

The logo for Howlround Theatre Commons consists of three black rectangular blocks of varying sizes stacked vertically. The middle block is the largest and contains the text "HOWLROUND" in a bold, white, sans-serif font, with "THEATRE COMMONS" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font directly below it.

HOWLROUND
THEATRE COMMONS

NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHT RESIDENCY PROGRAM

Assessment Report

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1.

BACKGROUND

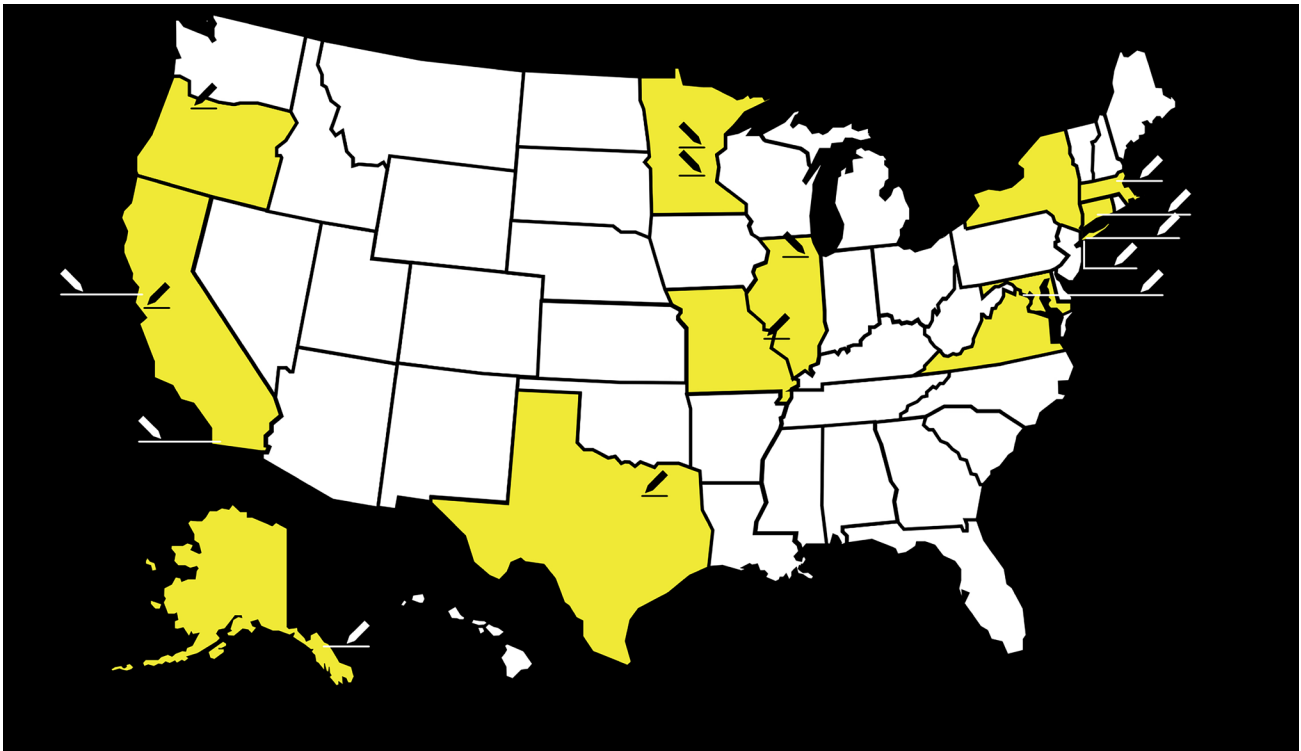
The [National Playwright Residency Program](#) (NPRP) was launched in 2012 by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, in partnership with HowlRound Theatre Commons, to address a widely recognized set of problems in the theatre sector. The program was a response to David Dower’s 2009 report “The Gates of Opportunity”¹ on the infrastructure for new work in theatre and Todd London’s *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, which examined how plays were written and produced in the United States at that time. London summarized the situation this way:

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.²

NPRP sought to intervene directly on these problems by piloting a new model of paying the salary for playwrights—with an emphasis on a diverse cohort of writers—to be embedded in producing theatres for a three-year period of time. The vision was to give diverse playwrights the space, time, and resources to create outside of the “gig model” and to encourage deeper, more collaborative relationships between playwrights and theatres. The hope was that this would not only benefit the participating playwrights and theatres, but also the communities in which they live and even the theatre field at large by demonstrating the success of an alternative model, eventually leading to a field that is more artistically vital, relevant to communities, and economically sustainable for playwrights.

¹ David Dower, [“The Gates of Opportunity, A Report from a Field Survey of the Infrastructure for New Works and New Voices in the American Theater, Conducted January-August 2006.”](#) November 2009.

² London, Todd et al. *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*. Theatre Development Fund, 2009.



Cohort two residency locations.

2. PROGRAM DETAILS

The program selects a cohort of theatres and playwrights, pays the salary for the playwrights to each be in residence for a three-year term, and provides financial support to the theatres to offset operating costs associated with the residency. Preferably, the chosen playwrights are ones with whom the theatres have a working history and who live in the theatres' community. Selected playwrights and theatres have the option to renew for a second three-year term. Each theatre agrees to produce a full production of their playwright's work during the three-year term. HowlRound amplifies the impacts of the program by convening participants, documenting their experiences via the HowlRound Journal and HowlRound TV, assessing program outcomes, distributing \$30,000 in microfunds to each playwright to facilitate professional development over their three-year term, and hosting weeklong development residencies for each playwright at Emerson College.

Since NPRP launched in 2013, Mellon has funded three rounds of the program, supporting thirty-six residencies with thirty-seven distinct theatres and thirty-eight playwrights, including fifteen playwright-theatre partnerships that have received two terms of

funding. The program has maintained an emphasis on diversity among playwrights (age, ethnicity, career stage, gender) and among theatres (size, location, artistic focus) to reinforce its goal of impacting the whole ecosystem of theatre. Nearly three-quarters of the playwrights who have participated are Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) and over half (55 percent) are women. A number of the participating theatres, from the current cohort and cohorts to date, are theatres of color, including [Ma-Yi Theater Mu](#), [Classical Theatre of Harlem](#), and [Cara Mía](#). Many others, such as [Company One](#), [Campo Santo/Crowded Fire](#), [Mixed Blood](#), [Adventure Stage](#), [Victory Gardens](#), and [Pillsbury House](#), have demonstrated commitments to diversity and diverse cultural roots. Several of the theatres are located in midsize or smaller cities, including [Perseverance Theatre](#) (Juneau, Alaska) and [Two River Theater](#) (Red Bank, New Jersey).

3.

SUMMARY OF THE 2017 EVALUATION

In 2016, after the launch of the second round of funding, HowlRound commissioned [Helicon Collaborative](#) to assess the program's impact to date on participating playwrights, theatres, and the field. [Helicon's review](#) found that NPRP had had very positive impacts on the vast majority of the participating playwrights and theatres. For playwrights, the residency freed them to take artistic risks; provided them with financial security, health care, and other benefits, many for the first time; and enabled new connections with theatres and other artists that expanded their professional opportunities. For theatres, having a playwright on staff pushed them to take more creative risks, to diversify the works they produced on stage, and to connect with communities in new and powerful ways.

However, that evaluation found that the program had not influenced change in the field at large, and if anything the trends called out in *Outrageous Fortune* had only continued to intensify since 2012. The report stated: "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 report concluded that truly changing conditions in the field would "require contending with underlying systemic economic factors in the nonprofit sector as well as supporting individual playwrights and theatres."

4. CURRENT EVALUATION GOALS

For this evaluation, HowlRound sought to do a deeper dive into questions about how the program has impacted the nature and quality of the *artistic* work created by playwrights and theatres, and whether, in aggregate, this has had a reverberating impact on the work being created in the field more broadly (the so-called “canon”). Despite this not being an explicit goal of NPRP, HowlRound was interested in what effects sustained support for playwrights and theatres might be having on the artistic work itself.

This study focused on two questions:

- 1. What are the impacts of extended residencies on playwrights’ artistic work and the artistic programs of theatres?**
- 2. What, if anything, can be discerned about the influence of the work being created by NPRP playwrights and theatres on the larger body of theatrical work (the so-called “canon”)?**

This research unfolded as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives uprisings swept the country in early spring 2020. The enormous disruptions that these events precipitated—for society as a whole and the arts sector in particular—sparked a third question: What can we learn from NPRP that can inform the future evolution of theatre?

5. METHODOLOGY

To explore these questions, the study included the following components:

- Interviews with fourteen playwrights and artistic directors involved in the program
- Interviews with seven field leaders not involved with the program, including scholars, critics, agents, and other playwrights¹
- An anonymous online survey of program participants, completed by thirty playwrights and artistic directors²
- A review of program documentation and writings by participants and others published on HowIRound
- A review of other writings and current conversations about the state of the field
- A discussion of preliminary findings of the study with current program participants during a HowIRound convening in July 2020, and integration of their feedback



NPRP cohort two convening work sharing. Boston, Massachusetts, 27–28 March 2018.

1. [See appendix 1](#)

2. [See appendix 2](#)

6. FINDINGS

Four major findings emerged from Helicon's review.

1. Having sustained general operating support greatly impacted the artistic work of playwrights, freeing them from the stress and uncertainty of gig work so they could experiment, expand, and grow creatively
2. For many theatres, having a playwright on staff greatly influenced their artistic processes and decision-making, the quality of their relationships with other artists, and their connections to community
3. The body of work created by NPRP participants is contributing to an overall trend of American theatres becoming more diverse, on and behind the stage, and across many dimensions (race, ethnicity, perspective, form). However, the concept of the "canon" is dated, inherently colonial, and not a useful construct for understanding the breadth and diversity of significant theatrical work today
4. As the American theatre field faces a "reckoning," catalyzed by COVID-19 and the Movement for Black Lives, the NPRP program offers some lessons for how relationships between theatres, playwrights, and communities could look different in the future

As the American theatre field faces a "reckoning," catalyzed by COVID-19 and the Movement for Black Lives, the NPRP program offers some lessons for how relationships between theatres, playwrights, and communities could look different in the future.

Finding Number One: Impacts on Playwrights

In general, the conditions for playwrights outlined in *Outrageous Fortune* have not changed and have only been exacerbated by the pandemic and corresponding economic crisis. Even before the pandemic, playwrights' financial lives were extremely precarious, defined by erratic gig employment and heavy competition for grants, residencies, productions, and publishing. Most support for playwrights is project-based and does not cover arcs of work, research, experimentation, or the full costs of living while making work.

The business model of theatres impacts artistic creation. As one person put it, "Playwrights are taught to think small (two-to-three person plays, simple sets, etc.) so they can increase their chances of being produced. Playwriting classes teach you to think, *How can I get produced? Not, What does the world need? or What do I want to express?*" Many playwrights told us they prefer to work with smaller or midsize theatres because these theatres invest in more adventurous or community-centered work, however making a living wage working at this scale is nearly impossible. At a certain life stage, many playwrights must either figure out how to make work that larger theatres will produce or write for film and TV to survive. Those who cannot or do not want to do either often take second jobs or leave the field altogether, leading to what a critic called an "exodus" of playwrights at a certain career stage.

In this context, the NPRP residency has been a game-changer artistically, freeing playwrights from the relentless pressure to find the next gig or write what they know will be successful for particular audiences. One person said, "The most important thing that the program does is support people on a human level. We all do better work when we can think about expansive ideas and not just survival. This is general operating support for artists."

The residency has enabled playwrights to take more risks and do work that the dominant business model of producing plays does not usually permit. Plays can have longer development times—with playwrights doing more research, trying different approaches, and, in a few cases, throwing away early drafts rather than "trying to make it work." This resulted in what many considered "more mature work" and a realization that the typical production process, despite being the norm, is too rushed to enable the full gestation of a play.

Playwrights also:

Experimented with form and content

- Rehana Lew Mirza and Mike Lew wrote their first musical
- Kirsten Greenidge created a site-specific work in an elementary school

Wrote for new or different audiences

- Kira Obolensky created work for people living in institutions (prisons, shelters)
- Pearl Cleage wrote a play for middle schoolers
- Vera Starbard, T'set K'wei, threw out an earlier draft of a play and wrote for and with her Tlingit community in Alaska instead

Wrote for a specific space or a particular actor, and tried different cast configurations

- Peter Nachtrieb wrote a play for a particular actor
- Melinda Lopez wrote and starred in her one-woman show, *Mala*
- Rehana Lew Mirza and Mike Lew's musical had a much larger cast than any they had previously worked with, as well as international collaborators

Responded in the moment to changing social conditions

- Marcus Gardley changed his planned next play to respond to police killings
- Lauren Gunderson and several other playwrights are writing plays specifically for Zoom now



Shannon DeVido, Marinda Anderson, and Gregg Mozgala in Ma-Yi Theatre Company's production of *Teenage Dick* by Mike Lew. Photo by Carol Rosegg.

Interestingly, a number of playwrights reported that although their experiments would have been deemed “too risky” had they not had the residency, these actually ended up being some of their most popular and financially successful plays, and some have gone on to be produced outside of their resident theatre. Many playwrights suggested that the success of their “risky” plays indicates conventional assumptions about what audiences want may not always be accurate and that theatres, and playwrights, can take more risks than they may think.

In general, the playwrights felt that the quality of their work improved as a result of the residency, and a full 80 percent of the playwrights who responded to the survey indicated that they were able to create work they would not have been able to create otherwise. One artist said: “My work got better simply because I wrote more.” Another put it this way: “It allowed me to achieve the quality of work I aspire to, and that was a career game-changer.”

The residency also triggered other professional opportunities, such as invitations to write for TV or film, conduct workshops, teach, and edit a book of plays. Nearly 60 percent of the playwright survey respondents reported that they had created more work for formats other than theatre during their residency than prior to that time. For some, it expanded

options in the theatre world itself, and at least two playwrights wrote a play for their residency that have premiered or are slated to premiere on Broadway.

One of the most important impacts of the residency was a sense of power and agency it gave the playwrights to have a salary and how that changed the dynamic with their resident theatre. “The program uplifts the dignity of the playwright,” one person said. Another person, a female artist of color, said: “My residency forever changed my own sense of power. I realized I had power in negotiating with the theatre [and other power brokers], and that has changed everything since.” This is not to say that power dynamics were erased entirely, and in some cases playwrights struggled significantly with institutional resistance to change. This was especially stark when the playwright was a person of color in a predominantly white space and was pushing for more equitable practices.

Numerous playwrights noted that the microfunds were critical to enabling impact and changing the typical power dynamics between playwrights and theatres. These funds (\$30,000 over three years, administered by HowlRound) enabled playwrights to travel to see others’ work, hire collaborators, and make production decisions without having to always go through the theatre. One playwright said, “It gave me a new kind of freedom in hiring and collaborating with other artists.” Another put it this way: “The microfunds enabled me to pay collaborators and run the production process the way I wanted to. I was able to be the artistic director of my own career.” It is worth noting that many of the playwrights used these microfunds, and in some cases portions of their own salaries in addition, to pay other artists, multiplying the creative impact of these residencies in largely invisible ways. During the HowlRound convening in July 2020 several playwrights mused about what it would look like if playwrights were given more agency over the production budgets for their plays.

Having sustained income and benefits also allowed playwrights to weather the unexpected ups and downs of life—personal tragedies, financial setbacks, relocations, and other life changes. In at least one case, this security [allowed the artist to make the choice to have children](#), something they had hesitated to do before having reliable income and health insurance. In short, it enabled playwrights the rare opportunity to invest in themselves and what is needed to feed their work beyond the demands of a specific play. Many noted that this did flow back into their artistic work in real but intangible ways.

“This residency allowed me to fully be with the grief of a loss in my life,” one playwright said. “If we are going to be able to write about these acute moments of the human experience, like we are experiencing right now on a societal level, we have to be able to fully experience them without worrying about how we are going to eat.”

An unexpected difficulty of the experience for many playwrights was transitioning out of the residency and back into the gig life, after having experienced a more humane way of living and creating work. Playwrights report being transformed by their residency experience, as a person and an artist, and then being disillusioned by having to return back to the status quo. As one person put it, “I think about being an artist differently now after my residency, and as a result I am more disappointed in how theatre usually gets made.” Another person said, “I forgot how to hustle for work. People are just interested in the newest product, whereas during the residency I was able to be with people who were invested in me as an artist.” For many playwrights, the residency experience made them even more aware of how difficult their “normal” conditions are—how un conducive they are to thriving and making good work.

Many playwrights suggested that the success of their “risky” plays indicates conventional assumptions about what audiences want may not always be accurate and that theatres, and playwrights, can take more risks than they may think.

Finding Number Two: Impacts on Theatres

Theatres also benefited artistically from having a playwright embedded within the institution, and at least 70 percent percent of artistic directors surveyed reported that there will be lasting artistic effects after the residency concludes. For example, a large majority of artistic directors said the playwright influenced their season programming choices, the development process of other playwrights' work, and other artistic decisions. One director found having a playwright's help reading scripts was so valuable they continued to pay to have a playwright in this role after the residency had concluded. Many artistic directors found the playwright to be a trusted artist voice in many non-artistic conversations too—from fundraising to strategic planning to marketing to community engagement. Large majorities of NPRP playwrights participated in these aspects of the work at their theatres.

In many theatres, resident playwrights became advocates, coaches, and supports for other playwrights during productions of their plays. This was particularly valuable when the non-resident playwright was a person of color whose work was being produced by white-led theatres, where racial and institutional power dynamics were both at play.



Nathan Lane in *Gary: A Sequel to Titus Andronicus* by Taylor Mac. Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

The program has had a commitment to support playwrights who are underrepresented in the field, and an overwhelming majority of the playwrights to date have been women, LGBTQ, and/or people of color. The duration of the residency allowed trust to be built, which made conversations about difficult subjects possible—including discussions about race and equity issues. A downside of this was that playwrights of color sometimes felt internal or external pressure to represent or even lead on equity issues within the theatre, even when this was not how they would have ideally chosen to spend their residency time.

Resident playwrights also facilitated relationships with local artists and community members, often bringing in new audiences through these relationships. Several artists created writing workshops for the local playwrighting community. In many cases, there may be lasting influences on the ways the theatres relate to their local communities.

Finding Number Three: Impacts on the Field and the Canon

In addition to the impacts on the individual playwrights and theatres, our inquiry sought to understand whether there has been an aggregate impact of the NPRP program on the artistic development and output of the field. Todd London, an early advisor of NPRP, notes: “The primary intent of NPRP was never about the ‘canon.’ The creative output of the playwrights was never the heart of the program. The heart was to provide homes for writers, to make theatres more artist-centered, to invest in artists.” However, even though it may not have been a primary goal of the program, HowlRound sought to know whether investing in artists and theatres in this way has had an artistic impact on the broader field or “canon” of work being created and seen on stages in the United States today.

Many individuals we talked to believe that NPRP has had an impact on the body of theatre work being produced today by virtue of who it has supported and how. “By enabling more diverse playwrights to create more work in more adventurous ways, NPRP has impacted what work is out there in the field,” said one field leader. A theatre teacher and scholar said, “I am not sure whether NPRP is having an impact on the canon, but it is impacting the writers. I know about half the writers, and they have all evolved as writers during their residencies.” And a number of the plays created during the residencies were called out as exceptional by people we interviewed. “I’ve been blown away by some plays created by the playwrights,” said one person. “For example, *Detroit Red* (by Will Power)

Resident playwrights also facilitated relationships with local artists and community members, often bringing in new audiences through these relationships.

and *Gary* (by Taylor Mac).”

However, many of the field leaders (critics, other playwrights, artistic directors) interviewed who are not closely aligned with the program were not aware of many of the NPRP playwrights or the program overall. “The program doesn’t have a very high profile,” one award-winning playwright said. An agent for playwrights and new work said, “I don’t think this program is having as much of an impact on the canon as it should. It needs its own press agent. The theatres alone cannot elevate this body of work to the national level of prominence.” There was a general sense among participants and non-participants alike that more could be done to elevate the profile of the program overall and the work of the participating playwrights who may not already be widely known.

In general, it is hard to disentangle the impact of the NPRP program specifically from a larger shift some are seeing in the field towards greater diversity, both on and off stage, due to the long and concerted work of many people in the field, as well as changing demographic and cultural realities. One critic noted that she has seen a distinct shift in the work on stage in recent years: “There are incredibly diverse playwrights working today—generating new kinds of conversations, pushing the art form forward, influencing the next generation of playwrights, talking about things never talked about on stage. This is not just theatre-as-entertainment, it is innovative and seeks impact.”

However, many people we interviewed noted that while theatres are more welcoming to “diverse” playwrights and “non-conventional” plays than they were ten years ago, this is sometimes a relatively superficial openness. Especially when it comes to larger theatres, diversity is tolerated only as long as the form and content does not feel threatening or

confusing to the theatre's subscriber base. "Theatre itself is a colonial construct," one artistic director said, "and white, older, wealthy subscribers determine the aesthetics of theatre." The artistic preferences of these traditional audiences are often misaligned with what younger, queer, and/or BIPOC playwrights want to write and with what younger, queer, and/or BIPOC audiences want to see. Many NPRP playwrights commented that they feel caught between writing what they want to write (or what they know will appeal to their own community) and creating work that will be "successful" in larger, predominantly white theatre spaces.

In addition to the increasing diversity of plays and theatre works being produced, we also heard about shifts in institutional leadership. There are more women, younger people, and people of color serving as artistic directors and managing directors of theatres than ten or even five year ago. "These leaders have more appetite for risk and innovation," said one person, which is shifting what is on stage.

But some expressed concern that these new directors and playwrights are set up to fail when the larger institution is not prepared for real change. The entrenched attitudes and behaviors of boards, staffs, and audiences, and the underlying business model of nonprofit theatre, are significant challenges to changing the status quo. "Theatres who have hired women directors don't realize that these new leaders aren't just interested in presenting different plays, but want to transform the culture of theatre, especially as it relates to race and community," said one theatre professional. Another added, "Most theatres are not prepared for changed leadership. They may hire a woman or a person of color, but they aren't ready to shift thinking and behavior away from how it was when a white man was the leader. It's a very incomplete gesture to hire a woman and then not truly support her. The memo about the future has not been read by trustees." Several people expressed concern that the extenuating circumstances of COVID may further burden these new leaders and could be a setback to change overall if theatres retrench into perceived "safer programming."

It is worth noting that reactions to questions about the "canon," even a diverse one, were extremely negative. "The idea of a canon is narrowing and homogeneous," said one field leader, adding, "canons represent the winnowing of opinion over time." A leading theatre producer noted, "It's simply not possible to say 'these are the most important plays of this generation' anymore. The breadth of work is just too great, and the breadth of

The entrenched attitudes and behaviors of boards, staffs, and audiences, and the underlying business model of nonprofit theatre, are significant challenges to changing the status quo.

opinion about what is good is much broader than it used to be.” An artistic director said, “The canon is a kind of certification, fetishizing something that went from Playwrights Horizons to being published and now is safe enough to do in multiple places. That is a really dated concept, and supremacist, and promotes laziness and a herd mentality. Laziness on the part of the theatre and on the part of the audience.” One producer asked: “What does impacting the canon even really mean? That these plays are taught in schools? That there are multiple productions of them? That they are named in surveys of important plays? Are these the most important measures of success or impact? I think the definition of canon—if it’s a term that lasts at all—needs to be rethought in this time.”

Overall, there was consensus that the most important factor influencing the quality and nature of the work being created today is the challenging economics of theatre itself. It remains extremely difficult for playwrights to make a living and therefore to continue dedicating themselves to working in theatre for the long-term. One field leader put the conundrum this way: “To [build a body of significant work], you have to have longevity, but our system makes it impossible to have longevity because eventually you have to eat. And so you go to film/TV.” TV in particular has become a financial lifeline for many struggling playwrights, whether they are eager or reluctant to embrace the medium. One playwright who also writes for TV suggested the hybrid career will increasingly be the norm for writers: “There is no future for the field of playwriting except through TV. The economics of nonprofit and commercial theatre just won’t support the full population of artists.” The increasing number of playwrights going back and forth between theatre and TV has created artistic cross-pollination between the forms. “Nothing has changed playwriting

more than the burgeoning TV movement,” said one playwright/screenwriter.

Finding Number Four: The Relevance of NPRP in the Context of COVID-19 and the Racial Justice Uprisings

It goes without saying that the pandemic is impacting every aspect of our society. As a live, social art form by definition, theatre may be among the most profoundly impacted sectors. Although most of the NPRP theatres are experimenting with online content, few feel satisfied by this as an alternative to live performance and even fewer have figured out how to earn revenue from it. Venues have had to shutter for indefinite periods, productions have been suspended, staff and part-time employees have been laid off or furloughed, and opportunities to make and produce work have collapsed. This is aggravating and amplifying pre-existing vulnerabilities and weaknesses in theatre. One artistic director said:

The whole nonprofit model is broken. Theatres are in Phase 5 for reopening and we won't get there for at least a year. At least 50 percent of the field will be lost by then—mostly the midsize theatres. The big ones will be saved because they are 'too big to fail.' The smaller ones can pull back and survive. But this will decimate the ecology of the field—especially the organizations that are dedicated to new work and artists.

Theatres focused on and rooted in BIPOC communities have been [historically undercapitalized](#) and are especially vulnerable. One NPRP participant underscored the implications: “So many playwrights are left without income, without royalties, without

“The theatre field is fragile, tolerates a great deal of mediocrity, and is guided by white supremacy,” said one playwright. “Now that there is no industry, people can speak truth to power without fear of retaliation.”



Perseverance Theatre's production of *Devilfish* by Vera Starbard. Photo by Michael Penn.

production fees... Many have no prospect for income for two or more years." It is obvious that whatever the field looks like in the future, it will be very different than the past.

We heard from everyone we interviewed that the pandemic, combined with the growing calls for racial justice, is provoking an unprecedented "reckoning" for theatre. "There is a revolution going on—[theatres are being called out by artists](#) and communities for long-standing inequities and insincere statements of solidarity," one artistic director said. "Theatres are realizing who they really depend on—artists and communities. The pandemic is helping us face the underlying problems in our sector. It's like a gift from God. If we had work we would not be paying attention." One playwright suggested that the current rupture is simply revealing what has been true for decades: "The theatre field is fragile, tolerates a great deal of mediocrity, and is guided by white supremacy. Now that there is no industry, people can speak truth to power without fear of retaliation."

There is concern about what extended shutdowns will mean for theatre institutions, for theatre professionals of all kinds, and for audiences—particularly when it comes to the potential loss of artistic talent. "I worry that theatres will abandon their commitment to adventuresome work in the wake of the pandemic and go back to crowd-pleasers like *Private Lives*," said one observer. A producer said: "I don't worry about the audiences

coming back. But I do worry about who will be left to make theatre when we can reopen. How many talented playwrights, directors, and other theatre people will have to leave the field in the interim?”

Others worry about what the underlying fragility of theatres means, even if greater equity is achieved. “We are dealing with two crises at once—the pandemic and racial justice—and they are converging in unfortunate ways. Theatres are finally turning over leadership to BIPOC people, but what are they turning over? A bunch of debt and layoffs.” And people wonder about the long-term impacts of extended dependence on virtual space. No one knows what the impacts will be, but one person offered a prediction: “The mini-broadcasts that are becoming the staple during the pandemic could become more commonplace afterward. Smaller casts, shorter works, presented online and in real time.”

While uncertain about the future, many of the people we talked to are quite hopeful and energized about the possibilities this moment offers. “This is an opportunity to organize and create a new future for theatre,” said one playwright. Several people expressed hope that this crisis would be the impetus for an older generation of largely white male leadership to step aside, creating space for the next generation with new values, ideas, and energy to reinvent theatre. More than one person suggested that this is a moment to go back to the roots of theatre and re-center artists and community connection in the



Regina Marie Williams and James A. Williams in Pillsbury House Theatre's production of *Scapegoat* by Christina Ham. Photo by George Byron Griffiths.

work. “It’s time to be writing plays for the people in the streets,” said one playwright. And one artistic director said: “This ‘pause in normal life’ is giving us the chance to thoroughly rethink our approach and fully decolonize our theatre. We will never go back to doing things the way we did before.”

Ultimately, the pandemic has only heightened NPRP participants’ already strong appreciation of the program. We heard from multiple people that having a playwright on staff (whose salary is paid) has been even more valuable to theatres during this time than before. Resident playwrights have been able to write about events as they happen and contribute to conversations around racial justice and equity within their theatres. They have helped keep art at the center of conversations, even as business models are in upheaval. Some playwrights have experimented with Zoom plays, talks, and virtual writing workshops, which have helped their theatres respond quickly to the moment. Of course, all residencies are going to look different now than initially anticipated, and the intrinsic flexibility of the program drew praise for making this adjustment as easy as possible. “The flexibility of the program has been a godsend during the pandemic,” said one artistic director. “We’ve made a seamless transition to remote work and our flexible relationship allowed the playwright to get what they needed during this time.”

And it is not lost on the playwrights how lucky they are to have a salary at this time, when many of their peers are suffering greatly with a loss of work and income for the foreseeable future. In fact, this highlights one of the most important things this program offers playwrights: security. Even a playwright whose residency had ended noted his luck: “A good thing about having had the residency is that I now qualify for unemployment during the pandemic.” Many said that their own security makes them feel a sense of responsibility to contribute to something bigger than themselves, to do something other artists can’t do because they need to worry about their own survival. Some have already found ways to use their microfunds or divert production funds to pay other artists during the pandemic. During the July 2020 convening, several playwrights began discussing how the cohort as a group might use their collective influence to come out in support of anti-racist theatre practices and policies, or advocate for benefits for gig workers more universally. There was a recognition that this is a moment that asks everyone to do what they can to contribute to a better system for all, and that it will be up to those currently living and working in the field to create the next thing.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, participants remain very happy with the program, and the inherent flexibility allows people to make adjustments to suit the particular needs of their relationship or context. However, based on this review, there are a few specific recommendations we would offer to HowlRound and the Mellon Foundation:

- Invest in a communications strategy to bring broader visibility to the participating playwrights and their work, individually and as a cohort, something like a [Kilroys List](#) for NPRP.
- Share the successes of the program with other funders and provide guidance for how individual theatres or groups of theatres in a community might replicate the model, in part or as a whole. (One artist who was not selected for the NPRP shared the model with a theatre and philanthropist where she lives and secured support to replicate the model for herself there.) This could include adaptation of the model to serve other kinds of artists and creatives by demonstrating the benefits of basic income or general operating support for artists.
- Work with each resident artist to co-design the structure and financial arrangement that works best for them. Some artists noted that it would have been better for them—financially and operationally—to remain an independent contractor rather than an employee. HowlRound and/or Mellon could help playwrights navigate and negotiate the legal and financial implications of their options.
- Support playwrights and theatres to build relationships and partnerships across the cohort—for example, enabling playwright exchanges between theatres or shared productions.
- Convene playwrights and artistic directors around issues of common concern (such as equity in theatres and [portable benefits](#) for so-called gig workers) and support cohort-level actions that could benefit the broader field.

The pandemic is a massive shock to society on all levels, but unfortunately it is more likely to be a harbinger of, rather than an exception to, what life may be like in our near future. Economic and political upheaval, social change, and the climate crisis will likely be our companions for some time.

If anything, COVID-19 and the racial justice uprisings have made clear that theatre does not exist in a world apart from society but is integrally linked with it. How playwrights, theatres, and the field at large choose to engage with this moment will be telling and may determine the relevance of theatre for years to come.

8. CONCLUSION

Although we do not think it is within our scope to offer recommendations to the theatre field broadly, a few insights from the NPRP program might inform the broader field's trajectory in this time:

- Artists have much to offer communities and organizations beyond the production of art for consumption. The commodification of theatre has led to a devaluing of artists, except insofar as they produce “successful” work. Supporting artists as creative thinkers and engaged citizens, as well as producers of art, can have unexpected benefits.
- Assumptions about what is “too risky” for audiences may be flawed. In fact, new audiences may be drawn in by so-called risky work that explores different themes, formats, or cultures than mainstream theatre's standard fare.
- There is no longer a way to claim ignorance or be neutral around equity—either you are supporting the status quo (tacitly or actively) or you are proactively taking action towards changing it. Transforming the white colonial construct of theatre is not as simple as producing a play by a person of color or even hiring a BIPOC leader at the helm. An anti-racist, decolonized theatre requires looking at American theatre institutions and practices as a whole—the architecture, show formats, audiences and norms of audience behavior, governance, business models, production schedules, and more—and being willing to start anew with values of equity at the core, even if that means what comes next looks radically different.
- Seeking pathways for sustainable livelihoods for playwrights must include more equitable compensation within theatre as well as consideration of factors outside of the theatre sector, including the status of our social safety net and opportunities in other fields. Artist advocates, including playwrights themselves, could do much more to engage with broader campaigns that would benefit artists if successful, such as the movements for portable benefits for gig workers and universal childcare.

APPENDIX 1: FIELD INTERVIEWS

- **Nan Barnett**, Executive Director, National New Play Network (NNPN)
- **Jeremy Cohen**, Producing Artistic Director, The Playwrights' Center
- **David Henry Hwang**, Playwright
- **Mara Isaacs**, Producer, Octopus Theatricals
- **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins**, Playwright
- **Todd London**, Director of Theatre Relations, Dramatists Guild; Co-Head of MFA Playwriting, the New School
- **Kelly Miller**, Literary Agent, Paradigm
- **Diep Tran**, Critic

APPENDIX 2: PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Cohort 1 (2012–2015):

- **Alliance Theatre** (Atlanta, GA): Susan V. Booth, Artistic Director, and Pearl Cleage, Playwright
- **Cutting Ball Theatre** (San Francisco, CA): Rob Melrose, Artistic Director, and Andrew Saito, Playwright
- **Dallas Theater Center** (Dallas, TX): Kevin Moriarty, Artistic Director, and Will Power, Playwright
- **Huntington Theatre Company** (Boston, MA): Peter DuBois, Artistic Director, and Melinda Lopez, Playwright
- **Kansas City Repertory Theatre** (Kansas City, MO): Eric Rosen, Artistic Director, and Nathan Louis Jackson, Playwright
- **Mixed Blood Theatre** (Minneapolis, MN): Jack Reuler, Artistic Director, and Aditi Kapil, Playwright
- **Oregon Shakespeare Festival** (Ashland, OR): Bill Rauch, Artistic Director, and Luis Alfaro, Playwright
- **Playwrights Horizons** (New York, NY): Tim Sanford, Artistic Director, and Dan LeFranc, Playwright
- **Soho Repertory Theater** (New York, NY): Sarah Benson, Artistic Director, and David Adjmi, Playwright
- **South Coast Repertory** (Costa Mesa, CA): Marc Masterson, Artistic Director, and Julie Myatt, Playwright
- **Ten Thousand Things Theater Company** (Minneapolis, MN): Michelle Hensley, Artistic Director, and Kira Obolensky, Playwright
- **Victory Gardens Theater** (Chicago, IL): Chay Yew, Artistic Director, and Marcus Gardley, Playwright
- **Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company** (Washington, D.C.): Howard Shalwitz, Artistic Director, and Robert O'Hara, Playwright
- **Z Space Studio** (San Francisco, CA): Lisa Steindler, Artistic Director, and Peter Nachtrieb, Playwright

Cohort 2 (2016–2019):

Renewed participants:

- **Alliance Theatre** (Atlanta, GA): Susan V. Booth, Artistic Director, and Pearl Cleage, Playwright
- **Dallas Theater Center** (Dallas, TX): Kevin Moriarty, Artistic Director, and Will Power, Playwright
- **Huntington Theatre Company** (Boston, MA): Peter DuBois, Artistic Director, and Melinda Lopez, Playwright
- **Kansas City Repertory Theatre** (Kansas City, MO): Eric Rosen, Artistic Director, and Nathan Louis Jackson, Playwright
- **Oregon Shakespeare Festival** (Ashland, OR): Bill Rauch, Artistic Director, and Luis Alfaro, Playwright
- **Ten Thousand Things Theater Company** (Minneapolis, MN): Michele Hensley, Artistic Director, and Kira Obolensky, Playwright
- **Victory Gardens Theater** (Chicago, IL): Chay Yew, Artistic Director, and Marcus Gardley, Playwright
- **Z Space Studio** (San Francisco, CA): Lisa Steindler, Artistic Director, and Peter Nachtrieb, Playwright

New participants:

- **Adventure Stage of Chicago** (Chicago, IL): Tom Arvetis, Artistic Director, and Carlos Murillo, Playwright
- **Company One Theatre** (Boston, MA): Shawn LaCount, Artistic Director, and Kirsten Greenidge, Playwright
- **HERE (Home for Contemporary Theatre and Art)** (New York, NY): Kristin Marting, Artistic Director, and Taylor Mac, Playwright
- **Ma-Yi Theater Company** (New York, NY): Ralph Pena, Artistic Director, and Rehana Lew Mirza and Mike Lew, Playwrights
- **Marin Theatre Company** (Mill Valley, CA): Jasson Minadakis, Artistic Director, and Lauren Gunderson, Playwright

- **Perseverance Theatre** (Douglas, AK): Art Rotch, Artistic Director, and Vera Starbard, Playwright
- **Pillsbury House + Theatre** (Minneapolis, MN): Faye M. Price, Co–Artistic Producing Director, and Noël Raymond, Co–Artistic Managing Director, and Christina Ham, Playwright
- **San Diego Repertory Theatre** (San Diego, CA): Sam Woodhouse, Artistic Director, and Herbert Siguenza, Playwright
- **Two River Theatre Company** (Red Bank, NJ): John Dias, Artistic Director, and Madeleine George, Playwright

Cohort 3 (2019–2022):

Renewed participants:

- **Company One Theatre** (Boston, MA): Shawn LaCount, Artistic Director, and Kirsten Greenidge, Playwright
- **HERE (Home for Contemporary Theatre and Art)** (New York, NY): Kristin Marting, Artistic Director, and Taylor Mac, Playwright
- **Ma-Yi Theater Company** (New York, NY): Ralph Pena, Artistic Director, and Rehana Lew Mirza and Mike Lew, Playwrights
- **Marin Theatre Company** (Mill Valley, CA): Jasson Minadakis, Artistic Director, and Lauren Gunderson, Playwright
- **Perseverance Theatre** (Douglas, AK): Leslie Ishii, Artistic Director, and Vera Starbard, Playwright
- **San Diego Repertory Theatre** (San Diego, CA): Sam Woodhouse, Artistic Director, and Herbert Siguenza, Playwright
- **Two River Theatre Company** (Red Bank, NJ): John Dias, Artistic Director, and Madeleine George, Playwright

New participants:

- **Artists Repertory Theatre** (Portland, OR): Dámaso Rodríguez, Artistic Director, and E. M. Lewis, Playwright
- **Cara Mía Theatre Company** (Dallas, TX): David Lozano, Artistic Director, and Virginia

Grise, Playwright

- **Crowded Fire Theater & Campo Santo** (San Francisco, CA): Mina Morita, Artistic Director, Crowded Fire Theater; Joan Osata, Producing Director, and Sean San José, Program Director, Campo Santo; and Star Finch, Playwright
- **The Classical Theatre of Harlem** (New York, NY): Ty Jones, Artistic Director, and Betty Shamieh, Playwright
- **Illusion Theater and School** (Minneapolis, MN): Michael Robins, Executive Producing Director, and Carlyle Brown, Playwright
- **La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club** (New York, NY): Mia Yoo, Artistic Director, and Murielle Borst-Tarrant, Playwright
- **Long Wharf Theatre** (New Haven, CT): Jacob G. Padrón, Artistic Director, and Mildred Ruiz-Sapp and Steven Sapp (UNIVERSES), Playwrights
- **Lookingglass Theatre Company** (Chicago, IL): Heidi Stillman, Ensemble Member and Artistic Director, and J. Nicole Brooks, Playwright and Ensemble Member
- **Mosaic Theater Company** (Washington, D.C.): Serge Seiden, Managing Director and Producer, and Psalmayene 24, Playwright
- **Rattlestick Playwrights Theater** (New York, NY): Daniella Topol, Artistic Director, and Basil Kreimendahl, Playwright
- **Repertory Theatre of St. Louis** (St. Louis, MO): Hana Sharif, Artistic Director, and Regina Taylor, Playwright
- **Theater Mu** (St. Paul, MN): Lily Tung Crystal, Artistic Director, and Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay, Playwright
- **WP Theater** (New York, NY): Lisa McNulty, Producing Artistic Director, and Cori Thomas, Playwright

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