



The American Voices New Play Institute at Arena Stage

## Theater Outside the Box: Devised Work

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A report on a convening of artists, producers, presenters and funders who create or support non-playwright centered work in the American theater.

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## I. Introduction

For its third convening, the American Voices New Play Institute (the Institute) wanted to expand its "research and development of effective practices, programs, and processes for new play development in the American theater" by focusing specifically on new plays that are not playwright-centered. While these plays have been described as "devised," "ensemble" and/or "interdisciplinary," recent conversations about supporting this work (such as NEFA's convening in July 2009 and the first meeting of the Director's Circle in November 2009, which focused on bridging the gap between presenters and producers) have shown that this work varies widely in form and content and that the lines are starting to blur for theaters nationwide. Producers are sometimes presenters, presenters are sometimes producers, play labs are sometimes agents, and artists are working in multiple disciplines, making their own paths.

Inspired by the positive momentum created by these recent conversations – including the blossoming of new initiatives like the NPN's Forth fund<sup>1</sup>, CTG's completion commissions<sup>2</sup>, the creation of the Network of Ensemble Theaters<sup>3</sup> and others – on February 19-20, 2010, the Institute invited more than 30 artists, producers, presenters, agents, service organizations and funders to Washington, D.C. to discuss the particular challenges and opportunities in championing, supporting, and sharing this work and the artists who create it nationwide.

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<sup>1</sup> NPN's Forth Fund: "The Forth Fund will build upon the NPN Creation Fund, a subsidy program that provides performing artists creating new work for touring with \$10,000 of unrestricted support. By contributing an additional \$15,000 towards the crucial production phase of development, the Forth Fund will enhance and deepen finished NPN Creation Fund work. Funds will be disbursed directly to Creation Fund recipients and commissioners, and will provide access to critical managerial, artistic and technical resources necessary to produce a new work for touring." (NPN Receives Support for Creative Development of Performing Art Work. February 4th, 2010, <http://www.npnweb.org/npn-receives-support-for-creative-development-of-performing-art-work/>)

<sup>2</sup> CTG's completion commissions: A grant that "will provide completion funds to projects that are already in progress but are in need of additional funding support." (Non-Text Based Work Gets A Boost. Winter 2009, Center Theater Group New Play Production Program.)

<sup>3</sup> Network of Ensemble Theaters: "A national coalition of ensembles created by and for artists, the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET) exists to propel ensemble theater practice to the forefront of American culture and society. NET links a diverse array of ensembles and practitioners to one another and the performing arts field, encouraging collaborations and knowledge building and dissemination. NET is committed to the advancement of the ensemble form and strives to bring about change in the world beyond ourselves through the transformative power of collaborative theater. We support bold artistic and civic experiments and aim to heighten the impact and excellence of ensemble theater." (Mission Statement. <http://ensembletheaters.net/about/>)

## II. The Process

The term "devised" theater has proven slippery and hard to define. Although the participants in the convening – a cross section of the field that included large ensemble leaders, puppeteers, duos, interview-based groups, individuals, and many others – covered a wide variety of the diverse work done in this field, all acknowledged the implausibility of classifying themselves as a specific "group." Although many of these artists have united for the sake of drawing attention to their work, there is, in fact, only one fundamental truth they could all agree on: there is no cookie cutter process for creating devised work.

Although this truth is challenging to funders who want each step outlined and defined (more on this later), artists revel in the fact that no one seems to work in exactly the same way and that each time they tackle a new project they often create a new process. Many artists claim that it is precisely this freedom that attracted them to devised work in the first place. As Geoff Sobelle, co-founder of Rainpan 43, said, "Part of the devised-ness of the work is a kind of DIY. This group of people is probably coming together because they didn't want to just learn their lines but build the set, [do the work.]"

From being in a "room with some stuff" to travelling to new places, the inspirations behind devised pieces are extremely varied. Artists agree that one of the most important elements in the process is simply time: time to sit with an idea, time to be together (if the work is ensemble-based), time to explore ideas, and time to reflect on what has occurred.

However, the time for the "bacterial growth of this kind of work," as one artist put it, is one of the hardest commodities for artists to find. One of the big obstacles to having this time is the lack of success at funding this portion of development: artists simply don't have the means necessary to dedicate the needed time to a project (more on this later). The self-producing nature of the work, for some, creates another obstacle. As Steven Sapp, one of the founding members of the UNIVERSES, pointed out, "It's all encompassing. It literally is you making every decision about every single thing. And then after you've sat there for hours doing this, that and the third you're like, 'Oh yeah, and now I'm supposed to finish writing this monologue that we have for rehearsal tomorrow.' We've been doing all this stuff for months and I haven't even looked at the script and we go into rehearsal. The smallest little minute thing—you talk about shipping—just, it becomes a nightmare. Because you have to get from point A to point B to point C to point D. You know when the show is over and everybody's going to the after party and the bars you're sitting in the back trying to make sure the set gets out. You know there is this enormous freedom—we can do anything we want, yay!—and then we have to do it."

Although most artists enjoy, at least to some extent, the ability to be involved in all aspects of the production, they know that the tasks involved in self-producing demand large chunks of their time that could be dedicated to the creation of the art.

### Collaboration

Some suggested that using additional help could create more time in which the artist can dedicate him/herself to the art. However, although the artists who do devised work described themselves as "highly collaborative," major kinks in development were repeatedly revealed when they were required to collaborate with someone outside of their core group or ensemble. One side of the problem occurs simply when groups or ensembles – many who have existed for years with only their original members – try to expand their capacity by hiring outside artists. As Kirk Lynn, one of six Co-Producing Artistic Directors of the Rude Mechs, said, "We're kind of punk rockers. We like it, the DIY aspect. When we hire people outside of ourselves, it doesn't work that well. We are meaner and harder on ourselves. It's hard to manage other relationships. Better when one of us writes a grant we don't like, makes a set we don't like – the one who messes up – keeping the fight internal – then someone we hired."

The other side of the problem exists when these tight knit groups are hired by outside producers or organizations during the developmental process. Although the demands of complete self-producing are difficult to sustain, artists often see these presenters, producers and institutional dramaturgs as perplexing elements that are occasionally thrown in the middle of their creative process – often with disastrous effect.

The question of dramaturgy and devised work – whether a role filled by an actual dramaturg, a presenter or a producer – remains fuzzy because the expectations of the role are often unclear. Some artists see this dramaturgical presence as someone who doesn't understand their process but is sent in to "fix" their work – usually late in its development. Ben Yalom, Artistic Director of foolsFURY Theater, relayed one such experience:

We were in the midst of creating this play...and we were at a stage in the process where everything was really uncomfortable for the creators in the room....And most of the artists – most of the performers in the room, the ensemble members – said "Ok, we're in this uncomfortable exploration stage; that's fine. It's going to be an uncomfortable week, but an exciting week as we try and try and figure out, because we don't know where we're going." And we had a couple people come in from the outside to

see what we were doing on the last day of that, one of them being the dramaturg who had some affiliation with the show but hadn't been able to be there very often and she sort of looked at this at the end, and...she was very concerned about it, saying, "This isn't mashing up with this." And I was like, "Of course not. Yet." For us in the devising process, we're used to being in a murky territory and that's part of the process. And she was coming in with a, "I'm used to seeing a script on a page and trying to tell you how those things fit together." I think she had some good things she could have communicated to us that would have been helpful but the paradigm of how one looked at the work and how one processed it and commented on it were clashing. I would love to have a model, to have a dramaturgical presence that got the process.

Despite the negative examples, many of the artists recognized the potential benefits of collaboration with someone in a dramaturgical role. Citing chemistry between artists and an understanding of the process as absolutely crucial elements to a successful collaboration, some artists championed the idea of having someone with a dramaturgical skill set in the room who could act both as a first responder and as someone who continuously asked questions. Artists revealed that success stories happened when the dramaturg was pulled fully into the process (instead of being on a "fix this play" mission), sometimes becoming an additional writer.

When the presenter has a dramaturgical role, many feel that a lack of communication about expectations inadvertently closes opportunities for better understanding and collaboration. Some presenters were clear that they respect the group's ability to self-dramaturg and believe that it would be irresponsible for them, as producers, to insert themselves into that role unless they knew that vocabulary. Although some artists appreciate the lack of "meddling," others felt that the presenter should be a part of the process. As Melanie Joseph, founding Artistic Producer of The Foundry Theatre, said, "I think many presenters [are] hesitant to respond to work in process. It's a completely different world from TCG theaters, where there is deep dramaturgical involvement that can sometimes go awry. We've all heard stories that include 'you've gotta fix your play.' But in the presenting world, few involve themselves dramaturgically at all, some feel comfortable to, but others don't. I, for one, want them to ask questions about the work since they're the ones who are going to be inviting their audience. As a maker, I therefore want to know what questions they have about the work. How presenters might engage in this process is something to think about not in terms of fixing, but asking in the process of making, which translates to their capacity to invite people. If I was cooking dinner, and someone else was

inviting the dinner guests, I would want them to be engaged with what was on the menu, and not simply to invite people to another dinner party."

Through all the discussion, both sides articulated that the best collaborations between artists and presenters are created through clear and open communication. One of the best examples of effective, communicative collaboration was a partnership between Rainpan 43 and Center Theater Group. From the artist's perspective, Rainpan 43 appreciated the fact that every conversation started with "what do you need?" Rainpan 43 acknowledged that the question addressed many of their normal problems because it created an understanding between artists and producer. As they said, "The clarity of conversation is huge."

This focus on clarity also makes a huge impact on the presenter, who adds this perspective:

You know, we only have a fixed pot of money for each production. We do the best we can. We listen to the artists. We let them set their own timelines for development. We try to put them in a room and leave them alone as much as possible and not interfere. So like with Rainpan, I believe we said "What do you guys want to do?" and they said, "We want to spend 8 weeks in New York (for the first phase of development)." And we're like, "Great. Let's figure out how to do that with the money we have available." It's having open communication and not an adversarial relationship. We say, "Listen. We really only have this" or, "We want to help you any way we can, but you have to be clear with us too and communicate with us your ideas and needs because we'll provide them however we can." We want to support, but there are limits. Most of the artists we work with do respect those limits because we're very up front, we have a very honest approach in saying we want to help you, and by asking them how can we help you.

### **III. Supporting the Process**

The Institute intentionally opened the room to funders, allowing them the opportunity to listen to the artists, presenters and producers talk about their needs, thus it is no surprise that a large portion of the conversation revolved around the financial support for devised work. One large obstacle in the funding process is simply the lack of knowledge about the existing ecosystem of funders and supporters. As artist Stephen Earnhart said, "I find it really hard to find a lot of the information about universities and residence labs... I wish there was...[a] sort of like NY cultural council and people can

point you in the direction of. A lot of times it's really hard to find the connection points, and I wish...there was a way in which that info was more accessible." However, even when artists stumble across potential support options, they often bemoan the fact that the current application processes for funding neither understand nor support the process of devising work – and the fundamental fact that no two processes are ever the same.

One of the biggest issues is that the current funding structure does not tend to support the full developmental cycle of devised work. As Kirk Lynn said, "One of the things I was thinking about...was the inception of the devised work, the time that [we have] spent thinking about [what] we're going to make next...That's the thing that doesn't seem terribly well supported and is often difficult in terms of getting into the rest of the path, in terms of grants and talking to producers and talking to partners. That dev work starts off in a more ambiguous strange place. We just have a hunch or have an idea but we don't know what it is yet and finding people to support that time and energy seems complicated." Although the artists agreed that there is no one "cookie cutter" process to their development, they all agreed that the early stages, which are the hardest to define, are the hardest to support financially. Each artist expressed different vital needs during the earliest stages of developing their idea – everything from gathering all the contributing artists in one place for an extended period of time, to travelling for research, to allowing time for everyone to, on a piece about the myth of the American West, watch "a dozen western films." However, despite the absolute need of the artists to have this early developmental time, no one has been able to find support for these stages within the existing infrastructure of funders. As Rachel Chavkin, Artistic Director of the Theatre of the Emerging American Moment (TEAM), said, "The fundamental gap is that by the time we are ready to talk about the work coherently we have needed [support] for two years. And that's a major, for us that's the major gap that [support] comes at the end of the process."

For artists who cannot afford to pay a living wage during the full developmental cycle of a project, the ironic outcome is that the process actually takes longer to finish. Artists are forced to have a "day job," making schedules a nightmare as they try to find the time when they can all be together – both for development and performance. As artist and puppeteer Dan Hurlin said, "When I work with other people...I am not in business enough to pay them a living wage. I can only pay them by the gig, by the week, by the rehearsal. And so, a lot of times touring becomes a nightmare because I can't very well say 'Well, no, you're part of [this project] so you can't take any other work.' So scheduling becomes a complete nightmare, and their availability plays into it."

One of the major problems artists find in talking to funders is the "script-oriented" focus of the applications. As Steven Sapp said, "In terms of not

having a script, we don't have one. We have stuff. So for us, as of now, it's more about the live performance, if we can get people to come see us live; or do a 'reading.' Kinda get a sense of what's working or where we're going, but in terms of having a "script" script, it takes a while for us to even hold one." The lack of written text causes difficulty in communicating effectively to funders the sense of what the project is. As Lisa Steindler, Executive Artistic Director of Z Space, said about a current project, "I have no script so it's going to be real hard to get funding for it because people don't know what it is and I don't know what it is." Most artists agreed that seeing the aesthetic of a group or individual in live performance is the most effective way to demonstrate what they are trying to do. Many also agreed that, if coming to see a live performance isn't possible, they would prefer to send in a DVD of their work in lieu of written text so that the funders can, in this way, still see a visual representation of their work. However, with Equity rules on videotaping, many devisers find it impossible to make videos of their work.

Another difficulty faced by the artists in the application process is related to the limitations created by the required line-itemed budget. Although artists realize that there needs to be some level of order to the "ask," they also know that the process of devised work – which is often messy and unpredictable – needs to be supported by money for "wildcards." As Dan Rothenberg, Founding Member and Co-Artistic Director of the Pig Iron Theatre Company, said, "If we're asking funders to help up innovate, we want to find a compromise place between saying 'this is the stuff that we do know' and 'this is the stuff we are going to find out we need. The stuff we know the most is the labor and time...But then we really want a line that's discretionary because midway through we're going to discover we need a rock band."

For many of the groups or individuals that are newer to the devised process, there is a general feeling that even if you manage to put together a cohesive and fully demonstrative application for funding, funders are wary of giving money to artists whose names are unknown. To these artists, the inability to break into these funding circles provides major obstacles to continue with their work, unless they have outside means to support their "expensive hobby."

While newer artists voice this frustration, experienced artists bemoan the fact that their previous work and reputation actually does little in alleviating the funding stress. As Ann Rosenthal, Executive Director and Producer for MAPP International Productions, said, "I see a gap in this country that even if an artist is known – has proven themselves to investigate something new, take creative risks and come out with a successful high quality production that is appreciated – that their next piece is still subject to the same kind of evaluation as if they hadn't already been tested...We're experiencing that all the time with artists that we've already raised lots of money for. They've put

on their show, and then it's the next show, and whether it's dance or theater or hybrid or whatever, the same questions come up: 'Well I'm not sure if he can really do this' or 'Sounds like a stretch' or 'I don't really understand the concept.'"

The feeling of being stuck in a cycle, always having one more "hump" to get over in order to prove yourself, only adds to the fears of newer artists. As Dan Rothenberg said, "If SITI company doesn't feel like they've gotten over the hump, then we will never get over the hump – ever."

This cycle, or "hump," also raised the question of whether funders, producers and presenters should focus on the development of artists instead of individual projects. Although one producer said that when she worked with an artist it was a "marriage for life," many artists feel that they are just another member of the dating pool – or simply a fling. With the pressure to prove their value with each project, and always seeing one more hump in the road, many promising artists leave the field simply because they can't find that continuous support. As Steven Sapp said, "People want to scatter, but they don't want to scatter because they feel like, 'We've worked so hard and we've trudged through the mud and, like, we got Humana!...' So we're making these certain places where we weren't really trying to and we're getting in these certain things... [and] it's like, can we make it over this next hump]? 'Cause there's a hump now. There's a hump sitting there and we know there's a hump sitting there and we keep talking about this hump sitting there. And we wonder, 'Can we make it over this hump to the other side?'"

## Assessment

Another obstacle artists see in the funding process lies in the area of evaluation and assessment. Many artists lament the lack of value assigned to projects that are created for the growth of the artists and feel pressured to have a "large impact" on the community in order to prove the worth of their work to funders. Many of the smaller groups feel that their size allows them the opportunity to have a deep involvement with their projects, their audience, and their community despite having a smaller impact in terms of numbers. Many fear that in order to have the scope funders desire, they will sacrifice their intimate connection with their projects in favor of a broad, superficial involvement. Others feel pressured to partner with other groups in order to create a more "attractive package" to funders – a partnership that is not always natural, desired or helpful and is often perceived as unnecessary work. As Ann Rosenthal summed up, "It's not about being big. It's like, 'What's the size of your impact? How many artists are you impacting? How many people?' And even now, many funders are thinking about new ways to have us measure our impact. And there are all these studies about the economic impact of the arts which basically miss the point. And I have been thinking

about how the country of Bhutan values Gross National Happiness and I was thinking who could I talk to who would know how they measure that? They must have a system. I'm really troubled by this notion of impact and the pressure to always be big. I was really inspired by an artist we work with from the Congo who is trying to make a difference in his community [where] there was nothing and he said he was really getting burned out and about to give because of the corruption and chaos he has to deal with all the time. But he finally said, 'If I impact a couple of people along the way, then this will be worth it.'

#### **IV. The Other Side**

While much of the conversation focused on the plight of the artists and their creation, during the second day all of the presenters and funders had the opportunity to gather around the table to discuss their own challenges in supporting devised work.

Many of the presenters and funders immediately indicated, only half-jokingly, that they felt like they were sitting at the "bad table." Although both funders and presenters feel like their job is to make the art possible, they have several obstacles that often make them the villains to the very people they are trying to support.

The largest obstacle funders face is the expense of supporting devised work. As Kelley Kirkpatrick, Associate Producer at Center Theatre Group, pointed out:

I think right now out of our sixteen commissions, six of them are collaborative, ensemble, or devised work. Sixteen commissions and a third of them are falling into this category. And what we're learning is that – as I'm sure all the parties here already know – is that it's very expensive, very expensive to put on. We have a commission fee, plus, on top of the research time, multiple periods of research time. Long periods that any playwright, director, actor would spend in the room normally – for [an ensemble] it's maybe a total of 24 weeks of development time, and a play would have maybe a total of 8-10 weeks of development time. So that's getting multiple people in the room with lots of resources, and paying people per diem and salary to work during that time, and rehearsal space, and etc etc etc. So that's one of the major challenges that we're finding is it's basically a two-for-one deal: we could do two plays for one devised piece. It's a little bit frightening for regional theaters to look at those costs.

Knowing the cost that comes simply from supporting one project, one of the immediate dilemmas for funders, presenters and producers is the sheer volume of work that needs their support. As Meiyin Wang, Associate Producer of Under The Radar Festival and Symposium, succinctly said, "That's the thing about being the 'bad guy,' by nature of [our system] we can only do so many projects each year. You have to choose." Most are working with a specific amount of available funding, or a certain number of spots in their season, and have an overwhelming number of artists or projects vying for their support. These limitations force them to say "no" to artists, even when they feel the projects are deserving of their time, attention and support.

Another major obstacle faced by funders and presenters is the need to balance the risk-taking of the artists against the requirements of the organizations that provided the funders their money. As Sam Miller, President of OAM Company, Inc., pointed out, "I think that there's a balance here: I think on one hand, artists need unmediated relationship between both audience and capital. On the other hand, artists – if you listen to the first panel – there's no fear of risk at that table, but there's a tremendous fear of risk at the other table, the presenting world. You know, they have a lust for this sort of thing but we fear it...There has to be a balanced investment here. That's our job, to say 'How can we give artists money at that stage where they're developing this content' but then how can we free up, how can we provide support for them when the time comes when they need other partners who do not have the kind of tolerance for risk as they do as artists."

Many funders and presenters agree that the ecosystem of support for devised work is not adequately transparent. While each individual organization is doing what they feel is best in order to support the work, many believe that more could be done simply through an awareness of each other and through a conscious alignment of resources, which many argue includes not only money but space and other non-monetary methods of support. As Sabrina Hamilton, Artistic Director of the Ko Festival of Performance, said "I get very upset when money is the beginning and the end of the conversation. I think one of the things we've really worked on, especially in the last couple of years, is finding what are those...other non-dollar things that we have to offer? And we have really looked at that and there are quite an amazing group of things that we can do: [such as] one of the things is just an atmosphere where we start with, [asking] what's the fantasy?; ...giving people access to technical or artistic areas of consulting or expertise;...[giving] people a flexible structure;...having more than one set of artists in the same place at the same time, who are very different, and having them live together and have meals around the table together;...sending people away with video if they don't have access to video, to [digitally documenting] a lighting design that they can take away with them."

## The Final Product

Even when projects are picked and the process is, at least to some extent, funded, there continues to be a problem with what is often called "unfinished" work or work that's not "ready." Presenters, funders and artists varied widely in their opinions on this "problem," and many agreed that the ideas of "finished" or "ready" are a slippery slope in and of themselves.

Many artists made a distinction between when a show was ready to be seen by an audience and when it was actually "finished." Knowing that audience reaction and feedback can be very influential on the eventual shape of a presentation, some artists rely on the opportunity to put their work in front of people when it, as longtime SITI Company member Barney O'Hanlon said, "has a beginning, a middle and an end but the majority of us on stage feel that it's not finished."

For presenters who book work with an expectation of a finished product for their audiences, this can be unsettling. There is some anger about "not getting what I paid for," and an underlying sense that there are artists who, when not receiving the full support they need in order to fully develop their work, use the presenting world as a means of production. As Creative Consultant Morgan Jenness said: "I think what we're talking about is two different things. Because we're talking about the process that the work itself demands and then we are talking about trying to use the process that exists to maybe help the work. Because you can't get the process that the work demands. So...you do develop on tour, and you know, it's a nightmare...to try to build this beautiful vision of [the work]...and it is this cobbled-together thing that ends up arriving at [the presenter] and it wasn't what it could've been because it was cobbled together. But, it never would've happened without that process."

While there is tension related to the problem of artists using presenters as producing opportunities, for some of the producers and presenters it came down to the relationship they had with the artists and honest communication: if they knew what to expect and had time to prepare their audiences correctly for what they were going to see, then it was generally less of a problem. As Susie Farr, the Executive Director of the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, said, "It's about either knowing it or having a relationship so that you can be told in the process." However, as Melanie Joseph said, "There's unfinished work and there's unfinished work. There's the unfinished work of a seasoned company like SITI Company, and there's the unfinished work of a younger company that's making their second or third show. And it's the same audience. So how do they differentiate their viewing experience?"

However, it should also be noted that many artists had issues with the term, "unfinished." As Dan Hurlin said, "I actually think that that's the wrong word. 'It's unfinished.' I don't think that that's what they're actually talking about. I think that they're talking about artists who maybe haven't found their voice yet, or maybe younger artists...I think a presenter is pretty clear, in general – in my experience anyway – and the artist is very clear about when work is finished and when it's not finished."

## VI. The Audience

This idea of presenting "unfinished" work raises the question of where the audience fits in the process. Some artists were adamant that the audience has a huge role to play in the development of the work and have purposely built audiences that are willing guinea pigs throughout all stages of development. As artist Jim Lasko put it, this is one of those "dividing lines between devised work and not devised work, because there is something about the process of making devised work. We keep hearing about the process of devised work that it keeps going, that the process doesn't end when the curtain goes up. And we hear that from the beginning it is trying to incorporate audience, thinking about all the ways it's thriving on the live interaction between the audience and the piece. And, while we can say that about all theater, it is very often not the case in most theater. It's a show that goes up behind a fourth wall and there is very little interaction between the audience and the piece of theater." As Leatrice Ellzy, Director of Artistic Programming and New Technologies for the National Black Arts Festival (NBAF) said, "Because now audiences want to be a part of the process. They're not the old audience that's just going to buy a ticket and show up and, you know, say, 'Wow me.'"

While acknowledging that the feedback from the audience can be immensely influential in the creation of a piece, some presenters argued that this really only works for artists who are working regularly in the same community. For presenters who book-in a multitude of artists, the idea of showing an unfinished work is undesirable. As Melanie Joseph said, "The question I have is about showing works in progress at a presenting site that you don't have an ongoing relationship with, whose audience might not get to see the final project. I wouldn't want to do that to my own audience in my own home, in my own city. I wouldn't show them a work in progress and then not show them the finished work. What a tease! I think it's disrespectful to both the artists and to the audience."

For all involved, the debate over whether audiences should be exposed to unfinished work was dwarfed by the greater question of finding an audience to see the work. The need for connection between audience and artist was

highlighted as the most important factor in getting people into the theater. As Ann Rosenthal stated, "I think that we're really in a place in this country where there is such a severe disconnect between the general public and working artists, that there's a lot of distrust on both sides. Too many people don't go to performances because they fear it might be weird or unfamiliar, and artists don't necessarily think that audience is educated or is sensitive enough to the process to really want to listen to their advice or to take it so seriously or to take the time to engage that audience." Although each artist and presenter approached this need for connection in different ways, much of the conversation focused on the benefits and importance of audience preparation and opening up the process.

For artists who have established homes or communities, outreach often revolves around actively inviting the audience into the process. Ranging from inviting audience members out for a drink after the show to recording their reactions and opinions, the goal is, as Kirk Lynn put it, to "actively involve our audience in our workshops and seeing us make our piece and sort of use the audience as creators." However, artists who want to invite the audience into the process face one major stumbling block: the talkback. Although many of the artists claim to be genuinely interested in the reaction of the audience to the work, all have been in situations during audience talkbacks that have been, as one artist gently put it, "really bizarre." Full of "I like this, I don't like this," talkbacks can have the feel of "directing by committee" instead of useful feedback. Some artists reported that asking the audience simply to describe their experience helped to shift the vocabulary of the talkback. However, as Ann Rosenthal put it, we have to find a way to "open up [the] process in a way that feeds the artist's own creativity and doesn't drain them and also isn't creating a 'cookie cutter' type of audience engagement program for all artists to fit into."

For presenters who book-in various ensembles or artists, the focus is on how the audience is receiving the work. As Leatrice Ellzy said, "We also take very seriously preparing audiences for work so, through public programs and other things we prepare audiences for work they are about to see and put it into some kind of context for them." For everyone, the idea of inviting the audience in is huge – and directly ties to the way that the shows are marketed. As Jim Lasko said, "Our marketing for the shows is our audience development, is our audience education, and is also the development of our work. So all these things are happening simultaneously. So it's sort of an answer to the question of 'how do you develop work and have an audience and get some feedback—as well as, how do you develop an audience.'"

## The Convening's Audience

As the participants of the convening discussed their audiences (both real and potential), die hard followers of devised work were able to add in their own perspective. As with the previous two convenings, the Institute hired two bloggers to document the conversation through the Institute's New Play blog ([npdp.arenastage.org](http://npdp.arenastage.org)), their personal blogs, and by hosting the hashtag #newplay conversation through the Institute's Twitter account (@New\_Play\_Blog).

However, even before the conversation began, the Institute was informed of a general excitement in the field and among devised work fans over the public portion of the convening. Entitled "How the Devising's Done: Theater Mavericks On Process," four of the participants (Kirk Lynn of Rude Mechanicals, Barney O'Hanlon of SITI Company, Andy Paris of Tectonic Theater Project and Geoff Sobelle of Rainpan 43), with the help of Georgetown students and local actors, demonstrated different techniques and processes that they use to create their work. From asking questions to practicing Viewpoints, the whole event, which was livestreamed on <http://livestream.com/newplay>, sparked interest around the country, and the Institute was told of "Devising Parties" in Los Angeles, Chicago, Australia and Singapore (among other places) where groups were gathering to watch together.

The general admiration for the participants, their work and their future possibilities was, after only the first presentation, summed up in one tweet:

**[dloehr](#) Two days, & I think I'd follow Kirk Lynn and the @RudeMechs to the gates of Hell. If nothing else, it'd be a helluva trip.**

## VII. Next Steps

At the conclusion of the convening, moderator David Dower asked each participant (including a group of local artists that had been in the room observing the conversation) to think of the things they felt were top priorities in order to promote further action in this conversation. The list is, unedited, as follows:

- Create a relationship with Equity that supports devised work
  - "The union shouldn't intimidate us, preventing us from creating our own work and our own opportunities. I'm in the union – I wouldn't exploit myself or my actor friends."
  - "It seems to be an immediate adversarial relationship. It all comes down to payment. And yes, I want to pay them when we

get to rehearsal. They aren't allowing the actors to be artists in the process."

- The notion of dramaturgical system (i.e. the process/cycle): idea, germinate, in the room, playing, back again, development, production, etc. How can theaters, presenters, universities form an ecology that allows that work to happen. There needs to be a database about who is doing that sort of work. A consortium.
- Solve universal health care. The resources of a maker of new work would triple immediately upon the resolution of the health care problem. People would commit themselves as mature artists instead of just young reckless people who don't need insurance. Able to bring the mature artists back into the field.
  - "We need to make a case for culture in the same way people make it for health care. I have to pay health care with money that could be going to the art."
  - "It becomes irresponsible to not take certain steps that make devising work possible only if you are institutionalized."
  - "This gets back to the Equity question – because so much of it is tied to health care and pension".
  - [artistsunitedforhealthcare.org](http://artistsunitedforhealthcare.org). – there is a huge improvement in the info is available. Huge setbacks in reform. Jim Brown. Actor's fund.
- See the local communities that are not NYC banding together and doing new work.
  - "I would like to see the amount of new work in D.C. double or triple. The price of producing is so much less than NYC. We need to get past the myth of the institution and the myth of Shakespeare."
  - "We need to get into the community and find the unspoken stories. And we should have a festival every year."
- Finding the on ramps – David's report for the Mellon.
- Be less myopic. We need to all know about each other. And there will be more as we work together and cross pollinate.
  - "An exchange "student" program. You can have my apartment and hang out with my company and I'll have your apartment and hang out with your company. The country is so large."
  - "Touring festival - festival of devised work that tours around the country."
  - "From the community theaters – each begins to really figure out their individual strengths, talk about the development of new work, and find strategic ways to make it happen. The touring festival would generate the process."
  - Devise-a-palooza.

- Including the people who could not afford to be here. The needs of some of those artists are not always the same as ours. How can we increase our ecology to include them – it would be really valuable to us.
- As momentum for devised work increases, we need to keep the term sufficiently undefined. So that we don't become exclusive and we don't codify.
  - "We need to find a language that describes the creation of new work but doesn't create boundaries. I really don't like the term devised work. It's limiting in a lot of respects and dismisses a lot of tradition that comes into the work. We need to search for a language."
  - "We need to find a way to frame it – a way that allows us to talk to institutions, funders and audiences without limiting it."
  - "We need to find the terminology that will be helpful to both sides."
  - "There is a sense of a lack of authenticity in the conversation between artists and funders – and a lot of it is based on a language that doesn't mean anything."
  - "It's becoming like the word experimental. All the specificity that it entails – and all the limits."
  - "Is it because we are defining ourselves against something that already exists? So much of it is going against 'not playwright'"
  - "None of us use the word devised in our marketing. It doesn't mean anything to the public"
- What are the types of support available to this work? What structures are established? I would love to see more support (financial, structural). Residences that allow groups to come together and work it out.
- Alliance of artist communities
- Advocating for support that is artist based, not project based
- Every institution, or every TCG member, commits to collaborating with some devised company (either locally or nationally) – something that is created through a series of engagements with the community in some way. The mandate that they create something that could never be created anywhere else – and then Cleveland trades with San Diego
- How do you make these steps where producers and presenters have these collaborations in the steps to developing their work? So devisers aren't using presenters to produce their work. Putting their commissioning money to the devisers.
- Philly 2008 elections – there was a house that was a polling site. Can every theater be a polling site? What would it mean to the community?
- One of the most exciting things is Arena Stage having Producing Fellows that are being assigned to the Resident Playwrights – long term, deep relationships – creative entrepreneurs.

- How do we create a culture entrepreneurial institute – something that is not supporting the institution but the producers – and the playwright/artists collaborative teams – a resource that is not politicized, but looking at cultural entrepreneurialism as something that needs to be supported.
- Architecture and space. UK – the National Theatre – the performances that are happening underground. The National Theater of Scotland has no theater space. And it's the national institution.
  - A lot of our work is counter to the regional theater – we did it in the space we found – so instead of trying to squeeze into the space – how do we embrace our non theater-ness. Reimagining the city and its own theatricality.
- The work we do as the people who create new work is important. We offer new ways of seeing, speaking and experiencing. We can't underestimate the importance of how we're going to expand our audience's brains.
- Treasure the multiplicity of scales that this work is happening on. Encourage us to remember to lift the field instead of just making stars or winners.
- How many of us remember the NEA ensemble grants. Is there the remotest possibility to lobby to have that back. It was a HUGE part of the life of the companies that are continuing to influence today's companies.
- Also the individual artist fellowships
- What are we doing about the other 95% of the country who may not know that they like theater?
- Articulating the process of making successful work: look at it, map it out. What needs to happen, what are the stages, what needs to be in place? What areas already have support? Where are the gaps? And how do we connect them? If we really saw that, we would realize that we have to diversify where the resources go. Who holds those resources?
  - We can't always think, with the system, that the big guys get the money and that will take care of things.
  - The assumption can't be that this is the one way to do something
- Open up the conversation, step out of the discipline. Dance, musicians, performers, visual art – a lot more people are devising work.
- We should know where we can be connecting to existing energies.
- Having just acquired my own new space – a place that I feel, feels inspired. I want that space subsidized for 6 months so that I could give it over to artists and not have to worry about rent. I just want people to use the space.
- Transparency – that which is occurring (or not occurring) in the banking world. In health care. Bill O'Brien was talking about the numbers of

- culture are happening according to classical ideas of what is “culture” – we have to define many areas of the art and define usage. We can’t ever get the money if we don’t know how much art is actually being used.
- Make a case for the role of technology. We need this kind of concern for technology – it is an ally, and we need to work through it together as a field. Other fields have proven that it is an important tool (music) and there is a resistance in our field to use this tool to build support. We need to understand it better and make it a friend. We need to think more creatively. We need to get to the next level.
    - It’s not only fear, but there is a real misunderstanding of how to use technology to drive mission.
    - RISA – Pittsburgh group – tracking consumption of jazz – digital technology
  - The future of supporting this field – the greatest idea I heard this whole weekend was CTG – long term residencies in an organization that is already structured to do that.
  - This is a self-empowering group of makers. We don’t wait for people, we just get it done. How we operate in this world is how I think the future – taking it into our own hands – how resources can be exchanged in smaller grants, between artists. This is what is in this room. Thinking about lateralizing those opportunities. Giving us the power to support each other. Not to say that the big orgs can’t do that – but just a way to add to it.
  - It’s easy to get obsessed with the how, the fundraising, the logistics – shift to a focus on the communication of an idea. What is the best way we can say something. When my focus shifts to how do I communicate something, people come to my aide and things get unblocked.
  - Increase inception time. Design your own process.

### **VIII. And Onward...**

As with the previous two convenings, the Institute committed to help push the ideas generated over the course of the proceedings into action.

- After this report has been disseminated, the Institute will invite all participants to regroup via conference call in order to review the priority list created at the end of the convening, as well as focus on the conversation that has happened post-convening.
- The Institute will then invite a group of willing participants to form a task force responsible for determining which action steps will be left up to individuals and which ones will require further work by the group.

- The task force will regularly convene throughout the year, focused on breaking down the steps necessary to start accomplishing the various action steps.

## **IX. From Scarcity to Abundance: Capturing the Moment for the New Work Sector**

In January 2011, the task force will be invited (along with the task forces from the previous two convenings) back to Arena Stage during the #NEWPLAY Festival that will feature all seven selections from round one of the NEA New Play Development Program. This large gathering, funded with support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation will, in part, focus a discussion of the convenings' final reports, updates from the individual task forces on steps made since the convening, and evaluations of the current state of the field. The focal point of the gathering will be a session devoted to recognizing the current opportunities available for advancing the ideas, practices and programs of the field of new play development in the American Theater.

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The American Voices New Play Institute is a center for research and development of effective practices, programs, and processes for new play development in the American theater. The Institute's programs are designed to test and develop promising advances in new play development around the country, with the intention of developing the infrastructure for new plays and new voices nationwide.