



THE BIRTH OF A THEATRE COMMONS

HowlRound from 2009 – 2017

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[]
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(2012-2017)



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Emerson
COLLEGE

A commons must arise from the personal engagement of commoners themselves. It is unavoidably the product of unique personalities, geographic locations, cultural contexts, moments in time and political circumstances of that particular commons.

—David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Patterns of Commoning*

Since HowlRound was founded, we have regularly published pieces on field learning, new models, and innovation. We have, however, much less frequently analyzed and shared our own work with the not-for-profit theatre field. When we surpassed our five-year mark, it seemed critical that we take the time to reflect on our own path. In contemplating how to best do this, we immediately thought of our partners at Helicon Collaborative, a research and strategy consultancy working for a more sustainable, equitable, and creative future. In this case study, co-authors Alexis Frasz and Holly Sidford have done a fantastic job of capturing the essence and evolution of HowlRound. We hope that in exploring and documenting our own experience, we may inspire a deeper understanding of how and why we are doing this work, the ways in which it is impacting the not-for-profit theatre, and what future might be possible if more people and organizations embrace a commons orientation.

Enjoy!



Jamie M. Gahlon

Director and Co-Founder, HowlRound Theatre Commons

We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words.

Ursula Le Guin (1929-2018)

1.

Introduction

Today, most live theatre in the US is created and produced in the nonprofit sector by a range of independent theatres and academic institutions. Commercial theatres—like Broadway productions and their touring shows—are still a significant part of the theatre ecosystem, but over the past half-century their prominence has been eclipsed by the growing nonprofit sector. In the 1950s and 1960s, a few theatremakers began to rebel against the for-profit orientation of the commercial model, which dominated at that time, and seek organizational structures that could enable more artistic risk-taking, more opportunities for artists, and wider public accessibility to creative work.

Many of these early nonprofit leaders were influenced by the democratizing work of Hallie Flanagan and the Works Progress Association's Federal Theatre Project (1935–39), which supported local theatres primarily outside of New York City to create new work and employ artists, and provided access to theatre experiences for millions of Americans for the first time. A primary founding intention of nonprofit theatre was, in fact, to reclaim theatre as an essential public good. Zelda Fichandler, cofounder of Arena Stage, described the impetus that drove the original founders of nonprofit theatres: "The thought that propelled us was that theatre should stop serving the function of making money, for which it has never been and never will be suited, and start serving the revelation and shaping the process of living, for

which it is uniquely suited, for which it, indeed, exists.”¹ Today the nonprofit cultural sector continues to have a distinctive role in our cultural ecosystem as a laboratory for artistic work undertaken in the public interest. The nonprofit model provides ways to invest in, develop, preserve, and share culture outside of the commercial marketplace. However, the nonprofit theatre sector is not immune to the trends impacting larger society, and one of the most significant trends of our time is the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small number of institutions and individuals, and the growing disparities between the “haves” and “have nots.” Michael Sandel, political philosopher and author of *What Money Can’t Buy*, writes that, “We live at a time when almost everything can be bought and sold. Over the past three decades, markets — and market values — have come to govern our lives as never before.”² Sandel observes that this amplifies inequality by making access to more and more things in life contingent on who can pay the price, and it corrupts things that should never be commodified in the first place. P. Carl, cofounder of HowlRound, reflected on how this was manifesting in nonprofit theatre at the time of HowlRound’s founding: “It seemed every part of our work had become commodified, and that the theatre was becoming ever more about money instead of transformation.”³ This “hypercapitalism” is now a defining part of our society’s dominant

1 “Address to the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society in Celebration of the Third Annual Zelda Fichandler Award,” HowlRound. November 13, 2011, <http://howlround.com/address-to-the-stage-directors-and-choreographers-society-in-celebration-of-the-third-annual-zelda>

2 Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012), 5.

3 P. Carl, “Curating a Theatrical Commons,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 172 (Fall 2017): 115–118.

paradigm. Widely respected systems expert Donella Meadows defines a paradigm as “the shared idea in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumptions ... or deepest set of beliefs about how the world works.”

Our paradigms, in turn, shape our behavior. She writes:

Paradigms are the sources of systems.... So how do you change paradigms?... In a nutshell, you keep pointing at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm ... you insert people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power. You don't waste time with reactionaries; rather you work with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of people who are open-minded.... Systems folks would say you change paradigms by modeling a [new] system, which takes you outside the [current] system and forces you to see it whole. We say that because our own paradigms have been changed that way.⁴

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The “anomalies and failures” of the nonprofit theatre system were becoming apparent to more and more theatremakers, inspiring a group of them—P. Carl, David Dower, Jamie Gahlon, and Vijay Mathew—to see if they could model something different with and for the “active change agents.” HowlRound was founded on the belief that another kind of system for nonprofit theatre

⁴ Donella Meadows, “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System,” *The Donella Meadows Project*. <http://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system>. Originally in *Whole Earth* (Winter 1997).

is not only possible but necessary in order to bring theatre into alignment with its core social purpose, and its aesthetic and civic potential. At its inception, HowlRound was “just” a collection of useful technological tools linked together by a shared set of values around equitable access to resources and democratic participation. The cofounders were inspired by the idea of the “commons,” the concept that certain resources should be collectively owned and managed for the benefit of everyone, and thus protected from private ownership by individuals or institutions. David Bollier, cofounder of the Commons Strategies Group and Senior Fellow at the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School of Communications, describes the commons as follows:

“The commons” refers to that vast range of resources that the American people collectively own, but which are rapidly being enclosed: privatized, traded in the market, and abused. The process of converting the American commons into market resources can accurately be described as enclosure because ... it involves the private appropriation of collectively owned resources. Such enclosures are troubling because they disproportionately benefit the corporate class and effectively deprive ordinary citizens of access to resources that they legally or morally own. The result is a hypertrophic market that colonizes untouched natural resources and public life while eroding our democratic commonwealth.⁵

⁵ David Bollier, “Reclaiming the Commons,” *Boston Review* 27, nos. 2–3 (Summer 2002). <https://bostonreview.net/archives/BR27.3/bollier.html>.



The HowlRound team in 2018. L to R: Jamie Gahlon, Ramona Ostrowski, Abigail Vega, J.D. Stokely, Vijay Mathew. Photo by Anya Prudente.

HowlRound's founders believed that cultural knowledge and practices are exactly the kind of public resource that should be cultivated and preserved for the good of all: "Not-for-profit, tax-exempt status is actually based in the idea of a commons, the idea that making theatre in communities has a value that cannot be monetized."⁶ HowlRound was formed as an experiment in creating a new kind of infrastructure for nonprofit theatre that intentionally and explicitly supports commons-based values and behavior. This case study reflects on the first phase of that experiment from 2009 to 2017, and considers what might be the next phase in its evolution.

6 David Dower, Jamie Gahlon, Vijay Mathew, and P. Carl, "Modeling a Theatre Commons," HowlRound, February 13, 2013. <http://howlround.com/modeling-a-theatre-commons>.

2.

Setting the Stage: The State of Nonprofit Theatre in 2009

In 2009, Theatre Development Fund released *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, a six-year study into how plays were written and produced in the United States at that time. The results of the study, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, were both comprehensive and disturbing. As the lead author, Todd London, put it at the time:

On one hand, we have a playwriting profession that is larger, better trained and more vital than at any time in our history. On the other hand, we have a profound rift between our most accomplished playwrights and the theatres who would produce them, an increasingly corporate theatre culture, dire economics for not-for-profits, dwindling audiences for non-musical work and perhaps most troubling of all, a system of compensation that makes it nearly impossible for playwrights to earn anything resembling a living.⁷

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⁷ Todd London et al., *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play* (New York: Theatre Development Fund, 2009).

That same year, a companion study by David Dower, also financed by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, was released. “The Gates of Opportunity” summarized the results of a yearlong inquiry undertaken by Dower, then associate artistic director at Arena Stage in Washington, DC. Based on his conversations with diverse theatre artists across the country, Dower’s study confirmed what many in the field already knew intuitively:

- The vast majority of philanthropic money goes to support the largest (i.e., wealthiest) theatre institutions, whose audiences are predominantly upper income, older, and white.
- However, the majority of cultural creation and public engagement in the nonprofit arts is happening outside of such institutions, in small nonprofits or in community settings, and is often fueled by the “sweat equity” of artists who are under-compensated for their work.
- “The gates of opportunity” for philanthropic funding and production of work are closely guarded by a small number of people at these major institutions and major media tastemakers, and are impenetrable for the majority of artists and organizations.⁸

8 P. Carl, “Finding the Gift and Making Theater for Everyone,” HowlRound, June 17, 2012. <http://howlround.com/finding-the-gift-and-making-theater-for-everyone>.

These two reports brought greater attention, and data, to the issue of unequal distribution of resources and opportunities in the theatre field, a fact that had long been decried by field leaders operating outside of large regional theatres, including Rosalba Rolon, Tisa Chang, Michelle Hensley, Dudley Cocke, and an increasing numbers of others.⁹ Nonprofit theatre—along with the rest of the nonprofit cultural sector—was mirroring the growing inequities in society overall. Funding and other support had become concentrated in the largest, richest institutions that predominantly served the privileged class, while the majority of creators and audiences were locked out of access to resources.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the country had barely begun to recover from the financial crisis, and although Occupy Wall Street had not yet coined the 1 percent/99 percent mantra,¹¹ discontent over the systemic imbalances in wealth were growing. London and Dower's reports confirmed the sense of many theatremakers on the ground that the field had gone awry.

9 Marta Moreno Vega and Cheryll Y. Greene, eds., *Voices from the Battlefield* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1993).

10 Helicon Collaborative, *Fusing Art, Culture and Social Change* (Washington, DC: National Center for Responsive Philanthropy, 2011). This study revealed that just 2 percent of cultural institutions in the US (those with annual budgets over \$5M) received 55 percent of all gifts, grants, and contributions.

11 "We are the 99%," Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=We_are_the_99%&oldid=822479297.

12 Including:

Kevin F. McCarthy, et al., *The Performing Arts in a New Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001). https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2007/MR1367.pdf.

AEA Consulting and the James Irvine Foundation, *Critical Issues Facing the Arts in California* (San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation, 2006). https://irvine-dot-org.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/168/attachments/Critical_Issues_Arts.pdf?1418954611. John Kreidler, "Leverage Lost: The Nonprofit Arts in the Post-Ford Era," *In Motion Magazine*, February 16, 1996. <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/lost.html>.

The factors that led to this situation in the nonprofit sector are complex, and have been extensively analyzed elsewhere,¹² but briefly they include: an exponential proliferation of nonprofit institutions and professionally trained artists over the latter half of the twentieth century, a philanthropically supported building boom that raised the fixed costs for nonprofit performing arts institutions, a plateauing of public funding, and an increase in competition for audiences from relatively more affordable and convenient digital media-based cultural forms.

In this environment, the drive for survival led theatres to see each other as competitors for funding and led many to make safer artistic choices in order to ensure large audiences. Large regional theatres, in particular, found that basic economics required them to program blockbusters with star artists for which they could charge high ticket prices, even though this strategy put attendance out of reach for all but the wealthier patrons. These expensive large-scale works pushed theatres towards coproducing, which further reduced the diversity of new work. As a result of these trends, many theatres became nearly indistinguishable in their artistic content and their operational models from their for-profit counterparts. Further amplifying this trend has been the rise of the “enhancement model” over the past couple of decades, whereby Broadway theatre producers support productions at nonprofit regional theatres as a testing ground for new shows.

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While this may be viewed as a valuable revenue stream for nonprofit theatres, critics worry that it contributes to pushing theatres in the direction of more commercially viable work.¹³

This perceived need to compete also fueled increasingly proprietary attitudes and behaviors around information, expertise, social networks, and financial resources. The nonprofit theatre field

became highly stratified, and information and resources became increasingly inaccessible to artists and arts workers outside of the largest theatres. Aside from the few who had long-term affiliations with theatres, playwrights and individual theatre artists were increasingly marginalized. Theatres of all sizes have increasingly sought to minimize costs by paying artists as little as possible, relying on them to discount their labor through what has come to be known as “sweat equity.”¹⁴

Despite these trends, at the grassroots level, in smaller organizations, and outside of institutions altogether, artistic creativity was flourishing. The last decades of the twentieth century saw an explosion of artistic expression in theatre and other fields, driven by growing demographic diversity and an expanding DIY ethos, and enabled by tools that allowed people to find and connect with each other in new ways. Storytellers of all ethnicities and backgrounds were engaging with communities, telling diverse stories, and challenging conventional notions about what theatre looks like, where it happens, and who can participate.

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While established field spokesmen decried the graying of theatre audiences, youth-centered genres like hip hop theatre and spoken word could not keep up with the demand from artists and audiences alike.

For the most part, resources did not trickle down to support

13 Laura Collins-Hughes, “Are Nonprofit Theaters Too Closely Tied to Commercial Producers?” *Boston.com*, October 13, 2012. <https://www.boston.com/un-categorized/noprimarytagmatch/2012/10/13/are-nonprofit-theaters-too-closely-tied-to-commercial-producers>.

14 RAND, *Performing Arts in a New Era*.

the artists and audiences at the roots, and this cultural and demographic vitality and diversity was not filtering back up into the mainstream nonprofit theatre field. James Kass, cofounder of Youth Speaks, a hip hop poetry and spoken word organization, says: “The nonprofit theatre system is still biased towards maintaining what already is, instead of opening to what might be coming next. This is particularly true with regard to the most marginalized voices, who often reflect the ‘audiences’ everyone is trying to reach, but rarely are partnered with in deep and meaningful ways that can shift the arts sector to both be more inclusive ... [and] more reflective of the future of this country.”¹⁵ Moreover, because much of this activity was small-scale, occurring outside of formal institutions, and at the community level, its scope remained largely invisible, even to many who were engaged in it. The hierarchical nature of the field meant that the “theatre sector” remained defined predominantly by what appeared on the stages of regional theatres and was validated in the pages of *American Theatre* magazine (which was itself supported by larger regional theatres).

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The problem of nonprofit theatre becoming increasingly stratified by class and race—and how this was contributing to both a lack of artistic risk-taking and broad community relevance—was widely acknowledged and lamented in the field, even by many in privileged positions. However, as organizer Jonathan Smucker notes, “Knowledge of what is wrong with a social system and knowledge of how to change the system are two completely

15 James Kass, Youth Speaks hosted convenings on Non-Profit Arts and the Next Generation, funded by the Doris Duke Foundation (2014).

different categories of knowledge.”¹⁶ Despite broad awareness of the flaws in the structure of nonprofit theatre, the economic model of the sector seemed to make changing it impossible. John Kreidler’s 1996 influential essay, *Leverage Lost*, asserted that despite the best intentions of most of those involved, the nonprofit system actually functions like a Ponzi scheme, requiring unlimited growth in resources—which is not possible—to sustain the growth in artists and institutions that the system itself encourages.¹⁷ In other words, the system as it appears today is not malfunctioning, it is performing perfectly as designed, which, when followed to its natural conclusion, leads to a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few. HowlRound founders Vijay Mathew and P. Carl acknowledge: “It does little good to call out organizations for not participating in their ethical, core duty to their community. Despite best human intentions, institutional and economic design will always trump individuals.”¹⁸ To change the outcomes of this system, therefore, requires changing the rules and structures of the system itself.

16 Jonathan Matthew Smucker, *Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

17 John Kriedler, “Leverage Lost: The Nonprofit Arts in the Post-Ford Era,” *Grant-makers in the Arts*, March 11, 1996. <http://www.giarts.org/article/leverage-lost>.

18 Vijay Mathew and P. Carl, “Culture Coin: a commons-based, complementary currency for the arts and its impact on scarcity, virtue, ethics and the imagination,” *Artivate: A Journal of Entrepreneurship in the Arts* 2, no. 3 (2013): 14–29. http://www.cciarts.org/_Library/docs/Culture_Coin.pdf.

**You never change things by fighting
the existing reality. To change
something, build a new model that
makes the existing model obsolete.**

Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983)

3.

Origins of HowlRound

As dissatisfaction with the status quo of the nonprofit theatre sector was growing among theatremakers, new technology was rapidly enabling people in all fields to organize, communicate, and do things at scale, outside of centralized institutions. Technology and open-source software was enabling distributed networks of individuals to organize more successfully by becoming visible and exerting collective influence, which in turn was accelerating new movements, such as Occupy, and commons-based peer-production platforms, like Wikipedia.

These new tools were rapidly disrupting fields where access to information and content had been tightly controlled, creating new possibilities for sharing information and building communities of interest without the intermediation of traditional gatekeeper institutions, shifting centers of power and influence as a result. Their hallmark was the ability to enable “collaboration among large groups of individuals, sometimes in the order of tens or even hundreds of thousands, who cooperate effectively to provide information, knowledge or cultural goods without relying on either market pricing or managerial hierarchies to coordinate their common enterprise.”¹⁹ Many of these new structures were inspired by the philosophy of the commons, articulated by Lewis Hyde,²⁰

19 Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983). —, *Common As Air: Revolution, Art and Ownership* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

20 Yochai Benkler and Helen Nissenbaum, “Commons-based Peer Production and Virtue,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 14, no. 4 (2006): 394–419, as referenced in Mathew and Carl, “Culture Coin.”

David Bollier, and others, as an approach to sharing and managing collective resources.

A group of theatremakers and cultural leaders—P. Carl, David Dower, Jamie Gahlon, and Vijay Mathew—saw the opportunity to utilize these readily available technological tools to begin to address some of the problems highlighted in *Outrageous Fortune* and “The Gates of Opportunity” and create a more democratic conversation in theatre.

In 2009, Dower, Gahlon, and Mathew began experimenting with ways to elevate unheard voices through the American Voices New Play Institute (AVNPI) at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., including a peer-edited New Play Map, peer-produced livestreaming of convenings and plays, and commissioned thought pieces from diverse voices in the field. In 2010, Carl, then director of artistic development at Steppenwolf Theatre, conceived of an online journal called HowlRound that could be a democratic space for artist-centered national discourse.²¹ HowlRound was launched in 2010 as a journal with support from the AVNPI, and Carl subsequently joined Arena as the director of the AVNPI in 2011.

In 2012, Carl, Dower, Gahlon, and Mathew moved to the Office of the Arts at Emerson College in Boston, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, where they relaunched HowlRound as an integrated communications platform that combined the journal and the other activities the group had been experimenting with over the past couple of years.

²¹ “Howlround” is the sound of a feedback loop—what occurs when sound from a loudspeaker is fed back into the microphone of a public-address or recording system. [Dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), s.v. “howlround,” 2012. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/howlround?s=t>.

At this time, HowlRound included:

- An **online journal**, for which any theatre practitioner could write, about anything that they thought was relevant to the field. No longer would discussion about theatre be limited to the bar after a show, whispers in a hallway, or what passed through the editorial processes of *American Theatre* magazine and the theatre critics of major newspapers. The fact that it was free, online only, and did not have a subscription model shocked people in the field at the time.
- **A livestreaming TV channel**, which was free to watch and available to anyone to share their content, including live theatre, conference sessions, panel discussions, and other material. No longer would you need an invitation to access a particular venue or be located in a major theatre city to share or experience work.
- **A New Play Map**, which plotted the development and production of all new plays happening anywhere in the US. This would render visible, for the first time, the extent of new work being created all over the country and the infrastructure that supported it, offering alternative definitions of a successful life for a play beyond what was presented on the main stages of major theatres or in major commercial hubs.
- A program of **in-person convenings**, which brought together theatre practitioners from all areas of the field to discuss the challenges and opportunities of a myriad of field-wide issues with an aim toward generating new ideas and plans of action. All convenings would be made transparent through documentation on HowlRound.



A Theatre Communications Group (TCG) keynote address livestreaming on HowlRound TV, 2016.

The intention of the founders was to “address the 99 percent problem in our field” by “opening the fire hose” of voices at the grass roots, thereby making the invisible creative energy of the field visible.²² It was a conscious experiment to see what would happen if theatremakers who were disconnected from each other and disenfranchised became aware of and could speak to each other, without going through gatekeepers. Neither the founders nor their early supporters and allies—including the members of its National Advisory Council, formed in October 2012—knew where this would lead. (National Advisory Council members listed in Appendix B.) However, they believed that enabling people in the field to see and speak to each other was a prerequisite for reclaiming theatre for the benefit of the art form, its artists, and society at large.

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22 P. Carl and Vijay Mathew, “Building a New American Theater of the Commons,” [Shareable.com](https://www.shareable.net/blog/the-theater-at-a-crossroads-seeking-a-sustainable-model-for-creativity), December 4, 2011. <https://www.shareable.net/blog/the-theater-at-a-crossroads-seeking-a-sustainable-model-for-creativity>.

4.

The Commons as an Organizing Framework

Initially, HowlRound was primarily an online platform featuring a suite of useful communications tools, guided by the principle that these should be accessible to anyone and everyone in theatre. Over time, however, HowlRound's founders began to articulate the deeper philosophy and set of values that had intuitively guided it from the beginning.

The core principle that undergirds HowlRound's work is the commons—a way of thinking about organizing people and managing resources for the benefit of the whole. In his 2010 book, *Common as Air*, Lewis Hyde defines the commons as “a kind of property in which more than one person has the right of action... a social regime for managing a collectively owned resource.” David Bollier observes, “A commons arises whenever a given community decides that it wishes to manage a resource collectively, with an accent on fair access, use, and long-term sustainability.”²³ In the US, a commons philosophy has shaped our understanding of how we manage natural resources like air, soil, and water, and other public goods such as parks, roadways, and utilities, which are (in theory) available to all and governed by rules that ensure no one person or group can use them in a way that prevents others from doing so too. HowlRound's simple assertion is that society's cultural

23 David Bollier, “Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm,” *The Next System Project*, April 28, 2016. <https://thenextsystem.org/commoning-as-a-transformative-social-paradigm>.

resources belong in the commons too, and should be stewarded for the benefit of all. This means ensuring that everyone is able to access cultural resources and knowledge and that no one is able to claim them exclusively for themselves or their institution if that results in others no longer being able to enjoy them too.

In this historical moment, the concept of the commons may seem startling, even radical, but it has been a primary way that societies have managed resources throughout history. David Bollier, Michael Sandel, and others point out that we are in an era of unprecedented “enclosure,” where shared resources are being co-opted and utilized for private financial gain. As Sandel points out, the idea that some things should not be monetized, for either moral or practical reasons, is increasingly hard to defend in our hypercapitalist society.²⁴ Bollier suggests, however, that the commons is not only a different way to share resources and communicate, it is actually a different way of understanding the relationship between the individual and the community as well. The commons implies a “nested I,” meaning “that the individual is not self-made and ahistorical, but that the collective impacts who I become.”²⁵

24 Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012).

25 David Bollier conversation with Alexis Frasz, 2017.

Theatre is by nature a collaborative art form, yet HowlRound's attempt to assert the commons as a fundamental principle for the theatre still seemed radical, and even threatening, to many. In 2017, P. Carl wrote,

At HowlRound we believe the knowledge and creativity that make up the theatre, that gets expressed through various avenues of experience and dialogue, should belong to as many people as possible, that art should be democratized wherever and whenever. In other words, conversations and conferences and performances should have as broad a reach as our will, and our rules and our technology will allow. As Lewis Hyde put it, 'Ideas, inventions, melodies, and ancient epics ... are non-rivalrous, if I consume them, so can you.'²⁶

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Hyde suggests that cultural resources have a unique quality in that, when they are used and enjoyed, they do not get depleted but rather beget more cultural ideas, objects, and experiences. Ideas and expressions are shared, and often re-combined, inspiring more creation and enjoyment. This bolsters the argument for a cultural commons. Thinking of cultural resources as collectively owned will not result in their being spread more thinly or over-used (as the

26 P. Carl, "Curating a Theatrical Commons," *Canadian Theatre Review* (Fall 2017), 116.

often-flawed “tragedy of the commons” rhetoric suggests²⁷), but will exponentially compound and enlarge them.



The Black Playwrights Convening, January 2010.

²⁷ John Tierney, “The Non-Tragedy of the Commons,” Tierney Lab, *The New York Times*, October 15, 2009. <https://tierneylab.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/15/the-non-tragedy-of-the-commons/>.

5.

Operationalizing the Commons

Asserting the commons as a philosophy is one thing, but how does the commons as an idea and set of values inform the practice of an organization or even a field? HowlRound has spent the last seven years working to answer this question. Our society's dominant paradigm—individualistic, competitive, and market-based—is so deeply ingrained in and perpetuated by our organizational structures and practices that it is often invisible to us. HowlRound realized early on that operationalizing commons values would require intentionally rewiring organizational structures and behaviors, or else dominant values would be perpetuated by default.

26



Emerson College President Lee Pelton addresses the first cohort meeting for the National Playwright Residency Program, March 2013.

As P. Carl and Vijay Mathew wrote in *Shareable* in 2011:

We've had to rethink our notions of conventional branding, identity, and behavior. If we are going to become stewards and stakeholders of a collectively shared commons, along with thousands of other organizations and artists in our field, we have to start thinking of ourselves as a 'We' and no longer as a 'Me.' Our theatre economy, like much of the larger world, is based on the primary assertion of the 'Me' in order to gain dominance, win funding, and social capital—a 'Me' that usually asserts itself at the expense of someone or something else.²⁸

27

This section describes how HowlRound operationalizes its core components, special initiatives, and key resources toward furthering the commons.

Based on its experiences over seven years, HowlRound has recently refined its mission, vision and values:

28 Carl and Mathew, "Building a New American Theater of the Commons." See also Jamie Gahlon, "HowlRound: A Case Story in Cultural Commoning," Voluntary Arts, November 15, 2017. <https://www.voluntaryarts.org/howlround-a-case-study-in-cultural-commoning>.

MISSION

HowlRound is a free and open platform for theatremakers worldwide that amplifies progressive, disruptive ideas about the art form and facilitates connection between diverse practitioners.

| 28

VISION

HowlRound seeks to democratize the arts by effectively modeling the transformative power of commons-based practice.

| 29

VALUES

- Generosity and abundance — all are welcome and necessary
- Community and collaboration over isolation and competition
- Diverse aesthetics and the evolution of forms of theatre practice
- Equity, inclusivity, and accessibility for underrepresented theatre communities and practices
- Global citizenship — local communities intersecting with global practice

HowlRound's values inform all of its choices about what it does and, even more critically, how it does it. The technology tools that HowlRound uses, whether an online journal or streaming, do not inherently promote commons-based behavior. In fact, the very same technology is often used in ways that serve commercial or individualistic motives. HowlRound has intentionally embraced the model of commons-based peer production and Creative Commons licensing,²⁹ and has designed both its own internal structure and the tools it offers the field in ways that reflect and reinforce commons values.

Core Components

HowlRound has built and staffed a new technological infrastructure to support the evolution of an inclusive, non-hierarchical, and socially responsible theatre community. It is designed to challenge the "twentieth-century assumption that to pool and share resources (technology and audiences) is to somehow lose one's organizational or brand-identity. [HowlRound's] innovation lies not in just using new technology, but in [its] coordination of it, in order to unleash a flood of new knowledge sharing and community building."³⁰ The three core technology tools that HowlRound utilizes are widely accessible and relatively simple: web-based publishing, video streaming, and user-generated maps.

29 Free copyright licenses that creators can use to give the public permission to share and use their work on their own terms. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>.

30 Vijay Mathew, "Submission of Excellence: HowlRound," *ArtsFWD*, December 5, 2012. <https://www.artsfwd.org/submission-of-excellence-howlround/>.

The HowlRound Journal

This online journal features essays on theatre and theatremaking written by practitioners in the field. Anyone can pitch an idea for a piece. Proposals for articles are vetted by HowlRound staff to ensure they meet its criteria of being original content, not purely self-promotional, additive to the existing conversation, and in line with HowlRound's values. HowlRound pays artist contributors \$50-\$150 USD per piece and edits submissions for content, style, and clarity prior to publication. In addition to individual articles on a wide variety of topics, the journal also publishes series that are proposed and curated by people in the field. Past series have focused on theatre in certain geographic areas (e.g., Montreal, New Orleans, Budapest, Brussels) and specific topics such as climate change, freedom of expression in the Middle East, disability in theatre, parent artists, and the arts and the military, among others. HowlRound staff occasionally write for the journal, suggest ideas for articles to others, and solicit content. The journal now contains over 3,200 pieces by 1,800 writers, amplifying an ever-expanding range of voices and reflecting the issues and concerns of an ever-widening cross-section of the theatre field today. As of December 2017, HowlRound had more than 45,000 unique users per month.

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HowlRound TV

HowlRound has multiple livestreaming channels that feature material from conferences, panel discussions, and performances themselves. Any person or organization can stream an event free of charge, as long as the channel is available at the time and the content has some value to the larger theatre community. Similar to journal content, TV producers submit their events via a pitch form, and HowlRound staff members vet the submissions for values alignment at a weekly meeting. A HowlRound staff

person works with the event's producer to ensure that they have adequate technical capacity and troubleshoots glitches that occur during streaming. HowlRound also publishes an announcement of each event and provides social media support to alert the field to the event. After being streamed, HowlRound archives the recording, and it becomes part of the knowledge commons on the HowlRound site. Currently HowlRound's TV archive contains more than 800 videos, from over 350 peer producers, that get thousands of view per month. In 2017, HowlRound TV streamed 113 events.

In addition to democratizing access to a wide variety of content for theatre practitioners, this is an efficient way of providing access to livestreaming technology for all content producers, regardless of location, financial resources, or status in the field. For example, both Theatre Communications Group's annual conference and the annual Alternate ROOTS convening are livestreamed on HowlRound, vastly expanding the reach of these gatherings beyond the live event and making them accessible to all. Vijay Mathew explains how this shared infrastructure creates exponential value for the field for a relatively small investment of resources. "Say 100 theatre arts organizations each have a livestreaming channel that costs \$5,000 per year—that's a lot of money, especially given the fact that one channel could provide enough bandwidth for the entire community. By aggregating the infrastructure and tools in one place, all 100 organizations don't need to have their own livestreaming channels. In this case, sharing is enormously efficient and cost effective."³¹

31 Jessica Conrad, "Why Peer Production Thrives in the Field of Theater Arts," On the Commons, November 18, 2013. <http://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/why-peer-production-thrives-field-theater-arts> - sthash.R1biAtw1.dpbs.



The World Theatre Map homepage, 2017.

World Theatre Map

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The World Theatre Map is a user-generated directory and real-time map of the global theatre community. It is currently available in English, Spanish, and French. An earlier iteration, the New Play Map, focused solely on new plays by US playwrights produced in the US. The World Theatre Map expands that scope to include all theatremakers and all kinds of plays. Anyone with a free user account can add or edit information on the Map, and it is a live, searchable directory of theatre organizations, artists, shows, and festivals happening worldwide. A majority of World Theatre Map users are not based in the US.

Four things make HowlRound's approach innovative and transformative:

- I.** The grouping of these tools on a single platform, which is freely accessible to all
- II.** The staff support to activate and maintain them
- III.** The commons philosophy that the tools and the content on the platform is for all, by all
- IV.** Regular convenings and other in-person relationship building activities



Participants reviewing action items at the convening From Scarcity to Abundance: Capturing the Moment for the New Work Sector in Washington, DC, January 2011.

Initiatives

In addition to its ongoing core programs, HowlRound undertakes activities to respond to emerging needs and opportunities in the field. To date, these initiatives have included:

In Person Convenings

HowlRound regularly produces and curates live convenings focused on key issues facing the field, often collaborating with other entities, such as Todd London's Third Bohemia, Theatre Development Fund, and Theatre Bay Area. Since 2009, HowlRound has hosted twenty such convenings, bringing together over six hundred theatremakers from across the field. Topics have included ensemble theatre making, the aesthetics of Latinx theatre making, examining the challenges and opportunities for Black playwrights, defining what we mean when we talk about diversity, and the opportunities and challenges facing transgender theatre artists, to name a few. Convenings have ranged in size from eight to two hundred people, and in length from half a day to multiple days. Some of these gatherings have triggered ongoing meetings or publications. HowlRound's convening on the intersections between the nonprofit and commercial theatre, for example, was the basis for Diane Ragsdale's subsequent book, *In the Intersection: Partnerships in the New Play Sector*.³² Unlike its online platforms, which are open to all, attendance at HowlRound

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32 Diane Ragsdale, "In the Intersection: Partnerships in the New Play Sector," HowlRound, October 15, 2012. <http://howlround.com/in-the-intersection-partnerships-in-the-new-play-sector>.

33 David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, (New York: Routledge, 1996).

convenings is carefully curated. However, most convenings are livestreamed to allow for virtual participation and wide accessibility (with the exception of convenings where privacy is necessary for the participants to feel safe or comfortable).

The agenda for each convening varies, but the commons philosophy informs the design of these gatherings, which are structured to encourage non-hierarchical dialogue across professional silos and perspectives. Inspired by the work of David Bohm,³³ HowlRound adapted and developed a dialogue format called Inner Circle / Outer Circle, where a group of people sit in a small circle inside a larger circle of participants. The inner group has an open dialogue in response to a prompt, while people in the outer circle listen actively. Next, the full group converses together reflecting and building upon what they have just heard. This is an unusual format for most professional convenings and it has qualities that participants find powerful, even transformative: genuine dialogue is encouraged, listening is as important as talking, and there is no false pressure to reach agreement. Diverse perspectives are intentionally included in the group and that diversity is genuinely respected; greater understanding is more highly valued than “winning the argument.”³⁴

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HowlRound’s convening skills are widely recognized as one of its distinguishing assets. Cheryl Ikemiya, program officer at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, notes: “They organize meetings in ways that conversations can thrive. Everyone feels comfortable and drawn in, and [is] able to find a place of common interest.

34 HowlRound, “HowlRound Inner Circle, Outer Circle Methodology,” internal document, 15 November 2017. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CobJwiOL-gIL4pbfR6eHA1eDkAXwIFhyYUN6HoQ1830/edit>.

Artists are fully integrated into the discussion, not just asked to perform or teach [as in many other theatre convenings].” People are increasingly approaching HowlRound for its skill in this area, including the New England Foundation for the Arts, which reached out to HowlRound to coproduce a 2017 convening on arts and the military.



Trans Theatre Artists Convening in partnership with New Dramatists, December 2015. Photo by Ramona Ostrowski.



Kirk Lynn leading a session during the Devised Work Convening in February 2010.

Support for Commons Formation

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HowlRound staff members are quick to clarify that HowlRound is not the commons, but an infrastructure and support system that allows users to engage in the act of “commoning.” To that end, Vijay Mathew says, “Our role as HowlRound staff is that of community organizers, facilitators, and systems designers.”³⁵

HowlRound’s intention is to make it easy for groups of theatre practitioners with shared sensibilities or interests to form supportive communities using its infrastructure and resources. It has hosted, advised on, or encouraged meetings with a number of sub-communities within the theatre field to explore how

³⁵ Jennie Rose Halperin, “Curtain up on HowlRound, the theater knowledge commons,” Creative Commons, November 10, 2016. <https://creativecommons.org/2016/11/10/howlround/>.

HowlRound's tools could advance their interests, including representatives of Black theatre, Asian and Pacific Islander theatremakers in the Boston area, and transgender theatremakers. HowlRound is currently working on upcoming gatherings with organizers of the Jubilee,³⁶ the diverse nationwide theatre festival; theatremakers concerned with climate change; Native American theatremakers; and theatremakers who are Deaf. To date, the Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC) is the most prominent example of how a motivated community of interest has been able to partner with and utilize HowlRound's infrastructure and ethos to communicate, organize, share resources, and advance its goals.

The LTC is an illustrative example of how a smaller community of interest within the theatre field can self-organize and mobilize to reach common goals, drawing on HowlRound's technology and staff as a resource. Initially incubated as part of Karen Zacarias' playwright residency with the American Voices New Play Institute and further nurtured in subsequent convenings, HowlRound now supports the LTC through a dedicated producer, Abigail Vega, supervisory assistance from HowlRound cofounder Jamie Gahlon, significant HowlRound staff time, and other administrative support. The LTC is independently governed by its own Steering Committee (of which Gahlon is a member), sets its own goals, and implements and assesses its own programs. (More on the LTC on p. 25.)

36 "Welcome to the Jubilee," Join the Jubilee. <https://jointhejubilee.org>.



Joe Goode and Judith Smith of AXIS Dance at the convening Art in the Service of Understanding: Bridging Artists, Military, Veterans, and Civilian Communities, co-produced with the New England Foundation for the Arts, March 2017. Photo by Jeffrey Filiault.

National Playwright Residency Program (NPRP)

In 2012, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation launched a national funding program designed to improve conditions for playwrights and the relationship between playwrights and theatres by embedding playwrights in producing theatres for three-year terms with salaries, benefits, and a guarantee for full production. At the start of the program, the Foundation asked HowlRound to help amplify and enhance the impacts of the program on the participants and the theatre field as a whole. HowlRound has organized regular convenings for participants, facilitated developmental residencies for playwrights, managed and disbursed developmental “micro-funds” for each playwright, and encouraged participants to document their experiences and share them with the field through HowlRound’s online platform. The real-time sharing of experiences by the participating playwrights

and artistic directors has made the program more transparent than other funding initiatives, strengthened the connections among members of the NPRP cohort, and enabled others in the field to learn from their struggles, discoveries, and successes. The program and its documentation has also advanced the field's ongoing dialogue about the issues at the heart of the book *Outrageous Fortune*: how to pay artists equitably, how to improve relations between playwrights and theatres, the role playwrights can play in connecting theatres to their communities, among others, as well as the dynamics of class, race, and gender in the theatre field.

Publishing

Since its inception, HowlRound has published or co-published three books on topics of critical and timely importance to the field:

- *In the Intersection: Partnerships in the New Play Sector* by Diane Ragsdale
- *The Latina/o Theatre Commons 2013 National Convening: A Narrative Report* by Brian Eugenio Herrera
- *All the Lights On: Reimagining Theater with Ten Thousand Things* by Michelle Hensley

Twitter Conversations

On Twitter, the use of hashtags (#) creates a virtual place for conversation around a particular topic or theme that can be easily followed. As part of the American Voices New Play Institute, HowlRound encouraged everyone in the field to use #newplay to



Kevin Moore and Erin Washington at In the Intersection: Non-Profit & Commercial Producers in the New Play Sector convening, Washington DC, November 2011.

announce new plays, rather than the standard practice of solely using the name of one's own theatre or play. This simple practice allowed anyone to easily track new plays without having to engage in laborious research or consistently follow all potential theatres, writers, or directors. #newplay is now widely used by both theatres and theatremakers to promote their own plays as well as new works by others. This is a clear shift towards more commons-oriented behavior.

For some years, HowlRound also hosted a weekly Twitter conversation centered on topics of interest to the theatre field, co-moderated by volunteers from HowlRound's readership community and HowlRound staff. These conversations dealt with topics such as how actors can confront whitewashing in the theatre, art, and the military, and reframing the climate narrative and definitions of "fringe." An archive of these chats can be found at howlround.com/twitterchats.

Resources

There is a widespread misconception about online commons-based peer production platforms. Because many such platforms use inexpensive and freely available technological tools and the content is largely user-generated, there is a perception that they can run on a shoestring budget or with minimal staff. Although commons-based platforms can be highly resource efficient compared to more top-down models, they still require ample resources to manage and scale. Lack of sufficient resources, including staff time and expertise, may explain some of the difficulty that others have had in trying to replicate HowlRound's success in other sectors such as dance or music.

The resources that HowlRound draws on are:

Emerson College

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In 2012, HowlRound's staff and operations moved from Arena Stage to Emerson College, which continues to host it alongside ArtsEmerson (a professional presenting and producing organization) in the college's Office the Arts. HowlRound's current core staff members (Jamie Gahlon, Vijay Mathew, Ramona Ostrowski, and J.D. Stokely, HowlRound Fellow) are employees of Emerson and work full-time on HowlRound activities. LTC Producer Abigail Vega works as an independent contractor with a full focus on the LTC. Until his departure from HowlRound in late 2017, P. Carl was director of HowlRound while also serving as co-artistic director of ArtsEmerson. HowlRound also employs other part-time staff, including a content editor and HowlRound TV producer, and employs Emerson College student assistants. Emerson's vice president for the College of the Arts and artistic director of ArtsEmerson, David Dower, and Office of the Arts executive

director, David Howse, an associate vice president at Emerson, are advisors to HowlRound and provide additional developmental support, as needed. Other staff members in the Office of the Arts help HowlRound with production needs, contracts, finance, development, and company management. In addition to these salaried positions, Emerson provides HowlRound with office space, technical support, and access to the administrative, financial, and intellectual resources of the college.

Emerson College is dedicated to innovation in communication and the arts, so being embedded there is aligned with both HowlRound's goals and its own. Deploying its substantial resources and expertise to help disrupt the status quo is in keeping with the college's strategic goals and the commons philosophy. As Vijay Mathew has noted, "It is actually important that we are within an institution like Emerson. The field is full of established institutions that have abundant money and power that can be repurposed toward the benefit of the whole." HowlRound's mission means that it is focused on ensuring whatever resources are invested in it, whether from Emerson or its philanthropic funders, are used to directly benefit the field as a whole. HowlRound's presence at Emerson means that the students, who are tomorrow's theatre leaders, have ready access to a wide range of knowledge, expertise, and tools.

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Staff Expertise

HowlRound's staff bring decades of experience in theatre management, new work development, and artistic leadership, as well as in community organizing, advocacy, fundraising, and research/writing. The cofounders (Dower, Carl, Gahlon, and Mathew) worked together on HowlRound for almost a decade, making the most of their different perspectives and longevity as

a team. Full-time permanent staff at the time this review began included:

- P. Carl, Director
- Jamie Gahlon, Senior Creative Producer
- Vijay Mathew, Cultural Strategist
- Ramona Ostrowski, Associate Producer

Peers

HowlRound is able to achieve its reach and impact because of its commons-based peer production model, which draws on the dedication, energy, and knowledge contributed by hundreds of peer writers and content creators, as well as the engaged participation of readers and viewers worldwide. This includes the national theatre leaders who served on HowlRound's National Advisory Committee from 2012–2017.³⁷

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³⁷ "About," HowlRound. <http://howlround.com/about>.

Philanthropy

HowlRound has benefitted from generous operating and program support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Barr Foundation, and the NEA, as well as numerous other donors.³⁸ This support has made it possible to build and maintain HowlRound's platform and tools, and to engage in activities that animate and support the community as a whole.

38 HowlRound and the Latinx Theatre Commons have also received contributions from Trust for Mutual Understanding, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Joyce Foundation, National Association for Latino Arts and Culture, Institute for International Education, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

“The third great era in the making of a national theatre occurred when HowlRound was founded [five years ago]. The first era was the Federal Theatre Project under the WPA and the great Hallie Flanagan.... The second great era was ... the regional theatre movement started in the early 1960s.... HowlRound’s founding launched the era of the commons. The hallmark of this era is that no one is in charge, except us.”

Todd London (2016)³⁹

39 “Video Archive: The Latina/o Theatre Commons 2016 Pacific Northwest Convening in Seattle—Friday 15 April 2016,” Café Onda, HowlRound, April 15, 2016. <http://howlround.com/latin-ao-theatre-commons-2016-pacific-northwest-convening-seattle-friday-april-15>.

6.

Notable Impacts on the Field

In any complex system, it is difficult—sometimes impossible—to attribute causality to any single factor. However, the theatre sector has experienced a number of profound changes in the years since HowlRound’s founding, and many leading voices in the sector believe that HowlRound has contributed significantly to these shifts. In public statements and in private notes of thanks to the HowlRound staff, the most impacts cluster in four areas:

Making the Whole More Visible

When the HowlRound journal was launched in 2011, the existing outlets for theatre discourse were controlled by a small group of people, most of whom had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Diane Ragsdale, at the time program officer at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, observes that “Prior to HowlRound, American theatre criticism was mostly puff pieces for big theatres and rising stars—there was little critique and the majority [of theatremakers] just weren’t given a platform at all. People felt disenfranchised. HowlRound brought many more people into a larger conversation around American theatre.” HowlRound staff believe it “has made highly visible space for a multiplicity of viewpoints, perspectives, and practices ... generating a diversity of narratives about contemporary theatre making that had been previously marginalized and unheard.”⁴⁰

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40 Jennie Rose Halperin, “Curtain up on HowlRound,” *Creative Commons*. November 10, 2016. <https://creativecommons.org/2016/11/10/howlround/>.

HowlRound's popularity and rapid growth surprised even the founders, who, while aware that many people lacked vehicles to express themselves, were not aware of just how big this community was. Jamie Gahlon believes that the grassroots energy that is now visible on HowlRound was always there, just under the surface. "We revealed something rather than created it," she says. The growth and reach of HowlRound would not have been possible were it not for the peer production model itself, which shifts creation, ownership, and decision-making power to the community. While acknowledging that HowlRound still hits up against its capacity limits, given its scope, Vijay Mathew observes that "HowlRound would not have worked if we had used a traditional journalism / media model... it would fail because a purely professional staff wouldn't be able to handle the volume, and the content would be too limited and narrow." Gahlon continues, "The peer production model unlocks the energy of the community in ways that traditional media models do not."

HowlRound's popularity among a wide range of theatre artists—as readers, writers, and content sharers—makes the true diversity and scope of the theatre field visible. "HowlRound helps the entire theatre field see the entire theatre field," says Jonathan McCrory, director of theatre arts at the National Black Theatre and member of the HowlRound National Advisory Council. "We get to see the full ecology, and that helps us have a real conversation about the stories that are essential to our humanity as a society but haven't been told in the dominant theatre sector." Diane Ragsdale concurs that it helps people "see a larger theatre ecosystem that we knew was there but was invisible, including how bigger and smaller institutions are part of the same interdependent landscape." The range of voices and activity on HowlRound's platform provides objective proof that there are broader spectrums of theatre

practice, aesthetics, venues, and cultural contexts than appear on mainstream stages, much of it deeply rooted in community values rather than market-oriented ones. It has also made it indisputable and clearly visible that while the larger theatres and superstar artists may take a majority of the field's resources, they represent only a small portion of the creative energy and numbers in the field, a major point in David Dower's "Gates of Opportunity" report in 2009. Still, seven years on, both HowlRound staff and others acknowledge that what is visible now may still be only the tip of the creative iceberg.

Providing a Structure for Organizing

Not only has HowlRound enabled the theatre field to see itself more comprehensively, it has also enabled individuals who share common values and concerns to find each other, exchange ideas, build supportive communities, and advocate for change. Activity on HowlRound's platform has revealed a critical mass of energy around certain topics. Previously, issues such as the lack of diversity and equity in the theatre field, the power dynamics between artists and administrators, and the lack of validation for community-based work had little purchase in larger field conversations. The reason is obvious: truly contending with these issues would require challenging the hegemony of the institutions that controlled decision-making and resources, an impossible challenge for individuals acting alone. Advocates for change in the field were dispersed and most lacked access to platforms to gather, communicate, and organize.

Through HowlRound's technical tools and initiatives, individuals separated by geography, financial status, or professional community have been able to coalesce around issues of common concern to share information, strategize, and exert pressure for

change. Providing a way for people to self-organize outside of and beyond institutions has been profound and has revealed that many of these concerns are not marginal, as they had been portrayed, but rather important to large segments of the field. By enabling these topics to be consistently foregrounded, HowlRound has had significant impact on the evolution of the field overall. San San Wong, program director at the Barr Foundation, put it this way: “HowlRound pushes up against the hierarchy in theatre. For example, it has been a validation mechanism for recognizing the lack of diversity. For this reason, it was threatening to many in the beginning. It is more accepted now, in part because the conversation in the rest of the field has evolved alongside it.” Cathy Edwards, executive director of the New England Foundation for the Arts, adds, “The field is really different because of HowlRound. It is much more connected at the grass roots. This is truly one of the breakout successes of national arts infrastructure.”

Some social scientists and scholars believe that infrastructures such as HowlRound foreshadows how we will organize people and activities in the future. David Bollier predicts that these kinds of “networked hubs of decentralized activity with the same sensibility” will displace the current “command and control” paradigm of organizing people and resources, which tends to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the few. These new, more democratic structures allow for a more emergent and decentralized form of leadership and activity. They are also more efficient. Bollier references “the structural limitations of centralized command-and-control bureaucracies in a networked age,” catalogued by anthropologist David Graeber and others, and argues that “the ‘next system’ will have to embrace peer

cooperation on distributed networks to do work that bureaucracy cannot perform well.”⁴¹

Democratizing Access to Knowledge

HowlRound has become one of the nation’s largest archives of theatre-related material,⁴² all freely accessible to anyone with an internet connection. This repository of essays, videos, convening documentation, and more is an invaluable knowledge asset for the field. Previously, access to the ephemeral art form of live theatre required living in or traveling to physical locations where the work was taking place. This gave a distinct advantage to artists and theatre professionals who could locate in theatre centers like New York or Chicago, and compounded the dominance of these locations in the field at large. Similarly, national and regional conferences like those hosted by Theatre Communications Group, Association of Performing Arts Professionals, and National Performance Network required ability and funds to travel, and sometimes an invitation. Recordings of performances or conference sessions either did not exist or were proprietary and hard to access. This further reinforced the hierarchical power dynamic in the field, strongly favoring those with access to the “insider networks.”

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Use of HowlRound’s livestreaming service has been growing in all

41 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules* (New York: Melville House, 2015) as referenced in Bollier, “Commoning as a Transformative Paradigm.”

42 To date, most of this commentary has been from the US, but this is beginning to change. A growing amount of content is being provided by theatremakers outside of the US, in multiple languages. In 2012 10 percent of HowlRound users were from outside of the US. By 2017, this had risen to 20 percent. Expanding its international reach is a strategic priority for HowlRound in its next phase of development.

segments of the field. A range of small, grassroots organizations and artists as well as larger theatres such as the Public, Dallas Theater Center, South Coast Rep, Berkeley Rep, and the Guthrie are using HowlRound TV to share stage productions and educational programs nationally and internationally. The positive benefits of streaming quickly become clear to those that do it. SITl Company found that, in livestreaming its symposium on the Suzuki Method, it “learned that placing an emphasis on digital accessibility deeply increased the impact of our event ... and [generated] a much more profound encounter than anticipated.”⁴³ In addition, Theatre Communications Group, Association of Performing Arts Presenters, Dance/USA, IETM - International network for contemporary performing arts, National Performance Network, Network of Ensemble Theatres, and others now typically stream their convenings. This broadly expands access to events, regardless of people’s locations or finances and, as artistic director of The Yard David White says, “breaks open ‘insider’ conversations.” HowlRound’s archive “is a great equalizer” in the theatre field, notes the Barr Foundation’s San San Wong, “because its content comes from people who are not ‘the usual suspects’ and people who are ‘the greats.’”

This digital knowledge repository is also influencing how theatre is taught and studied. A growing number of educational institutions—from as far away as Seoul, South Korea—are using the HowlRound archive as a basis for their curricula. This reduces the need to be located in or near a “theatre center” to study theatre, thereby expanding the geographical diversity of emerging artists. It

⁴³ Informal communication with HowlRound.

also allows budding theatremakers to be informed by a widening array of contemporary practitioners around the globe, rather than just the official library or experts that might be accessible at their particular institution. The long-term impact that this breaking open will have on the evolution of the theatre discipline is unknown, but some field leaders believe it could be profound.

There are signs that field norms are shifting in the direction of greater transparency and openness—propelled, in part, by HowlRound’s non-proprietary tools and methods. Vijay Mathew notices this reflected in “micro-behaviors.” In HowlRound’s early days, he notes, when large theatres used HowlRound TV, they wanted to have the content clearly branded as their own. Now there is less demand for this, which Mathew believes is because the theatres recognize that they get greater reputational benefits from participating in the peer sharing community than from reinforcing their own brand.

Spreading the Commons Philosophy and Practice

HowlRound staff members acknowledge that some people use their platform and tools simply because they find them useful, and not because of an underlying commitment to commons values or behavior. They expect this will continue to be the case for many users, but they plan to become even more intentional in their efforts to influence the field’s consciousness and practice toward a commons-oriented approach.

Part of how HowlRound inspires commons behavior is by consciously articulating a set of alternative values and showing how these can be made tangible through its operating structure and practices. This is most explicit in HowlRound staff writings, in the structure and content of its convenings, and in its support for

affinity groups of theatremakers to engage in “commoning.” Over time, it has become a beacon that attracts, activates, amplifies, and connects the community of art makers who want to be working in more community-oriented ways. Jonathan McCrory, artistic director of the Theatre Arts Program at the National Black Theatre, says, “HowlRound is a way to connect people interested in democratizing the making and presenting art.... The way that HowlRound operates helps us reimagine the way we do our work, outside of the capitalist mindset.” While a widespread shift in attitude is difficult to quantify, anecdotally HowlRound staff note that words like “abundance,” “generosity,” and “non-competitive” are now more commonly used by a broader cross-section of people in the field, both in submissions to HowlRound and in other publications and public forums. In addition, convening partners are increasingly open to the commons philosophy as an organizing framework at events.

The Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC) is widely acknowledged by HowlRound and others in the field as a predominant example of the radical possibility of the commons (see profile below).

While its participants would agree that it is a work in progress, it is a vivid example of how commons-based infrastructure and philosophy can unleash possibilities that would otherwise have remained dormant. HowlRound simply provided physical and virtual space, tools, and support for a group of Latinx theatre community members to incubate their ideas and self-organize. HowlRound’s commons philosophy provided a starting place, which LTC built on to develop its non-hierarchical, radically inclusive organizing structure. David Dower says, “The LTC members already had these values and concerns. They just lacked a structure to connect to each other and support action. That’s what HowlRound provided.” The LTC is now a cultural-

political movement, engaging thousands of people and hundreds of institutions nationally and internationally. In the words of cofounder Lisa Portes, head of the MFA program in directing at the Theatre School of DePaul University, “The LTC [has now become] the most effective, dexterous, and impactful model for getting sh*t done I’ve ever come across.”

Profile

Latinx Theatre Commons

Although the US cultural landscape is vibrantly multicultural, the content and audiences of mainstream American theatre do not reflect this reality, and as a result perpetuate outdated narratives and ideas of America. Latinx people are the fastest growing population in the United States. According to the US Census, the Latinx population has increased by 50 percent since 2000 and nearly 600 percent since 1970. Yet the faces and artistic voices of the Latinx community are vastly underrepresented on stages and theatrical venues across the country.

The Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC) was initiated by a group of Latinx theatremakers who were increasingly frustrated with the misrepresentation or lack of Latinx culture on stages and in professional theatre publications, the lack of attention to Latinx theatre in national theatre dialogue, and the absence of places for Latinx artists to gather, talk, and address challenges facing their work. In 2012, following discussions she initiated while a resident playwright with American Voices New Play Institute, Karen Zacarias, playwright and founder of the Young Playwrights Theater, asked HowlRound to host a two-day meeting for a small group of Latinx theatre artists. This group, which came to be known as “the DC 8,”⁴⁴ birthed the LTC as a forum dedicated to using “a commons-

based approach to transform the narrative of the American theatre, to amplify the visibility of Latina/o/x performance making, and to champion equity through advocacy, art making, convening, and scholarship.”⁴⁵

From its galvanizing first meeting in May 2012, the group moved quickly to organize a larger national gathering, which took place with HowlRound’s support in October 2013 at Emerson College in Boston.⁴⁶ This meeting brought together close to eighty playwrights, directors, scholars, and others—the largest gathering of Latinx theatremakers in more than twenty-five years. A Steering Committee was established, and a movement was born. The LTC now includes an international network of more than three thousand constituent members; a Steering Committee of fifty-five people diverse in age, gender, geography, and cultural background; ten subcommittees; and a rapidly growing program of activities, including convenings, showcases, and festivals, online commentary, publications, mentorships and support for related scholarship, networking, and professional development activities.

HowlRound provided part-time producing support for the LTC for its first eighteen months, and—when it was clear that more was needed—helped secure funding for a dedicated producer from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Abigail Vega was hired as the LTC Producer in spring 2014, and began that May. She is an independent contractor supervised by Gahlon at HowlRound. The LTC raises money to cover her compensation, which HowlRound

44 Kristoffer Diaz, Lisa Portes, Tlaloc Rivas, Antonio Sonera, Enrique Urueta, José Luis Valenzuela, Anne García-Romero, and Karen Zacarías.

45 Goal statement by LTC on HowlRound website as of 2017. <http://howlround.com/latinx-theatre-commons>.

46 For more information, see Brian Eugenio Herrera’s monograph on the convening http://howlround.com/sites/default/files/The_Latina_o_Theatre_Commons_2013_National_Convening_A_Narrative_Report.pdf.

has supplemented as needed. Vega remains the LTC's first and only staff member, working closely with the Steering Committee and constituents to craft and implement its mission, vision, values, and programs, and its organizing and decision-making philosophy.

The LTC is built on the principles of "Service, Radical Inclusion, Transparency, Legacy and Leadership Cultivation, and Advancement of the Art Form."⁴⁷ Vega describes the process of development: "It took us a year. We had to provide multiple opportunities for everyone to have a say. We started with sixty values and whittled them to five. We've had to prove to people that we aren't working in a traditional structure.... We promote horizontal mentorship—legacy and leadership across generations. We are working to break the expectation of hierarchy and 'being chosen.' We have worked to educate people about what a commons is—it is not a free-for-all or a place where you get things free. It is accessible to all, but together we must set and follow the rules. All of our decisions are consensus-based."

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Since 2013, in partnership with HowlRound and in collaboration with numerous other partners and contributors, LTC has produced a wide range of events, including:

⁴⁷ Anne García-Romero, "Latina/o Theatre Commons: Updating the US Narrative," Café Onda, HowlRound, August 8, 2012. <http://howlround.com/latinoa-theater-commons-updating-the-us-narrative>.

- **2013 LTC National Convening** Boston, October-November, 2013
- **2014 Sol Project Meeting** New York, August, 2014
- **2014 LTC National Convening at the 2014 Encuentro: A National Latina/o Theatre Festival** Los Angeles, November, 2014
- **2015 LTC Carnaval of New Latina/o Works** Chicago, July, 2015
- **2015 LTC Texas Regional Convening** Dallas, October-November, 2015
- **2016 LTC Pacific Northwest Regional Convening** Seattle, April, 2016
- **2016 LTC New York Regional Convening** New York, December, 2016
- **2017 LTC International Convening at the Encuentro de las Americas International Theatre Festival** Los Angeles, November, 2017



The Latinx Theatre Commons First National Convening, October 2013. Photo by Meg Taintor.

In addition, LTC has aided the development of the Fornés Institute, established to preserve and archive the work of Maria Irene Fornés through workshops, convenings, and advocacy, and El Fuego Committed Theatres Initiative, a consortium of eighteen theatres supporting the development and production of new Latinx plays. LTC also launched and sustains Café Onda, a dedicated section of the of HowlRound journal focused on Latinx theatremaking. LTC has also encouraged the development of other commons-based efforts such as the Black Theatre Commons, the Consortium of Asian American Theaters & Artists, the Ghostlight Project,

48 American Theatre Editors, "TCG Announces 2017 National Conference Awardees," American Theatre. <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/06/06/tcg-announces-2017-national-conference-awardees/>.



Participants at the 2014 LTC Second National Convening which took place at the 2014 LATC Encuentro: A National Latina/o Theatre Festival in November 2014.

and the Every 28 Hours National Initiative. In June, 2017 Theatre Communications Group awarded the LTC and HowlRound the Peter Zeisler Memorial Award for exemplifying pioneering practices in theatre and dedication to the freedom of expression and risk-taking in advancement of the art form.⁴⁸ Reflecting the commons spirit of the effort, twenty-five people went to the stage to accept the honor. The LTC has had far-reaching impacts on participants. By enabling the sizable community of Latinx theatre artists to see each other and organize around shared goals, the LTC has elevated the visibility of Latinx theatre productions, provided Latinx theatremakers with new opportunities to make and showcase work, and increased the numbers of works by Latinx theatre artists on mainstream stages.

This has influenced the thinking and programming of numerous theatres and inspired other cohorts of theatremakers to consider their own routes to collective action. Other impacts of the LTC on the landscape of American theatre are likely to be seen in the future.

7.

What's Next?

By all accounts, HowlRound has been a remarkable success even in its short lifetime, contributing to transforming the way the theatre field understands itself and communicates. Its experiment in “opening the firehose” of voices outside of the gates of mainstream theatre changed the field, revealing the centrality of issues and perspectives that were formerly marginalized or invisible, and allowing like-minded people to connect and organize. This is not a minor intervention—systems specialists say changing who has access to information and enabling people to self-organize are two of the most important leverage points in any system for creating change.⁴⁹

In part because of its own work, conditions in the theatre landscape are different now than they were when HowlRound started. Things that were perceived as radical or threatening by mainstream theatre at that time, like allowing anyone to publish or free livestreaming of content, are now commonplace and (mostly) accepted by even the largest theatres as the new normal. As the margin has moved towards the center, HowlRound is appropriately asking itself: What is next on this evolutionary journey?

From 2016–2017, HowlRound undertook its first strategic planning process. With extensive input from advisors, field experts, and its

49 Donella Meadows, *Places to Intervene in a System* (The Sustainability Institute, 1999). <http://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>

platform users, HowlRound reaffirmed its mission and values with a few adjustments to better reflect the needs in the field today. It will continue to serve as a free and open knowledge commons for the theatre field, but will publish fewer articles and prioritize those that seek to challenge the status quo and support the values, voices, and practices HowlRound is trying to advance.⁵⁰ Priority themes include theatre commoning (managing and producing with generosity and abundance, community and collaboration); lesser-known or marginalized aesthetics or new forms of theatre practice; equity, inclusivity, and accessibility for underrepresented theatre communities; and theatre practices, processes, and issues relevant that derive from a specific geographic location but are relevant to others around the world.⁵¹

HowlRound is also undertaking a web redesign in order to make content more accessible on the site and working to intentionally expand its international reach.

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While the field has changed in many ways, we are still a long way from manifesting a nonprofit theatre system that supports diversity, cooperation, and participation over competition and profit. Three concerns arose repeatedly in conversations with HowlRound staff and field leaders:

- Greater awareness of structural inequities has not yet translated into a redistribution of money and power in the theatre sector,

50 HowlRound participate page, accessed February 2018. <http://howlround.com/participate>.

51 See <http://howlround.com/participate>.

which are still highly concentrated in the hands of very few institutions and individuals and directed towards supporting a limited range of content.

- Even if resources were reallocated, some people question whether—in its current iteration—our nonprofit structures are capable of supporting commons values and practices at scale. David Bollier suggests that because our current systems encourage competition and consumerism by design, transitioning to a more commons-oriented society “requires a wholly different set of institutions, legal regimes and social practices for managing (and mutualizing) money, credit and risk.”⁵² Do we need to design a new arts system with commons values in mind at the outset? Or, as others suggested, can philanthropy more strongly incentivize and support commons-oriented behavior in this field? ⁵³

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- Finally, some wonder whether it is possible to change conditions in the theatre field without addressing the dysfunctions in the larger socioeconomic system within which it is embedded such as institutionalized racism, structural wealth inequality, extractive economic models, widespread commodification, and so on. With that in mind, they hope for ways to explore what role theatre, and culture more broadly, has to play in precipitating

52 David Bollier, “Democratic Money and Capital for the Commons,” January 14, 2016. <http://www.bollier.org/blog/democratic-money-and-capital-commons>.

53 Nicolas Krausz, Heike Loeschmann, and Vivian Paulissen, “The Commons as a Path for Philanthropy to Catalyse System Change,” *Connected Action for the Commons*, January 28, 2016. <http://politicalcritique.org/connected-action/2016/the-commons-as-a-path-for-philanthropy-to-catalyse-system-change/>.

shifts in these larger systems and moving society as a whole toward a more inclusive, democratic, and sustainable future.

Raising these issues is not meant to imply that HowlRound has fallen short in its work to date. On the contrary, it is because of the profound reach and impact it has had in a relatively short amount of time that many in the field believe HowlRound has the potential to be a catalyst, organizer, and host for the difficult conversations that need to happen around these larger structural challenges facing the field and our society as a whole. Clearly these are not issues that HowlRound can address alone, but it could be an important organizing space for the field, and others, to contend with them in years ahead.

As of this writing, and in line with HowlRound's practice, it is beginning to gather stakeholders in the field of performance to discuss how the world and the field has changed, and where HowlRound's tools, platform, and values can be most useful next. Appropriately, the next phase of the commons will be defined by the commons itself.

Appendix A

Methodology

For this case study, Helicon conducted extended conversations with HowlRound staff members; interviewed twenty leaders in the theatre field, philanthropy, and other artistic disciplines; and reviewed materials on the HowlRound site and archives. In addition, we conducted a literature review on topics including the history of theatre and the nonprofit sector in the US, the commons, and systems change. The study primarily focused on the period between early 2011 and summer 2017. Drafts of this study were reviewed by HowlRound staff for completeness and accuracy.

Interviews

- David Bollier, Commons Strategies Group; USC Annenberg School of Communications
- P. Carl, HowlRound
- Deborah Cullinan, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
- David Dower, Office of the Arts, Emerson College
- Cathy Edwards, New England Foundation for the Arts
- Jamie Gahlon, HowlRound

- Matthew Glassman, Double Edge Theatre Farm Center
- Cheryl Ikemiya, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation
- Todd London, University of Washington School of Drama
- Kirk Lynn, Rude Mechanicals; University of Texas, Austin
- Teresa Marrero, University of North Texas Department of World Languages/Literatures/Cultures
- Vijay Mathew, HowlRound
- Jonathan McCrory, National Black Theatre
- Lisa Portes, DePaul University Theatre School
- Diane Ragsdale, New School
- Michael Rohd, Sojourn Theatre; Arizona State University
- Clyde Valentin, Ignite Arts Dallas, Southern Methodist University
- Abigail Vega, Latinx Theatre Commons
- David White, The Yard
- San San Wong, Barr Foundation

Appendix B

National Advisory Council (2012-2017)

- Ilana Brownstein: Director of New Work, Company One, Founding Dramaturg, Playwrights' Commons, Associate Professor, Boston University, Boston, MA
- Deborah Cullinan: Executive Director, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
- Olga Garay-English: Arts Consultant, Los Angeles, CA
- Matthew Glassman: Executive Director, Double Edge Theatre Farm Center, Ashfield, MA
- Rachel Grossman: Ringleader, dog & pony dc, Washington, DC
- Michelle Hensley: Artistic Director, Ten Thousand Things Theater, Minneapolis, MN
- Melanie Joseph: Producing Artistic Director, The Foundry Theatre, New York, NY
- Fran Kumin: Arts Consultant, New York, NY

- Todd London: Executive Director, University of Washington School of Drama, Seattle, WA
- Kirk Lynn: Head of Playwrighting & Directing Program, UT-Austin, Co-Artistic Director, Rude Mechs, Playwright, Austin, TX
- Jonathan McCrory: Director of Theatre Arts Program, National Black Theatre, Producing Artistic Director, The Movement Theatre Company, New York, NY
- Bonnie Metzgar: Independent Artist, Chicago, IL
- Diane Ragsdale: Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Netherlands
- Michael Rohd: Founding Artistic Director, Sojourn Theatre, Founder, Center for Performance and Civic Practice, Chicago, IL
- José Luis Valenzuela: Artistic Director, Los Angeles Theatre Center & The Latino Theater Company, Los Angeles, CA

About Helicon Collaborative

Helicon works for a sustainable, equitable, and creative world for all people. Through research, strategy development, program design, and other approaches, Helicon collaborates with artists, cultural organizations, foundations, and diverse creative enterprises that share its belief in the power of art and culture to make a more just, safe, and beautiful world for all. www.heliconcollab.net.

