

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation  
New Plays Initiative

*The Gates of Opportunity*

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abridged and edited by Ben Pesner

A report from a field survey of the infrastructure for  
new works and new voices in the American theater,  
conducted January – August 2006

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This is an abridged version of a much longer report submitted to The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in early 2007. The investigations and conversations with practitioners that form the basis of this report were conducted by David Dower while he was serving as artistic director of Z Space Studio in San Francisco, and were supported with a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	2
Executive Summary .....	5
I. The Meetings .....	8
II. Questions and Assumptions .....	9
III. Findings.....	10
IV. Opportunities and Ideas .....	31

## Introduction

What follows is the essence of a report on the infrastructure for new works and new voices in the American theater that I prepared with support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in early 2007, following the eight-month period in which I traveled across the US and interviewed practitioners about their experiences. Though actors, designers, and directors did participate in these discussions, I was focused principally on generative artists: playwrights, ensembles, and multidisciplinary theatermakers. Throughout the report I simply refer to them all as “artists.”

This study began as a very personal journey to defeat my own sense of isolation from the field at large. I was undertaking, after nearly 20 years of work in the San Francisco Bay Area, to meet my “tribe” and try to connect the dots between what I was involved with on behalf of Bay Area artists and the struggles and opportunities in communities around the country where there seemed to be others similarly engaged. It intersected with the Foundation’s interest in understanding the sector itself more broadly and deeply. The investigation was not originally intended to be shared with the larger field, and I am grateful for the hard work of Ben Pesner to create this public version of the document.

Since completing my journey in 2006, much has happened that has impacted the organizations, communities, and opportunities described in this report. A very small portion of what has occurred has been, in modest measure, a reaction to the process of gathering people together to discuss these issues that took place during and around this study. The larger impact has come from the cumulative momentum of a number of individuals and organizations at work in the sector on inquiries of their own.

Reading these findings in this form, two years distant from their writing, and three years down the road from when I first began the trip, I am struck by how the inquiry, for me, has continued since I arrived at my first city and by how it has continued to develop for the organizations and individuals I met on the way.

The investments the Mellon Foundation has made and continues to make in this sector have great potential to alter the landscape for many of these communities. For the first time, for instance, play development labs around the country have received significant support from the Foundation to continue to build upon their effectiveness supporting new plays and playwrights. The National Endowment for the Arts New Play Development Program, which I am fortunate enough to direct for Arena Stage, was separately developed at the NEA even as I completed the field survey and report. It has developed alongside other major investments and initiatives aimed at improving new play development and production in the US. Notably:

- The Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust has made significant new investments in the sector, as have the Edgerton Foundation and the Robina Foundation.

- The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis has launched a major Web site that has the potential to make visible the efforts and existence of hundreds of American playwrights nationally.
- The Sundance Institute Theatre Lab has expanded its programming.
- The Public Theater in New York, through its Public Labs, has increased its capacity to respond flexibly to new plays and to support playwrights.
- Denver Center Theatre has revived and expanded its new play program.
- Austin's theaters have opened new spaces, launched a new festival, and begun organizing as a community to connect the whole crowd directly into the national new works infrastructure.
- Center Theatre Group of Los Angeles has completely revamped its image from the time of this report and is now leading the field in a number of ways, including its support of devised work and its decision to stop taking a percentage of playwrights' earnings from subsequent productions.
- The National New Play Network (NNPN) and the National Performance Network (NPN) have both expanded their programs, and the Network of Ensemble Theaters has continued to develop its own.
- Theatre Development Fund has conducted a major investigation into the lives and livelihoods of American playwrights that extends far beyond the scope of this field survey. Convenings in 2009 at both the Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival (again with the support of the Mellon Foundation) and the national conference of Theatre Communications Group (TCG) in Baltimore have started to bring to the surface the findings, questions, and connections between the TDF study and this study and how they can best inform efforts to strengthen what I envision as the "Gates of Opportunity."

Much else has transpired beyond the list above; one of the most powerful developments on behalf of strengthening the infrastructure for new work and emerging voices has been the frequency with which the sector has begun to come together to meet, discuss, and develop a shared investment in this inquiry. There were always panel discussions—every new play festival around the country had at least one session where two or three people involved in play development would talk about trends and practices and answer questions of the gathered audience. The difference now is that we are meeting in different configurations to speak to, learn from, and move with one another. Again, special recognition is due for the leadership of the Mellon Foundation in this area. I started on this path after attending half a dozen different conversations at their invitation, and the Foundation has continued to convene leading practitioners from all over the country as they have formulated their own new directions for their resources. But the practice of gathering diverse groups around the table has also been carried forward by the participants, with gatherings hosted by Sundance (of the leading new play development labs), the NEA New Play Development Program (regular virtual gatherings with program participants and players in the sector), at the Humana Festival, at TCG, at a National Arts

Strategies workshop in Phoenix, at Arena Stage, at the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP), and in many other contexts.

It is in the frequency, diversity, and vibrancy of these convenings that I find the greatest well of optimism that we are truly going to strengthen the Gates of Opportunity for the current generation and for those to come. It is my firm belief, derived directly from the experience of this specific journey (which really started at a TCG convening in Portland in 2002), that we are living in a period of abundance in the new works sector. It is equally my conviction that we are living in a period of misalignment in terms of resources, which is the key factor in our failure to recognize and capitalize on the abundance of resources and opportunities in and around our sector. By advancing a more rational alignment of these resources, I believe we would unleash the potential of the sector, improve the health and effectiveness of the infrastructure on which we depend, and achieve a sense of authentic engagement between institutions and the artists they serve. The place to begin this realignment is in dialogue.

This summary report is offered in the spirit of opening and advancing that dialogue.

As Linda Richman used to say on *Saturday Night Live*: “Talk amongst yourselves.”

*D. D.*  
*November 2009*

## Executive Summary

In 2006 the Mellon Foundation gave me the opportunity to survey the state of the infrastructure for new works and new voices in the American theater. My goal was to better understand who we are, the health of this sector and its impact on the vitality of the country's theater ecology, the gaps in the infrastructure, and examples of best practices and outstanding efforts in the sector on which the whole support system could be strengthened. I attempted to make the case for a direct and meaningful investment in the sector from leading philanthropic institutions like the Mellon Foundation. My report focuses on the following observations:

**There is a widely distributed informal network of opportunity.** I visited 15 communities and spoke with more than 300 people in this sector during the course of the survey. The gates of opportunity are scattered all over the country. They are primarily informally affiliated, with a few notable and salutary exceptions. These gates lead to professional and artistic advancement regionally, not necessarily (or even principally) in the major markets. Though the segment of the field with the greatest resources and visibility orbits New York, there are other satellites around which emerging artists have gathered and from which they are developing their own voices and impacting the field. Some are formed by geographic proximity; others are created around cultural or aesthetic affinities. The distribution of these organizations and initiatives fosters distinct and often important "personalities" of a region, but also breeds isolation and marginalization.

**The language of the field is a blizzard of ambiguous buzzwords.** Fuzziness surrounding the terms of art in the new-work sector contributes mightily to the sense of inauthentic interactions between artists and institutions, institutions and funders, and artists and the audience. A sense of "gaming the language" or "spin" pervades the field. A concerted effort to apply specific meanings and values to words like "artist-focused," "emerging," "workshop," "residency," "development," and others could be of great service to the artists and organizations working in this sector. At the same time, some of these words are of high value to funders, boards, and critics, tempting every organization to claim that they are to some extent "an *artist-focused organization developing new works by emerging artists of culturally diverse backgrounds.*"

**Diverse organizational models proliferate.** Unlike the major regional theaters and presenting institutions, the organizations in this sector come in diverse shapes and sizes. They are frequently idiosyncratic, having grown up around the passion or vision of a specific individual or unique opportunity. They serve different forms, different cultural perspectives, different market segments and different stops along the artists' path as they develop their careers. This diversity is an important aspect of the vitality of the sector.

**Effectiveness varies greatly across the sector.** As a consequence of the geographic distribution, the absence of a distributed model, and the diverse visions and missions guiding the players in the sector, degrees of effectiveness of these gateways vary greatly. Much is made of the "low barriers to entry" in the performing arts fields in general, and

the “silting up” impact of the problem is felt acutely in this “new works, new voices” sector.

**There is an imbalance in the distribution of resources.** At present the distribution of philanthropic resources is heavily balanced in favor of the major institutions. The majority of the activity and opportunity, however, falls outside this segment and is being supported by “sweat equity” at levels of activity that are not sustainable. Compensation levels for artists, especially as compared to the administrators, also appear to be out of balance throughout this sector. Institutions of all sizes, however, struggle to pay meaningful wages to artists involved in the development processes.

**A disconnect exists between emerging artists and opportunity’s gatekeepers.** It is not a surprise that there is a great deal of dissatisfaction with the state of the field among the emerging artists. There are far more artists trying to squeeze through these gates of opportunity than will fit, certainly. But what was a surprise was the degree to which the artists who are finding their way *through* them feel the ecology is unhealthy. These concerns can be boiled down to a question of authenticity in the interaction between the gatekeepers and the artists they are purporting to serve.

**Opportunities to stabilize the sector abound.** Given the economic scale on which so much of this sector operates, relatively modest investments of capital, if strategically deployed, could have a significant stabilizing impact. There are opportunities in fostering solid strategic planning and improved organizational skills, in convening participants to defeat isolation and disseminate learning, in resourcing best practices to recognize leadership and inspire effectiveness, and even in promoting direct investment in the artists.

## I. The Meetings

I spent eight months visiting my colleagues in communities around the country, talking with both artists (primarily *generative* artists, though freelance actors, directors, and designers also participated in smaller numbers) and organizational leaders. In many cities I was able to convene these groups separately.

Beginning in January 2006, I conducted meetings in Atlanta, Austin, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, and Washington, DC. I met with artists and organizational leaders from around the country at a Theatre Communications Group Conference; at the 2006 APAP Conference in New York City; at the Sundance Lab in Aspen Grove, Utah; The Z Space in San Francisco; New Dramatists in New York City; and Creative Capital's annual retreat. I also had an opportunity to include the views of some of the sector's leading funders.

The range of organizational representation was broad, including leading regional theaters; mid-sized theaters; ensembles; emerging companies focused on new works; culturally specific companies; artist-focused development organizations; and service organizations. University-based programs, hybrid models, and national initiatives also participated.

Artist representation was equally broad, encompassing the vibrancy of the sector in terms of cultural and aesthetic perspectives. Participants included playwrights; puppet theater creators; artists creating within an ensemble; spoken-word artists; movement-based artists; artists adapting from literature; solo performers; music-theater artists; and more. It was notable how many communities struggled to pull together a culturally diverse conversation on the topic.

In every community the invitation to talk together about the preoccupations of this study was remarked upon as an important and rare opportunity to come together around a subject other than marketing or advocacy concerns. It was clear that most of the communities do not initiate these conversations on their own. In several communities the participants around the table had never met each other.

## II. Questions and Assumptions

The investigation revolved around a set of four questions.

### For the organizational leaders:

- 1) What models are at work in your area that foster opportunity for artistic and professional advancement for emerging theater artists?
- 2) What challenges are the organizations and individuals who are catalysts for these opportunities facing?
- 3) What is the current financial picture for these programs?
- 4) What is the impact of the "emerging artists/new works" sector on the area's cultural ecology? How does the community impact the national theater ecology?

### For the generative artists:

- 1) What models currently being used create opportunity for artistic and professional advancement for emerging theater artists? What is effective about them for you? What is less than effective about them?
- 2) What challenges are the organizations and individuals who are catalysts for these opportunities facing from your vantage point as an artist working in these situations?
- 3) What challenges are you facing in developing your own artistic and professional opportunities?
- 4) How does the "emerging artists/new works" sector impact the area's cultural ecology? How does your community impact the national theater ecology?

I imagined these questions would provide a jumping off point for discussions of the basis assumptions I brought with me into this study—that:

There is **within each community an infrastructure for emerging artists** that exists **as an essential element** of the ecology of that community and **connects that community's artists and projects to the field.**

I anticipated I would find, in every vibrant community, an organization or group of individuals that were **focused on the voices of their own community**. This, after all, was the whole purpose of The Z Space. And in my naiveté, I felt every effective center of opportunity must surely have one. However, I did not find that these communities have especially organized around the voices of their own geographic areas, nor have they made it a priority to support them. Most of the development centers recruit *nationally* for playwrights and ensembles to participate in their programs. Most of the small companies dedicated to new work produce plays by writers coming out of New York. Even the theater-focused service organizations that exist ostensibly to support the local theater community generally provide administrative and infrastructure services focused on actors and producing companies, rather than artistic development services for generative artists

residing in their region. I find this curious even today. But while I did not find a robust infrastructure in each region aimed primarily at supporting local generative artists, *per se*, I did find a range of diverse and highly effective methods, programs, and models for supporting artists and their new works. There is, in fact, a high-energy, nationally distributed, diverse, and deeply committed “tribe” of individuals and organizations fostering opportunity for advancement for artists working outside the New York/Los Angeles axis. And, while they don’t share the same shape or focus, as I expected they would, when taken together they comprise a promising, if as yet unorganized, base from which to build a productive, effective, and comprehensive infrastructure for the sector.

### III. Findings

#### *The Terminology is Fungible*

One of the first issues I confronted was the fungible nature of our language in the sector. There is a glut of buzzwords, largely invoked as a way of demonstrating value to the funding community, trustees, and other colleagues in the field. These terms are imprecise and mean vastly different things to different people. Everyone wants to be perceived, to a greater or lesser extent, as an “artist-focused home for the development of new works by emerging voices.” They design “workshops” and “residencies.” They fund activities that “develop” plays. But what they are actually doing, and why they are doing it, varies wildly in every instance. Imprecise language peppers guidelines, proposals, and program activities. But most importantly, it is bewildering to artists and leads to real confusion in all interactions around developing new work.

#### **Fungible Term #1: “Artist-Focused”**

Overuse of the term “artist-focused” is, to my view, the principal contributor to the bewilderment. Many, if not most, organizations use this term to describe themselves, despite the fact that they are all doing vastly different work with different goals, priorities, and outcomes. Few organizations would say they were *other* than artist-focused. In fact, the term is perceived to confer legitimacy, most powerfully in the eyes of one’s peers and the funding community. But if so many organizations are artist-focused, why are artists so uniform in their experience of feeling isolated, marginalized, or “in the way” at those institutions? It seems to me that because of the lack of specificity, “artist-focused” has been rendered meaningless, like being “unique” or “innovative” or any of the other over-played words of grantspeak.

The problem is that there is a real meaning and an important value to this term that is obscured by its indiscriminate use. There is, in my experience, a powerful role in the infrastructure of opportunity for those spaces and organizations that are truly focused on the artists they serve *as a matter of the first priority*. Among these are what we are now referring to in the field as the “play labs” or “development centers,” the artist-led ensembles, the retreat centers, and a handful of other environments. In this context, being “artist-focused” means that the **resources of the organization are entirely focused on the artists participating in its programs.** It means that the energy of the place is prioritized and activated on their projects, their artistic growth, and even their career advancement; that the *purpose* of the organization is built around their success; and that “success” is defined by the artists themselves. It means that the artists are to a large extent setting the agenda for programs, processes, and schedules. The choice of artist and project launches a conversation about what resources, process, collaborators, and outcomes will be needed to help get the work where it is going, which is often to some other organization that can focus on production and audience challenges. The role of the audience, the marketing and production decisions, and the involvement of donors and press are all shaped by the artists’ goals—and there may, in fact, be *no* role for these

constituencies. This is of particular value in the early stages of a work's development, and of particular importance for the early projects of an artist's career.

Producing organizations, with a few exceptions, are not actually artist-focused. They cannot be. And in my opinion funders, donors, and the artistic leadership must not have that expectation of them. While those organizations can be *friendly* to artists, they are *focused* on producing work for an audience and sustaining the institutional capacity to keep going. The best of them balance the priorities of artist, audience, and institutional stability with aplomb. Many have programs that aim to be artist-focused, but even these programs are unavoidably constrained by larger institutional priorities. Only within those limits do they operate in an artist-friendly way.

It can be hard to keep in mind that *organizations focused on production, audience engagement, and/or community development are equally important for the ecosystem*. These priorities should be valued in their own right, not relegated to being what one participant described as the “things we *have* to do so we can do the things we love.” The field needs all manner of approaches to advancing opportunity for artists, and I believe that a healthy field will align the diverse preoccupations and priorities of the whole enterprise. In my view it is unhealthy to privilege one set of organizations or priorities over another. Where would artists be if nobody prioritized production? What would it be like if no producers or managers or networks were focused on advancing the artistic product and creating meaningful economic return for the artists' investment—particularly for playwrights, whose payment is based primarily on royalties? What would the field be if nobody was actually focused on acquiring and engaging audiences? What artists and stories would comprise the field if no organizations were focused on developing artists and audiences in communities that are chronically underrepresented?

But being *other* than “artist-focused” is perceived to be “less than.” One is open to charges of being “commercial” or “a factory” or “playing it safe.” In my conversations with grantmakers around the country, they consistently used this term to describe the grantees in their portfolios that they thought were doing the most important work in their communities—though they were describing all types of organizations, with a whole range of priorities. And so organizations hype the ways they prioritize the artist, even though the tens of thousands (or, in the case of the Leading National Theaters program at Mellon, hundreds of thousands) of patrons who come through the doors each year are, legitimately, the dominant priority of their company.

I came away feeling that we have to come to grips with the real costs of over-valuing and romanticizing the concept of “artist-focused.” Non-specific use of the term crowds the space for the actual artist-focused spaces and networks to grow because they are unable to compete effectively with leading theatres for funding in this area. It also denigrates the important roles of audience development and production. And when the audience- and product-focused institutions feel compelled to claim the mantle of being “artist-focused,” artists in those environments are surprised and frustrated to find themselves *not* at the center of the enterprise. This confusion is the main driver of the “authenticity gap” we'll get into later in the report.

### *The Special Challenge for Community-Focused Organizations*

A number of organizations committed to the development of artists from within a specific, underserved community describe themselves as artist-focused because they do not fit the traditional models of producers, presenters, or development centers. Much creative process happens at these organizations in a wide array of aesthetic forms. Leaders of these organizations speak eloquently and passionately about the importance of developing avenues for experiencing artistic process for both professionals and non-professionals within underserved communities. They make a strong case for the social value of these organizations. Says one leader in this world, “Most of the people participating in our programs do not aspire to careers as artists. They aspire to make good art while they are here, and we continue to raise the bar for them, but they are not often going to enter the profession of theater.”

The confusion here is again unhelpful. Community-focused organizations tend to claim space in the artist-focused tent because they are perceived to be “lower quality” if they lead from a community purpose. This ignores the important role these companies are playing both socially and as a point of access to the field. In fact, in those cases where artistic quality is part of the puzzle the outcomes can be quite high, even as the organization maintains its primary commitment to its community heart. The productivity and importance of these organizations will not be accurately measured by counting the number of professional careers they have launched. There can be no doubt that the value of access to creative process for any under-resourced community is unimpeachable and should be celebrated and supported in its own right.

### **Fungible Term #2: “Emerging Artists”**

This term is used freely but means many different things. It appears in grant guidelines with increasing regularity, with entire programs built around it. The term is meaningless absent its institutional context, though meaning is often conferred on the term by funding guidelines.

Repeatedly in these conversations the participants asked me to define my context for the term “emerging.” Each organization that actually sought to serve “emerging artists” defined the term differently. More and more, funders are setting the definitions for this term as a means of establishing eligibility for grant support. While it is important to recognize that the term is fluid, it is also important to be clear about how it is being used when it is part of the criteria for eligibility.

### *Artists find the condition to be iterative, not a rite of passage.*

The artists interviewed bristled at the challenge of even defining the term. The most common complaint was the implication that there is a neat progression to a career from a beginner, to an emerging artist, to an established artist (which then implies “no longer in

need of support” or worse, “no longer sexy”), to a master/mentor. The theater does not work that way.

*It's a constant process—I feel like I emerge with one project when it's produced, [then] submerge between projects, if I'm lucky re-emerge with the next project—but I don't see a time when I'm going to be able to say, “I've emerged.”*

*I'm emerged in my region, but unknown in New York. So what does that make me? Mainly it makes me ineligible for support to continue my work at home because all those programs are for emerging artists.*

*If emerging artist means an evolving artist, then we are all emerging. He who is not busy emerging is repeating himself.*

The term fetishizes the new.

*All the focus on the use of the term “emerging artist” tells the mid-career artist they are yesterday's news. Unless someone is going to come along and say, “We're here for the mid-career, middle-aged, modestly successful artists to keep contributing,” then where are we emerging to?*

*How many shots do I get before it's over? How long can you be emerging before they give up on you?*

*I'm going to ride the emerging train as long as nobody makes me get off. There's no other train for me to get on.*

### **Fungible Term #3: “Development”**

This is perhaps the squishiest of terms in the sector. Is a reading “development,” especially when it is the fourth, fifth, sixth setting in which the play is read in lieu of a production? Is offering cheap or free rehearsal space a development service? Where the line is murky between the focus on the artists or the audience, on the progress of a career or on a single product, it is impossible to guess what “We develop plays” actually means.

A wide range of applications of the term materialized in the survey. Some organizations are dedicated to a “thick” interpretation of the term. They provide programs and services that support individual artists (primarily, but not exclusively, playwrights) in a variety of ways. There are resources for the development of a specific work; resources for career advancement; resources to facilitate peer support activities (writers' groups, professional development workshops and mentoring programs, etc.); resources devoted to the study of the field and advocacy for their constituents. These organizations connect their artists to both production opportunities and artistic advancement opportunities. Inasmuch as they develop resources for their constituents and advocate for greater resources and

opportunities, they are developing the artists and the climate for these artists along with specific projects.

Other organizations define development exclusively in terms of projects. This group includes the producing theaters that are open to new work. While they may work frequently with the same artists, their programs and resources—including commissioning funds and readings—are only available for projects on which those artists are working for the supporting institution. These organizations may develop projects they are planning to produce through extended rehearsals or one or more workshops prior to the start of the full production process.

Because the funding world has elevated “development” to a high priority, all of the organizations participating in this survey describe development as a priority. However, the actual resources devoted to developing opportunities for artists can be a very small fraction of their total budget. And the commitment to “development” is often measured as much in terms of activities for audiences (such as a reading series and post-show discussions) or communities (such as outreach to schools and marginalized populations), or regions (in the case of service organizations, particularly) which can have little to no direct impact on the artists.

#### **Fungible Term #4: “Residency”**

Residencies can mean everything from a literal home where playwrights can actually reside, to a meeting between an artist and the community. The residency requirement is a very popular condition of funders supporting new work or the touring of work for audience-focused institutions. And yet, several artists had received major grants that came with a residency requirement which turned into an obligation that proved detrimental to their artistic process. Furthermore, to listen to the stories of the organizations and individuals in this survey, it is frequently “gamed” or entirely ignored. There are, however, many exceptional stories of powerful interactions between artists and communities that demonstrate the potential of these types of activities to cultivate audiences and unlock the potential of the theater arts to engage with a community. Again, more precision in the application of the term can help us capture the value of these opportunities, promote the best practices in this area, and lead to a more authentic conversation around the term between the artists and their organizational hosts.

#### **Fungible Term #5: “Workshop”**

The term “workshop” is used to describe a wide range of activity. Some examples include:

- Anything more than a five-hour rehearsal process for a reading.
- The pre-production sketch of a new play—sometimes fully staged, sometimes fully memorized, sometimes involving design collaborations and tech.
- A period of anywhere from two to three weeks in a room with actors to create a devised text, culminating in a reading.
- A multi-week process that involves designers.

- A low-budget premiere of a play. Tickets are sold, press is invited to review the work, and the process involves a full rehearsal period and full complement of design elements.
- The interaction between the artist and the community—workshops are skill building opportunities led by the artist “in residence” for a period of “development.”

### Activity Abounds

Taken as a whole, there is in this country a vibrant collection of emerging artists and small organizations supporting them in a variety of ways. There are many approaches to the difficulties of creating work as an emerging artist, and to creating opportunities for those artists. The degree of success, how success is measured, the sense of direction and purpose in the work, and especially the rates of pay for the work are all over the map.

**Quantity of activity is assured.** In every community on this tour there was an abundance of activity in the realm of the new—new plays, new companies, new arrivals and new discoveries at every table. And I did not get the sense that the amount of activity was particularly in jeopardy. People were making plans for more. They were talking about others who were not at the table but were “coming on.” Training programs were pumping out graduates. Much of this energy was going into new work, specifically into plays written by American writers on the first few rungs of the professional ladder; these were not always world premieres but also early productions of plays new to these communities. There was also significant amount of company-created new work. [Note: When I went back to look at the impact of the economic downturn on the activity in these communities, it was largely unchanged in terms of quantity. There were new players in some places and a few organizations that had scaled back, but by and large the sector remains undaunted.]

Even the major regional theaters that attended these meetings cited a degree of activity that I found surprising. Though a quick glance at their subscriber seasons would not reveal it, the representatives of these institutions spoke about ambitious plans for the future and of an increasing commitment to new work within their companies. Though the artists raise a lot of questions about the purpose and intention of this activity, there are many more programs underway in the LORT companies, and dedicated advocates for new work within those companies, than I’d understood when I got on the road.

**Quality of the results is unpredictable.** While the quantity is assured, the quality of the results varies greatly—not only the quality of the artistic outcomes, which runs the gamut, but also the quality of the organizations’ efforts to support artists. There are some clear institutional leaders in this area. There are also individual leaders who regularly step out on a limb with an emerging artist or company and help to advance them professionally. Many more groups in this sector are struggling to build and sustain programs that serve artists effectively, that are well-curated in terms of how the resources

are allocated, and that advance the development of both the artists and the organization supporting them.

Still, expertise in this work seems to run thin and the people looking to do it seem to lack access to opportunities to develop that expertise. Leaders in the field express concern about the “silting up” of the environment for developing artists and new work. They talk about the lack of real barriers to entry for people wanting to make theater, which swamps the whole field with competitors for available resources. Their worries are compounded by the proliferation of poorly managed organizations, working with insufficient resources, who are charged with separating the wheat from the chaff. Some of these organizations are working to improve their effectiveness. But many lack the tools and capacity for real self-evaluation and thus cannot accurately measure their true impact on the field.

Any attempt to help in this sector is going to have to be carried out with a commitment to identify those organizations and individuals that demonstrate an appetite for developing their own effectiveness on behalf of the overall ecology of the field. These organizations will have a vision of how to serve, the capacity to achieve it, and a knack for effective stewardship of their resources in reaching their desired outcomes. They will come in all shapes and sizes and in a wide variety of states of fiscal health. We need to develop ways to measure effectiveness that look past the traditional indicators. These measures will likely have to be derived case by case and in concert with the organizations themselves in order to ensure they are being evaluated on their true mission and strategy, and not on inorganic or counterproductive criteria.

**Isolation and provincialism are constraining productivity of activity.** I was also struck by the degree of isolation that so many of the communities struggle with. Most seemed isolated from “the market” unless they were located in New York. The impact of their work, and its capacity to generate additional opportunities for the artists involved, seemed slight. In some communities, individuals are breaking out of their own regionalism; but they are struggling to bring their community along with them. A perfect example is Austin’s Rude Mechanicals. That company has managed to break through to attain a national reputation, touring regularly now both in traditional presenting circumstances and in longer runs at mid-sized theaters. But they feel isolated in Austin, to which they are deeply committed, and they are keenly aware that they have a responsibility to lead the way out of that bind on behalf of their community. Similarly, On the Boards (Seattle) and Z Space (San Francisco) are working in direct, programmatic ways to help their local artists break through. Hip Hop Theatre Festival and Sister Cities are taking the challenge head-on as well. But these efforts are not necessarily sparking a groundswell in the communities they are residents of. [Note: In the time since this study, Austin has developed a lot of momentum on this effort to emerge as a whole community. There is learning going on in this effort that could benefit every community on the list that I visited.]

One of the surprises in this study for me was the widespread acceptance and even *celebration* of the isolation among the organizational participants in many communities.

The individual artists, by and large, were hoping to build careers that could sustain them, some with more support and bigger dreams than others. But they were largely in the dark about ways to make that happen, unless they were already connected to one of the effective catalysts for broader opportunity. The small companies and the local entrepreneurs, however, were quite often entirely content with, in many cases proud of, their status quo. I found this especially troubling as it related to compensation, or any expectation of an economic return, for their artists. In several cities, for example, there was spirited discussion about whether paying artists for their work would destabilize the ecology, and whether aiming for outcomes broader than their own small audiences and short runs would “taint” the work. (I heard very few individual the artists voice this specific concern, but a surprising number of the ensembles and most of the small companies did.)

**Activity is frequently unhinged from vision and strategy.** I was struck by how few examples there are of organizations or individuals who seem to bring both vision and a sense of strategic planning to bear on behalf of new works and emerging artists. The artists, in most of these meetings, seemed more victimized by the ecology than engaged with it. This was true for the small companies as well as for the “new works” representatives of many larger organizations. To be sure, there are shining exceptions, and it is important to know who they are and how they function. But many more organizations seemed to lack a sense of what they were aiming to accomplish and how they would actually get there. They are simply *doing*. In some cases that translated to a sense of inertia—“This is who we are, this is what we are always going to be, and this is good enough.” In some cases it seemed to translate into heroic efforts that are bound to flame out—“We’re never going to pay ourselves, so I’m going to keep my day job, be at the theater every night, and write grants on the weekends.” In some cases organizational representatives were clearly distressed about the state of their organizations but baffled about how to change it. Those seemed to be the cases where there was a realistic chance of improving effectiveness and strengthening fragile gates of opportunity.

It is also important to note that the places that are most adept at articulating and implementing an organizational vision are the ones that are most effective on behalf of their constituents. These places and people are crucial to the health of the ecology and in any effort to strengthen the gates of opportunity it will be important to identify and support them.

### *The Organizational Models Are Diverse*

The new works sector has in large part grown up in geographic isolation. There are no disseminated models apart from the subscriber-based producing organizations. There is very little interaction between the communities and organizations where opportunities are being created, and sometimes even among the companies within a community. The organizations have grown up in the context of their regional ecology, and they are organized around (or shaped by) the needs and gaps in their home communities. Frequently they have grown up around a catalytic individual or ensemble vision. The

preoccupations and personal circumstances of the founders mean the approach to service in the sector is idiosyncratic.

The smaller organizations do not appear to be reacting to other models, such as the regional theater movement, as much as they are growing in organic response to the needs of the artists or community. Says one leader of a hybrid model, “These needs come to be what they are for a whole host of reasons and through an evolving set of circumstances and conditions. We are designed around the changing needs, and therefore we don’t look like each other, let alone like the traditional institutions. And probably we won’t look like this in another ten years either since the needs are likely to continue to change.”

There is tremendous variety in the shape, size, stability, and personality of the organizations holding open the gates of opportunity for America’s unknown theater artists. This is, of course, distinct from the regional theaters, which have come to look much more alike, have substantially similar organizational structures, strategies, and programs, work on the same contracts and processes, and create opportunities for the same subset of artists working in the same subset of the form and a substantially similar audience. Certainly there are variations and distinct institutional personalities, and all artistic directors will point to the specifics of their visions and programs as distinguishing features, but in essence this is a single disseminated model with similar benefits and challenges across the country.

The sameness has made it easier for funders to support and evaluate these organizations. This will not be the case for the part of the ecology that I am writing about. The diversity of the models and the strong identification with the passion of a single founder or founding ensemble are key ingredients in their effectiveness. Efforts to strengthen this sector will have to embrace the diversity, rather than encourage sameness. I came away from these conversations thinking that the gatekeepers themselves need to be able to demonstrate their effectiveness, develop it, and articulate it, and that the effort to do so would improve the quality of their impact on this sector. Rather than attempting to come from the outside with a set of measurements, can we come instead with a set of resources (financial and intellectual) that help each company set its own agenda and evaluation process in the same way being done for the artists being served?

### *Parallel Issues in the Presenting Field*

The presenting field provides a great range of opportunities for artists working in forms, or with companies, that are built around enabling playwrights to break into the field and advance their careers. A core of very smart and inventive leaders is pursuing effective models to commission and develop work. However, there are also challenges for the innovators among the presenting field. Most striking, in my discussions with the presenters and observers of this sector, was that they are talking about a very small number of artists and projects—the same names and projects come up with alarming regularity. The actual number of artists passing through these particular gates is constrained by what one participant referred to as “herd mentality” and another as

“lemming behavior.” This is not that different from the challenge playwrights are voicing in the regional theater context—the sense that opportunities seem to “pile on” to the same small group of anointed “emerging voices.”

Nor has the gap between the commission and the presentation of the finished work been filled effectively in the presenting community, leaving the artists little choice but to present unfinished work in public. Presenters and managers describe a situation in which artists are “using the presented gig as a workshop opportunity, but we are selling it to the public as a ‘world premiere.’” There are many negative consequences to this disconnect: the cost to the audience’s confidence and the consequent erosion of the presenters’ confidence in programming new work; the destructive impact of trying to do development in the context of an audience expectation of a polished work. But in these discussions, another theme emerged that is equally troubling. Artists who have managed to workshop a piece through the presenting circuit get to the end of their development process to find that the field has already passed judgment on the work, causing difficulties in booking the finished work. “The presenters who hosted the early work were warning people, ‘It isn’t ready,’ and the people who hadn’t presented it yet felt it was either ‘over already’ or ‘unsuccessful’ based on the stories they were hearing along the way.” The problem compounds, in that the artist becomes tainted for future projects by a reputation for “not finishing.”

Clearly there is an important role for presenters to play in opening the gates of opportunity to emerging artists. But the commingling of the process of artistic development with presenting is murky, and the results are entirely dependent on the talent and expertise of the presenting organization (at creating effective environments for artists to create) and the artist (at managing a multi-venue development process under the radar). Can we recognize and reward excellence in this particular endeavor within the presenting field? There is clearly energy and creativity in the field—even if only among a small percentage of the total presenter market—that has an appetite for finding solutions to this set of problems on behalf of the artists they are interested in.

### *The Role of Universities*

In many communities participating in the study there are well-resourced and respected theater programs based on local campuses. Yet I found very little evidence of effective collaboration between these academic institutions and the local community of non-student artists. In many cases that community is populated to a significant degree by graduates of these programs who may be able to trade on some vestigial personal relationships to get access to university resources, but there is little programmatic interaction.

There are wildly varying degrees of effectiveness in these programs from the standpoint of the training offered and the extent of their ability to create professional opportunities for their students, though all of them come with a precious price tag. If the professional programs are acting as gatekeepers of opportunity, the only artists who will make it through those gates are people who prioritized, and paid for, a conservatory education.

The impact of this winnowing mechanism on the diversity and accessibility of the field shouldn't be underestimated. The narrowing of these opportunities to a specific set of admissions criteria is equally troubling. With the exception of the handful of major programs, the actual person at the gate—the keeper of the opportunities—is not a practicing professional in the field. Without making the resources of the institution more broadly available to the community of artists at work in the field, how are they actually contributing to the health of the ecology in their region or within their area of expertise?

Since these MFA programs are churning out so many graduates with expectations of a life in the theater, what responsibility do they have for creating opportunity? Is it enough that they foster informal networks of classmates who form their own support structures? Is sufficient attention being paid to the manner in which these opportunities are strengthening the overall infrastructure for the field?

In one meeting with artists, every participant held an MFA from a top program. I asked whether the MFA was an essential badge of legitimacy in the field. An unqualified “yes” was the answer. In fact they went so far as to say that an MFA from one of a half-dozen programs was the signifier of a real playwright—differentiating between a professional and a hobbyist. While this clearly is not the case in the field, the presumption was striking.

We spoke in some detail about the benefits of the MFA programs for the playwrights around the table. They agreed that these programs allowed them to find and hone their own voice as a playwright, to sharpen their individuality, and to trust their own drummer. The playwrights also spoke of their disappointment that, when they got out of school, their plays were most often relegated to small-budget productions at scrappy companies or the reading series at the major houses. If the MFA programs promote, hone, and celebrate the idiosyncratic elements of an individual's voice absent a consideration of the actual context in which plays will be evaluated outside the academy—where they meet the real-world considerations of audiences, production resources, and the specific aesthetic interests of the gatekeepers—it does not surprise me that the major theaters deem many of the plays “risky to produce” and consign them to reading series instead of subscription slots.

### *Understanding the Development Process*

I came out of these meetings concerned about the state of thinking about development in the field, and about the impact of the confusions and challenges I have been hearing on opportunity for emerging artists, forms, and initiatives. It is vital that people and institutions with resources to foster opportunity understand some basic truths about artistic development before wading in to this part of the ecology. It is equally vital that the participants in the sector understand these truths before they go about allocating those resources to create opportunity.

*The process of artistic development is idiosyncratic.* Each project, artist, aesthetic terrain and career stage calls for a fresh analysis of what is effective in furthering the artistic agenda. The extent to which the development process became codified and franchised is a problem with multiple consequences.

- Emerging artists are bending their language, their process, and even their aesthetic preoccupations to avail themselves of opportunities. They can game the system by “talking the talk” only for so long—and if they have not transcended the “emerging” label by the time their relationships dry up, they are done.
- The franchising of process promotes sameness in the outcomes. For example, a whole class of plays famously “read well” but “can’t be staged.” Or a form gets fetishized—like the heat surrounding hip hop theater—but the actual artistic distinction of each work gets blurred. Or an expectation is set out of habit—“We never actually produce plays from our reading series,” “New plays always lose money,” “We can’t produce a premiere without a workshop first,” “We can’t develop it unless we get the right to premiere it”—axioms that are untested and not necessarily true if taken on a case-by-case, artist-by-artist basis.
- When support for development is directed at the cookie-cutter approaches it encourages sameness and a lack of authenticity. But breakthrough artists often break form both in the way they make their work and what work they make. Producers and presenters who have led in this arena have led by adapting their processes in response to the artists they are supporting.
- Fetishizing development as a necessary or even productive stage of a work’s evolution is dangerous. There are many examples of white-hot works from unknown artists that spring from something so fierce (and even fragile) that to “develop” it is to kill it. Assuming that development is *always* part of an artist or project’s process leads to the “developed to death” syndrome. But, just as frequently, it hardens artists against the potential benefits of development.

What is called for is a way to celebrate and promote the practice of *customizing process for each relationship*. Institutions serious about being artist-focused will evolve their process decisions with the artists they support over the course of each individual relationship. They will also recognize that there may come a time when they can no longer provide the most effective home for the continued development of an artist, especially if that artist emerges into new opportunities. The artist’s evolution, as well as the ending of the relationship with an artist who is either moving on to new levels of exposure and impact, or branching out in new directions that don’t fit well with the organization’s environment, need to be seen as part of the development process. This is a *primary indicator of a successful process*. Did the institution and the artist, together, develop art, foster new opportunities for the work created, promote the artist’s continued growth, and create learning for the field?

### *Production, Production, Production*

It is a mantra. In every community, the generative artists said that what they need most to continue their artistic and professional development are production opportunities. It was surprising to me how little they distinguished between the quality of the opportunity, the pay scale, or its perceived status. In particular, playwrights and people working on their behalf expressed a strong voice that until the elements of production (designs, marketing energy, audiences, and even critics) were brought together around their project, they could not fully see what was being created and where they were in the process. Unless they were in the middle of a production process, however under-resourced or high-pressured, they weren't learning the skills they need to sustain themselves in the profession.

It can be hard to argue with their logic. Still, I am skeptical about "more production opportunities" being a panacea.

One playwright in this study has had dozens of productions around the country in the past three years. A few years out of grad school, he has seven different plays in this mix and he is writing two more on commission. He's got a stack of high-profile reviews in low-budget productions. And he is feeling productive, like he has momentum professionally. He is struggling financially, but highly visible in the new-play world. This should sound like a success story. But when I talk with producers at the level that would be his next professional step, the one where he could reasonably hope to sustain himself financially, he is already famous as a writer who does not finish his plays. "I like his voice, and I like him enormously, but all the plays just seem so slight. He seems to be just jumping from one to the next without committing to any one of them."

Damned if you do, damned if you don't, apparently: Too many productions and you lose your opportunity to develop your work; no productions and you are stuck in development hell.

Is there a way to encourage balance in the new works/new voices sector? Lab organizations can create circumstances which closely simulate the production process, without inviting audience or critical expectations ahead of the progress of the play's development. Producing theaters are less able to control the pressure of their own expectations that the play needs to suit their audiences. But regardless of the environment in which development happens, it cannot be the end of the road for the play and provide a satisfying outcome for the playwright—even if the play is headed for disaster when it hits the audience. There is probably a role for the small regional upstarts here, producing premieres on a shoestring for a tiny, insider audience of friends, families, and theater people, and in so doing providing playwrights an opportunity to build the muscles necessary to carry their plays through more pressured production opportunities. But these are often the very productions that observers have in mind when they talk about the "silting up of the system"—the wet blanket of mediocrity that can choke the oxygen out of the field.

### Artist Compensation

I was struck by the dependence on sweat equity in the sector and the relative complacency about rates of compensation. Artists expressed very modest expectations of financial return on their work. Organizations creating opportunity for them seldom spoke of trying to create meaningful compensation. In Los Angeles, an entire system of theaters has sprung up specifically to *avoid* paying basic union wages for theater. In San Francisco, the companies spoke about money and payments to artists as interfering with process and blurring the sense of purpose. In Portland, one participant spoke about the “hidden subsidy” on which their whole arts ecology was based: the trust fund. “Nobody is working in the theater here full time unless they’ve got some other source of financial support.” In Chicago, the fact that “everyone is working for free” was cited as a key to the strength of the community and to the signature “Chicago style.”

What has created this acceptance, even embrace, of not paying artists? There is a certain amount of “facing reality” here—there are never going to be sufficient resources for all aspiring artists to be paid a living wage while they develop their voice, vision, and craft. So, rather than wait for the money to magically appear or spend their energies trying to raise it, people are saying, “We’ll just do it ourselves.” And there is clearly energy released into the sector from this refusal to be defeated by economic circumstance. Many opportunities that get a young artist moving are found in this pay-for-it yourself sector.

However, the ramifications of designing the infrastructure around sweat equity seem huge. For example, if there is no next step beyond the “pay to play” level, then only those people who have some level of personal subsidy can stay in the field long enough to develop and, eventually, emerge. What is the impact on diversity, then? Where are the working class, working poor, and middle-class voices in our American theater? How can we expect to develop audience diversity when there are so few opportunities for artists of diverse perspectives and experience to contribute to the cultural dialogue?

Even in the major regional theaters, the pay scale for artists developing work is appalling, especially since the playwright will then be required to work more than a year or two (or three) on a play without additional pay. The scale of pay for process-related work is equally paltry for actors, emerging directors, and designers.

It is similarly troubling that the gap in pay between the artists and institutions of the “emerging” sector and the Leading National Theaters is so vast. A quick read of the annual Theatre Facts statistics from Theatre Communications Group will show that individual salaries for fundraising staff and managers of the regional theaters are the equivalent of one year’s budget for most of the organizations participating in this study. Compared with data collected by Theatre Development Fund on playwrights’ compensation, administrative salaries are five times or more what the artists whom the major institutions claim as the central purpose of their endeavor can expect to make in a year.

### *The Regions / New York*

I was surprised at the isolation and insularity of so many of the regional organizations and artists participating in the survey. It was the exception, in these meetings, when an organization or artist had significant experience outside their own region. More troubling was how little awareness people and organizations seem to have of one another.

There are certainly significant exceptions: a few frustrated voices that were frantic for a way to connect. In conversations about the state of new work and the health of the infrastructure for emerging artists, the context was always New York. Witness the most popular definitions of “emerging artists”—they inevitably use a *New York Times* review as a measuring stick.

It was my strong sense that there exists a whole world of emerging and invisible artists who do not prioritize New York success, who are not measuring their progress or accomplishment by whether it moves through New York or registers with the *Times*. But I also found that the impact of New York plays a role in the vibrancy, stability, and sense of identity of communities around the country.

There is also an impact of New York as the market hub on the development organizations and emerging artists at work in New York. Artists there are frequently developing their work in a white-hot glare. But it is not unambiguously an advantage to be working in this heat as a young voice. An emerging playwright tells a harrowing tale of her first professional production, which was at an Off-Broadway theater. Lacking the experience and the tools to protect her vision from the competing interests and raised stakes of the market, she wound up feeling like she was “trying to ride a bull in some rodeo nightmare” and could not keep herself grounded in the process. Though the play would be judged a success by most standards, the writer continues to try to recover her original intent through rewrites for subsequent productions. She is currently looking for ways to get out of New York to complete her next project.

### *Diversity (or lack thereof)*

I was surprised by the number of communities I visited in which the participants were all white. While gender seemed pretty balanced, and there was most often some sense of aesthetic diversity, there was a surprising lack of cultural diversity. In three of the communities I did the outreach myself, which resulted in different cultural perspectives in the conversation—but not without effort. It was clear that the culturally specific organizations in these communities have the fewest resources in terms of fostering professional opportunity for new works and new voices.

[*Note:* The subject of diversity was raised and debated in the Mellon Foundation’s 2009 convening at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. Highlights from this discussion may be found on pages 10-11 of Ben Pesner’s report on the convening, *Today and Tomorrow:*

*New Play Development Before and After Opening Night.* It was noteworthy that the only faces of color in the room were a small handful of artists and two young staff members of a regional theater. In a room of over 70 people, there were probably not ten people whose cultural perspective was not rooted in the dominant culture.]

### *Artists See a Lack of Authenticity in New Play Development*

There is an enormous amount of activity in the new works sector nationally, and yet the artists paint a picture that seems to say there is not enough support out there, that what there is often lacks an authentic engagement with artistic process, and that the financial rules of the new play development game are stacked against them in their drive to forge a life in the arts. The most common theme of the artists' conversations in this study was a perceived lack of authenticity in most development programs—in the commissioning and the development process.

#### *Commissions*

*Commissions are the money theaters pay playwrights to go away. "We know you are a playwright. We want your name in our grant reports. We're never going to produce you. Here's some money."*

As extreme as this sentiment is, it is not far from the mainstream in terms of the playwright's perception of the new play commission. It is common in the field to say that only 30% of commissioned plays reach production at the theater that commissioned them. Can it really surprise us, then, that playwrights feel a lack of authenticity in the dialogue surrounding commissions?

**The amounts tend to be too small to be meaningful.** The majority of playwrights observed that the range of commissions most commonly ran from \$500 to \$5,000. Though many of the participants have achieved significant levels of professional success within the nonprofit field, the most common commission amount averaged out to \$3,000.

*That's not enough money for me to write the play, really. Nor is it enough to commit the company to getting some sort of production outcome to get it back. It sends a really strong signal that I shouldn't get a big fantasy going about my place in their planning. They are not going to produce my play. But they are not going to say it until they absolutely have to.*

Playwrights who had worked on commissions of \$10,000 or more felt that the quality of their relationship to the institution was very different from that resulting from smaller amounts. These commissions also lead to a more engaged and substantial development process. However, one playwright offered a counter-argument to the value of small commissions:

*I view these commissions as validation of my being a professional in the field. I don't expect productions from them but the sense of having moved*

*from wanting to be a playwright to actually being a playwright that these small commissions create for me has a huge impact on my commitment to continuing in the profession.*

**Commissions are frequently experienced as a way to purchase legitimacy.** Many playwrights spoke of a sense that the commission was not so much about the play as it was about giving the theater a means of showing funders they were committed to new work or new voices (including more diverse voices), or appeasing the Artistic Director or Literary Manager's desire to be relevant in new work.

*I got the \$3,000, and I got a reading. They didn't produce the play, nor did I have a sense they were actively considering it, but they got a nice picture of a black man to put on their brochure and in their reports.*

**Commissions from presenters are an invitation to go into debt.** Creating a presentation without infrastructure for its production is leading artists into debt. Because of the lack of production infrastructure at presenting institutions, the artists have to cope with the expectation that they will arrive at the venue with a completed production that they have created with their own resources. When this sentiment is contrasted against the challenges expressed by the presenters, who speak of work arriving unfinished, a gap in this corner of the sector begins to reveal itself.

**Commissions may require productions but are insufficient to cover the process.** The number of commissioning grants that require the organization to deliver a production seems to be growing. However, the amount of money available to support the premiere is insufficient for the company to further invest in process, and the playwrights are subsidizing this gap with their own resources. Either the writer is going to pay out-of-pocket for the necessary development infrastructure or the organization is going to try to do that work "for free"—by not paying the collaborators, by squeezing the process into the time not devoted to production, or by keeping the development time and engagements to a bare minimum.

**Commissions create entanglements.** There is a general sense that the degree of entitlement the commissioning theater assumes over the future life of the resulting play is out of step with the amount of the investment.

*They tied it up for so long. I feel like it was clear from the beginning that they weren't going to produce this play. So what's the point of setting a clock that means it will be years before I can offer it to someone else?*

*The fact that I had taken a small commission from them meant that the theater that wanted to premiere it backed away when they heard there was a commission already. If I'd thought it through I wouldn't have done it. I was going to write the play anyway. And then I could have had a production already at a place that knows my work.*

One approach was cited several times as an example of an “authentic dialogue” around a commission even though the theater did not produce the premiere. Three playwrights told the same story:

The Artistic Director says, up front, “I’m not going to be able to produce you, but I’d like to give you the opportunity to develop a play here.” The sentiment is backed up with a \$10,000 commission—a significant award in the field. And the amount of time the play is tied up there is tightly timed to the duration of the development process—no lingering process of letting go of the right to premiere the work they were not going to produce.

### *The Development Processes*

*The process our plays get...is “off-the-rack.” It doesn’t fit anyone well, but fits everyone just enough to give the sense that they’ve clothed us.*

Though this playwright had the best metaphor for what everyone was experiencing, the sentiment came up over and over in these conversations.

### **The Reading Series**

Of all the processes that seemed to dispirit the generative artists, none was more often cited than the reading series at a producing theater. Virtually no generative artist in the survey felt it was structured to develop their play.

*The reading with audience is something the theater is doing for their own reasons that don’t have anything really to do with me. I can appreciate that they need to do it, but it irks me that they say it is for my benefit.*

*There’s a tension between the individual needs and the institutional template around development. The template notion is being driven by funding programs—you have to be able to describe it and measure its outcomes and that argues against the customized approach.*

Some artists spoke of finding real value in the proliferation of readings outside the purpose of development.

*Readings are most valuable in terms of developing professional relationships and collaborations. I leave the audience out of it because they are doing whatever they are doing. But it is a way to create a ladder.*

This sentiment was particularly strong among the directors and actors who participated in the conversations, which should disturb the reader a bit. If the directors and actors involved in the reading are there to advance their careers, is it any surprise that the playwright does not feel that the play’s development is at the center of the purpose of the exercise?

## The Talkback

Audience talkbacks came in for the harshest criticism of all the ill-fitting aspects of the development process. The prevailing sentiment was that the purpose of the talkback was to confirm the audience's sense of themselves as smarter than the playwright.

*I wouldn't say it is useless. I have to listen with an open ear and a guarded heart, but sometimes I've heard useful comments from audiences.*

*Where I come from my mother taught me that talking back was rude. So why do I have to sit through it every time someone reads my play out loud?*

The talkback is almost always run by the producing theater. The audience has typically been promised that the playwright will sit on stage while they talk back.

*Why can't I run my own? I'm actually pretty good at conversations and I generally have real questions that I could get into with them. But for some reason the playwright is invited to sit there while someone translates or moderates the audience experience for them—like we need to be protected. Well, if we do, then don't make us sit there. If we don't, then let's have a real dialogue. It's humiliating the way it is handled now.*

How has the talkback become a cookie-cutter process that varies so little from building to building and for which the audience seems to have developed a sense of entitlement? Developing an appetite for and an understanding of new work among the core theater audiences of the country is an important endeavor. But it should not be confused with being inextricably part of the process through which every play is born.

## The Meeting with Staff

A close second to the talkback as the most inauthentic moment of the development process is the “notes session” with the artistic staff.

*Every playwright learns early on how to fake it, or you don't survive. You've seen When Harry Met Sally? That scene in the restaurant when Meg Ryan fakes an orgasm? It's like that. My job is to make the artistic staff feel very good about themselves so they will advocate for producing my play.*

*We have to put on an attitude of gratitude, of listening hungrily and being so pleased that they've solved our problematic play. Why is every new play automatically broken? And why is it broken in different places every time it is read by the next literary manager?*

*All the while I'm sitting there thinking, “What's the damage to my play to incorporate these notes and is it worth it to get this production?”*

*The feedback is really less about the progress of my play, it seems, than it is about how to make my play work for their audience.*

Artists talk of the vast difference in investment that they have made in the process of creating the play versus the amount of time the institution has spent with the material. They wonder why they are deemed to know so much less than the Artistic Director about their play.

*I'd be so much more comfortable with this interaction if I felt that the person had entered my world before telling me how to fix the play. So often it is more about the play they'd write, or the play they'd rather produce than the one I'm working on.*

*Every theater feels the need to put their stamp on the thing. Like they measure their own value by the number of new pages I produce as a result of their input.*

Why do the artists put themselves through this?

*You live in fear, when you are still coming up, of being labeled "difficult." You can't live down that reputation once it is stuck to you. There are a thousand plays out there that would kill for the chance yours has been given and you worry that if you are insufficiently deferential you will be written off before you get going.*

### **Attachments and Encumbrances**

The development process is rife with opportunities for a play to become hopelessly bogged down by attachments. There are the rights requested by the commissioning theater—the right of first refusal on the premiere with a long period of consideration that takes the play out of circulation just as it is getting up a head of steam. There are the attachments of collaborators in the development process—the expectations of directors and actors that the play's advancement will advance them as well. There are the subsidiary rights claimed by the premiering producer, and then the huge bite taken out of the play by producers of a commercial transfer. Unquestionably there are rational requests to be made by an organization that has invested real time and resources at real risk to themselves to create new opportunities for the play. But playwrights, in particular, live in a constant state of dread that they will have to accept more encumbrances on the play in order for it to keep moving. One writer involved in a development lab said:

*I'm nauseous just thinking about this here. This director is a very sweet person and we're doing good work, but I can't say that the play's premiere belongs to her. I don't have that kind of standing. And, though she hasn't asked for that, I know it is an implicit part of her decision to do this lab. It colors the relationship, for sure.*

*There is just such need in our field and there are not the resources to fill it. So I get why theaters and other artists want to find a star to hitch their wagons to. I'm still trying to find my play and find my own way into the field. And it's really debilitating to be faced with all this need every time I enter a development process with a new play. I think I'm going to go back to writing my plays alone in my room and throwing them over the transom. Spot me a ticket on opening night and send the checks to my agent.*

### Characteristics of Effective Institutions

I run the risk here of painting the participating artists as a group of complainers. Nothing could be further from the experience. The artists took great pains to single out the most effective institutions and advocates for their work, and the practices that create that sense of effectiveness.

**They truly place artists at the center of the organization.** A common trait of “best practices” was the sense of the organizational setting as an “artist-friendly” environment. People talked of being among their peers where multiple projects are in motion at once and the artists seem to outnumber the staff. This was a benefit of festivals and of retreat centers as well as of the development centers. Places that created opportunities (both casual and formal) for writers to be in the same space together were especially popular in the “best practice” surveys among playwrights.

**They customize their processes to the work.** Organizations that offer customized development engagements were cited over and over as the champions of the generative artists. This list included many of the leading presenters as well as the development centers and the scrappy companies focused on new work.

**They are actively engaged in the process.** It was a common sentiment that the most productive settings were those where the generative artists had the sense of the whole place “having its sleeves rolled up on my behalf.” This contrasted to environments where development activities seemed to be ancillary to the actual purpose of the organization.

*They may not have the same resources or the same impact on my career, but that little company with the funky little black box is turning itself inside out to get my vision on the stage. I don't need to make an appointment with the Artistic Director. I don't need to ask to see the press release. We're doing this together, all of us, and it feels like I'm actually part of the team.*

**The relationship is with the artist, not just the play.** Most of the examples cited by the artists involved organizations that they felt they had a relationship with that was bigger than a single play.

## **IV. Opportunities and Ideas**

There was a lot of creativity expressed in these conversations around the question “What could a funder do to help?” Here are some of the suggestions that seemed to me the most promising, practical, and compelling.

### **Community Organizing Support**

I came away from several communities thinking, “If only they could have some facilitated time to think and plan as a community they could really pull this together.” In some cases it was about a lack of a mechanism for community collaboration. In others it seemed to be an inability to envision ways to support the local emerging artists more effectively through a strategic alignment of the community’s resources and expertise. Strengthening the capacity of these communities to construct and maintain their “gates of opportunity” should lead to developing a local infrastructure of artists and donors. I am certain there would be great cross-community benefits for the artists and the field as well as for the participating organizational leaders.

### **Between the Commission and the Premiere**

Commissions are “hot.” Premieres are “hot.” What happens in between is invisible. There needs to be a robust and reliable source of support for the period of time between the commission and opening night if emerging artists are going to develop their voices and their projects successfully. National Performance Network (NPN) is launching a pilot program, the Forth Subsidy Fund, aimed at this need. But the lack of support for actually creating the work is at the heart of the unsatisfying outcomes so often reported by presenters and artists in dealing with new work, particularly from emerging voices. This subsidy would support the process of development and the extended collaborations that are frequently needed to mount the premiere of a new play.

### **Role of the Private Philanthropic Sector**

The private philanthropic sector needs to be sold on their role in sustaining the gates of opportunity in order to achieve their full potential in strengthening this sector. There is no current mechanism for the people who are setting the priorities for cultural investment for major donors (officers of community foundations, for example, or the leading “taste makers” in the philanthropic circles of a region), to meet, understand, and support this sector at the same level that they support the major cultural institutions and social service organizations. Yet investments of that size in these organizations, relative to budget, would have enormous impact on the sector nationwide. A handful of leaders from the philanthropic circle in the any of the communities I visited could entirely change the landscape in that community. But the local and regional donors, especially private philanthropists, don’t understand how to invest in it. Instead, many major theaters are now successfully running enormous campaigns to create huge “new works endowments” with these local cultural resources, locking away the philanthropic capacity of the region from emerging voices in perpetuity. Will this lead to better artistic opportunity for

emerging voices? To more effective and productive development and delivery of the art? To a healthier regional artistic community? I don't see evidence of that from this survey.

A vibrant local arts ecology is important to the health of any community and to the quality of life of the major philanthropists resident within it. Municipalities and philanthropic leaders are still in thrall to Richard Florida's work on this topic. But the case hasn't yet been made effectively for how support of the grassroots ultimately strengthens the whole system. Many of these philanthropists will be more comfortable attending the major institutions like the ballet or the symphony or the leading regional theater. But they can surely be helped to understand the importance of their support at the level of these opportunity gates. How does the venture mindset help us, in communities like Austin, the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, and Washington, DC? How does the explosion of Alice Waters's work on locally grown and sustainable food help local arts? Can Ruby Lerner's efforts at Creative Capital get outside the realm of public philanthropy and the "arts community" and really break into the parties and boardrooms of the majors?

And can the majors get more invested in making this happen? I heard a leader in the orchestra field speaking at a meeting of performing arts leaders from around the country. "Our efforts to support the new and emerging composers are caught in a double bind: to attract new audiences we need to program new repertoire, but programming new repertoire *antagonizes our core patron/donor base.*" Can we avoid this sort of trap by consciously working together within the ecology to keep the flow of audiences and artistic trends moving freely between the small and big institutions? Can we "share the wealth" and, in so doing, strengthen the whole—or is it really a zero-sum game, in which every dollar directed toward the Gates of Opportunity is a dollar lost to the majors?

My sense is that sharing the wealth makes the pie larger for all, and that this isn't happening more widely out of a failure of vision (of community, of collaboration and partnership) more than out of financial or facility impediments. The opportunity here, then, is to provide leadership and incentives for this sort of strategic alignment of resources (financial, facility, audience, access) around the regional and community ecology which could lead the local philanthropic sector to support and encourage those initiatives that aim to build the whole network of local opportunities rather than bulk up the assets and influence of a single gatekeeper.

### **Strengthen the Leading Development Centers and Small Theaters**

Play development centers are perpetually on the verge of collapse. A handful of these organizations are thinking strategically about their role in the field and in their local region. They have demonstrated success in terms of their methodology and mission. With relatively little administrative overhead on the funder's side, they could be strengthened through multi-year operating grants that are aimed at carrying them past the brink to sustainability. This boils down to a need for direct investment in stabilization. There is a whole second tier of organizations that are aiming (in some cases claiming) to do the same thing for their own constituents. Seeing resources allocated to the sector,

along with the concomitant baselines, benchmarks, and accountability, would help spur these emerging organizations to do the hard tasks of taking their own work to the next level of effectiveness and permanence.

### **The Festival Approach**

In several communities the discussion of a festival of new work dominated the conversation about what was missing locally in terms of infrastructure. The festival was seen as a way to both showcase local work and to connect local artists with work that was happening around the country. Breaking geographic barriers both in terms of what is seen in a community and what context the local artists are presented in could be valuable for ensembles and touring artists seeking to break out of the NPN circuit, for example, and are not yet ready for Lincoln Center. This would require local partnerships, but a national foundation could build quickly on the success of established festivals and capitalize on the energy within individual communities to create momentum that would help gain interest among local funders that might invest in the opportunity.

### **Give the Playwrights the Money**

Playwrights were unambiguous in their suggestion for how to help. Give the playwrights direct support for writing plays and money to bring with them into the conversations about production. What would happen, for example, if writers received direct grants of \$25,000 to write the play and another \$25,000 to take with them to their producer-of-choice for the play's development? If playwrights were at the table for production and process decisions in an environment they chose, would the process of development and premiere feel more authentically focused on their vision and needs? And would the opportunities that resulted create different outcomes for the art, the artist, and the field?

### **Fellowships to Catalytic Leaders**

In each community there is at least one individual with a vision and a sense of how to actualize their ideas. Create fellowships for these people. Put resources in their hands, ask them to curate their investment on behalf of strengthening the opportunities for emerging artists and support their efforts through convenings of the fellows, outreach to other philanthropic resources within their communities, and publication and dissemination of their efforts. These would likely be multi-year fellowships but should rotate to others. Much of what is working in this sector is the outgrowth of a single vision, whether from an individual or an ensemble. Fostering continued growth and exploration for these individual leaders is perhaps the most effective way to serve the sector.

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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](http://www.Mellon.org).