

Legal Name
Theatre Development Fund
Project Title
To support a project to find new ways to connect playwrights and generative theatre artists with audiences
Project Progress and Successes
<p>Triple Play is a 6-city convening and research project launched by Theatre Development Fund (TDF) and Theatre Bay Area (TBA) to address the nationwide need for theatre institutions to build audiences and appetite for new plays. The project builds on TDF's Outrageous Fortune study on the lives and livelihoods of playwrights and TBA's study Counting New Beans on the intrinsic impact of live theatre. It was sparked, in part, by a sentiment echoed by theatre practitioners that theatre organizations ought to be serving as bridges between artists and audiences, but too often they act as walls. Triple Play aims to create a paradigm shift that will link audiences, playwrights, and theatre institutions in communities across the country. The project posits that, as a field, the theatre could implement better practices for building audiences for new work, and make more meaningful connections with their communities, if generative artists were at the center of these efforts.</p> <p>The 18-month project, funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, began last winter by convening theatre practitioners in Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, San Francisco and Washington DC. During this initial stage of the project, we also commissioned research papers by WolfBrown and Zannie Voss which served as the basis for discussion. Their research uncovered wide differences in the ways that theatre leaders and playwrights perceive audience and artist engagement, and it offered new insights about the propensity of audiences for risk-taking theatrical work. In addition to these papers, we distributed a sampling of "bright spots" or effective audience engagement strategies taking place across the country, which was compiled by Polly Carl of ArtsEmerson. These interactive conversations, attended primarily by theatre leaders, marketing directors, and playwrights, asked probing questions about how risk is defined individually by theatre institutions in relation to their audiences, the work they present, and their marketing efforts. By bringing the same fundamental set of questions to each city, the project encountered and chronicled critical regional differences in the environment for making and presenting new work.</p> <p>Upon completion of the 6-city tour, it became clear that the Triple Play conversations were creating a self-propelling momentum and that the issues being addressed were hitting a nerve. The level of enthusiasm, candor, and commitment to change among participants continues to be encouraging. In addition to the planned local convenings, Triple Play also hosted a session at the TCG National Conference in San Diego in June 2014 and will host a session at the upcoming National Arts Marketing Project in Atlanta in November 2014. We are currently in the process of administering the second stage of the research project, which brings the audience directly into the conversation through a series of interviews and focus groups. Our target audience is single ticket buyers who are "new to file", in other words, regular theatregoers who occasionally attend new work but are not "new play junkies." We have solicited a dozen theatres in the cities we visited to engage with us in new research for this next phase of the project. Each selected theatre is presenting a new play this fall. Each has been asked to identify a playwright partner to help with the research -- a playwright other than the one whose show is currently on their stage. The research will have two parts. First, the playwrights will conduct one-on-one interviews with four to five audience members while a representative from the theatre observes. Then, the theatre representative will lead two focus groups with audience members just before they attend a performance of the new play at the theatre, while the playwright observes.</p>

Through this action-oriented research methodology, we are beginning to model behavior that we are striving to encourage, by engaging playwrights directly in conversation with audiences. All the interviews will follow the same protocol, designed by WolfBrown. Both interviewers will write up their observations; several playwrights will then synthesize the findings. We hope to uncover some of the motivations that propel theatregoers (casual, sometime theatregoers) to attend new plays. Why were they attracted to a specific show? What are they anticipating as they arrive at the theatre? What have their past experiences of attending theatre led them to expect from that evening, or any evening, of theatregoing?

We hope our research will lead to a deeper understanding of audience motivation, expectation and response, especially in relation to new work, that can be turned into actionable steps for theatres to attract more people to their productions. We also hope that theatre administrators will look differently at their artists, seeing them as uniquely gifted partners for connecting with audiences. We hope that artists (here playwrights) will gain a new understanding about how people think about, receive and react to the art. And we hope that audience members, in conversation with artists and administrators, will walk away with a new sense of connection to the institution, to the art, and to artists themselves.

The project will culminate in a national convening at the Center for Theater Commons at ArtsEmerson in January, 2015, where approximately 75 of Triple Play's participants -- playwrights, theatre administrators, thought leaders -- will share and examine what we have found to date, to discuss the implications and propose next steps.

Perhaps the greatest success of the project is in the alliance of partner local organizations-- League of Chicago Theatres, LA Stage Alliance, New Dramatists, Woolly Mammoth, and Playwrights Center--who have demonstrated their individual stakes in the project and commitment to developing strategies for their communities and for the field as a whole. It is not our intention that our findings should be merely discussed theoretically, but that they be debated and put into practice by theatre makers nationwide.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

Our intention at the outset of the project was to include audience members in the initial set of convenings. However, it proved challenging to invite and incorporate audience members who were not already "theatre insiders". Meeting participants expressed the idea that the follow-up to these conversations should test our collective assumptions about audience tolerance for risk and interest in new work by querying audience members nationwide. We will seek to achieve this through the current round of small playwright-audience interviews. This "phasing" approach was ultimately very beneficial. We were able to achieve a level of candor and self-reflection in the initial round of meetings, and to unpack what different theatre institutions mean when they invoke commonly used vocabulary such as "engagement," "community", "risk", and "diversity".

We had some attrition with implementing the interview processes at all interested theatres. Originally, we had assigned playwright-interviewers at 11 theatres producing 11 new plays in the 6 host cities, and we are moving forward with 9 theatres in 5 cities. Smaller theatres tend to be under-resourced and do not have ticketing systems that track the kind of audience information that the study requires (could not identify single-ticket buyers), their marketing staffs (often wearing several other hats) are already stretched, and the protocols for the interviews may be too rigid. The unfortunate result is that some of these theatres that may have the most to teach in terms of connecting artists and audiences, do not have

the institutional "bandwidth" to participate in the research project in its current design.

Another challenge to recruitment and participation is conveying that the project is not necessarily intended to create new practices. Rather, our intention is to come to a greater understanding of how audiences behave, to understand the complexities and commonalities of building audiences for new work in different cities, and to disseminate and build on strategies that are already effective for theatres that may be working under similar circumstances in far-flung locations.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

Theatre-makers in each of the cities we visited are thinking about audiences -- and thinking about them differently. The achievement of this project to date is not a uniform set of "lessons learned" that applies to all theatres, but rather the harvesting of common obstacles, concerns, observations, and good questions that we will address together at the convening in Boston in January, for example:

- Artists and theatre-makers in every city we visited were thinking about when to engage an audience for a given show (months in advance, right before, right after) and where to do it (on site, off site). (Some observed that aesthetic risk is easier if the promises about the show are clear ahead of time, and truthful. Some theatre-makers (Minneapolis) pop audience members into the backs of their cars and make theatre on the freeways.)
- Theatre practitioners are wrestling with the fact that there is no one description for the theatre, other than perhaps that it is live, that can be utilized as a way to develop audiences. The work is too varied for a "got milk" effort.
- Every play has a different "right" audience and this is part of the reason that subscription may not be as attractive as it once was. (In New York, we heard talk about single ticket buyers and dwindling numbers of subscribers and the need to market each show from scratch, rather than building on a foundation of loyal returning patrons. Some makers (Washington) embrace this reality and speak of "designing" a new audience for each production, as if they were describing the set.)
- In every city, theatre-makers were worried that people in their community, potential audience members, weren't even thinking of theatre as an option. (In San Francisco, theatre-makers wonder how to make theatre "cool" enough to attract young techies, while still others (Chicago) want pragmatic solutions and offer each other advice about what's worked to reach new audiences.)
- In every city, theatre-makers are thinking about how audiences connect personally to the work. Audiences seem to want to talk to each other after a show, not the artists.
- Theatre-makers (those in Los Angeles in particular) are concerned about "community," meaning the people in their geographic neighborhood, or those who share a cultural affinity -- LGBT, Latino.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

We have attached the 2 studies commissioned by WolfBrown and Zannie Voss/Jack Schwimmer, as well as a powerpoint presentation outlining the current interview protocols.

Archive of livestreamed conversations:

<http://howlround.com/audiences-artists-theaters-livestreaming-triple-play-trplplay->

discussion-series%E2%80%94mon-march-10

Hashtag:
#TrpIPlay

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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