

White Paper:

How Do You Develop Plays? Some Observations from Round 1

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These insights come from reading the synopses of process, readers' reports and full-page project descriptions for all of the applications to the Outstanding New American Play and Distinguished New Play Development Project for the inaugural round of the NEA's New Play Development Program (191 applications all told.) Granting that the process synopses were a paragraph long, that most of the writing was done by the theaters and not the playwrights, and that these proposals were written to secure funding (not trouble-shoot any less-than-ideal realities), this snapshot of new play development and production in the United States still suggests some interesting trends.

Aesthetic range:

The quantity and range of the aesthetic goals of these projects is truly impressive. Proposals include:

- plays by well-established writers, working with long-term collaborators
- plays by writers who are also artistic directors
- plays by almost-new writers
- plays by writers in another genre, who are writing a first or second piece in theater
- plays by generative artists who propose continuing to work in their highly rarefied, very specific way
- playwrights who have always worked solo, collaborating with
 - another playwright
 - a composer
 - an interdisciplinary group (social scientist; futurist; visual or other fine artist)
- Musicals
- Plays for young audiences
- Plays for teen audiences
- Satires, slapstick, 19th-century melodrama
- Circus plays
- Documentary-based theater (documentary-based musicals for young audiences...)
- Adaptations (of the Greeks, of Ibsen, of a Persian fairy tale)
- Multimedia, interdisciplinary pieces
- Holiday plays (a good half-dozen; and speaking as an employee of a LORT Theater, the field wouldn't mind a few more appealing, high-quality holiday shows)
- High ambition, "low tech" pieces (several applications spoke specifically to their ambitions to find theatrical but non-technically demanding expressions of their ideas; sometimes the proposals singled out a desire to find a 'non-cinematic' mode of expression)

- Politically engaged plays (one theater says it's working "to ensure that the overlapping debates between morality, politics, and personal relationships will be represented by new American artists, and not just on the news or in the Supreme Court.")

Suffice it to say that new plays and new play development is every bit as interesting and sophisticated as it has ever been, with processes that are sometimes scrappy and low-tech, sometimes highly specific and time-intensive.

Proposed Developmental Paths:

One of the stated goals of the NPDP is to "identify, organize, and disseminate widely in the theater field information on effective collaborative models for the sustained development of outstanding new American plays," a kind of best practices compendium. The in-depth tracking of the development and production of the Selections and Finalists will yield a more nuanced look at these experiments, but these applications provide a useful backdrop for the finer details yet to come.

Standard practices -

Most theaters proposed one or more of the following, and most playwrights spoke to the use of in the development of their past works:

- Readings: sometimes a cold read, sometimes with actors who have rehearsed for this or previous readings
- Workshops:
 - With or without the actors who will be performing the roles in the production (several of the New Play Development projects requested funding to be able to provide continuity of actors, and wrote eloquently of the value of an acting ensemble—either preexisting or assembled specifically for this project—as collaborators.) The relationship between actors and playwrights in creating new work seems a rich area for further inquiry and analysis.
 - 3-5 days of rehearsal with the playwright in residence
 - Extended over a series of weeks, especially with ensembles who work together frequently
- Staged readings: usually subsequent to conversations about the piece with major collaborators—playwright, sometimes Artistic Director, production's director, institutional (or in rare cases play-specific) dramaturg

Less frequent components (it's unclear if these were less frequently proposed due to financial limitations of some proposals, the innovation of others.)

- Research period: interviews with experts or community; travel
- Residencies to ensure productive communication, collaboration, cross-pollination of ideas among the production's collaborators:
 - Smaller ensemble theaters in residence at larger producing theaters
 - Playwrights with established ensembles (for instance, Ellen McLaughlin and Ripe Time's partnership on *Septimus and Clarissa*, where McLaughlin hopes to make use of the director/Artistic Director's "ensemble-devised process she has developed over many years with her company.")
 - Playwrights, when they're pursuing specific audience development or engagement goals (during this time, playwrights may be teaching in schools, working without actors on the script, discussing design, etc.)

- Skill workshops: training in specific skills that the piece calls for (training in commedia performance, aerial performance)
- Workshops with designers: usually targeted members of the production team (set or sound designers) as the playwright and (usually) director begin to develop the theatrical language for the piece; occasional proposals for workshops with full tech support.

What's useful in development? Based on these two hundred applications, the following through-lines emerged as the constantly useful components—however scarce money and therefore time could best be used:

- Production-oriented development
 - Many applications in the Distinguished New Play Development category stressed that the development time was targeted towards production. When the application didn't stress the expectation that the developing organization was planning on producing the piece, or—if they weren't a producing organization—that they were planning on assisting the playwright in finding a production for the piece, one or more of the initial screeners usually called attention to the lack of firm commitment to target the piece toward a production. The commitment to (or at least strong expectation of) production signaled a commitment of faith in the generative artists that allowed him/her/them to do the best, most uncoerced work.
- Getting the right people in the room
 - Over and over, in the applications and their evaluations, generative artists, institutions and the evaluators emphasized the importance of trust and time in bringing a theatrical piece to its first iteration on stage. Proposals emphasized the longstanding understanding and relationships between core collaborators; or the unique nature of each collaborator and how their newness was thrilling—but needed more than their usual gestational and rehearsal time. Grant funds were frequently requested to enhance pre-production relationships—in-person conversations, etc—as well as workshop-specific time
 - Likewise, applications and evaluations stressed the familiarity that the play's expected *audience* may have (or need to develop) with work of this sort—do they know enough about the process of developing new work? Will this piece be an aesthetic stretch for the presumed audience? Or is this piece expected to bring in an audience that the institution hasn't seen before (and then how are they reaching these people, how are they engaging with them, how much is the playwright alone expected to be the ambassador for the play, the idea of theater, the subject matter...)
- Keeping the right people in the room long enough
 - Many of the applications for Outstanding New American Play stressed their interest in extending the rehearsal period for a show, allowing the production team to explore the piece with all of its faculties and resources: The cast that would be performing, the space they would be performing in, the audience who had been previously engaged in the developmental process.

Balancing the Audience's Response With the Play's Ambitions:

Beyond butts in seats (see “getting the right people in the room”), the imagined audience plays a large role in these projects.

- Developing New Audiences
 - Some theaters expressed interest in using a specific play to reach into a new audience and have relatively sophisticated plans for engaging the audience, from

- incorporating the playwright into extant Education Department activities to inviting leaders of specific communities to attend readings of the piece through its development.
- Evaluators expressed some skepticism about the “if you build it they will come” strategy of some proposals—the idea that by producing a piece that features characters of a particular demographic (African-American, people under 30), that same demographic will clamor to see the play. This would be another fruitful area of investigation with any of the funded projects with similar ambitions.
 - Audience as arbiter of success
 - This is a strain taken up most strongly by the evaluators.
 - Some projects seemed to ignore the audience until opening night, which struck some evaluators as dangerous (the process may become precious; the playwright may not have sufficient information about how his/her piece could be landing)
 - Some projects leaned on exposure to the play in process to “promote strong emotional connections” between the writer and the audience.
 - In a specific case—Second Stage and Rajiv Joseph’s *Girls in Liquid*—the institution expected that the content would be outside of their current audience’s experience, and proposed exposing the audience to the playwright as a way to prepare them for the content of the piece.
 - Some evaluators found the reliance on audience response dangerous—particularly if audience response was a prerequisite for programming the play, or in a specific case that seemed to have “too many steps that prioritize donor [response and comfort] over the play”

Again, my overall reaction to this peek into the literature is thrillingly multivalent, and offers many intriguing areas for potential inquiry: How the plays and experience of playwrights and institutions met their particular expectations—aesthetic achievement, box office, audience engagement (and how to measure that with specificity), the project or producing organization’s visibility in the local/regional/national community. The NEA New Play Development Project is a promising laboratory for the American theater community, and subsequent rounds of funding—and the experiments in sharing stories of innovation and excellence as well as interesting failures—will broaden the NEA’s repository of information and experience, the idiosyncratic or more widely exploitable lessons each funded project offers.