television writers often double as producers, they can wield a great deal of artistic control over their work and how it is ultimately seen by an audience (unlike in the movie industry, in which writers sit at the bottom of the totem poll). That is fundamentally different from what happens in the theater, where playwrights seldom stage their own work. Nor, it should be said, would many writers desire to do so.

Audience Engagement, Education, and Development

The artistic director of a Los Angeles company spoke passionately about the need for deep community engagement. “There are always going to be those wonderful, idiosyncratic, quirky projects that are about a person alone in their room at three o’clock in the morning, conceiving a play in isolation. But there are many projects that could be out in the world engaging audiences in really interesting ways. I don’t think we do enough of that.” He linked audience engagement to the issue of artist compensation:

What are we paying our artists for? What is the engagement that we have with artists throughout the process? If they were part of a more organic audience engagement process, we would be thinking about how we pay the folks who are getting butts in the seats in a different way.

And, he added, this kind of engagement would deepen the sometimes fraught conversation between artistic directors and playwrights.

His counterpart at another theater spoke about this topic from a different point of view. Reminding the group that “We’re in the business of storytelling,” he tasked his colleagues to do a better job of marketing new work, of finding and inspiring audiences who crave the kind of deep connection with stories and ideas that theater is uniquely poised to deliver. Why, he asked, should new work be seen as riskier to produce, as is suggested in the two studies?

I don't get what's the difference between new plays and plays where people wear funny clothes and talk funny....When I hear that new plays are a risk, or that people are fearful that they will lose audiences, I don't understand that. The problem might be how we market the new play. Can't we create excitement that

this is a new play? I know for a fact that there is an audience out there that has adventurous tastes and wants to see new work. I know for a fact that we are increasingly becoming a more serious society, and what we do with our leisure time is find more provocative things to talk about and see and witness in art. I think that popular culture is bland, and that, especially since 9/11, most Americans are beginning to realize that.

A dramaturg also wondered whether we are engaging our audiences deeply enough, particularly when it comes to more challenging work. She spoke about creating a contextual framework for new plays and theatrical innovation. This requires theaters to inaugurate and sustain a rewarding conversation with the audience. Too many theaters actually do the opposite, she said.

Are audiences feeling ill-equipped when they come to the theater to understand what the theater is trying to say to them, and what kind of conversation they are supposed to be having with this play and this theater? Are they feeling that they are being made to feel stupid? They are not stupid and they are not illiterate; so how can we contextualize what we do in a way that is inclusive of the audience, and not insulting to them?

She and others agreed that theaters often don't do a good enough job in marketing new work, in communicating with the audience about why they are producing the plays they have programmed, and creating an environment that rewards them for seeking out challenging fare. She urged the group to focus on equipping the field to do a better job telling our own stories, our "stories about stories."

Towards Trust and Authenticity

Both reports devoted a great deal of attention to the fertile but sometimes fraught interplay between artist and institution. They describe trust as the coin of the realm in a medium for which collaboration is so valued, and essential. And yet, both studies deem authenticity, or the frank and open sharing of intentions and expectations, as startlingly absent in playwrights' assessment of their relationship with theaters.

In the institutional theater system as it has developed over the past several decades, plays are now produced by professional theater administrators who are more or less permanently employed. This was not the case under the commercial theatrical model it replaced, where independent commercial producers' fortunes rose and fell with their shows' success at the box office. A key set of questions the participants wrangled with concerned how the relationship between artist and institution play out on various levels—decision-making, power, communication, economics, and so on. These power dynamics are "scary" for writers, said one playwright. They are even more so for playwrights who speak out about them, she said—and especially for writers of color. A dramaturg added that trouble enters the picture when the "intentions, goals, and assumptions that both theaters and artists have about a project haven't been talked about up front."

Transparency, she continued, is of utmost importance, so that all parties enter a collaboration with a good sense of where the other parties intentions and priorities lie.

Another participant referred to an area of particular sensitivity: the language of rejection. As described in *Outrageous Fortune*, mistrust often stems from how theaters articulate to writers their decisions *not* to produce a particular play. But he quoted what a frequently produced playwright once described to him as “the best rejection letter he ever got.” It said, “I am not compelled to do your play.” There was no critique, no false promises, no offer to help develop the work; just an honest response.

One of the most startling moments of the gathering occurred when a director of new play development made a soul-searching observation about how theaters deal with artists. He suggested that the practice of “risk management” plays a far greater role than most institutional leaders would admit. “The systems we have put into place have shifted from promoting creativity to risk management,” he said. “These processes started with good intentions, but have had unintended consequences.” To illustrate his point, he spoke about play readings. Originally intended to “promote creativity, to give the author a chance to hear the work out loud in front of people,” readings are now often a mechanism through which theaters can see if a play is stage-worthy without actually producing it. No wonder so many playwrights perceive readings as a kind of audition, he said, paraphrasing writers: “What you’re really doing is testing my play.” Similarly, stepped commissions began with the idea that parameters and deadlines are good for writers. Many writers agree; and yet, he argued, stepped commissions now enable theaters to “manage our investment so that we’re not spending too much money on something that may turn out to be bad.”

He offered two more examples. The proliferation of literary offices stemmed from a creative impulse: “Let’s open the doors to allow as many [writers] as possible access.” Now, he said, “They have become a way of weeding out a potentially bad play.” And a dramaturg, once seen as a collaborator in the room, is now often “somebody with an institutional stamp, who has accountability and expertise in making sure this isn’t going to be a bad play.”

But it’s not an either-or, this respondent stressed. All arts organizations operate on a continuum between promoting creativity and risk management. Both are necessary. He invoked the dual imperatives of requirements of working towards a mission and demonstrating fiscal responsibility. The question, he said, is where on the spectrum does any individual organization fall; and is it honest about its place?

Here again the bottom line is the importance of openness and transparency, both within the institution and between theaters and artists. Ultimately, according to one of the artistic directors present, authenticity takes work, but requires maintaining a clear focus on the organization’s mission. “We are often under pressure from boards in these times to make decisions based solely on fiscal resources, what we think we will have next year, or, more important, what we think we *won’t* have next year in this kind of economy.” The only appropriate response, he argued, is to “essentialize our missions and visions,” a

phrase he attributed to Ben Cameron of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. The challenge, he asserted, is to achieve relevance to both artists and audience. “If you can do the two together you are an aesthetic genius.”

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