

The Field and its Challenges

Reported by Stephanie Coen with Stephen C. Forman and Ben Cameron

A chorus of voices proposes crucial goals for the American theatre—and suggests some creative ways of getting there

Preface

The attached report represents the opening step in TCG's first attempt in more than 10 years to capture comprehensively the challenges facing the theatre field—and indeed, the first attempt ever to bring artistic and managing leaders and individual artists together in making such an assessment. We are deeply grateful to all who participated in the five roundtable discussions around the country and hope that this will prove a valuable springboard to a wider conversation with the field.

It would be misleading to read this report as an indicator that theatre is imperiled, enervated or intimidated. To the contrary, there are substantial indicators—both anecdotal and quantifiable—that would suggest the art form is thriving. "Theatre Facts 1998" (our most recent fiscal analysis of the field) shows over a nine percent increase in unrestricted net assets over the prior year, rises in attendance and impressive individual surpluses. The National Endowment for the Arts report on public participation in the arts showed that theatre is the performing arts form with the highest level of public participation. And in every city, we heard stories about a veritable explosion of theatrical activity—from the emergence of new companies of distinction to increased "storefront" activity involving formal or informal collectives of artists, of emergence of new voices in playwriting, of heavy conservatory applications, and more.

That the health of the art form does not necessarily translate into easy health for theatre organizations or favorable conditions for our artists is the dilemma that lies at the heart of this report. Therefore, read, enjoy, ponder, despair—but without forgetting that we have much to celebrate.

—Ben Cameron, executive director, TCG

Introduction

During the spring months of 1999, Theatre Communications Group conducted a sequence of meetings to hear what people had been thinking and saying about their work within the nonprofit theatre world—the first attempt to do so in 10 years. The effort was generously funded by a grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation with additional assistance from the James Irvine Foundation.

As a prelude to the involvement of the entire TCG membership at the June '99 National Conference in San Francisco, some 80 people came together in five small groups to grapple with major challenges and possibilities facing our theatres today. Day-long discussions were held in Chicago, Dallas, San Francisco and New York City (where there were two meetings, including one of the national TCG board of directors). The individuals whom TCG invited to attend these meetings—artistic and management leaders, representatives of both TCG-affiliated and nonaffiliated theatres, individual artists, funders and theatre trustees—reflected the field in all its diversity. TCG's only caveat was that no theatre could be represented by more than one person. A complete

list of participants is attached at the end of this report. (The report was also sent for comment to a wide range of non-TCG theatres via local arts-service organizations. Those comments have been incorporated into the report.)

Our intentions at these meetings were simple. First, we wanted to carefully listen to how participants characterized the current challenges. Second, we wanted to hear how people thought about the future and the feasibility of achieving their different goals. We had no intentions regarding what came out of these discussions except a desire to accurately report back to the field what we heard. The effort was not designed to get agreements of any sort among participants or to assist TCG in creating its own plans and strategies.

While themes did emerge, we've tried in the report to avoid making any simplistic generalizations. In fact, we encountered some very different views about the state of theatre. In many ways the breadth of beliefs about the field were indicative of the breadth of the art form itself. We also have tried to create a user-friendly, middle-length document that contains only the highlights from our conversations.

Regardless of the city in which a particular meeting was held, certain large thematic questions floated beneath the surface of all five gatherings; large questions each worthy of extensive investigation in their own right. Such questions included, for example:

What is the core responsibility and obligation of the theatre to the artist within an economic system that provides vastly different rewards for different kinds of work?

Do we desire to be deeply integrated into our respective local civic cultures? Or must we remain to some degree apart, challenging the status quo and conventions?

How do we address the implicit tension between mission-driven and market-driven needs in our programming and in our language as we seek to articulate the value of theatre to our audiences?

Does a concentration on conventional, stability-creating management practices within our theatres—such as reserves and endowments—serve the art or displace it?

In short, these may not be issues that can be "resolved." There are no simple answers. Many of the most important issues will continue to be addressed most effectively at the local level via skillful ongoing discussions within the theatre and its community. Let "solutions" fit the character of the community, the institution and the people.

One key theme, however, sits conceptually separate. In the words of some of our participants, "Haven't we said a lot of these things before?"

We found that, yes, much had been said before, which speaks to the depth and history of some of the challenges we face.

The fact, though, that some of the key issues have a long history also speaks to the importance of not raising false expectations around solutions. The work we have in front of us is terrifically challenging. What's needed is the capacity to work the issues well,

and to see renewal and change as work that begins anew every day. —Stephen C. Forman, facilitator

Part 1: Present Company

The nonprofit theatre is exploding with vitality as the field explores a diverse range of stories, and as new voices—particularly from emerging artists and companies—come together to find new ways of telling those stories. Despite the depth and breadth of how much there is to celebrate, however, the field is confronting numerous challenges as it struggles to articulate its own value and build both artists and audiences.

The competition theatre faces from other performing arts and visual media—and from sources as disparate as video games, sports and evangelical preaching—is affecting both artists and audiences. Theatre must position itself as a unique experience among many options. As William Gregg, producing artistic director of New American Theater in Rockford, Ill., notes, "We have to restate every day that we are live, that theatre is visceral." It is particularly difficult to cultivate and attract new audiences, especially for contemporary work, participants agree, when other media influences are drawing them away from theatre as an art form.

In addition, many participants express dissatisfaction with the prevailing forms of contemporary theatre, pointing to other art forms—such as the visual arts—which have successfully re-invented themselves. "Museums have become theatrical," notes Yale Repertory Theatre of Connecticut's managing director Victoria Nolan, "and they are experiencing a golden age." Theatre, by contrast, participants suggest, has remained to some degree stagnant. "I worry about the conventions in playwriting and design with which we are telling our stories—many of which are the same as they were in 1901," says Chris Coleman, artistic director of Atlanta's Actor's Express.

Many younger and emerging artists who might reject those prevailing forms, participants note, have not yet found their own place in the field. "There is a generational shift in the way we look at the aesthetics of theatre," suggests Jon Nakagawa of New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. "There is now a visually based aesthetic and new ways of doing theatre in non-theatre performance spaces." "We need not to be judgmental about the aesthetic that younger people are bringing," concurs freelance director Roberta Levitow (Calif.). "We tend to talk down to them because we make assumptions about our negative feelings for other media; we don't see its sophistication."

In addition, participants across the country, particularly those affiliated with training programs, note a trend toward young people wanting to make theatre—and applying in large numbers to graduate schools—but too rarely going to see it. Says designer Susan Tsu (Tex.), "As an educator and a theatre artist, I'm concerned about theatre that is of interest and affordable to younger people." "Audience development is not about numbers," notes Amanda Dehnert of Providence, R.I.'s Trinity Repertory Company. "We get distracted by our need for sales and subscriptions. My generation is not coming; we have to remind them that theatre is an essential part of their lives."

It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract younger people to artistic or administrative positions in the resident theatre movement, given that salaries are woefully low (many participants noted that an entry-level salary at Disney is the equivalent of a high-level salary in the nonprofit theatre). In addition, many emerging artists and managers have

different expectations of compensation than individuals of previous generations, and are not interested even in jobs that pay what is considered a decent standard of living in the nonprofit theatre. Other younger artists are choosing to create theatre as one of many artistic pursuits or in tandem with other careers. Although artists of every generation have produced their own work—serving, as playwright Oyamó (Minn.) puts it, as "the field's greatest philanthropists"—many emerging artists have no expectation of making a living in the field and are not seeking to enter it on a full-time basis.

Many theatres are addressing questions of repertoire and targeted audiences, participants suggest, to confront the prevailing—if often unspoken—notation of "slots" for plays by artists of color. Even culturally specific theatres are struggling with the idea of diversity as they face their own audience expectations and seek to define—and continually redefine—their community. "I've been asked, 'Why would the Black Rep be doing *Waiting for Godot*?,'" notes artistic director Ron Himes of Missouri's St. Louis Black Repertory Theatre. "It's important for us to do this to build our audience."

The commercial theatre, and the field's uncertain relationship with it, represents a source of both potential and concern to nonprofit theatres. "Most of the work on Broadway right now comes from nonprofit theatres or from England's not-for-profits," argues Emily Mann, artistic director of the McCarter Theatre of Princeton, N.J. "We create the work; we have to continue to find ways to give the work future life. This is a long and complex discussion. In the meantime, however, we should know that commercial producers need us just as we need them; we must not see them as the enemy."

Artistic provocation is one of theatre's most essential qualities and one of the most difficult to achieve.

In the current financial and political environment, it is becoming more difficult to take artistic risks or present "controversial" work. Even as theatres have become more creative in solving their financial problems, tension continues to exist between box office and long-term artistic capital. The constraints of fiscal responsibility, in other words, can lead to conservatism in artistic programming. Theatres for young audiences in particular feel pressure to present the "tried-and-true," despite their own desires to engage young people by challenging them. "It's Dickensian—best of times, worst of times," says producing director Carol North of Metro Theater Company in St. Louis, Mo. "We're doing exciting new work, we have a passionate board—but the people who would hire us are making ever-more conservative choices with regard to young people. I won't do *Cinderella*."

A new conservatism and decline in opportunities for touring companies was also noted by many participants. The few troupes that tour exclusively or as their primary mission are under more pressure to present plays that are most potentially lucrative for their host venues. (Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or the comedies, for instance, are booked more often and more easily than the plays that might be more challenging for both artists and audiences.) "The road has become more conservative and dependent on its own bottom line," notes The Acting Company's producing director Margot Harley. "I feel isolated not only from my colleagues, but from the funding sources."

As American society becomes increasingly ruled by what Kent Thompson, artistic director of Montgomery's Alabama Shakespeare Festival, defines as "a Top 10 cultural

mentality," many artistic leaders of the nonprofit theatre field discussed feeling out of sync with a dominant culture that resists challenging or less-well-known work. "The general population pushes the art that we do toward the center," notes Penumbra Theatre Company of Minneapolis's artistic director Lou Bellamy. "I want to push it the opposite way." And without the financial opportunities that were once more readily available to artists through the National Endowment for the Arts, it is becoming increasingly difficult to seed innovation, research and development. "It's harder now than it was when I began my career," says playwright David Henry Hwang (N.Y.). "The concentration around name brands makes it harder for new names to come up and reduces the diversity of experience."

Together with this sense of cultural conservatism is a recognition that audiences, conditioned by other media, are entering theatres with different expectations than the artists themselves. Says Libby Appel, artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, "The need among audiences for less challenging work is creating a problem for the artists who make it." "Theatre-goers now come in and say, 'I've paid a lot of money—dazzle me in less than two hours,'" notes designer and director Loy Arcenas (Calif.). "The idea of the short show has changed in our culture," agrees Tony Taccone, artistic director of California's Berkeley Repertory Theatre. "We're all grappling with this idea of entertainment versus intellectual complexity. How can we introduce new forms and ideas to an audience that has a shorter attention span and is increasingly dominated by a need for the familiar? It's our job as leaders to fight this trend when we can and to articulate how we rub up against the values of the dominant culture."

For many participants, the tragedy in Littleton, Colo.—which occurred midway through the five meetings—became a galvanizing symbol of the power of theatre to bring people together, but also highlighted the field's insularity and what Roberta Levitow calls "the disconnect between enormous issues in the outside world and how the theatre is experiencing it. Too often," she continues, "when we go to the theatre we go to a place of great denial, where none of these things exist. We're not holding up a mirror and reflecting what's out there." Exacerbating this isolation, participants say, is an overall international hermeticism and lack of exposure to first-rate major world work.

"What the theatre does when it works is to connect us," Tony Taccone says. "Our culture is starving for authenticity, but how people define authenticity is very subjective. My job as an artist is to explore with my audience which experiences define the 'authentic.' It is important to realize, however, that this culture is one that does not encourage such a potentially dangerous and subversive exploration."

With the field now in its fourth decade as a true national movement, it is grappling with issues of isolation, leadership and succession.

The decentralization of the theatre field, in the words of the Mark Taper Forum of Los Angeles's artistic director Gordon Davidson, "also carries a problem—we don't see enough of each other's work. Today, everybody can see the same movie. That changes the frames of reference, and we are trying to absorb that change." Similarly, the decline of intelligent, provocative criticism at newspapers around the country (particularly, participants say, in San Francisco and New York City) is further complicated by the strength and influence of the *New York Times*, which can affect which new plays will go on to be produced and have future lives on a national scale.

As founders leave their theatres (either by death, retirement or resignation) and institutions move into second and third generations of artistic and management leadership, the field is expressing its concern over what Joy Zinoman, artistic director of Washington, D.C.'s Studio Theatre, calls "how the endgame happens." For individuals, the goal is to exit—and allow new leaders to emerge—with grace. On a national scale, this passing of the torch to a younger generation is happening at a time of uncertainty and field-wide transition. "Younger companies are responding differently from the founding companies that began 35 or 40 years ago," notes Paula Tomei, managing director of California's South Coast Repertory. "The model has to be reinvented, both for individuals and for institutions. The new group does not feel it has ownership of what has been established, but doesn't know what their new model is yet either."

For other theatres, the missions of which are deeply connected to the founder's vision, the pressing concern is less the organization's transition than its very survival. John O'Neal, founder of Junebug Productions of New Orleans, "is about five years from stepping down," notes the company's managing director MK Wegmann. "Is the theatre a project that ends or an institution that goes on?" "The bottom line," says Mario Ernesto Sanchez, artistic director of Miami's Teatro Avante, "is that funding is not being increased and we are not gaining new audiences. Will the person who succeeds me start from where I leave off, or from where I began 20 years ago?"

Individual artists, too, are expressing deep concern about their ability to renew their own energies and draw the next generation into the field at a time when they are perhaps more demoralized and exhausted than ever before. Their need and desire for, in designer Ralph Funicello's (Calif.) words, "financial self-sufficiency and artistic expansion," is tempered by an ongoing struggle to balance their artistic visions with their ability to pay their rent or photocopy their plays. For many emerging artists, moreover, the debt they carry from graduate or training programs can become an insurmountable obstacle. "The secret we don't tell our design students in the graduate schools," Funicello continues, "is that they'll never pay back their loans designing for the theatre alone. Artists in their thirties are getting work, but they can't support themselves."

Compounding these problems is what Roberta Levitow identifies as "a class system between those that have full-time jobs and health benefits and those that don't." Individual artists, of course, are the least likely to have health benefits; taking a job outside the theatre field that will provide them with benefits takes away from their flexibility in pursuing their art. The ongoing effects of this day-to-day struggle, representatives of all five meetings agreed, can be devastating for individual artists. "I'm 40 years old," says Sharon Bridgforth of Frontera @ Hyde Park in Austin, Tex. "My peers are burnt-out, bitter, crazy or dead. The struggle feels like an abusive relationship. If we're burnt-out, bitter and crazy, how are we going to mentor and inspire young people?"

The nonprofit theatre field is undercapitalized in financial and human resources. This struggle with the field's day-to-day fragility is having a long-term detrimental effect on both individuals and theatres.

Two of the founding goals of the resident theatre movement were to create companies and to provide those companies (including administrative and artistic staff) with "the white picket fence"—a reasonable standard of living that would allow people to have a

home and a family. These goals have not been met or sustained. In addition, low salaries, long hours and chronic organizational understaffing are causing burnout on every level, from support staff to management and artistic leadership.

For many managers, leadership carries an inherent loneliness and isolation: They want to support the artist but must be fiscally responsible, and cannot share their dilemma without undermining their own leadership position. "How do you maintain an intimate environment with your staff and make the decisions that you have to make, not the ones you want to make?" questions managing director Laura Penn of Seattle's Intiman Theatre. "I find myself wanting to commiserate with my staff, but that's not leading. How do you remain connected to the people you're working with when you have to make the 'wrong' decisions?"

"There's never enough money," says Buzz Ward, executive director of Ohio's Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. "Our costs might be covered, but not our staff time. We meet with human capital what we can't meet with financial." In addition, he continues, "there's no career path within the institution; most people in lower positions need to move out [to another organization] in order to move up." The high turnover that results makes it more difficult for individuals to get to the next level even after five or ten years of work, and to build institutional memory and staff continuity. "Attracting, retaining and rewarding good staff people is a real problem," notes producing artistic director Matthew Wiener of Arizona's Actors Theatre of Phoenix. "I'm 39 and I'm the oldest person at my company. What happens when you're at your most productive, your smartest, and you can't afford to do your best work?"

Low compensation is one of the factors causing individuals artists and technical and production support staff—such as craftspeople and artisans, who can easily find better paying jobs elsewhere—to leave the theatre field at increasingly alarming rates. Among individual artists, playwright and actor Ellen McLaughlin (N.Y.) notes that "a vitality is being drained out of theatre"—the talent drain to Hollywood among writers and actors is especially virulent. "It's impossible to make a living in the American theatre," says McLaughlin, noting that low fees and high royalties constitute a double whammy for playwrights.

While many unaffiliated artists hold positions as educators, which essentially provide them with a means—higher salaries and health insurance—to subsidize their work in the theatre, the low level of compensation and small budgets continue to provide enormous frustrations. "You keep thinking that when you move to a different level, a bigger theatre, it will get better," notes Ralph Funicello, "but it's often about doing the work with not enough money and trying to design too many shows at once to make up for the inadequate fees. You feel that you are not doing your job as well as you would like to. I know that managers have felt for me when they haven't been able to pay me enough, but it's destructive to feel that you aren't creative because your budget is too low. You keep feeling that if you were more creative you would be able to find a way to design the show to satisfy the needs of the director and the playwright even with this low budget. When you start to question your own creativity, you lose the ability to create." The need to find ways to increase compensation, keep artists in the theatre, and enable them to have the time and resources to be challenged is of critical importance.

Financial pressures are forcing managing directors to make decisions based on containment; says Terrence Dwyer, managing director of California's La Jolla Playhouse. "Management is too often about what we're not able to do, not about what we can do." This pressure to hold within resources is antithetical to the desire to support an artistic vision that first brought managers into the theatre; it is also making it almost impossible for them to support the next generation of leadership—and, in the words of managing director Benjamin Moore of Seattle Repertory Theatre, "encourage other people to come along and take a risk, to resist containment and push the envelope."

Further, mounting expectations that resources should be stretched impacts both the day-to-day functions of individual theatres (as, for instance, too few staff members attempt to realize too many jobs) and the field as a whole. Co-productions, for example, enable theatres to engage in large-scale work they might not otherwise have been able to afford, reach wider audiences and increase opportunities for productions to tour to multiple venues. On the downside, however, fewer productions are being seen. Many participants, in addition, noted a trend toward co-productions simply for their financial feasibility, what Victoria Nolan identifies as "collaboration in the name of economics rather than art." In addition, fewer productions are being seen as a result.

Approaches to individual, corporate and foundation giving have radically changed over the past decade. Both funders and theatres are redefining their relationship, particularly in light of the restructuring of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Several individuals were able to relate financial success stories for their theatres: healthy budgets, active audiences and strong support from funders. In general, however, virtually all the participants stressed negative trends in individual, corporate and foundation giving. The field identifies, for instance, a widespread loss of philanthropy among the truly wealthy. As the oldest generation of philanthropists is dying, there is little sense that the inheritors of their wealth have also inherited their belief in philanthropy and support for the arts. And while many people identified a movement toward increased contributions from individuals, that money does not compensate for the widespread loss of general operating support. "As an institutional theatre, we think about money all the time," says Long Wharf Theatre of Connecticut's managing director Michael Ross. "Every week we have to add up \$50 contributions to reach \$65,000, and every year we have to start all over again. The ongoing cycle is too daunting."

Even as technological advances are creating and enhancing new opportunities both artistically and on a production level, many participants note that institutional infrastructures are absorbing a disproportionate share of current funding trends and institutional budgets at a time when many theatres are worried about general operating support and ongoing artistic programming. "Our budgets are being eaten up by our need to upgrade our technology and the specialization of staff that follows," says artistic director Timothy Near of California's San Jose Repertory Company. "There's very little corporate and foundation support in Tucson," notes Barclay Goldsmith, producing director of Arizona's Borderlands Theatre, "and the money that does come in is all for doing something new. We got a grant to develop sophisticated software when we're trying to meet payroll."

"We're all looking for bottom-line funding that goes to our core mission," says executive director Alexander Speer of Kentucky's Actors Theatre of Louisville. Participants across

the country, however, noted trends in giving and support based instead on funder-driven concepts. The nonprofit resident theatre movement was sparked by an infusion of capital from the Ford Foundation and programs such as CETA. Today, with financial resources becoming more limited, funders and theatres are discovering that the most achievable solutions may not meet the most pressing needs of the fields. "It's a different financial world than the one in which the funders created a national movement," says Suzanne Sato of AT&T Foundation (N.Y.). "Many grants now can only be symbolic, so I'm left with a need to prioritize and educate the field about leveraging." Points out Peter Donnelly of Corporate Council for the Arts (Wash.), "The word 'unrestricted' has become confused with 'unaccounted for'; the fact that a grant is unrestricted doesn't mean that it won't be accounted for, but funders are interested in outcome."

Midsize theatres are particularly vulnerable to this changing environment.

The theatres whose financial stability and very survival are most tenuous, participants in all five regional meetings noted, are the midsize organizations that exist in what Jack Reuler, managing artistic director of Mixed Blood Theatre Company of Minneapolis, defines as "the window between young upstart and sage." "The big theatres seem assured, and new companies are always born," notes artistic director Martha Lavey of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company. "The midsize theatres are dependent on individuals who burn out because the structure and the resources aren't there."

At the same time, many theatres have discovered that success can come with its own costs. Arne Zaslove, for instance, notes that his company, the Bathhouse Theatre, was the fifth Seattle-based theatre to close for financial reasons within the last decade. "In the 1980s," he says, "I was part of the Seattle fringe, of risk-taking theatres where the work came first. Suddenly, 10 years later, we were running on box office, we needed a board, we had debt—and we couldn't survive our own institutionalization."

Even as the field addresses its own economic health and institutional stability, participants expressed concern over the ongoing fractionalization of the resident theatre movement into "small," "medium" and "large" theatres. "Smaller organizations work to become more stable and larger," notes managing director Paul Tetreault of Houston's Alley Theatre. "Then when they are, when they have bigger budgets and can pay people more, they have all the constraints of being the 'establishment.' The Alley is often attacked by smaller groups—we didn't ask to be the establishment, but our budget got larger."

This fractionalization is also based partly on what MK Wegmann calls "a shifting understanding of the ecology of theatre" on the part of funding organizations, which are providing more support for established companies and less for emerging groups or companies that are smaller by design, and partly on internalized paradigms adopted by the field itself. Many theatres led by people of color, Wegmann suggests, "seem to be perpetually defined as 'emerging' even when they are 25 or 30 years old because they have struggled in a system that is institutionally stacked against them, and so are less stable as organizations even though they have consistently made artistically excellent work."

For many smaller, community-based grassroots or political companies, the legacy of the '60s—when social reform gave rise to activist theatres—is a palpable symbol of their

own self-definition. "I feel a pressure against being 'alternative' from donors, funding sources, the government," says Steve Bailey, executive director of Jump-Start Performance Company in Austin, Tex. "The model of the culture we're living in means money, and that's not our model. Half of our trustees are also in our company, and our artists are also our administrative staffs. But we have to deal with the politics of now, not the '60s. The people who are rooted in our community cannot qualify for funding when the model is based on free-marketed, short-term employment." MK Wegmann notes that "Junebug is making work that is meant to dismantle the structures we are dependent on for support. We don't choose to work with that structure, but we do need it for our survival." For these and other companies, there is a challenge in balancing their core missions with their professional evolution as their work grows more expansive and their budgets become larger.

As theatres seek to redefine themselves, boards are taking on an increasingly active role in their structure and operations.

As boards carry ever-larger responsibility for the financial bottom line, the leaders of many larger organizations expressed their belief and concern that the dominant model upon which the resident theatre movement was founded—a subscription-based season in which a theatre is run as a partnership between an artistic director and a managing director, what Benjamin Moore calls "the ideology of two people being closely allied and yet balanced"—may no longer be relevant. For some managers, boards represent a positive value; Laura Penn, for example, calls her board "a tangible community" that links the Intiman to its larger community and allows her to gauge its relative successes and failures. But as boards become more involved in the theatre's day-to-day operations, others worry that, as Paul Tetreault says, "The idea of the trustee as a temporary holder or caretaker of a public trust is dwindling." Many participants discussed the idea of board recruitment, and certain questions—who are they, why are they changing, and how do we get them involved—echoed throughout the meetings.

"A synergy existed between the founding artists and their trustees," comments managing director Edith Love of Dallas Theater Center. "Now we have trustees who want to be more involved and have the business acumen but who have never had a connection to the art form." Many trustees see their position as a hobby; others define success only in financial terms and fail to understand the theatre's role as a creator, rather than merely importer, of new work. "I worry that I can't support artists the way I want to," says the Old Globe Theatre of San Diego's managing director Tom Hall. "The institutions that we created for the purpose of providing safety for artists are often doing just the opposite, and it's become all about 'How do we get into the black?' rather than 'How do we support our institutions so they can be provocative?'"

Part 2: Strategies for the Future

Collaborating with Non-stage Media:

"Young artists are working with a new vocabulary, a new ecology of theatre," comments Jon Nakagawa of Lincoln Center. "How do we talk to them? How do we get those younger artists into our institutions? How do we link the scales of the chain?" For many artistic directors—including Molly Smith of Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage and Martha Lavey of Steppenwolf—one strategy is to encourage both emerging and established artists to move freely between live theatre and non-stage media. Emily Mann strongly

advocates developing partnerships with both non-stage media and the commercial theatre.

Creative Financial Strategies:

Across the country, artistic directors, managers and individual artists expressed as a matter of urgency the need to create new streams of revenue in response to the changing financial and political climate. Says Gordon Davidson of the Taper, "We inherited a structure based on box office, philanthropy and government support, and trying to do a body of work not having raised all our money at the beginning of the season but, rather, racing toward the end of the season spending, earning and raising money in the hope that we will finish at least even. We need new systems; the bottom line numbers, more and more, have nothing to do with the quality of the plays chosen but, rather, their contribution to income." Chris Coleman urges stabilizing small and midsize organizations through endowments; similarly, many managing directors of larger institutions stressed their own needs for larger and more stable endowments that would allow them to take more creative risks. Joy Zinoman advocates for long-term capitalization through five or six simultaneously active funds rather than endowments; her theatre's extension fund, for instance, is used to extend successful shows beyond their scheduled runs.

Many participants suggested that grant-giving organizations might consider both the long-term and short-term needs of theatres, and base their funding on flexible guidelines. "Midsize theatres could push themselves into stability if they had a development director or marketing director," suggests Martha Lavey, "whereas established theatres need operating support." Benjamin Moore is seeking to integrate "what is now a profound disconnect between making art and strategic planning, which is institutional driven and concerns three or four years down the line but rarely has to do with the actual programming and work that will be produced."

Cultivating New Audiences:

The need to expose theatre to a larger public—including younger and culturally diverse audiences as well as people who don't normally go to the theatre—emerged as a major theme for participants across the country. "Communication and loneliness in society is a larger cultural problem," notes Peter DuBois, artistic director of Alaska's Perseverance Theatre. "We're in the business of giving people what they didn't know they wanted, so how do we create a dialogue with our audience?"

In addition to increasing artist visibility in their local communities—particularly in schools—and sponsoring discussions and panels, artists and managers are seeking new ways of articulating the value of theatre to cultivate future audiences. "There are different stake-holders and different people coming to the table now, and some of us are having to redefine our alliances and our communities," points out Marsha Jackson-Randolph, co-artistic director of Atlanta's Jomandi Productions, noting the success of the commercial "urban circuit" in attracting a new generation of African-American audiences by marketing theatre as a product and, therefore, impacting the techniques used by her theatre to reach audiences. Others, such as Molly Smith, are utilizing environments familiar to young people, such as the Internet and performances that cost what a movie costs, to help bring them to the theatre.

Downsizing:

"My company was founded as a grassroots company and is now the second largest in the city," notes Matthew Wiener. "The Ford Foundation created a profession that had never existed before. What happened in the '60s forced a field to be born that we're now all part of, and I'm not sure that it works. Should my company grow up or grow down, evolve or devolve?" That question echoed throughout the meetings as many theatre leaders wrestled with the field's existing structures and creative environment. For many midsize and smaller theatres—including Chicago's Organic Theatre Company and the Undermain Theatre of Dallas, Tex.—downsizing is emerging as a viable model for long-term survival. These theatres are exploring devolution and restructuring, including cutting their staffs and their budgets, as positive tools for their future artistic growth. "We are returning to our grassroots beginnings in order to move forward," says Undermain's Raphael Parry, "and to enable our work to be produced according to our initial inspiration."

Earmarking Resources for Individual Artists:

Participants across the country identified a series of potential resources that would particularly benefit the needs of individual artists. Among these were sabbaticals, in the words of designer Nan Cibula-Jenkins (Ill.), "to gain perspective and take on different projects. Time gives us the opportunity to explore." (Sabbaticals emerged also as an important need for artists and administrators holding high burnout positions on the staffs of institutions, with Denver Theatre Center Theatre Company of Colorado's artistic director Donovan Marley among many who advocated for paid leaves of absence for such individuals.) Other tools for individual artists include well-funded residencies and multi-theatre commissions.

Entrepreneurship and Marketing:

The idea of entrepreneurship—in both the making and the marketing of art—emerged as a key theme, particularly for younger participants in the regional meetings. "The American theatre is about not-for-profit ways of looking at the work," notes playwright Chay Yew (Calif.). "What about for-profit, entrepreneurial approaches? Are we being aggressive enough? Is there a way to sell things to get people into the theatre and to let the audience continue the dialogue after they've already given their money?" "Audience tastes are being 'Disneyed down,'" says artistic director Rob Bundy of Houston's Stages Repertory Theatre, "yet we are not responding strongly or being smart enough in our marketing strategies. Instead, we're taking the artistic high road, refusing to change how we advertise our work to potential customers, which is self defeating." Notes Arne Zaslove, "It's taken me 40-some years to realize that I'm not a businessman—but that I need to be in order to do the work that I want to do."

Evolving Management Structures:

Many theatres are seeking, in the words of William Gregg, "to emulate within the administration how a stage production comes together." These theatres, including Center Stage of Baltimore, are exploring such strategies as team management to create a spirit of collaboration outside, as well as within, the rehearsal hall. Martha Lavey, who maintains a close professional relationship with her theatre's founders, advocates "calling upon the constituencies of the theatre for help and counsel; it helps relieve the problems and ups people's investments in the theatre." Buzz Ward emphasizes the need for managers to remain aware of the time resources of administrators, artists and staff as theatres expand. "We in leadership roles make decisions about new programs," he

says, "but we don't have to implement them. We must respect their already overburdened schedules. We also have to insist that our staffs take their vacations."

Expansion of Theatre Spaces:

"Do people want to see another five-play season in the same way in the same space?" asks Arne Zaslove. Participants across the country expressed interest in developing multi-theatre, interdisciplinary arts complexes, particularly as current facilities age or become less viable in realizing artistic directors' expanded visions. "The model for running a traditional regional theatre has run out of gas," says Tony Taccone. "We have a larger goal: To build a multidisciplinary arts center with other artistic organizations on our city block. Theatre that conveys art only through the language of the artistic past is reaching smaller and smaller audiences. I want to expand the definition of language." Other participants cited the need to include training facilities or a theatre for young people as part of new and expanded venues.

Increased Advocacy:

"The local level is where you seed innovation," notes Marian Godfrey of The Pew Charitable Trusts (Pa.), and theatres and individuals across the country are grappling with their local advocacy needs and with what many participants perceive as an important need for a national profile for the American theatre. "Artists have to serve a lot of worlds," notes playwright Ifa Bayeza (Ill.), "including education and the economic development and revitalization of their communities." Given this paradigm, artists—particularly artists who also identify themselves as activists—are forging new relationships with the civic institutions and local politicians in the places where they live and work.

Questions Michael Ross, "Organizations are valued within their own communities, but how do we translate that into a national scale?" Many participants argue for emphasizing theatre's larger role in society as a public good, what designer Ming Cho Lee (N.Y.) calls "its mission as a public responsibility, as much as education or elections." These individuals call for strategizing ways to develop and enhance the theatre's national profile, including lobbying, political action and shared resources, such as a spot or slogan that would be included on all radio ads produced for larger and better-financed theatres around the country.

Partnerships and Collaborations:

"Can we look at the field differently— instead of only 'the big theatres' and 'the rest of us'?" questions Bonnie Morris, producing director of Minneapolis's Illusion Theatre. "Can we talk about an ecology of theatre in our communities—how do the big regional repertory houses, the midsize companies, the new theatres and individuals interrelate, support and nourish each other?" Many organizations are responding to this challenge by seeking to create new partnerships and collaborations among theatres of different sizes and structures, between institutions and individual artists, and with practitioners of other art forms to create multidisciplinary work. "We want to be established, not to be the establishment," says Marsha Jackson-Randolph. "The user-friendly ecology that we're all trying to move toward would allow us to control the resources appropriate to our visions." Other theatres, such as Austin's Frontera, are advocating for artists through residencies and exchanges, creating a "national arm" for unaffiliated artists.

Part 3: Conclusion

"Our challenge as a field," says Marsha Jackson-Randolph, "is to define and celebrate who we are, as opposed to self-abnegation. We have for so long been defined as a community of have-nots; how do we as a community define ourselves as haves?"

Throughout the five regional meetings, this question emerged in different contexts as an underlying theme of each conversation. From artistic visions to management philosophies, from local grassroots advocacy to the need to develop a national profile for the American theatre, from the diversity of audiences to the diversity of art, the field is struggling with how to articulate its own value.

How much this self-definition has to do with the nonprofit theatre's overall financial stability varied from individual to individual, region to region. "Ten years ago the NEA was imploding and we weren't sure we would still be around; now there's talk about how to manage success and where to go in the future," was the consensus of one meeting. Another group offered this analysis: "Ten years ago, it was assumed we would survive; the focus was on an ideal world. Now our focus is on surviving, and entrepreneurship is no longer a dirty word." One participant noted that the "paradigm for the '90s is management-driven responsibility." Another expressed his belief that "we've shifted as a field from being institutionally based to being individually based, and focusing more on artist compensation than on new and bigger buildings."

In every meeting, however, participants agreed that the role and responsibilities of the nonprofit theatre field have changed radically since the movement first began to flourish in the 1960s. In Gordon Davidson's words, "We have seen a shift from theatre as popular entertainment to film as popular entertainment—we're a cottage industry, they're the mass producer."

Driving every conversation, then, was a simple question: How does this cottage industry—limited by undercapitalization, by a talent drain to Hollywood, by competition with mass media, by an audience that is increasingly conservative—create enduring values for its own communities? Does the theatre, which has the power to change lives on an individual scale, also have that impact (and its inherent responsibility) on a larger scale? At a time when society is rocked by violence, exemplified by the shooting in Littleton, and the entertainment industry is under attack for its negative influences on young people, how do we address the impact of theatre arts on society?

Whether the answer is art or activism, the answer comes down time after time to the connection between artists and audiences that exists when there are 200 or 2,000 strangers in a room. "The embrace of the community and the small takes us far away from what our culture celebrates, which is wealth and fame. I feel marginalized in society, but not in my own community," says Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble of Pennsylvania's Jerry Stropnick. "We are not mass media; all theatre is local." at

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Chicago

Janet Allen, Artistic Director, Indiana Repertory Theatre

Ifa Bayeza, Playwright
Lou Bellamy, Artistic Director, Penumbra Theatre Company
Ping Chong, Artistic Director, Ping Chong and Company
Nan Cibula-Jenkins, Designer
Peter Culman, Managing Director, Center Stage
Barbara Gaines, Artistic Director, Shakespeare Repertory Theater
William Gregg, Producing Artistic Director, New American Theater
Ron Himes, Artistic Director, St. Louis Black Repertory Theatre
Martha Lavey, Artistic Director, Steppenwolf Theatre Company
Ina Marlowe, Producing Artistic Director, Organic Theater Company
Bonnie Morris, Producing Director, Illusion Theater
Carol North, Artistic Director, Metro Theater Company
Jack Reuler, Managing Artistic Director, Mixed Blood Theatre Company
David Saar, Artistic Director, Childsplay
Rick Shiomi, Artistic Director, Theatre Mu
Alexander Speer, Executive Director, Actors Theatre of Louisville
Buzz Ward, Executive Director, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park

Dallas

Steve Bailey, Executive Director, Jump-Start Performance Co.
Sharon Bridgforth, Associate Artist, Frontera @ Hyde Park Theatre
Rob Bundy, Artistic Director, Stages Repertory Theatre
Bren Dubay, Playwright
Barclay Goldsmith, Producing Director, Borderlands Theater
Marsha Jackson-Randolph, Co-Artistic Director, Jomandi Productions
James Larson, Artistic Director, Omaha Theater Company for Young People
Edith Love, Managing Director, Dallas Theater Center
Donovan Marley, Artistic Director, Denver Center Theatre Company
Raphael Parry, Artistic Director, Undermain Theatre
Jorge Pina, Artistic Director, Guadalupe Cultural Center
Paul Tetreault, Managing Director, Alley Theatre
Paula Tomei, Managing Director, South Coast Repertory
Susan Tsu, Designer
MK Wegmann, Managing Director, Junebug Productions
Matthew Wiener, Producing Artistic Director, Actors Theatre of Phoenix
Dewey Scott-Wiley, Artistic Director, Trustus

San Francisco

(Additional Support Provided by The James Irvine Foundation)

Loy Arcenas, Designer
Peter DuBois, Artistic Director, Perseverance Theatre
Terrence Dwyer, Managing Director, La Jolla Playhouse
Gordon Edelstein, Artistic Director, A Contemporary Theatre
Larry Eilenberg, Artistic Director, Magic Theatre
Ralph Funicello, Designer
Tom Hall, Managing Director, Old Globe Theatre
Heather Kitchen, Managing Director, American Conservatory Theater
Benjamin Moore, Managing Director, Seattle Repertory Theatre
Timothy Near, Artistic Director, San Jose Repertory Theatre
Laura Penn, Managing Director, Intiman Theatre
Tony Taccone, Artistic Director, Berkeley Repertory Theatre

Chay Yew, Playwright
Arnie Zaslove, Artistic Director, formerly of Bathhouse Theatre

New York

Lyn Austin, Producing Director, Music-Theatre Group
Rene Buch, Artistic Director, Repertorio Español
Amanda Dehnert, Associate Artistic Director, Trinity Repertory Company
Margot Harley, Producing Director, The Acting Company
Ming Cho Lee, Designer
Emily Mann, Artistic Director, McCarter Theatre
Ellen McLaughlin, Playwright and Actor
Julia Miles, Artistic Director, Women's Project & Productions
Jon Nakagawa, Producer, Contemporary Programming, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts
Michael Ross, Managing Director, Long Wharf Theatre
Mario Ernesto Sanchez, Teatro Avante
Molly Smith, Artistic Director, Arena Stage
Jerry Stropnick, Artistic Ensemble, Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble
Roberta Uno, Artistic Producing Director, New World Theatre
Joy Zinoman, Artistic/Managing Director, The Studio Theatre
New York, TCG Board Participant List
Jessica Andrews, Managing Director, Arizona Theatre Company
Libby Appel, Artistic Director, Oregon Shakespeare Festival
Dudley Cocke, Director, Roadside Theater
Chris Coleman, Artistic Director, Actor's Express
Gordon Davidson, Artistic Director, Mark Taper Forum
Peter Donnelly, President, Corporate Council for the Arts
Marian Godfrey, Program Director for Culture, The Pew Charitable Trusts
Charles F. (OyamO) Gordon, Playwright
David Hawkanson, Managing Director, Guthrie Theater
David Henry Hwang, Playwright
Ricardo Khan, Artistic Director, Crossroads Theatre Company
Roberta Levitow, Director
Michael Maso, Managing Director, Huntington Theatre Company
Victoria Nolan, Managing Director, Yale Repertory Theatre
Robert J. Orchard, Managing Director, American Repertory Theatre
Judith Rubin, Chairman, Playwrights Horizons
Suzanne Sato, Vice President, Arts & Culture, AT&T Foundation
Roche Schulfer, Executive Director, Goodman Theatre
Kent Thompson, Artistic Director, Alabama Shakespeare Festival

Survey Results

As they contemplated the challenges facing the theatre field today, participants in a follow-up survey to the TCG/Doris Duke Charitable Foundation meeting were asked to list their top three most pressing concerns—the priorities to which they would most like to devote new resources and attention, if they could. The following five issues were listed most often among respondents' top three concerns; numbers in brackets indicate how many votes each issue got:

- Creation of new work, including commissions and development grants and programs (80)
- Fundraising and development for production support (71)
- Audience development efforts (59)
- Endowments (42)
- Decline of general operating support (29)