



**ASSESSMENT OF THE NATIONAL  
PLAYWRIGHT RESIDENCY PROGRAM**

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**HELICON**

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Theater Development Fund released *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, a six-year study into how plays were written and produced in the United States at that time. The results were both comprehensive and disturbing. As the study's lead author, Todd London, put it at the time, "On one hand, we have a playwriting profession that is larger, better trained and more vital than at any time in our history. On the other hand, we have a profound rift between our most accomplished playwrights and the theatres who would produce them, an increasingly corporate theatre culture, dire economics for not-for-profits, dwindling audiences for non-musical work and perhaps most troubling of all, a system of compensation that makes it nearly impossible for playwrights to earn anything resembling a living."<sup>1</sup>

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation responded immediately, supporting broad-based discussions of how the field might address issues identified in the study, including playwrights' ability to earn a living making plays, relationships between playwrights and producing theatres, and the relevance of theatres to their communities.

Informed by these conversations, in 2012 the Mellon Foundation launched the National Playwright Residency Program (NPRP) as an effort to catalyze a field-wide shift by embedding playwrights in theatres. The program pays the salary for a playwright to be in residence in a producing theatre for a three-year term, with the option to renew for a second three-year term. To date, Mellon has funded 23 distinct theatres and playwrights (including 9 playwright-theatre partnerships that have received two terms of funding).

The program seeks to:

- Boost playwrights' artistic endeavors and improve their financial conditions by giving them space, time and resources to create, and helping them develop better and more balanced relationships with producing theatres;
- Transform theatres' practice and thinking by having a playwright embedded within them for extended periods of time;
- Shift norms in the field regarding how theatres engage and value playwrights, and inspire more theatres to support playwrights on an ongoing basis, not just by project;
- Work toward an ideal of having playwrights become salaried employees of all theatres.

The Mellon Foundation asked HowlRound to assist in implementing the program by amplifying and enhancing the impacts of NPRP on the participants and the theatre field as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> London, Todd et. al. *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*. Theater Development Fund. 2009.

Toward this end, HowlRound has organized regular convenings for participants; facilitated artistic development residencies for playwrights at Emerson College; managed and disbursed \$30,000 in developmental “micro-funds” for each playwright during their three-year residency; provided ongoing counsel and support to participants; and encouraged participants to document their experiences and share them with the field through the work of “commons producers” and other means, including postings about the residencies on HowlRound’s online platform.

In 2016, Mellon initiated the program’s second three-year term. This included renewing grants to nine of the original cohort and adding nine additional theatre-playwright partnerships. Based on their assessment of experiences during the first round of the program, Mellon and HowlRound made adjustments to the program:

- Making the application an open call and allowing playwrights to initiate the partnership with a theatre. This change reinforced the goal of re-balancing the relationship between playwright and theatre, and encouraged a broader array of potential participants to come forward.
- Favoring playwrights who had strong connections to the theatre’s local community and interest in working with community members. This shift acknowledged the observation from the program’s first three years that the playwright-theatre relationship tended to be stronger if the artist lived in the community or had strong local roots.
- Offering participating theatres additional funding to defray operating costs associated with the program. This change responded to participating theatres’ request for assistance in covering operating costs incurred in hosting the residencies.
- Eliminating the commons producer role and having each playwright and theatre develop a documentation plan as part of their residency design. The commons producer concept was an experimental approach to project documentation, designed to both track developments at each residency and share lessons with the larger field by distributing the produced material via HowlRound’s website. Twelve commons producers were hired by HowlRound in NPRP’s first year. Each producer received an orientation and training from HowlRound and was paid a \$2,000 annual fee to track activities of a given residency. A number of interesting products were generated by the commons producers, including articles, videos, blogs and other activities. But overall the experiment fell short of its goals for authentically capturing the added value of an embedded artist, and the challenges associated with NPRP residencies. The theatres found it difficult to understand the producers’ role and some (especially larger theatres) had difficulty integrating this work into their operations. Some of the producers were outstanding, but others were inconsistent in their performance. Letting each playwright and theatre develop a plan for documenting their residency and sharing the results gave the participants more control over this element of the program.

In the second phase, the program maintained an emphasis on diversity among playwrights (in age, ethnicity, career stage, gender) and among theaters (in size, location and artistic focus) to reinforce its goal of impacting the whole ecosystem of theatre.

In 2016, after the launch of the second round of funding, HowlRound commissioned Helicon Collaborative to help assess the program's impact to date. Helicon's review focused on the participants in the first phase of the program, and involved interviews with those theaters' artistic directors and playwrights; conversations with staff at the Mellon Foundation and HowlRound; attendance at the summer 2016 convening of playwrights and theatres; and a review of related documents and materials.

This report summarizes key findings of Helicon's research. Appendices provide a description of the components of the NPRP initiative, a summary of the kinds of activities that playwrights undertook during the course of the first three years of their residencies, and a list of people interviewed for this study.

## OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Overall, the NPRP program represents a bold investment in changing the relationship between playwrights and theatres, and has positively impacted participating theatres and playwrights in a range of ways. All the participants appreciate the opportunity the program has offered, and all have gotten something of value from participating. In addition to enabling theatres and playwrights chances to engage with one another in new ways, the program has helped expand diversity in the plays produced on American stages, and offered fresh ways to think about the playwright-theatre relationship and the role of playwrights in a theatre's relationship with its community. For many of the playwrights, it has been a truly transformative experience.

The extent to which the program has shifted norms or conditions in the theatre field or the dynamic between playwrights and theatres overall is not yet clear. Despite their largely positive experiences, most participating theatres report that they are not planning to continue full-time playwrights' residencies after the Mellon funding ends. As the findings show, the barriers are both logistical and economic. It is legitimately challenging to integrate a full-time working playwright into the staff, operations and organizational culture of most theatres. Even when theatres acknowledge the great value of having a working playwright integrated into their day-to-day operations, they feel that paying a playwright full-time is a luxury they cannot afford. This is not necessarily a failure of the NPRP program but rather a result of the larger socio-economic context in which the theatre field and playwrights exist today.

The outcomes of the NPRP initiative to date do suggest that we are still some distance from a nonprofit theatre field that is artistically vital, relevant to communities and economically sustainable for playwrights, other theatre artists and theatre organizations themselves. How to create such a field requires more concerted discussion and collaborative action.

## FIVE PRIMARY FINDINGS

Five primary findings emerged from Helicon’s research:

### 1. NPRP is a bold and well-executed response to field-wide challenges

The playwrights and theatre directors Helicon interviewed see NPRP as a bold intervention to address systemic problems in the theatre field. Further, they believe that the openness and collaborative spirit with which the Mellon Foundation and HowlRound have approached designing and implementing the program represents a model for good field/funder relationships. Participants praise both Mellon and HowlRound staff members for their “desire to know more, do it better, improve the lives of artists and push the field forward,” and for their responsiveness and willingness to adjust program components in response to participants’ feedback.

Participants also praise the program’s flexible design, which maximizes the chances for positive impact on each participant (playwrights and theatres) and influence the field in a holistic way. To increase the opportunity for positive impact on playwrights and theatres, for example, each duo shaped its own plan of work, tailored to the circumstances of the partners. To recognize that the theatre field is an ecology and improving relations between playwrights and theatres is a field-wide concern and responsibility, a broad range of theatres were included in the program—from large regional theatres to small, experimental ensembles. To emphasize the breadth of outstanding talent available in a field where the predominant model is producing plays written by white men in theatres led by white men, NPRP’s first cohort included ten playwrights of color (71% of the cohort), five women playwrights (36% of the cohort), four female artistic directors (29%) and one artistic director of color (7%).<sup>2</sup>

The diversity of the cohort represents an important step toward rectifying legacies of gender and racial bias in the field. In addition, the expectation that both theatres and playwrights would document their residency work and post reflections on the HowlRound website made it possible to extend the learning of the participants to others in the field.

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<sup>2</sup> In the second cohort of NPRP participants, 7 of 10 playwrights are people of color (70%) and 2 of 9 artistic directors are people of color (22%); 6 of the 10 playwrights (60%) are women and 2 of 9 artistic directors (22%) are women. Thus, in the two cohorts combined, 71% of playwrights are people of color and 13% of artistic directors are people of color; and 46% of playwrights and 26% of the artistic directors are women.

## 2. For the playwrights: Positive artistic, financial and professional impacts

### *2.1 Three years with a full-time salary and the time and space to write profoundly affected the creative life of the playwrights, and their financial health.*

All the NPRP playwrights have completed new plays and seen them produced during the course of their residencies, most of them at their home theatres. (Neither Oregon Shakespeare Festival nor Playwrights Horizon produced their playwrights' work during the first three-year term though each produced a full production the season after the first term.) Some took on ambitious new projects; others reworked and remounted previous works. All enjoyed new opportunities to collaborate with other artists; and many explored new forms of writing such as novels, screenplays or translations of other artists' work. Thirteen of the original 14 playwrights took advantage of the HowlRound's offer to provide artistic development residencies at Emerson College—using these opportunities to workshop plays, give readings, pursue research and/or conduct writing retreats. This propelled the playwrights' creative development, and was also viewed as a boost to Emerson College and the Boston area theatre ecosystem.

It should be noted that while having a secure salary was welcome to all the playwrights, the rate of pay became an issue for some. Each playwright received a salary commensurate with the rates of pay for senior staff at the host theatre—largely because the program designers did not want resident playwrights to be paid more than host theatres' artistic directors, which would have been the case in some theatres had all the playwrights been paid the same amount. Thus salaries varied within the NPRP playwrights' cohort as a whole. This became a heated topic during the early program retreats because a number of the playwrights thought they should all receive the same amount, regardless of size or geographic location of their host theatre.

Receiving a full-time salary and employment benefits during the residency was a novel experience for most of the playwrights, and health benefits were particularly valuable for many. In addition, the sustained salary enabled several playwrights to invest in their financial and personal health in ways that will benefit them for the long term. Some bought houses; others expanded their savings; some invested for retirement.

A selection of comments from playwrights reveals the profound impacts of this unique experience on their life and work:

- “Freedom from that constant worry of finding gigs and covering insurance allowed me to write six plays.”
- “The financial support has given me a sense of the long game. I can think about projects in much more complete ways because I am not fractured in my attention, scurrying for income.”

- “This has been the most valuable experience of my career. I have become a better and more confident writer.”
- “I’ve had four productions in four years—unprecedented in my experience. In addition, I’ve been able to form closer connections to actors I love, the theatre community in my city and community members.”
- “This has allowed me to see things I wouldn’t have otherwise, outside of where I live. It’s upped my intelligence, and shifted the ideas I am engaged with.”
- “I had real time to think about my artistic life, my artistic goals. The residency has been life-changing.”

All the playwrights expressed deep gratitude for the opportunities provided by NPRP, but some also expressed their awareness that even a program as generous and sustained as NPRP will not change the fundamental economics of their lives, or the economics of the theatre field more generally. Many shared fears about what they will do after the program ends. Some have been hesitant to give up teaching positions or other part-time work during their NPRP residency, for example, or to turn aside opportunities to write for tv shows or pursue commissions, because they do not want to lose professional connections that may be essential later. In some cases, this created tension between the playwright and their theatre if the theatre felt it was not getting enough of the resident playwrights’ time or artistic attention.

## ***2.2 Residencies enhanced the playwrights’ professional standing and expanded their professional networks.***

In addition to getting time and financial support to write, participating in the NPRP program helped playwrights build their reputations and connections that have led to additional professional benefits. Being selected for an NPRP residency is an important professional validation in itself. Getting to know other playwrights and theatre directors in the program expanded playwrights’ opportunities and their sense of possibility. Being centrally placed within a producing theatre has given many an unparalleled opportunity to meet and work with a range of people—including both theatre staff and visiting artists. With this has come new professional confidence. Many playwrights used their developmental micro-funds to travel to see their fellow NPRP playwrights’ productions in other locations, or to expand their artistic horizons in other ways. Meeting regularly with the other playwrights created a new professional community for the playwrights, where they could share some of their artistic struggles. The forums for exchange between playwrights and artistic directors created many new cross-pollinations.

Selected comments from playwrights reveal the importance of this validation and networking:

- “I went from being unknown to having meaningful national recognition.”
- “This theatre is a watering hole, with so many different artists coming through. Engaging with these other artists has been a source of inspiration.”
- “NPRP has given me national visibility. It’s not a coincidence that all the plays I wrote for my resident theatre have been produced or are about to be produced by other theatres.”
- “I would never have had a chance to meet so many theatre directors had I not been in the program. [And now I’m] situated to get a meeting with the literary manager or staff manager of any theatre in the country.”
- “I feel I advanced my own standing, but also the visibility of a lot of other playwrights and artists previously unknown to the theatre. I was listened to and had an impact on my theatre’s artistic choices.”

### ***2.3 The playwrights expanded their artistic and non-artistic toolkits by taking on new roles.***

In addition to writing, many playwrights used the residency period to experiment with other artistic modalities. Several directed plays (a few for the first time); others explored productions of their work outside conventional theatre venues, in places such as prisons and community settings. For some, working with community members helped stimulate their artistic thinking.

A few comments describe these impacts:

- “I took a play from creative idea to full production for the first time. I worked on every element. I had never done this before and, while terrifying, it was tremendously stimulating—a huge growth opportunity.”
- “This taught me about writing about a community and to a community ... how to write about a community in ways that are meaningful to its members without literally putting the community on stage.”
- “It was wonderful and creatively stimulating to work with young people—high school and younger. Learning how to communicate across generational lines has been very interesting and unexpected, and helpful to my writing.”

Many playwrights contributed to the administrative operations of their theatres—supporting theatres’ communications, social media and marketing efforts, for example, or writing funding proposals or participating in fundraising events. Most have attended at least

some staff meetings and a few have become part of their theatres' leadership teams. In one case, the resident playwright facilitated a process for the theatre staff to articulate its organizational values. Some playwrights have interacted extensively with board members—enlarging board members' understanding of the playwriting process, artist-theatre dynamics and issues related to race and cultural diversity. The opportunity to work with community members—including youth groups, neighborhood associations, schools and churches—has been particularly meaningful for some of the playwrights.

Most playwrights reported that the residency has expanded their skillsets and mindsets, and enlarged their understanding of the dynamics of both theatre production and working in the community:

- “Seeing the inside of theatre operations was illuminating. I now understand theatres' constraints and how little time there is for anything.”
- “I now see the real need to educate board members. Many have so little interaction with artists, or with people outside their social class.”
- “I can see that I have made a difference in decision-making and the staff seeks my opinion about issues that go beyond artistic choices. This is really gratifying.”

However, in some cases, the playwright's role was problematic for other staff members of their theatres. The purpose of the residency and resident playwright's role was not always clearly explained to other staff, and caused confusion or resentment in some places. Especially in those theatres where many other staff members are artists or playwrights themselves, the resident playwright's flexible hours and opportunity to focus exclusively on writing created discord and challenges for the directors.

- “The staff never understood my variable schedule or the fact that I didn't chip in to help with every production. But that was not my job. It became a problem on occasion.”
- “Everyone was nice; but I felt little camaraderie. No one was really in charge of helping me do what I needed to do. No one wanted the extra work of helping me do things.”
- “In one staff meeting, it became clear that the staff loved me, but they loved me for my fundraising and my community building, *not for my art*. I had to really resist just becoming another administrator, and they had to resist putting me in that position too.”
- “I found that the value the playwright brings is not always clear, and not always prioritized or monetized. Some of the things I did for the theatre that I thought were most important were not valued by the rest of the staff.”

- “I had a hard time holding the playwright accountable because they bristled at the idea of being a staff member and following HR rules that the rest of the staff abides by. The playwright acted like a ‘salaried freelancer,’ which created problems for us.”

#### ***2.4 Many of the playwrights of color became de facto educators of theatre staff, board and audiences regarding issues of race and class.***

Close to two-thirds of the original NPRP playwright cohort are African American, Asian or Latinx. In the interviews, many reflected on the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which racial issues affected their residency experience. This ranged from board members expressing surprise to an African American playwright that s/he could write about people in upper economic brackets to playwrights of color feeling uncomfortable working in theatres that were very removed from their community or socio-political consciousness.

Addressing racial and class bias within the host theatres was not a specific expectation of the residency, but many playwrights felt they had no choice but to work on this issue with their institutions. Most of those who found themselves in this position accepted it willingly as an opportunity to exert influence on this critical concern. In a few cases the theatre’s artistic director and the playwright worked together very consciously and deliberately on addressing bias issues in the theatre, once the playwright was in residence.

Given rising concerns about diversity, inclusion and equity in the cultural sector generally, these pressures on the playwrights of color might have been anticipated, and it may be a flaw in the program design that there were no formal structures for preparing or supporting both playwrights and theatres for this work. But the experiences of the playwrights raise questions about the burden that an individual artist can or should bear for driving institutional change, simply because they are representative of a particular group, and suggest that a playwright’s efforts can be only marginally effective if they are not accompanied by a larger institutional commitment to change. For example, one playwright noted that their theatre’s professed desire to diversify staff and board was abandoned when it became clear that the theatre would have to change recruitment practices and reach beyond its usual hiring networks. Race and class bias remains deeply entrenched in the theatre field, and while playwrights can play a role in addressing these concerns, it requires extensive and sustained institutional commitment to effect real change.

Comments from playwrights reflect the importance of this work:

- “Regular theatre is so intransigent, still overwhelmingly led by white men. It’s like a big abacus of people in power, and they just get moved around. Until there is systemic change in theatre, it’s hard to imagine they will embrace plays that bring everyone in. In my own self-interest, I have to work on this.”

- “People talk about racial diversity a lot, but the thing that is most challenging for theatres is talking about class.”
- “I have been so conscious of race in every moment of every thing [in the residency]. It isn’t adversarial, people are engaged in trying to understand race and class. But that has meant we have to talk about it all the time, and I have had to find ways to frame questions that don’t put people’s backs up.”
- “I helped the institution question itself and its practices regarding race and class. Doing this work became critical to my ability to be successful.”

### **3. For the theatres—Positive impacts on creative risk-taking, diversity of work on stage, and connections with community**

#### ***3.1 Resident playwrights propelled theatres’ commitment to new work and new play development, including work by diverse artists.***

With the theatre directors’ encouragement, most NPRP playwrights have been involved in at least some aspect of play selection or season development at the theatre in which they are in residence. This has had two primary impacts: 1) having the playwright’s voice in the room during these discussions has changed the theatre staff’s sensibilities about plays under review (and in some cases, the plan for a whole season), and 2) it has pushed staff to be more open to the work of women and artists of color. Working to produce a play by their resident playwright also emboldened some theatres to take new artistic risks, and experiment with untried approaches to production. At some theatres, the playwright in residence helped staff make the case for new and more diverse work to the board in compelling ways.

The comments of theatre directors reveal the value of these contributions:

- “Our playwright introduced us to the next generation of writers, including many artists of color we did not know.”
- “Because our playwright was writing about something that is happening right now in our city, in our country, it encouraged us to think differently, to work differently.”
- “It changed our senior team meetings to have the playwright participate. We all became more aware of how our decisions would impact artists.”
- “As an outsider, our playwright could raise issues that staff members didn’t see, or didn’t want to talk about.”
- “Our playwright helped sell the idea of new work to our Board, and the need to include artists on the Board.”

- “I had never gone into rehearsal with an uncompleted script before but I had confidence in our playwright and I was willing to trust that we would emerge with a terrific conclusion.”

### ***3.2 Resident playwrights enriched the theatres’ connections with local communities and enlarged their understanding of the theatre’s role in their locality.***

Many of the resident playwrights have connected energetically with audiences and community groups, making new friends and connections for their theatres. Some playwrights were asked explicitly to help the theatre build bridges with communities the theatre wanted to get to know. Most playwrights embraced this opportunity, using it to advance their personal artistic goals by learning about local residents and using the stories of the community as inspiration for their writing. In several cases, especially those where the playwright had strong previous connections with the community, the playwrights’ work in this area helped theatres rethink and renegotiate their relationship to different communities, most notably younger people and people in African American and Latinx communities.

It remains to be seen whether playwright-led or playwright-infused community engagement strategies will be sustained by the NPRP theatres after the end of the program. Both financial and organizational challenges may make this difficult. However, theatre directors’ comments reveal the meaningful impacts of this direct playwright-community engagement during the NPRP residencies:

- “In the theatre field, there is growing awareness of the need to connect to communities, serve communities, work with communities. This program showed us ways it can be done that aren’t about marketing, but about artists and the artistic process itself. Our playwright connected us to a community we didn’t know but wanted to, and did it the most authentic way possible. Our playwright’s work stretched her, stretched us and engaged audiences in exceptionally powerful ways.”
- “The residency gave us an authentic relationship with the African American community for the first time. Having this artist being here brings all the other people they’ve worked with into the theatre and makes more people feel this theatre is *their* place.”
- “Our resident playwright has become the face of the theatre in our community. Even our mayor knows him and speaks about his work in public speeches.”
- “An important effect of the residency is that our Board is now asking how the theatre can look more like the city.”

- “As a result of the work that our playwright did in the community, we have a greater awareness of the community needs that this theatre can fulfill. Our agenda has become bigger than the theatrical. We are now committed to making this a better community, and are attracting widening support to do that.”

#### 4. Characteristics of residencies that succeed or struggle

Being involved in a full-time residency for three years has been an unprecedented experience for all the playwrights and theatres involved in the NPRP. None of the participants had done this before and most appreciate the experimental nature of the initiative. As in any experiment, results for both playwright and theatre have varied. Moreover, partnerships between a playwright and a theatre were bound to differ depending on personalities, goals, and artistic styles. All those we interviewed emphasized that there can never be a one-size-fits-all approach to success. However, the partnerships that have produced the most meaningful outcomes for both playwright and theatre share some characteristics and those that were more problematic also share certain features.

##### ***4.1 The residencies that had the greatest positive results for both playwright and theatre demonstrated most or all of these qualities:***

- The values, goals and expectations of the theatre and the playwright were closely aligned;
- The director and playwright had worked together previously;
- The playwright was at a stage in their career where s/he could commit fully to the residency and take full advantage of this kind relationship with a theatre;
- The theatre had a genuine commitment to produce the playwright’s work;
- The theatre had both the will and sufficient internal capacity to make use of the playwright as an artist, not just as an adjunct administrator;
- Both theatre and playwright were committed to honest communication and feedback, and to adjusting the relationship for mutual success; and
- The playwright lived in the community and had a strong interest in engaging with the community as a part of the residency.

##### ***4.2 Difficulties arose most frequently when:***

- The expectations of the playwright were not clearly delineated, there was a difference of opinion about the playwright’s role, and/or theatre staff members were uncertain about the playwright’s role, schedule and responsibilities;

- The playwright was expected to be an adjunct administrator, and the theatre did not value or know how to integrate them as an artist;
- Being embedded within an organization did not suit the work style or career goals of the playwright;
- Plays created by the playwright were not of interest to the theatre to produce;
- Obligations associated with the playwright’s previous commissions or new artistic opportunities outside of the resident theatre conflicted with host theatre’s schedule or expectations,
- When additional opportunities for the playwright became available in the host theatre—such as directing assignments—that had attendant obligations or costs beyond the scope of the NPRP residency (such as paying an agent); and/or
- The theatre had other pressing priorities or other major initiatives underway that made it difficult for the artistic director, managing director and other staff to give the playwright adequate attention and support.

Integrating any new person into a theatre staff naturally has its challenges, but some theatres struggled with this more than others. This may be primarily due to the fact that while many playwrights work in administrative roles in theatres, playwrights are not typically integrated—in their artistic capacity—within the operating structures of producing theatres. This is one of the issues that the NPRP program set out to address. That some theatres struggled with this is an indication of how challenging it is to change organizational culture, not a failure of the program *per se*. As one person put it: “Few theatres know how to deploy artists—as artists—within the organization. How would they? It’s so infrequent in the theatre field. This is one of the things we need to overcome, but both the workload and the financial pressures facing theatres make it hard for them to let artists explore roles that are not directly related to production. And it’s hard to change without more opportunities to practice.”

## 5. For the theatre field—Despite valued impacts on NPRP participants, little change in underlying conditions

There is continuing, and in some places intensifying, conversation in the theatre field about the issues raised in *Outrageous Fortune*—most notably the impediments that American playwrights face in trying to make a living in the theatre, the lack of involvement of working playwrights in the day-to-day workings of theatres, the lack of diversity of voices on stage and behind the scenes, and the declining relevance of many theatres to their communities (as indicated by attendance and contributed income). People we interviewed for this study credited the NPRP program with contributing meaningfully to this conversation, which has

also been advanced by Theatre Communications Group, the Latinx Theatre Commons, HowlRound and others.

However, the forces that are sustaining the *status quo* are large, systemic, and resistant to change. At the time of writing, NPRP has not yet shifted these underlying conditions, and most interviewees believe that, on its own, the program cannot possibly do so. The economic model of the nonprofit theatre is a major structural challenge. Nonprofit theatres are heavily dependent on discounted labor by artists and administrators, and increasingly reliant on ticket sales and earned income. The need to attract substantial ticket revenue pushes many theatres away from risk-taking and investments in artists and communities that do not generate financial returns. Meanwhile, the proliferation of mediated storytelling platforms (television, film, YouTube, podcasts, radio and other vehicles) makes those forms more universally available and less expensive than live theatre. In addition, playwrights (and other theatre artist) see increasing opportunities for meaningful income from these new platforms, and this is drawing talent away from live theatre. The significant expansion of television series and made-for-television movies, in particular, has increased the demand for good writing, and growing numbers of playwrights are being lured by these opportunities for both financial and artistic reasons.

The NPRP initiative reinforces the point that achieving meaningful change in the theatre field will require contending with underlying systemic economic factors in the nonprofit sector as well as supporting individual playwrights and theatres. An ongoing challenge to this kind of systemic change is the limited philanthropic interest in long term, field-wide interventions on the systemic level. The Mellon Foundation is one of very few foundations that is focused on addressing structural issues in specific artistic fields.

The NPRP experiment suggests that, at a minimum, at least three significant underlying issues need further analysis and sustained strategic responses to produce meaningful change in the field:

***5.1 Larger economic pressures and incentives shape the business and operational choices of theatres and playwrights, and make it hard to shift behavior.***

Theatre professionals have broad awareness of the precariousness of playwrights' livelihoods, and some additional playwrights' residency programs have emerged in recent years to try to address this problem (for example, the Tow Fellowship and the Public Theater's program). However, the current business models and organizational structures of theatres of all sizes make prioritizing residencies for playwrights "nearly impossible," especially without sustained funding. Only two of the NPRP theatres suggested that they would attempt to sustain their residency program when the Mellon Foundation's NPRP support ends, and these theatres indicated they would need meaningful additional financial incentives in order to do so.

Moreover, not every playwright wants a full-time job in a single theatre. For playwrights, it can be risky or undesirable to commit fully to one theatre for a sustained period of time, for financial and artistic reasons. Even if many more theatres could and were willing to provide ongoing support for playwrights in residence, these positions would likely be few and highly competitive, and would still not serve to shift the economic conditions for the vast majority of playwrights.

Moving forward, it is worth considering what kind of *systemic* intervention could help a larger cross-section of playwrights address their financial challenges and achieve more sustainable livelihoods. One approach may be to look at conditions for theatres and theatre artists in a specific locality, and develop new mechanisms that help multiple theatres and artists at the same time. An idea being developed by a consortium of theatres in the Twin Cities to offer a season's employment to a cadre of actors is one such collective action by leaders in a particular place. This may offer a relevant model.

***5.2 Despite increasing awareness about the importance of diverse voices in all aspects of theatres' work, progress towards cultural equity in theatre is slow.***

Awareness and concern around the lack of cultural diversity in the theatre field — among writers and performers, administrative staff, board members and audiences alike — is growing, as it is in every part of the nonprofit cultural sector, commercial entertainment, and other parts of society. Increasingly, theatres understand that they must better reflect the country's diverse cultural and demographic landscape by supporting the work of women, artists of color, trans-gender artists and other under-represented voices, or they will become increasingly irrelevant to communities of the future.

For many theatres in the NPRP program, working in sustained ways with playwrights of color has been a profoundly important and rewarding experience in this regard. Several reported that their resident playwright has propelled a shift in the internal culture of the theatre and deepened the organizations' commitment to values of diversity and inclusion in all aspects of its work—including staffing, artistic choices, programming, community relations and board membership. This influence of the playwright was most significant when the theatre had other internal champions for diversity and endeavored to make real changes to its artistic and/or organizational practice. While the playwright was not the sole catalyst for change, these theatres recognized and appreciated the distinctive role that artists can play in shifting sensibilities and behaviors.

Investing in a critical mass of playwrights from currently under-represented groups is an important strategy to advance equity in the theatre field, and one that has been under-utilized to date. As with the issue of economics of the theatre field, this may be an area where collective action by theatres and funders in particular localities may be an important part of achieving long-term systemic shifts. The work of Enrich Chicago

([www.enrichchi.org](http://www.enrichchi.org)), a consortium of cultural groups and funders working together to address diversity and equity issues in Chicago's cultural sector, may offer lessons from which theatres in other locations could benefit.

### ***5.3 Theatres recognize the need to be more relevant and connected to the communities where they live, but continue to struggle with this imperative.***

The audience demographics for the vast majority of American theatres are significantly out of alignment with the demographics of the communities in which they are situated. Increasingly, theatres recognize that they have a responsibility to address this issue, and that it is critical for their long-term health and survival to do so. Having more diverse playwrights telling stories on stage helps a broader range of people see reflections of themselves and their lived experiences in theatre. However, in cases where communities don't have a habit of going to the theatre or may perceive the theatre as not "for them," simply changing the work on stage may not be enough.

In some of the NPRP residencies, the participating playwright worked actively to build bridges between the theatre and local communities, especially communities of color, young people and local artists. These playwrights spent time in the community, engaged community residents in the creative process, and built trust for and interest in the theatre more generally. While some of the playwrights had worked with communities as a part of their artistic process previously, this was new to some and in a few cases, the experience fundamentally influenced the playwright's artistic work. In addition, some NPRP playwrights helped their theatre's staff members better understand how to engage community members so that this activity could continue after the playwright's residency ends. This includes participating in neighborhood events or visiting with community members in local venues that have little to do with the arts, learning about the community's history and its concerns before suggesting any kind of theatre-based partnership, and figuring out what will make community residents feel comfortable and ensuring that such hospitality is extended authentically and consistently in all the theatre's activities.

While not all artists are interested in or good at this kind of community engagement, those who are can powerfully strengthen theatres' relationships with their communities. Currently, few theatres engage playwrights in this way, properly resource them for this work, or continue it beyond the duration of a specific production. Doing so could have multiple and multiplying benefits—for the playwrights' creative process, for the communities in which they work, and for the theatres' role as civic leaders and public servants. However, if theatres want to truly change their relationship with their communities, they must commit to this effort—not as audience development for a specific show but as a fundamental part of all their work now, and well into the future.

## CONCLUSION

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s investment in the National Playwright Residency Program has demonstrated that salaried theatre-based employment for diverse playwrights over multiple years, supplemented with effective developmental support and communications efforts, can have profound results for participating playwrights, theatres and communities. There are many lessons for how to achieve these results in the experiences of the program participants. At the same time, the program also has revealed the challenges associated with embedding working playwrights in theatres. And it has illuminated the scale of the commitment—both in terms of will and resources—that will be required to shift practices across the theatre field more widely. The NPRP initiative catalyzed many theatres and playwrights to think and behave differently in the short term, but truly changing playwrights’ compensation, the relationship between playwrights and theatres, the diversity of voices on theatre stages and in theatre offices, and the relevance to theatres to their communities requires these institutions to be internally motivated to behave differently, with or without philanthropic incentives.

The NPRP proves that change is possible. It also reinforces the need to renew efforts to understand and grapple with the systemic barriers to more widespread change in the theatre sector. What might true sustainability for playwrights and theatres look like? What are the ideal role(s) for playwrights within nonprofit theatres today? What will it take for theatres to become more equitable in their practices and more relevant to their communities, and what is the opportunity for playwrights in this work? The Mellon Foundation, HowlRound, and the cohort of NPRP playwrights and theatres can continue to offer leadership and lessons to the field as it grapples with these and other questions essential to theatre’s future.

## APPENDIX A: PROGRAM DETAILS

### National Playwright Residency Program Goals (from Mellon Foundation materials)

- To advance the state of playwrights in the American theatre by providing them with space, time and resources;
- To influence the working environment of theatres by embedding playwrights in them;
- To help the field (including other funders) understand the value of embedding playwrights in theatres;
- To work toward an ideal of having writers become salaried employees of theatres at rates commensurate with senior staff.

### **Additional goals** (expressed by HowlRound)

- To influence the theatre field more generally by increasing the visibility and influence of diverse artistic voices;
- To change the relationship between theatres and communities as a result of working with playwrights who have strong community ties;
- To shift in the balance of power between playwright and institution by providing resources to the playwright such as micro-funds and artistic development residencies that took some financial pressure off of theatres while enabling the playwrights to expand their artistic vision in new or ambitious directions.

### Program components

- Grants to theatres to employ one working playwright full-time over three year period;
- Documentation and information dissemination (commons producers; recorded conversations; articles and videos posted on HowlRound);
- Convenings of participating theatres and playwrights;
- Site visits by HowlRound staff and ongoing consultations with participants;
- Artistic developmental residencies for playwrights at Emerson College;
- Microgrants for playwrights (\$30,000 for each playwright over the three-year period);
- Requirement that theatres produce at least one work by the resident playwright during the grant term.

## Grantmaking to date

- First round (2012-2016):
  - Program planning informed by advisory committee
  - 38 theatres invited to apply with applications that included statements by both artistic director and playwright
  - Proposals vetted by advisory committee and Mellon staff
  - 14 theatres granted three-year awards ranging from \$161,000 to \$303,000 (terms varied from 36 to 42 months)
- Second round (2016-2020):
  - 9 residencies renewed (via application process)
  - 51 theatres applied through an open application process
  - Proposals vetted by advisory committee and Mellon staff
  - 9 additional theatres with 10 playwrights granted multi-year awards; grants range from \$190,000 to \$349,000 (terms varied from 36 to 44 months)

## Program Participants

### **2012-2015**

#### Alliance Theatre

Susan V. Booth, Artistic Director  
Pearl Cleage, Playwright

#### Cutting Ball Theatre

Rob Melrose, Artistic Director  
Andrew Saito, Playwright

#### Dallas Theater Center

Kevin Moriarty, Artistic Director  
Will Power, Playwright

#### Huntington Theatre Company

Peter DuBois, Artistic Director  
Melinda Lopez, Playwright

#### Kansas City Repertory Theatre

Eric Rosen, Artistic Director  
Nathan Louis Jackson, Playwright

Mixed Blood Theatre

Jack Reuler, Artistic Director  
Aditi Kapil, Playwright

Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Bill Rauch, Artistic Director  
Luis Alfaro, Playwright

Playwrights Horizons

Tim Sanford, Artistic Director  
Dan LeFranc, Playwright

Soho Repertory Theater

Sarah Benson, Artistic Director  
David Adjmi, Playwright

South Coast Repertory

Marc Masterson, Artistic Director  
Julie Myatt, Playwright

Ten Thousand Things Theater Company

Michelle Hensley, Artistic Director  
Kira Obolensky, Playwright

Victory Gardens Theater

Chay Yew, Artistic Director  
Marcus Gardley, Playwright

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company

Howard Shalwitz, Artistic Director  
Robert O'Hara, Playwright

Z Space Studio

Lisa Steindler, Artistic Director  
Peter Nachtrieb, Playwright

## 2016-2019

### Continuing theaters:

#### Alliance Theatre

Susan V. Booth, Artistic Director  
Pearl Cleage, Playwright

#### Dallas Theater Center

Kevin Moriarty, Artistic Director  
Will Power, Playwright

#### Huntington Theatre Company

Peter DuBois, Artistic Director  
Melinda Lopez, Playwright

#### Kansas City Repertory Theatre

Eric Rosen, Artistic Director  
Nathan Louis Jackson, Playwright

#### Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Bill Rauch, Artistic Director  
Luis Alfaro, Playwright

#### Ten Thousand Things Theater Company

Michele Hensley, Artistic Director  
Kira Obolensky, Playwright

#### Victory Gardens Theater

Chay Yew, Artistic Director  
Marcus Gardley, Playwright

#### Z Space Studio

Lisa Steindler, Artistic Director  
Peter Nachtrieb, Playwright

### New participants:

#### Adventure Stage of Chicago

Tom Arvetis, Artistic Director  
Carlos Murillo, Playwright

Company One Theatre

Shawn LaCount, Artistic Director

Kirsten Greenidge, Playwright

HERE (Home for Contemporary Theatre and Art)

Kristin Marting, Artistic Director

Taylor Mac, Playwright

Ma-Yi Theater Company

Ralph Pena, Artistic Director

Rehana Lew Mirza and Mike Lew, Playwrights

Marin Theatre Company

Jasson Minadakis, Artistic Director

Lauren Gunderson, Playwright

Perseverance Theatre

Art Rotch, Artistic Director

Vera Starbard, Playwright

Pillsbury House + Theatre

Faye M. Price and Noel Raymond

Christina Ham, Playwright

San Diego Repertory Theatre

Sam Woodhouse, Artistic Director

Herbert Siguenza, Playwright

Two River Theatre Company

John Dias, Artistic Director

Madeleine George, Playwright

## Activities of Playwrights During Residencies (2012-2016)

Related to their own play-making and artistic work:

- Wrote plays (and novels, screenplays and other literary work; and translated work from other languages)
- Workshopped plays
- Gave readings
- Remounted plays or had new plays produced

Related to theatres' artistic programming and season planning:

- Advised on play selection/season planning
- Read new scripts
- Directed plays
- Dramaturged other playwrights' plays
- Provided literary management for theatre

Related to audience engagement and community relations:

- Served as ambassador for the theatre, did community relations work and civic interactions
- Led or participated in audience engagement activities
- Networked the theatre with non-arts communities and organizations
- Worked with community youth—conducted workshops on theatre and scene writing; led summer seminars with high school students
- Helped plan and/or participate in cultural festivals and community-building convenings and conferences
- Conducted writing workshops and classes with audience members (including prison inmates)
- Taught playwriting
- Helped launch local writers' group

Related to Board development and fundraising:

- Attended and/or presented at Board meetings
- Led writing workshop with Board members
- Provided grantwriting assistance and participated in fundraising activities

Related to other theatre work:

- Provided marketing/advertising services—storytelling and articles about the theatre
- Conducted social media
- Participated in staff Leadership Team; attended staff meetings
- Elevated visibility of local playwrights, helped strengthen community of local artists
- Served as ambassador from the theatre to local artists—meetings with emerging artists, weekly writers groups, salons for artists and patrons to discuss artistic themes, meetings with visiting artists
- Helped write an organizational Values Statement
- Supported initiatives on diversity and building cultural awareness

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWS**

### **Playwrights**

David Adjmi, Soho Repertory Theater  
Luis Alfaro, Oregon Shakespeare Theater  
Pearl Cleage, Alliance Theater  
Marcus Gardley, Victory Garden Theater  
Aditi Kapil, Mixed Blood Theater  
Melinda Lopez, Huntington Theater  
Julie Myatt, South Coast Repertory  
Peter Nachtrieb, Z Space Studio  
Kira Oblensky, Ten Thousand Things  
Robert O’Hara, Woolly Mammoth Theater  
Will Power, Dallas Theater Center  
Andrew Saito, Cutting Ball Theater

### **Artistic Directors**

Sarah Benson, Soho Repertory Theater  
Susan V. Booth, Alliance Theater  
Peter DuBois, Huntington Theater  
Michelle Hensley, 10,000 Things  
Marc Masterson, South Coast Repertory  
Rob Melrose, Cutting Ball Theater  
Kevin Moriarty, Dallas Theater Center  
Bill Rauch, Oregon Shakespeare Theater  
Jack Reuler, Mixed Blood Theater  
Eric Rosen, Kansas City Repertory  
Tim Sanford, Playwrights Horizons  
Howard Shalwitz, Woolly Mammoth Theater  
Lisa Steindler, Z Space Studio  
Chay Yew, Victory Gardens Theater

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