

The Dream Continues:  
American New Play Development in the Twenty-First Century

by

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B.A., University of Oregon, 2001

M.A., University of Colorado, 2008

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Theatre

This thesis entitled:

The Dream Continues: American New Play Development in the Twenty-First Century

written by Gregory Stuart Thorson

has been approved by the Department of Theatre and Dance

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Date \_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB protocol # 12-0485

**Abstract**

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The Dream Continues: American New Play Development in the Twenty-First Century

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Oliver Gerland

New play development is an important component of contemporary American theatre. In this dissertation, I examined current models of new play development in the United States. Looking at Lincoln Center Theater and Signature Theatre, I considered major non-profit theatres that seek to create life-long connections to legendary playwrights. I studied new play development at a major regional theatre, Denver Center Theatre Company, and showed how the use of commissions contribute to its new play development program, the Colorado New Play Summit. I also examined a new model of play development that has arisen in recent years—the use of small black box theatres housed in large non-profit theatre institutions.

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## Introduction

New play development is an important component of contemporary American theatre. Almost all major non-profit Broadway, off-Broadway and regional theatre companies have new play development programs. Hundreds of playwriting competitions and residencies exist nationwide to develop playwrights and their work.

New play development is not a new phenomenon in American theatre. In the early twentieth century the Provincetown Players developed a number of successful playwrights including Eugene O'Neill. By the late 1950s, new play development had become an industry itself, and, by the end of the twentieth century, it had become a multi-million dollar industry. In 1988, Douglas Anderson published in *TDR* an influential essay titled, "The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America." In it, he outlined a number of models or methods of new play development that I will consider in greater detail below. He was inspired to conduct his study by this observation: "the American theatre is premiere crazy. Judging strictly by the numbers, this is the golden age of American playwriting" (57).

Contemporary new play development is not free of problems; in fact many influential members of the industry bemoan its current state. One might think that funding is the problem. Certainly, funding is an important issue but the problems of new play development cannot be fixed simply by throwing more and more money at them. A statement made by Anderson thirty years ago continues to ring true today: "In fact, there's a real possibility that we're drowning in it [funding]" (56). The crux of the problem can be

the new play development models themselves, which restrict creativity by forcing exciting new voices to adopt stereotypical dramatic forms. As Michael Wright notes, “Unfortunately, too many theatre practitioners still think of play development as ‘play-fixin’,” as if to suggest that those poor little playwrights just don’t know what they are doing. These well-intended folk often wade right in with suggestions about how to make plays better without a single thought about playwrights’ need for process” (xiii). Playwrights and their plays do not fit into a one-size-fits-all style of development. Putting a new play through multiple revisions, workshops, or critiques can water down its uniqueness. Imagine if *Waiting for Godot* was put through a playwriting workshop. Would its unique (and exhilarating) breaks from convention be poorly received or misunderstood? There is something to be said for the old adage that a great play just flows out of a writer. Arthur Miller wrote *Death of Salesman* in a cabin in remote Michigan. While Eugene O’Neill received tremendous support from the Provincetown Players, one does not sense that his plays were over-workshopped. Models of new play development should offer playwrights the freedom to pursue their own unique process. In a large and corporatized industry like contemporary American theatre, this is a tricky proposition.

In this dissertation, I will examine current models of new play development in the United States. I take as my inspiration, starting point, and template, Anderson’s influential essay. The questions I will address are: Do theatres today still use the models of new play development identified by Anderson? Have old models been revised or new models been introduced? What appears to be the most effective method for developing new playwrights and new plays in the twenty-first century?

To begin to answer this last question, first I must define what I mean by “effective.” Effectiveness will be measured by both critical and commercial success. An effective new play development process yields plays that are both critically and commercially successful.

As we shall see, there is no single “most effective” method of new play development. Each playwright has a unique way of working, and playwrights at different stages of their career have different opportunities. Many of the models of new play development identified by Anderson continue to operate but there definitely have been changes in the last three decades: the use of commissions has increased as has the importance of non-profit theatres, and a new model based around black box theatres has arisen. Major non-profit theatres like Lincoln Center Theatre, Roundabout Theatre, and Signature Theatre have constructed black box theatres that enable them to produce the work of writers earlier in their careers. Last year, National Public Radio produced a story about Lincoln Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music investing millions of dollars in theatres dedicated to producing new plays. (Lundon) These theatres are small and allow the organizations to produce writers and plays outside of the blinding glare of Broadway and off-Broadway. Ticket prices are around \$20 for productions that are being marketed to a young audience. Most important, the black box theatres enable these major companies to produce writers of all career stages in one building. For example at Lincoln Center, the Vivian Beaumont Theater provides a Broadway experience, the Mitzi Newhouse an off-Broadway experience, and the new black-box Claire Tow Theater an off-off-Broadway experience.

I believe that new play development is succeeding in the United States. In this dissertation, I plan to examine the state of the field, with particular interest in seeing how

older models of new play development remain effective, how non-profit theatres in the field have risen in importance, and how black box theatres housed in larger institutions are serving the needs of emerging playwrights.

## **Review of Literature**

Anderson's article "The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America" assesses the field of new play development from its beginnings in the mid 1950s through the mid 1980s. Anderson explores seven different models of new play development. He names them "the Dream," "TCG," "the Workshop" (National Playwrights Conference), "the Major Regional" (Mark Taper Forum), "a New Model" (South Coast Repertory Theatre), "the Competition," and "the Festival" (Actor's Theatre of Louisville). Anderson's article is a major influence on my dissertation. I plan to examine some of these models and to analyze how well they are working in contemporary theatre. The two in particular on which I focus are the Dream and a New Model.

The Dream, aka The Dream of the Commercial Transfer, refers to a new play receiving a production at a Broadway theatre. A major change in the field that I will examine is that for-profit Broadway production companies have very little interest in developing new plays. Rather they are more interested in productions of new musicals and revivals of musical and straight plays, leaving new play development to the non-profits. "For playwrights, the not-for-profit theatre *is* the theatre. Over the past three decades, the nonprofits have become the generating center of new-play development and production" (London, Pesner, and Voss 3). We shall see that the contemporary version of the Dream is a production by a major non-profit like Lincoln Center. Recent hit productions of new plays



by Lincoln Center include Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House* and Jon Robbie Baitz's *Other Desert Cities*.

The second of Anderson's models that I will examine is the "new model," essentially, the development method of the South Coast Repertory Theatre. Elements of the South Coast Rep model include commissions—contractual agreements that connect playwrights to theatres—and the process of doing readings of multiple plays, and then picking the most interesting and successful ones for fully-realized productions. The value and importance of readings and staged readings are a source of debate in the field. A theatre like Actor's Theatre of Louisville has never used them; rather, it presents scaled down full productions of each script.

Denver Center Theatre's new play development program is close to the South Coast Rep model. At their 2012 New Play Summit, which I had the pleasure to attend, six plays were presented as readings. Instead of a talkback, each audience member filled out a questionnaire provided by the playwright. This technique focuses response to the play for the playwright. Instead of an unwieldy talkback, playwrights get responses to the questions that they think are essential for the play's development. After the Summit, two to three plays are chosen for full-productions in Denver Center Theatre's season.

Most of David Kahn and Donna Breed's *Scriptwork: A Director's Approach to New Play Development* (1995) is a how-to guide to working on a new play. The most interesting part of the book is the appendix, which consists of interviews with major figures in new play development. Interviews with Lee Blessing, Oskar Eustis and Jack O'Brien provide insight into where the field stood during the mid 1990s. The highlight of the book is an interview with Anne Cattaneo, dramaturg at Lincoln Center, who discusses different

methods and models of play development that she has worked on over her career. She states her main philosophy as, “Treat every script as if it were the original manuscript of *Waiting for Godot*—with that kind of respect and that kind of caution. You are in your career in the hopes that that will come to you some day—a script that is brilliant and that you don’t understand yet and that you can learn and grow as an artist to understand and realize” (Kahn and Breed 127). Cattaneo is one of the most respected dramaturgs in the field and has been working at Lincoln Center to develop new plays since the mid 1980s. I am pleased to report that I interviewed Cattaneo and her insights feature prominently in Chapter Four.

Michael Wright’s *Playwriting at Work and Play: Developmental Programs and Their Processes* (2005) outlines a number of the major new play development centers in the first years of the twenty-first century. His insights into New Dramatists, the grandfather of new play development, and The Eugene O’Neill Theater Center National Playwrights Conference are helpful for understanding the history of new play development in America. Wright traces the history of the O’Neill from the initial leadership of Lloyd Richards (director of *Raisin in the Sun* and many of August Wilson’s plays) to James Houghton’s tenure to its state in 2005 under J. Ranelli. My research and Wright’s share a similarity in that both aim to examine models of new play development. However, major differences between our research projects exist. Wright’s book is written as a sort of a how-to manual for playwrights looking for a model of play development congenial to their style and personality. My research is designed for a more academic audience. Moreover, Wright and I examine different models: he considers Anderson’s “Conference” model (The O’Neill Center Playwrights Conference) and his “Festival” model (The Humana Festival at the

Actor's Theatre in Louisville, KY). As stated above, I will focus on Anderson's "Dream" and "New" models. Finally, Wright's book was published in 2005 before non-profit theatre companies and the black box model acquired their current importance.

In his 2006 TCG article "The Shape of Plays to Come," Todd London, long time artistic director of New Dramatists, argues that models of new play development that had been previously successful are not functioning well at the turn of the twenty-first century. "It's a sad irony that the very systems set up to nurture writers and involve them in the theatre have led to their disaffection" (London, "The Shape of Plays to Come" 22). Writing in the aftermath of 9/11 when theatre companies' budgets were drastically reduced. London was pessimistic about the culture of new play development in the new millennium. He documents Denver Center's struggles to gather the finances capable of supporting new play development and its suspension of all new play development. Since this closure, the new play development program has restarted. He quotes Anne Cattaneo as saying that new play development is dead. London's article is a shot across the bow of institutions involved in new play development. Certainly, the collapse of the global economy post 9/11 greatly reduced budgets and finances at theatres across America. But he also states that older models need to evolve and new models need to be created to better serve playwrights of the twenty-first century.

Published in 2009, London's *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play* is the culmination of years of research on the state of new play development in the United States. Ninety-four American theatre companies and 340 playwrights were surveyed and interviewed for this study. It reveals poor collaboration between playwrights and the artistic directors who want to produce their work. London observes that,

throughout much of theatre history, playwrights wrote for a specific theatre which served as their “artistic home.”

Chekhov, surrounded by the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre, reads his plays to them. Moliere, starring in his own work, gets carried from stage to deathbed by his company—his literal and figurative family—for whom he writes and with whom he brings his comedies to life. A wharf in Provincetown, fog shifting in and water lapping at the floorboards—Eugene O’Neill’s first sea play is being performed by the band of passionate amateurs who discovered him. Or think about Brecht directing his own play with the Berliner Ensemble; Caryl Churchill discovering hers through research and improvisation with the Joint Stock Theatre [...] And then there’s Shakespeare, looming over all of them, a player among players on the banks of the Thames, at home in his Globe. (London, Pesner, and Voss 1)

Much of London’s book consists of direct quotes from the theatrical professionals surveyed. Sarah Ruhl’s *The Clean House* is cited as the most recent play with the commercial and critical success indicative of an effective new play development process. The book ends with a snapshot of what is working well in the new play industry.

I aim to offer an updated snapshot on what is working well in the new play industry by looking at new play development programs at New Dramatists, The Lark Play Development Center, Lincoln Center Theater, Roundabout Theatre Company, Signature Theatre Company and the Denver Center Theatre Company.

## **Methodology:**

I define “new play development” as an institutionally-supported process that leads to a play’s first production. This institutionally-supported process might include workshops and readings (table and staged) as well as the solicitation and review of feedback from fellow theatre artists (e.g. directors and dramaturgs) and audience members. As stated above, an effective play development process leads both to critical and commercial success. Accordingly, Tony and Drama Desk awards—as well as literary awards, like the Pulitzer—are a way to gauge success. I measure success also by the number of productions a play receives. Plays that go on to multiple productions are more successful in this view than plays that do not. The size of the theatre company can also be a tool for evaluation. Many of New York’s non-profit theatres and regional theatres across the country spend a lot of money on scouting plays in development and are increasingly in competition for the same ones. Plays that debut at major theatres like Manhattan Theatre Club or Oregon Shakespeare Festival have, in a sense, already proved themselves, at least with industry professionals.

## **Definition of Terms:**

**New play development industry:** Theatre companies and institutions that are dedicated to helping writers produce new plays. These companies can use production-focused models or value process over production.

**Black box theatre:** A small theatre (up to three hundred seats) that is used to stage new plays in an intimate environment. As I use the term, a “black box theatre” does not need to have flexible seating.

**Non-profit:** An institution overseen by a board of directors that uses its surplus revenue to achieve goals other than rewarding stockholders. In theatre this is particularly important as it allows for more creative risks.

**LORT:** An abbreviation for League of Resident Theatres. At around seventy-five members, LORT is the largest association of professional theatres in American.

**Emerging playwright:** A playwright early in his or her career. Typically, an emerging playwright will have an MFA in playwriting and has written already a couple of plays.

**Mid-career playwright:** A playwright who has at least several plays produced and published. Typically, mid-career playwrights have participated in new play development programs.

**Legendary playwright:** A playwright like Edward Albee or Tony Kushner who has achieved great success. Legendary playwrights frequently have a close relationship with a major non-profit theatre.

**Play reading:** The reading of a playwright's new play in front of an audience. These events often involve simple staging. Readings provide playwrights feedback while the play is under development.

**Table read:** A reading of the play done with the actors sitting down. This event offers the playwright a chance to hear a play aloud for the first time.

**Workshop:** A period of time set aside exclusively to focus on a playwright's new play. Workshops frequently involve actors and a director. They culminate in a reading or a small-scale production.

**Dramaturg:** A research assistant for playwrights and directors. Dramaturgs are part of the creative team that provides feedback as plays are under development.

Much of my information comes from interviews with playwrights, directors, dramaturgs and artistic directors conducted between December 2013 and June 2014. These individuals have the best sense of what models are being used today and which ones are most effective. I will focus on New York City non-profit theatres Lincoln Center Theatre Company, Roundabout Theatre Company, and Signature Theatre. I will look at a regional theatre: the Denver Center Theatre Company. I also will examine New Dramatists and the Lark Play Development Center, institutions that focus solely on play development and not on production. This dissertation is focused on researching the development of new spoken drama; the development of new musicals will not be considered.

The following are samples of the interview questions I used:

What is the most effective methodology to develop new playwrighting? (I know this is broad and by methodology, I'm thinking something like: a year residency for a playwright, a playwriting competition, readings and workshops, plays by famous playwrights going straight to production, etc)

What models does your company use for developing new plays?

Have they adapted over time?

Do you favor readings or small-scale productions?

How is feedback to playwrights given? Either from the creative team or the audience?

What is the most effective way to solicit scripts?

How do you evaluate new plays and what are you looking for?

Theatre companies invest a lot of money in new play development. Where is the industry as a whole? Playwrights seem to be dissatisfied, why?

Maybe this question goes too far, but will playwrights ever be satisfied with the system?

What is the best way to keep the playwright actively engaged in the process?

What do you think about theatre companies charging a percentage of royalties for future production? How does this affect the field going forward?

**Chapter Organization:**

In Chapter One I provide an account of the history of new play development in the United States. I discuss new play development before 1900 and examine its rise throughout the twentieth century. I conclude by considering a couple of contemporary play development centers and festivals such as the O'Neill Playwrights Conference, the Humana Festival and the Public Theatre.



Chapter Two examines New Dramatists and the Lark Play Development Center, companies that provide residencies to early and mid-career playwrights. The residencies are organized around the needs of the writer and are very playwright-centric. Neither organization produces plays; rather, they use their financial resources to support playwrights while their plays are being written. Once a play has been completed the organizations advocate through industry connections for the play's production. This chapter describes organizations where playwrights might get their start in the industry.

Denver Center Theatre Company and its Colorado New Play Summit are studied in Chapter Three. I detail the organization's new play development philosophies through an interview with dramaturg Douglas Langworthy. The Colorado New Play Summit features plays commissioned by the company or submitted by an agent. In this chapter I examine the growth of the commission model in new play development. I trace the journey of two plays from the 2012 Colorado New Play Summit by examining the development of *Ed, Downloaded* by Michael Mitnick and *Grace, or the Art of Climbing* by Lauren Feldman. Playwrights' participation in the Colorado New Play Summit suggests that they have taken a further step along their career path.

In Chapter Four, I examine the major New York non-profit theatre companies Lincoln Center Theater and Signature Theatre Company. I analyze how the artistic directors of each organization, Andre Bishop and James Houghton, respectively, have worked to create an artistic home for playwrights. Signature Theatre Company utilizes two residency programs to develop new plays. Lincoln Center Theater has years-long connections to legendary writers who it helped to develop and whose work it produced in its off Broadway and Broadway theatres. Practically speaking, the opportunities afforded

by Lincoln Center or Signature Theatre's Residency One programs are available only to playwrights with well-established professional credentials.

In Chapter Five I offer a model of play development that has recently arisen—the black box theatre housed in a larger organization. Lincoln Center Theater and Roundabout Theatre Company have created small theatres dedicated to premiering new work by emerging playwrights. These companies seek to offer writers the resources of a major theatre company without the pressure of a production's financial success. This model is one a less experienced playwright might utilize but, because it is the most recently developed, I make it the subject of my last chapter.

In Conclusion, I summarize my findings, articulate the most important developments in new play development that I have discovered, and suggest paths for future research.

## **Chapter One**

### **The History of American New Play Development**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will examine the rise of new play development in the United States. By the start of the twenty-first century, play development was a multi-million dollar industry: but how did that happen?

As I will show in this chapter, in the nineteenth century many American plays were written but the focus was more on entertainment and commercial success. Nineteenth century American playwrights frequently wrote plays or adaptations that would attract the attention of a popular actor or actor manager with hopes that he or she would produce it. One of the first sites for writer development was George Pierce Baker's Workshop 47 at Harvard University. Baker was one of the first professors of drama in America; and in this workshop, he helped playwrights develop their skills through the production process. The Provincetown Players and the Group Theatre were two of the first American theatre companies purposively to support the creation of new American dramas. Seen especially in their collaborations with Eugene O'Neill and Clifford Odets these theatres placed emphasis on developing serious drama over entertainment. A major change in new play development in America occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Federal, state, and local grants led to the creation of non-profit and regional theatres. The Public Theatre, for example, used this funding both to produce Shakespeare's works, and also to create original works. Playwriting festivals like the Humana Festival and the O'Neill Playwright's Conference offered prestigious opportunities for playwrights to workshop their plays and see them

produced. Over the last 40 years non-profit and regional theatres such as the Lincoln Center Theater Company, the Roundabout Theatre Company and the Denver Center Theatre Company have dedicated themselves to cultivating new plays and new playwrights. I view this trend as crucial to new play development in the twenty-first century.

### **Beginnings**

Many notable original plays were produced in the United States prior to the twentieth century; however, in comparison to their European counterparts, American theatres did not place a high priority on supporting the development of new plays. Playwriting swelled to an historical high in Europe in the late nineteenth century with writers such as Ibsen, Chekov, Shaw and Strindberg producing seminal works. The independent theatre movement flourished in Europe at this time due to the strong desire of producers like Antoine and Brahm, to stage new works by these playwrights. The independent theatre movement was influential in the United States where it influenced the creation of the little theatre movement. The participants of the little theatre movement were early advocates for original American writing. However, while original American plays were staged, there was greater interest in producing the work of the great European playwrights of the time.

Pre-twentieth century American playwriting was focused on creating vehicles for star actors.

There can be no denying that the primary interest of American playwriting was generally opportunistic. The object in the nineteenth century was to

supply stage pieces for actor-managers. Readers [...] would do well to think of them as commodities designed for the stage. (Gassner xiv)

Plays were created to thrill and entertain their audiences. Adaptations of novels, such as the *Count of Monte Cristo*, were very popular and performed regularly. "Plays [were] fashioned for standardized thrills of false accusations, imprisonment, escape, and long nursed vengeance"(Gassner xiv). Such sweeping tales became the basis of actor-driven vehicles; in fact, Charles Fechter's dramatization of Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo* is how Eugene O'Neill's father, the actor James O'Neill, made his fortune. While many of these plays were well written, entertainment was of greater importance than exploration of important personal or social issues. Writers of this period generally regarded their work as "show business."

Melodramas such as Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867) were the most profitable productions of the time. "The classic example is [...] *Under the Gaslight*, in which the virtuous heroine pursued by a villain she has been resisting for some time sees her protector tied to the railroad tracks and rescues him from certain death just in time" (Gassner xxiv). Melodramas like *Under the Gaslight* owed more of their popularity to spectacle and visual effects than to their thought-provoking writing. "A playwright's theatre in which the drama itself was to be the primary interest was yet to be born"(Gassner xxiv). To make a living, playwrights sought the good fortune of popular actor-managers who could pay them well.

Nevertheless, drama in America was maturing. By the 1890's one notable development occurred as playwrights like James A. Herne who, in plays like *Margaret*

*Fleming*, fused realism of character with the “drama of ideas” (Gassner xxv). Drama focused on social tension and issues also elevated the form.

In 1899, Herne himself provided one of these works, *The Reverend Griffith Davenport*, the drama of a liberal clergyman in the South who opposes slavery. [...] Social drama began to be written with considerable emphasis on economic realities by Bronson Howard. [...] Business life was combined with social comedy in Howard’s most distinguished pieces, *Young Mrs. Winthrop* (1882) and *The Henrietta* (1887). [...] Monopolistic practices and financial manipulations became a target. [...] The rising conflicts of capital and labor became the theme of a number of treatments sympathetic to the underdog. (Gassner xxv–xxvi)

Plays about social and economic issues such as Clifford Odet’s *Awake and Sing* and Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* would be produced during the late 1920s and 1930s, a very fruitful period in American playwriting.

### **The Development of Theatre in the American University System**

While students had presented productions of plays in America since the Colonial days, course work in the field was rare. A major influence in creating theatre as a field of study in the university system was George Pierce Baker. “Baker was a leader in introducing modern theatre studies to the university curriculum” (Chansky 98). Baker became one of the first American professors to specialize in drama. In 1903, he started a playwriting course at Radcliffe University that was eventually opened to Harvard University students. By 1913 a workshop for producing plays had begun. From Eugene

O'Neill to Robert Edmond Jones, many of Baker's students became leaders in the American theatre.

Through his class at Harvard, English 14, a study of the history of the English drama, Baker began to develop the techniques and philosophies that he would teach throughout his career. Three traits stand out: "his sympathetic understanding of the relationship between the life and plays of each dramatist; his belief that the dramas he taught were created for the stage and were to be acted rather than read; and his view that the history of the drama should be an evolution of the dramatic form" (Kinne 37-38). This class, however, remained a study of the dramatic form, not a course involving actual playwriting.

Interestingly, Baker started his classes as a form of audience development. He did not begin his work focused on developing the actor or the playwright. Baker sought to develop an audience for original and challenging plays.

A literary awakening in the drama would come, he thought, not when the masses read plays but when they experienced an intellectual awakening and growth comparable to that which had occurred among the readers of novels during the nineteenth century who learned to demand truth as well as entertainment. In a general way, G.P.B.'s life work was a succession of attempts to integrate the arts of the theatre with the sound instance of the social mass. (Kinne 68)

A major shift in Baker's career occurred in 1912 when he created a playwriting course, called English 47. A shift from study to practice began when Baker allowed his students to write a play to satisfy their thesis requirements for graduation. The main requirements of Baker's course were writing one-act plays and a three-act play.

In a short time English 47 merged into Workshop 47 which branched out from the Harvard campus by adding local members of the community interested in theatre. It was to be Baker's major accomplishment in helping to develop original American works. "Baker [...] handpicked a local audience and insisted, as a condition of membership, on active critical participation in developing new plays via detailed written responses to performances" (Chansky 71). Allowing the audience to give feedback on original scripts was an early precursor to the talkback, a common vehicle for collecting views of new plays in development. The written response model pioneered by Baker continues to be employed in the industry; indeed, it is very similar to what Denver Center Theatre currently uses for the Colorado New Play Summit.

Baker saw developing the audience for new American theatre as just as crucial as developing the playwrights themselves. Even after he left Harvard for Yale to start a professional theatre training program, he never stopped advocating for the idea of American audiences should demand good original American plays.

The most important aspect of the Workshop for playwrights was the opportunity to see their plays in production. A young playwright wrote of his experience in the Workshop:

Simple and unprofessional as some of the productions there were, I absorbed a great deal of knowledge about the spoken word—and, I think, I gained a sense of structure. Only when I lost contact did I realize how much more I could have learned about acting and lighting, scenic design and direction—and their potential contribution to any play. (Kinne 191)

Seeing their work in performance allowed the playwrights to develop their skills with language and dramatic structure. It also opened the playwrights' eyes to the importance of



all the elements of theatre—including design and direction. A playwright's need to see his or her work fully produced is a common desire of playwrights across the entire history of new play development.

Baker's workshop lasted from 1912-1924. Audience members and playwrights had to be serious about the project. Baker kept records on attendance at productions and each member of the group was responsible for frequent written criticism. In the twenty-first century, when audience development is a major objective for American theatre companies, Baker's ideas might seem less radical. The early twentieth century American theatre needed a push towards serious drama, and Baker intended to give it that push.

Baker's model of play development reveals some good and bad aspects. "The 47 Workshop took seriously the idea that original theatre needs a committed audience and that the actual members of this audience can work actively as co-makers of meaning in the theatrical event. [...] At worst, Baker perpetuated a notion that the public who should influence playwrights should be white, upper-middle class, and urban in outlook" (Chansky 105–106). Baker's greatest legacy was opening up the play development process to interested scholars, students and audience members.

### **The Provincetown Players and Eugene O'Neill**

In the summer of 1915 a group of vacationing artists and writers founded The Provincetown Players. This company was a part of the little theatre movement, which had its roots in the independent theatre movement that had swept across Europe prior to World War I. "Taking their inspiration from the European independent theatres, these groups offered their subscribers a season of plays mounted with care for artistic principles"

(Brockett and Findlay 486). However, the Provincetown Players pursued a course different than most of the other little theatres: it placed producing original American plays at the center of its mission.

Under the leadership of George Cram Cook, the Players sought to encourage playwriting by involving writers in all aspects of production. “It [The Provincetown Players] was the only little theatre with the avowed purpose of producing exclusively American plays and including the dramatist in the environment of collective creativity” (Sarlós 155). This is an important distinction as, in the early twentieth century, the works of Ibsen, Strindberg and Shaw were being produced internationally but the production of original works of American playwrights lagged behind. The Provincetown Players gave American playwrights an all-important opportunity for production.

The Provincetown Players also displayed a strong commitment to the playwrights and their satisfaction with their scripts. The playwright’s participation in the rehearsal and production process was essential.

Cook’s devotion to the playwright remained one of the guiding principles of the Provincetown. [...] Broadway’s cherished tenet that the best place for a playwright during the production of his play is on a slow boat for Africa received a blow in the constitutional proviso that “no play shall be considered unless the author supervised the production. [...] The president shall cooperate with the author in producing the play under the author’s direction. The resources of the theater [...] shall be at his disposal. The author shall produce the play without hindrance according to his own ideas.”

(Deutsch and Hanau 38–39)

Provincetown's "playwright's theatre" shows the emerging transition in American theatre from plays being used as vehicles for actor-managers to plays being vehicles for the playwright's intent.

Over eight seasons, the Provincetown Players produced ninety-seven plays by forty-seven American playwrights. During this time Provincetown "encouraged and accelerated a general transformation of American playwriting from mere craft into art, and it did this by offering the same opportunity for experimentation to any potential dramatist willing to take a risk" (Sarlós 161). The Provincetown Players were a very important part of making the 1920s one of the most fruitful periods of American theatre prior to World War II. Influential dramatists like Susan Glaspell, Wallace Stevens, and Neith Boyce Hapgood, along with many others, produced important original works. However, the Provincetown Players' most lasting effect would be their collaboration with the first great American playwright—Eugene O'Neill.

Over his career, O'Neill had a tremendous impact on American playwriting, perhaps more so than any other dramatist.

Not many today question the pre-eminence of Eugene O'Neill as America's leading playwright. The playwrights who followed him—Williams, Miller, and Albee, and, more recently, dramatists like Sam Shepard, David Mamet, and Tony Kushner—all have acknowledged their profound debt to him, as have younger playwrights in countries as remote from one another as Sweden and China. He is internationally recognized as the quintessential American dramatist of the twentieth-century world stage. (Manheim 1)

The Provincetown Players produced many of the premieres of his early plays, which served as springboard for his career.

The Players' first production of an O'Neill play was *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916). The production occurred in a makeshift theatre on the end of a pier in Provincetown; humble beginnings for a playwright who would make his Broadway debut just four years later. "For the next ten years O'Neill worked with the Players in their several forms; they would produce several of his best-known early plays including *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. In the fall, when the Players returned to New York, *Bound East for Cardiff* opened the group's first New York bill in Greenwich Village" (Manheim 9). Sources differ on which play marks O'Neill's Broadway debut, both *The Emperor Jones* and *Beyond the Horizon* premiered in 1920, but *The Emperor Jones* was produced and developed by the Provincetown Players, and its Broadway transfer was the group's biggest success.

The Provincetown Players discovered O'Neill and, even after he achieved repeated success and acceptance with a Broadway audience, they continued to support his more experimental works. Certainly the Players provided O'Neill with all-important opportunities of production. It is hard to have a complete sense of how much time the Players spent developing his work, however. O'Neill's plays were changed and influenced by the reception of early audiences but he was fortunate that the Players seemed ready to produce anything he gave them. What he gave them was of a personal nature as he frequently used his own life as source material. His best play was first produced posthumously; obviously, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* was not work-shopped in a public setting. Perhaps O'Neill is like a number of great playwrights in that they did not need play development—only the opportunity for production.

## **The Group Theatre and Clifford Odets**

In the 1930s, the Group Theatre debuted new American plays and achieved great commercial and critical success producing the plays of Clifford Odets. The first glimmerings of the Group Theatre became visible in 1928 when a number of the key players, Harold Clurman, Lee Strasburg and Sanford Meisner, began rehearsing plays in their spare time. However, 1930 is generally seen as the year that the Group was founded.

One Friday night in November 1930, Harold Clurman, a twenty-nine-year-old play reader with the Theatre Guild in New York City, began a series of weekly talks for an audience of young actors he hoped to interest in the theatre we wanted to establish with his friends. [...] When this quiet, stammering young man opened his mouth, out rushed an extraordinary monologue, the aggregate of everything he ever thought, felt, hoped, and dreamed about the American theatre and American life. When he paused for breath the following May, he had articulated a vision of a new kind of theatre: an ensemble of artists who would create, out of common beliefs and technique, dramatic productions that spoke to an equally committed audience about the essential social and moral issues of their times. (Smith 3)

Clurman and his fellow Group co-founder Cheryl Crawford had worked at the Theatre Guild as play readers. They admired the Guild's desire to bring new American plays to a larger audience, but over time they grew dissatisfied with the Guild. "In part, members of the Group Theatre were protesting against the Guild itself, which, according to them, had no program other than rather vague 'cultural' and 'artistic' aims. The Group, on the other

hand, was committed to the Stanislavsky system in acting and to leftist sentiments in politics” (Brockett and Findlay 500). The Group admired the Moscow Art Theatre, so it was not surprising it was a major influence on their philosophies. Ensemble spirit was of great importance to the Group: they lived and worked together, and they were one of the first American theatre companies to maintain a paid permanent troupe.

The Group is a good example of the shift in American theatre from the actor-manager driven work of the nineteenth century to the ensemble based work of the twentieth century; it desired to see all aspects of production—from the script to the director and to the actors—succeed together. In his book *The Fervent Years*, Harold Clurman describes the theatre’s philosophy of connecting the playwright to the actor.

We expected to bring the actor much closer to the content of the play, to link the actor as an individual with the creative purpose of the playwright. In most theatres the actor is hired to do a part: he was expected to make it live on the stage, but as an individual he stood outside the play or the playwright’s vision. His art and the playwright’s were presumed to be connected only technically. (23)

Clurman saw the lack of cohesion in the American theatre as its major problem. “We have, on the American stage, all the separate elements for a Theatre, but no Theatre. We have playwrights without their theatre-groups, directors without their actors, actors without their plays or directors, scene designers without anything. Our theatre is an anarchy of individual talents” (Smith 5). The Group was determined to create a unified theatre company that would dedicate its resources to producing timely and socially significant theatre productions.

Presenting new plays was at the heart of the Group's objectives. "Clurman wanted their new theatre to present contemporary plays by American writers that dealt in a vigorous, positive spirit with 'the essential and moral and social preoccupations of our time'" (Smith 8). The plays of Clifford Odets were the most influential new work that the Group Theatre produced. In 1934, Odets, an actor with the Group, approached Clurman with the outline of a one-act play about taxi-drivers questioning whether to strike. Clurman was drawn to the project, which eventually became *Waiting for Lefty*. Odets returned days later having written the play in three nights.

Due to its focus on workers and their plight, *Waiting for Lefty* was in close concert with the Group's political philosophies. "When the company read *Waiting for Lefty* in the cellar of the Majestic Theatre, they were struck by its originality and fire. They rehearsed it in their spare time. Luther Adler told me with a quiet glow of pleasure: 'Harold, the Group has produced the finest revolutionary playwright in America'" (Clurman 133). Clurman's statement makes it is obvious the passion the company felt about producing Odets' play. Playwrights bringing their plays to a theatre company they trust, believing that it will give them a production in accord with their intent, is an idea as timeless as theatre itself. This system certainly has its merits—playwrights that have fostered strong relationships with theatre companies can trust them to produce good and faithful interpretations of the play. This model succeeded for Odets and the Group and exists frequently in contemporary theatre.

The Group's production of *Waiting for Lefty* was an immediate sensation. It tapped into the immediate struggles of its audience.

When the lights went up on the bare stage [...] no one expected anything except another casual piece of agitprop thrown together for a good cause.

Within moments everyone in the theatre knew better. As the actors began to speak Odet's stingingly authentic dialogue—so radically different from either the affected patter of the Broadway show-shops or the wooden sloganeering of agitprop—audience members found themselves swept up in a drama they seemed to know intimately, from deep inside themselves, even though they'd never heard a word of it before. (Smith 197)

The Group's production of *Waiting for Lefty* also expressed the company's desire to create productions that seamlessly melded the talent and interests of all involved.

Swept up by the passion they had aroused, the actors were no longer acting.

They were being carried along as if by an exultancy of communication such as I have never witnessed in the theatre before," wrote Clurman. The twenty-eight-year-old playwright was awed by the emotional spirit he'd ignited.

"You saw theatre in its truest essence," Odets remembered years later.

"Suddenly the proscenium arch of the theatre vanished and the audience and actors were at one with each other." (Smith 199)

*Waiting for Lefty's* popularity surged as productions were mounted across the country. The day after the premiere, the office of the Group was deluged with calls for permission to produce it. The play also received the George Pierce Baker Cup at the Yale Drama tournament. The success of *Lefty* cemented for the Group the importance of collaboration.



*Waiting for Lefty* changed people's ideas of what theatre was. [...] In a fragmented society of wounded individuals, theatre could bring people together and make them whole. After such a revelation, there was no going back for the Group. They would seek the communion created by *Lefty* in everything they did. Sometimes they found it, sometimes they didn't, but they could no longer be satisfied with anything less. (Smith 199)

*Waiting for Lefty* started a productive period for the group that continued with the success of Odet's *Awake and Sing* (1935). Over time, artistic and financial factors contributed to the Group slowly breaking apart. In 1938 Clurman reorganized the Group, losing some of its collaborative nature and making it closer to traditional commercial theatres.

### **Tennessee Williams and the Golden Age**

The mid-twentieth century was a highpoint in American playwriting. From the mid-1940s through the 1960s, playwrights like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee wrote some of the most influential and successful American plays yet produced.

With the aid of Elia Kazan as their mutual director, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller dominated Broadway during the 1940s and the early 1950s. After them, there were followers and imitators, some with talent but none with a definable and durable vision. Then in the 1960s there was Albee as innovator. [...] He is, said Jose Quintero, 'the last great playwright that we have.' By that he means that Albee is the fourth, after O'Neill, Williams, and Miller. (Gussow 17)

Tennessee Williams' journey from unknown playwright to American legend offers a window into American new play development in the mid-twentieth century. His career demonstrates the importance of the Group Theatre and the Dramatists Guild in new play development, as well as the changing nature of collaboration in play production on Broadway.

In 1939, Williams entered a playwriting contest held by the Group Theatre. Williams did not win first prize, but his play, *American Blues*, was so outstanding the Group created a new award. The prize money helped Tennessee move to New York to seek production and development of his play. Shortly after arriving in New York, Williams enrolled in an advanced playwriting seminar run by Theresa Helburn and John Gassner. Williams joined the Dramatists Guild; at the time, all playwrights had to join the guild to have a play produced on Broadway and the guild protected playwrights with its standard contracts. Williams soaked in life at the center of the theatre world. "He spent many afternoons watching rehearsals of the new Clifford Odets play being produced by the Group Theatre. One day Harold Clurman [...] introduced himself and said that Tennessee's new play was on his desk" (Williams and Mead 80). Similar to the model of new play development that New Dramatists practices today, Williams attended many performances of Broadway plays, some through tickets provided by the Dramatists Guild, and he attended lectures from famous writers.

Over the course of the twentieth century, playwrights gained greater artistic freedom as they separated themselves from the star-actor model. The idea and job of the director also expanded and changed over this time. In new play development, the director's job is to create a production that matches the playwright's intent and to serve as a

sounding board for developmental ideas throughout the process. Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan's working relationship shows the development of the collaboration between the playwright and director.

A director who works with a playwright on the first production of a play is a full collaborator in the work that is eventually described in the published script. This is now commonplace; when Tennessee Williams began working with Elia Kazan on *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, it was more like an accusation. The Broadway theatre of the forties was still functioning on a model for the production process that had originated at the turn of the century, just as the director had come to assume a separate identity from the producer and actor-manager. [...] In the early twentieth century, the playwright gained greater and greater respect as a literary artist while the functions of producer and director gradually were separated into those of the business manager who tended to the money side of the production and the artistic director who actively staged the play. (Murphy 1)

Williams and Kazan had a complex creative collaboration. Williams trusted Kazan to realize the playwright's vision on stage and sought his feedback on early drafts of his plays. Certainly the producer remains a critical force in new play development and many would emerge during the second half of the twentieth century, from Joe Papp to Andre Bishop to Oscar Eustis. However, Williams and Kazan's relationship suggests that closeness between playwright and director also can have a major impact on contemporary new play development.

## Joe Papp and the Public Theatre

I see the rise in importance and influence of non-profit theatres during the 1960s as crucial to new play development in the twentieth-first century. A look at Joe Papp and the Public Theatre, a non-profit organization, sheds light on this important turning point in American new play development. Joseph Papp's work at the New York Shakespeare Festival and later, more importantly, at the Public Theatre was among the major influences on new play development in the mid twentieth century.

In the decades since the fifties, new play development has steadily increased. The rise of playwright-friendly producing environments, such as LaMaMa ETC, Mark Taper Forum, Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Magic Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, Crossroads Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre, and the Public Theatre, among others, helped fuel the growth. (Wright xii)

Papp produced many different kinds of plays over his career. In the 1950s, he worked with the New York Shakespeare Festival to stage free Shakespeare in Central Park. By 1962, the Delacorte Theatre had been built as a permanent home. In 1967, Papp founded the Public Theatre, a theatre complex made up of five theatres with the ability to suit many different kinds of productions, eg. Shakespeare, musicals and new plays. The Public opened with the new musical *Hair*. The Public's economic stability was always complicated by the lack of dependable grant and public support. In 1975, in a workshop led by Michon Peacock and Tony Stevens, a group of dancers started a process that would become the musical *A Chorus Line*. *A Chorus Line* was one of the first productions to be created through a workshop process. Befitting its tenuous financial state, the Public had to borrow the \$1.6 million needed to mount the piece. However, *A Chorus Line* became a

tremendous success running on Broadway for 6,137 performances and helping to stabilize the Public's financial situation.

Creating a more diverse audience was crucial to Papp. "[He] consistently argued that the renewal of the theatre depends upon attracting a new audience, for otherwise, it will be impossible to escape the middle-class biases which have created most of the problems. Thus, one of his major goals has been to reach the unsophisticated and to show them that the theatre is both relevant and entertaining" (Brockett and Findlay 715). Conventional theatre's lack of political relevance was one of the main reasons why Papp started the Public.

By the mid 1960s, Papp saw that the gulf between American society and mainstream American theatre was extremely wide.

By 1966, President Kennedy and Black Muslim leader Malcolm X had been murdered, and the nation had watched on television more than a decade of violence attending desegregation. Now, they were watching Vietnam. There were 285,000 Americans in Vietnam by 1966, over five thousand casualties and a growing student movement challenging U.S. involvement. [...] He listened to the music of Bob Dylan as well as the Beatles and grasped that traditional attitudes towards authority, sex, race and gender were changing fast. (Epstein 201–202)

It was not so much that Papp embraced youth culture—his political involvement predated the 1960s—but he felt it was incredibly important to help create new plays that spoke to this generation. Papp said, "I am looking for plays that have some passionate statement to make that is commensurate with the times we are living in" (Epstein 202). Papp saw

Broadway as being devoid of current and modern playwrights so one of his goals with the Public was to help promote emerging playwrights' work: "There were no really modern plays being done on Broadway at that time, there were just none. Broadway was bereft, and not only did I want it to have real writers of drama, I wanted to give these writers Broadway recognition. They were first-class, serious writers and they'd never had it" (Turan and Papp 394).

Perhaps the importance of developing current and insightful work by new playwrights is best symbolized by Papp's relationship with David Rabe. Rabe's first play, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, considered by many to be the best play written about Vietnam, was the disturbing portrait of a young American soldier serving in that war. "In November 1971, Papp opened his second David Rabe play, *Sticks and Bones*, at the Public Theatre. For most of the fall, American attention had been riveted on the 'Pentagon Papers,' the 7,000-page collection of documents detailing United States involvement in Southeast Asia" (Epstein 264). Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* was about a protagonist returning home from Vietnam and his incredibly difficult experience readapting to American life.

By the time [Papp] produced Rabe's second play, Papp was sure he had found the Festival's voice. He told people Rabe was the successor to the first great American playwright, Eugene O'Neill, and that if he were to produce *just* Rabe in his theater, he would be accomplishing something. 'Frankly, I stand in awe of his extraordinary talent, which by an existing standard is unmatched in the United States today. [...] I see David as a national playwright. What that means to me is that he has an acute perception of the American consciousness. This perception in the theater makes it possible for

ideas to transcend the limitation of class, color and economic lines. (Epstein 265)

While Rabe remains an important twentieth century American playwright, in hindsight, Papp's comments about Rabe's talents verge on exaggeration. But in them is evident his commitment to developing plays that resonate in their time and to the playwrights that write them.

Joseph Papp is often cited for successfully walking this tightrope of commercial and critical success throughout his time at the Public Theater. Papp was famous for his devotion and commitment to playwrights and new plays. He developed long term (though admittedly complicated) relationships with writers such as David Rabe, Sam Shepard and Tina Howe. Lincoln Center Theater's Anne Cattaneo describes Papp: "When he met you, his enthusiasm was instantaneous, and he often kept his promises: to produce an unwritten play by an actor, to find a large grant for a fledgling translator. Papp's commitment could lift an artist from obscurity into the public's eye" (London, Pesner, and Voss 8). Papp's strengths in new play development came less from a methodology and more from following his instinct and his gut. If a play caught his attention, he didn't need to ask twenty people if he could do it—he just did. Papp also moved plays directly into production. Tina Howe explains, "There was no reading or work shopping. It was just bang, you went into rehearsal, and in rehearsal and previews you figured out what the problems were" (London, Pesner, and Voss 8). Contemporary playwrights complain about the chilly professionalism and corporate atmosphere at major non-profit theatres. As new play development has grown into a major theatrical industry, managing it is difficult—too little freedom can choke an artistic vision but too much can yield an unsuccessful or unprofitable product.

In 1973, Papp was offered the chance to run Lincoln Center Theater. Lincoln Center was founded with the best of intentions but, from its inception in 1965, it has had a troubled history. Well-known directors from Elia Kazan to Herbert Blau and Jules Irving had difficulty raising money for and generating income from the large theatre, the Vivian Beaumont. Initially, Papp was reluctant to take the job as he was pleased by the success of the Public Theatre but leading Lincoln Center allowed him to pursue two of his goals—to promote new playwrights and to bring greater diversity to theatre audiences.

Lincoln Center had been kind of a haven for safe plays, and I wanted to begin to deal with it in an entirely different way, to get some new works that were significant in there. I had to get a first play on, and I wanted to start with something from David. He was in the forefront; he was dealing with issues that I felt were the most important ones. (Turan and Papp 338)

Papp felt the prominence of Lincoln Center would give playwrights the visibility they needed. “He wished to add at least five thousand black subscribers to the Lincoln Center Theater’s list of forty thousand predominantly white ones and admit the young and elderly as ‘passholders’ at lower charge” (Epstein 278).

Rabe, however, felt that his play *In the Boom Boom Room* was not ready for such a high profile opening.

Joe did a selling job. He said that he wanted to open his regime with *Boom Boom Room*; that mine was the best play he had, that he wanted to invade the sacrosanct confines of Lincoln Center and he had no other play that he wanted to put in that position. That’s what I mean. You are always slid into the position where you were bearing the burden of his programs. It wasn’t



just the play that got looked at on its own merits. It was a play that was judged in terms of how it manifested or represented the program. (Turan and Papp 339)

Rabe felt the play needed more development including a workshop. The production ran into many problems; Papp fired Rabe's long time collaborator, director Jeff Bleckner, and hired an inexperienced director in his place. Eventually he removed that person, putting himself in the position. The production was unsuccessful and it ended Papp and Rabe's creative relationship. Papp confesses, "Rabe's *Boom Boom Room*—I rushed it up too fast. It wasn't ready. I was fighting against deadlines. These new works, they have to be generated first, developed downtown first, molded in the workshop" (Epstein 308). Certainly Rabe and Papp's collaboration produced more hits than failures but the process of premiering *Boom Boom Room* was so difficult that it led to a very negative experience for the playwright. Rabe's and Papp's experiences with this production show that serving a play's needs and spending the needed time on its development are vital to new play development.

In many ways, the Public continues with Papp's vision today. It has a number of different sized theatres to help accommodate unique new works and productions. Shakespeare in the Park continues to be very popular, with notable productions including *Mother Courage and Her Children* (2006), *Hair* (2008) and *The Merchant of Venice* (2010) among others. It is currently led by Artistic Director Oscar Eustis who remains dedicated to new play development.

### **The Late Twentieth Century: New Play Development becomes an Institution**

Nationwide play development in the United States began in 1957 through a series of donations from the Ford Foundation. “The modern history of the movement begins in 1957, when real passion and real money for new work appeared in the guise of W. MacNeil Lowry of the Ford Foundation. He single handedly underwrote the decentralization of the American Theatre, and in so doing created a vast new network for the American playwright” (Anderson 55). At the time there were in the United States only 13 regional theatre companies, all with limited operations. Lowry’s mission was two-fold: to issue substantial grants to create resident acting companies, thus stabilizing the acting work force; and to put these ensembles at the service of creating new plays. By 1964 the Ford Foundation was spending \$325,000 yearly on new play development. Creating a network of regional theatres resulted in many new opportunities for playwrights.

Lowry’s idea was very successful and by 1988 there were over 260 professional companies nationwide. (Anderson 55). That year alone, these companies mounted 170 premieres and countless workshops and staged readings. As discussed in the Introduction, Anderson’s “Dream Machine” essay was published in 1988 and offers a clear view of the new play development methodologies then in force.

Founded in 1968, the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center National Playwrights Conference is the second oldest new play development institution in America. Lloyd Richards shaped the conference into its current model and ran the program from 1968-1999. Richards, a Tony Award-winning director collaborated on many notable productions of new plays, from *Raisin in the Sun* (1958) to August Wilson’s cycle of plays on African-American life. The O’Neill still maintains a policy of open submission and usually receives

around 1,500 scripts a year. After Richards' retirement in 1999, James Houghton, current artistic director of Signature Theatre Company ran the conference for three years. One of his most significant changes was in the way playwrights received feedback. Houghton eliminated the post-performance critique, feeling that an audience of a hundred and fifty provided too many disparate opinions on the play and could lead the playwright down wrong paths.

There are two aspects of the O'Neill model that I find most interesting. First, after the initial reading the playwright meets with the director and dramaturg to create a plan for rehearsal. "The team then met with Richards to discuss their plan, and he either approved it or suggested some additional aspects to consider, or raised questions that were designed to illuminate problems that may not have been examined" (Wright 28). Second, the O'Neill model culminates in a staged reading after following the process of giving a play an initial reading and an intensive rehearsal process.

Every play had the same limit, known as the four-and-a-half-day rehearsal: four full days of rehearsal in which to stage the play and to do any further rewriting, plus one additional, short rehearsal the day after the first staged reading. [...] Each play received two staged readings on consecutive days before a paying audience. (Wright 28)

While the staged readings have minimal production value, designers are essential to the O'Neill's model. They ask critical questions and help the playwright consider how their script would look and function in an actual production. James Ryan, a former designer in residence, describes the collaboration:

The most important meeting that happens, before you go into the rehearsal process, is usually a day or two in advance, where the three designers and the director and the dramaturg sit down with the playwright. Sometimes this is the most important thing that happens to a playwright here. What happens in that meeting is that the playwright is asked to be the go-between, in some ways to do the job the director normally does: wrestle with what the environment for this piece should be. [...] It is meeting with three designers who will try to help by asking wonderful questions and sharing their own observations about what the play evokes in them in the way of visual images and moods and emotional truths. (Wright 29–30)

The four-and-a-half-day rehearsal period culminates in a staged reading. There are a number of benefits to a staged reading.

Having one's play on its feet is a different experience from limply listening to actors read a script in class. With a staged reading, you get to see the characters behave in real time: when they argue or dance it gets physicalized; when they are uncertain of what to say next, it is expressed in the language of the body—not simply covered with the reading of a stage direction. [...] In other words, the play begins to take the time on stage that it will in production, which can be a very helpful learning tool for the playwright.

(Wright 34)

Currently led by Wendy Goldberg, The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center National Playwrights Conference remains one of the most influential new play development programs in the nation.

Another of America's most influential new play development programs is the Humana Festival, presented by the Actor's Theatre of Louisville. The festival, founded in 1976, premieres many new plays each year.

The bread and butter of the Actors Theatre's success certainly is the Humana Festival of New American Plays, and without the festival, the Louisville theatre would not merit special recognition. However, given the institution's reputation as a "playwright's theatre" due to its commitment to the development of new works, the Humana Festival provided the Actors Theatre of Louisville with an international reputation for supporting established playwrights, discovering new talents, and presenting America's best new plays. (Ullom 2)

Much of the success of the festival is due to the work of Jon Jory. Creating a theatre capable of achieving international success in the middle of Kentucky was a daunting challenge, but one Jory surmounted.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, non-profit theatres like The Actors Theatre of Louisville have been pronounced champions of new play development. In a 1974 interview, theatre producer James M Nederlander described the relationship between Broadway and the nonprofits. "The regional theatres have become the tryout ground for Broadway. In other words you try it out with [a nonprofit theatre] and, if it's good, it moves to Broadway" (Ullom 46). The truth of Nederlander's quote is still evident today. I think the relationship between Broadway and regional theatre is very similar to the relationship between Broadway and the nonprofit theatres in New York City. Almost all new play development is done by nonprofit theatre companies. With its focus on musicals and

revivals, Broadway does not have the interest or the right capabilities to take a lead in new play development.

Like at the O'Neill Conference the playwright is an integral part of the rehearsal process at the Humana Festival. "Jory's work helped reestablish the prominence of the playwright in the rehearsal process in theatres nationally and promoted the inclusion of dramaturgs on the staffs of professional theatres. Thanks to the success of his festival, new opportunities for playwriting development sprang up across the country" (Ullom 162). One advantage that nonprofits have in the field of new play development is availability of theatre spaces and administrative staffs. The most successful new play development programs are geared to provide writers with the time and materials to create their plays. Jory understood this well: "his festival and its dedication to the needs and concerns of the playwright demonstrated the importance of process over product" (Ullom 163).

Looking at American new play development, a couple of trends stand out. First is the importance of non-profit theatres in the field. Relatively few plays premiere on Broadway, and many of those are produced by non-profits. New play development is left almost exclusively to non-profit theatre companies in New York and around the nation. A second important trend is the importance for a playwright to have their works fully produced. Full production allows the playwright to see the work on its feet and to evaluate how an audience receives it. Audience feedback, whether or not it is in the form of a talkback, has a large impact on how playwrights envision the future of their plays.

The best new play development systems are playwright-centric—focused on giving writers the resources they need to create their plays. Due to theatre companies' sometimes-shaky economic status, this is not always possible, but playwrights and

producers agree that it is the ideal option. In well-funded theatres from Lincoln Center to Denver Center, this ideal situation can become a reality.

A problem in the field remains the lack of connection between playwrights and the theatres producing or commissioning their work. In an effort to get better funding and more economic stability, many non-profit theatres have invested heavily in administrative staffs geared towards development and marketing. It is rare, however, for playwrights, actors and designers to be employed year round, creating a disconnect between the theatres and theatre artists. For example, the relationship between the Group Theatre and Clifford Odets is hard to imagine in contemporary theatre. Despite these challenges, American new play development is alive and well, an important component to twenty-first century theatre production.

## Chapter Two

### Process over Production: New Dramatists and The Lark

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will examine two companies, New Dramatists and the Lark Play Development Center, that focus on playwrights residencies over production. These organizations do not produce in-house; rather they work to give a playwright the resources and time to write his or her play without the pressure of production timeline. I also examine a speech by playwright Richard Nelson in which Nelson condemns the new play development industry for being focused on “play fixin.” Nelson claims that the new play development industry assumes playwrights need help with creating their work while other theatre artists do not. I believe that play development models like New Dramatists and the Lark provide a playwright-centric model that is focused on the needs of the play and the playwright.

In 2007, playwright Richard Nelson gave the keynote address to the Alliance of Resident Theatres (ART/NY) in New York City. He focused on new play development and his experiences with it. Nelson started his speech in a positive light,

I know I am in a room of people who care about theater, who love theater, many of you have and are devoting your lives to theater. And any lover of theater - must also be a lover of plays. And any lover of plays will, I am sure, recognize the unique place of the playwright in the making of theater. [...] As I tell my students endlessly – theater is the only artistic form that uses the entire living human being as its expression. Playwrights write people, not



words. We write words to convey people. To push us aside, to make us the 'text guy' and not the play guy is a subtle but dangerous change in thinking and betrays a new mindset about the place of the playwright in the making of theater.

Nelson is a well-respected playwright, educator and advocate. He soon turned to addressing problems he witnessed in the field of new play development. His address caused a good deal of controversy and led to a major reevaluation of the field in new play development.

Nelson expressed his belief that the role of the playwright is under serious attack in contemporary American theatre. In his view, the growth of the new play industry has created theatre professionals who are only focused on fixing or helping plays, not supporting their unique development. Nelson stated,

But perhaps the greatest threat to the playwright in today's theater comes from not those greedy and ignorant, but rather from those who want "to help." "Help. Playwrights are in need of help." This is now almost a maxim in our theater today. Unquestioned. A given. But where does this mindset - for that is what it is, a mindset - come from? Of course playwrights need things - money, productions, support, encouragement. So do actors, directors, designers, artistic directors. But THIS mindset is different, because what is meant here is: "Playwrights are in need of help - to write their plays. They are in need of help - to do their work. They can't do their work themselves."

Nelson describes a patronizing culture of help that grows out of good intentions. The new play industry exists to develop plays and some of that work involves helping playwrights.

However, this mindset has grown so that, at least in Nelson's view, playwrights are no longer trusted or considered able to bring their work to fruition.

Nelson also talked about a state of unfairness surrounding playwrights' work. Other theatre artists aren't assumed to need help; we assume that they are talented enough to do their own work competently.

How strange. What other profession is viewed in this way? What other person in the theater is viewed this way? Imagine hiring say a director with the assumption that he couldn't do his work himself. Now I am not saying by this that a director shouldn't listen to others, receive notes, be open to discussions, and so forth. Quite the opposite, for THIS is all part of what a director does. AND I am NOT saying a playwright shouldn't listen to notes, be open to discussions, and so forth - because THIS is what a playwright does. What I am saying is that the given mindset should not be that the playwright cannot be trusted to lead this process. Cannot be trusted to know how to work within the collaboration of theater. (Nelson, Richard)

In Nelson's view, this culture of help, grounded in good intentions, has evolved into a detriment for the playwright. The idea that all plays and playwrights need help lowers the status and position of the playwright relative to other collaborators.

In his address Nelson also asserted that playwrights know the way of working that best suits them.

Again, I am not saying that a playwright should avoid and ignore comments and reactions to his work, quite the opposite. But I am saying that our mindset toward playwrights should be this: 1) the playwright knows what he

is doing, 2) perhaps the play as presented is as it should be. So that the onus for change is not on the playwright but on others, on the theater. And the theater is there with a full array of tools to support the playwright as he or she attempts to improve upon his or her play. How to improve a play should be the domain of the writer, with the theater supplying potential tools, a reading say, or a workshop with clearly delineated goals. These are tools that should evolve out of a need, as opposed to being a given.

Nelson pointed out that new play development is being thought of from the perspective of the theatre producer instead of considering what the playwright needs to write the play.

Nelson declared that playwrights need to be viewed as professionals, capable of determining their own path.

Nelson described a culture of dependence that extends to actors and directors and even to audience of new plays.

Now if it is assumed that all plays need to be helped along, then no playwright actually has it in his or her power to complete his or her play. Therefore, can it really be called his or her play? Ah - now we come to other trickier sides of this equation, where the "help" given writers also has strings. In the time I've been given, I'd like to look at just a few - there are many - examples of how this mindset has infiltrated our theater and what it is doing to my profession. So let's get specific. And let's look at the actors, directors, even audiences who have been taught/re-educated by this culture to feel a responsibility to "help" the playwright write his or her play. Producers, literary managers, dramaturges who "help" with rules about what makes a

good play, who “help” by mandating readings because they must be “helpful.”

Let's look at managers who “helpfully” organize commissions so that the theater can encourage OR is the word “enforce” changes that are “helpful” to the play. There are contracts that demand remuneration for this “help.”

There are foundations that allow their monies to be used in a developmental hell that breeds the loss of confidence and control that every playwright needs, must have, to succeed.

A complaint that many playwrights voice is that their plays get stuck in a culture of readings. The play goes through a reading and the playwright receives some feedback. Sometimes the play gets another reading with changes or the reading is all the play gets.

SO. Readings. Mandatory reading of plays for judgment or to “give help.” Be careful. This is dangerous, and has already caused great harm. A play with two people at a table having a conversation—this works in a reading, we get a good sense of what the writer is after. But what about seven people in a room, moving about, talking to two, then three, unheard by a fourth, and so on. This makes no sense in a reading. And so playwrights, practical people that we are, slowly—like a bad evolution—we stop writing in forms that don't work in readings. And again, slowly, our plays begin to look alike, dramaturgically similar. Of course a playwright can benefit from a reading, but one needs to be so very careful about why the play is being read, what hopefully is being gained. And, what is being lost. All those reading series out there—careful, careful, in the long run are they doing much more harm than good? (Nelson, Richard)

Nelson stated that he believes that playwrights working in a reading-centric model of new play development begin to write plays that make successful readings, rather than being good onstage in full productions. Nelson believes this culture of help has hurt new play development. Even though the impulse comes from good intentions, focusing on the problems that plays have rather than on the playwright's developmental process has hurt the industry.

A number of organizations, focused on new play development, New Dramatists and The Lark Theatre Company among others, have sought to meet playwrights' needs in the way that they want. These programs do not aim to put plays into production. In fact, many do not produce plays but are focused on developing the writer. These programs are writer-centric; they provide funding to playwrights while allowing them to determine their own path and needs.

### **New Dramatists**

Founded in 1949, New Dramatists is the oldest new play development center and has a single mission: to give playwrights time and space in the company of gifted peers to create work, and realize their artistic potential, while make lasting contributions to the playwright's development. In 2012, New Dramatists reported that their revenue was \$1.7 million and 99% of that amount raised through contributions and grants. Their expenses were \$1.5 million. New Dramatists is playwright-focused: writers set and determine their own course through a seven-year residency. New Dramatists is not focused on producing plays, instead the organization connects with Broadway, off-Broadway, off-off Broadway and regional theatres in order to advocate for production for the plays that come out of its

residencies.

The history of New Dramatists started in the 1940s when the number of people interested in becoming playwrights was growing. After the success of American playwrights in the 1940s and 1950s, many writers, including Tennessee Williams, moved to New York hoping to hit it big on Broadway.

They flocked to New York with scripts or ideas for plays in hand. But the theatre world was limited in scope and accessibility and could not assimilate them all. Competition for agents, minor productions, even readings became intense. At one meeting of the Dramatists Guild, members and associate members jammed into the Alvin Theater to express their frustration at their inability to have their work produced or even heard. (New Dramatists and Alumni Publications Committee 2)

Michaela O’Harra, a writer whose play had recently closed without explanation, developed a number of ideas to support playwrights. In association with Howard Lindesay, Richard Rogers, Russell Crouse, Oscar Hammerstein II, John Golden, Moss Hart, Maxwell Anderson, John Wharton, Robert E. Sherwood and Elmer Rice, she founded New Dramatists. From the start, the organization sponsored “regular panel discussions, where members could read and critique a colleague’s script: rehearsed readings in which a cast of professional actors read a play aloud for the playwright’s benefit, followed by a critique session; and workshops, in which a fully realized play was presented at New Dramatists to a live audience” (New Dramatists and Alumni Publications Committee 3).

According to Artistic Director Todd London, New Dramatists was one of the first programs focused on new play development in the United States.

New Dramatists was founded in 1949 in a really different world than the one we live in now—[there was] really nothing but Broadway. It was the seed moment of the regional theatre movement and off-Broadway. There were no off-off Broadway or MFA playwriting programs to speak of, except for the school that had been founded by George Pierce Baker at Yale. But that was not really a professional track in the way there is now. There were no new play development companies or wings of theatres because there were no theatres to have new play development.

O'Harra founded New Dramatists in this vacuum. She sought to create an organization that was focused on playwrights and understood their situation and needs.

New Dramatists used practical ways to help develop playwrights. They gave playwrights tickets to see productions and began to network playwrights to peers within the field.

It was founded by a playwright and in a way it was meant to be a bridge between aspiration and the profession, which was Broadway at the time. It had a very practical plan: get playwrights to observe Broadway plays, get them tickets to Broadway plays, get them to read their plays for their peers so that they have feedback from somebody. Get them into craft discussions with professional working Broadway artists, and overtime let them see their plays up on their feet with actors holding scripts. That was the start of it. Now, the basics are really the same, but the world is really different. It is not about getting playwrights to Broadway because there is very little new work

that gets done on Broadway. It is really about developing playwrights for the American theatre and beyond, and the American theatre is regional and off-off Broadway [and the] non-profits. There are now MFA playwriting programs all over the country; there are new play development companies all over the country. (London, "Personal Interview")

From its beginning, New Dramatists has allowed playwrights in residence to determine their own course of development. This approach avoids the problematic playwright "helping" and "play fixing" that Richard Nelson derided.

At New Dramatists, playwrights are in control of every aspect of how their work is shown to the public.

The operating concept of New Dramatists is complete freedom for the writers' exploration, without any kind of commercial pressures since the organization does not produce the work of the writers. The explorations range from private unrehearsed readings to a public staged reading done on a lighted stage with workshop set pieces, often simply painted hollow blocks configured in imaginative ways. New Dramatists provides playwrights with actors for readings and will find a director if the playwright has no particular preference or existing relationship. At all levels of readings, playwrights have the option of having talkbacks or not, although, typically, they opt not to have talkbacks, often preferring to seek out feedback from selected individuals.

(Wright 16–17)

New Dramatists provides administrative support to help playwrights get their in-development plays in front of an audience, as well as a staff experienced in working on and



providing feedback on new work.

New Dramatists continues to be very playwright focused. London articulates the current mission as:

The mission really is a simple one: it is to give the playwrights space and time to develop their craft and themselves as artists in the company of their most talented peers. It's really about how a creative community can help sustain and challenge the individual artists and how the individual artist can grow given the resources of space and time. In the case of New Dramatists, the time is seven years of free service of a staff of nine people who are really here just to support the laboratory work of the writers. Two theatres, a building to write in, to stay in if you are in from out of town for a period of time. All sort of activities that are both professional development and designed to get the writers into each other's company on the premise that they are each other's greatest resource. It is really about learning from other playwrights, which is really the essence of the beginning of New Dramatists as well. It was writers in a room learning from other writers and now its writers in a church learning from other writers over a period of seven years.

The playwrights in residency at New Dramatists utilize many helpful resources. These residencies are sought after and many successful playwrights have come through New Dramatists programs.

Getting a New Dramatists residency is very competitive. Last year the organization received over 500 applications for a handful of slots. Playwrights are encouraged reapply if they are not selected. How is such a competitive process adjudicated? London explains,

The writers are selected not by me but by a committee that changes every year. The committee is made up of a very set equation of people: three current resident playwrights, two alumni playwrights and two outside theatre people who are usually actors, directors, dramaturgs or designers. It changes utterly every year, so it's never the same people making the decisions. We have an admissions window which has traditionally been from July 15<sup>th</sup> to September 15<sup>th</sup>, though that may be changing. Writers submit two plays and a letter of interest. Those plays circulate through the committee until the committee meets three times over a period of eight months. This year there were 518 submissions. With two plays each, you have about a thousand plays for the committee to read. The committee meets three times and during that time they winnow the group to a group of finalists, maybe twenty or twenty-five, and by the end of the process each member has read all the plays of the finalists. Every playwright is discussed every play that is read is discussed. The committee work is facilitated by [me] and Emily Morris, who is the director of artistic development. We facilitate the process, but we don't evaluate and we don't weigh in on anything that isn't about the process. We aim for a consensus, so it's not about some people vote or somebody else selects somebody else. It's that the whole group has to reach a consensus on a group of writers and that group has usually been between five and eight, though there is no set number. It is the number that they agree on and the number that we feel as an organization we can sustain resources for seven years. Right now there are forty-nine writers.

They are a very successful lot. Alumni include such influential writers as Nilo Cruz, Horton Foote, Richard Foreman, Maria Irene Fornes, John Guare, Donald Margulies, Suzan-Lori Parks, John Patrick Shanley, August Wilson, and Doug Wright. Current playwrights and alumni of New Dramatists have won seventeen Pulitzers, twenty-four Tonys, seventy-one OBIEs and seventeen Drama Desk Awards. (“About New Dramatists”)

New Dramatists is made up of a number of different playwright programs. The New Dramatists Playwrights Lab supports resident playwrights exploration of their work. “Similar to Bell Lab’s mission to give leading scientists time, space and resources to explore important questions and develop game-changing new technology and tools, the Playwrights Lab offers structured, comprehensive support for our resident writers and their development of new work, while it places the writer at the center of the creative process” (“About New Dramatists”). Reflecting the mission of New Dramatists the lab gives playwrights time and resources to investigate challenging approaches to developing their plays.

The Playwrights Lab is made up of a couple of different programs. One- or Two-Day readings allow the playwright to work with actors and directors on a piece. Writers have the ability to utilize an unlimited number of readings. Weeklong intensive workshops are utilized to address deeper creative questions that a play might raise. Finally, New Dramatists has a number of Production Partnerships across the theatre industry. New Dramatists does not produce in-house so it has created an interesting model of creative partnerships between writers and theatres nationwide.

Different writers utilize different opportunities.

The thing about New Dramatists that is distinctive is that the writers have a fair abundance of time. They have seven years here. Unlike say the O'Neill or Sundance where you go with a particular project, our writers are here to grow themselves over time. So during that time they may work on ten plays, they may work on seven plays, they work on one play, they may work on no plays and just be apart of the community and do their play work somewhere else. They may write here, they may use our laboratory. In this structure and this time frame, they have lots of different ways they can approach their work. The key is that they always decide what they are going to work on how they are going to work on it. The limits have to do with time and money. They can work for a day or two days on a kind of reading. [...] We have a two-week, five-play retreat that is the same sort of time over two weeks. [...] One of the things that I've really learned in the past few years after we added these things called the Creativity Fund, which are these five day workshops, that are scheduled on an as needed basis. [...] Given more time the writers will experiment with more models of development. (London, "Personal Interview")

Seven years allows playwrights great flexibility on how many and what kind of writing projects to pursue while in residency. Extended time and freedom from economic uncertainty allow playwrights to experiment with a wide range of avenues to enrich their writing.

New Dramatists provides support for playwrights but it does not provide in-house full productions of their residents' work. At first this seems like a flaw, given that so many

playwrights advocate for the importance of production above all else. London sees it almost the opposite way:

The work goes everywhere except here. It is part of our bylaws that we do not produce and we have no future participation in the work that is done. We get no money from our writers, we get no money from their plays, and we don't produce or select their work. Once someone is into New Dramatists they can do whatever they want. They can work on whatever they want to. We advocate widely and constantly for all of them and each of them. We advocate for all of them in many different ways. Partly by participating in field wide conversations in new work. [...] We advocate to the theatre, to our colleagues at theatres about specific projects and specific writers. We partner up with theatres, from time to time, in programmatic ways, where we serve as a laboratory for work that couldn't be developed as fully or on the playwright's terms if it was at the theatre. We try and spread the word about the writers and their work. We have a script share program. We have a public library downstairs with scripts and manuscripts on the shelves. We have alumni plays on the shelves. We continuously work as community members of the American theatre to promote playwrights and advocate for production as the final goal for development so things don't dead end here or anywhere. Along with the Lark, Sundance and Playwrights' Center we've been working to create more programmatic and steady ties to the production world, so we can help playwrights know earlier in the process that there is an increased

likelihood that it is headed to production. But we never produce and we will never produce. (London, “Personal Interview”)

Because it does not spend its resources on production, and what would be probably a limited number of production opportunities, New Dramatists can support writers and then network them to production opportunities in the field. New Dramatists advocates for its writers across the field and has many important connections. As London states, production is the main goal after all—just not at New Dramatists.

London also believes the New Dramatists’ model addresses many of the concerns raised by Nelson. By only providing support and making the process playwright-driven, the model provides support without being about play fixing.

Another thing that changes new play development is intention, and I think the intention really informs the process. We, as a staff and with the writers, have defined our intention as to sustain the writers through the hard work of making new work and making careers. That’s really different than going to a new play development workshop to fix a play. Our goal is to give them as much support and encouragement and fill the room with as many interesting, inspiring and relevant artists as we can so that they will leave the room charged up to write. Our goal is not to find out what’s wrong with the play or fix the play, or to help them solve the play. [...] Instead, the approach is, you have these resources of space and time we are asking you to take charge of your own process and we expect you to do that. You have said as a member of this community that you want to be in charge of your own process. Rather than doing as you do in the rest of the theatre world, and waiting for

someone to tell you that your play is good enough, and they want to work on it because they might produce it and, therefore, they are going to look for the flaws in it or the good things in it. We are instead saying you can do what you want here, you can work in accordance with your own urgencies, and you can work in whatever way you want. We happen to be a staff of process-savvy people if you want to bounce ideas off of us. Somebody on staff is assigned to each process. They are really good at [asking] what are the possibilities? Who are the people who might help you achieve your goals? What do you expect from this workshop? (London, “Personal Interview”)

New Dramatists provides support, from more mundane tasks (like photocopying) too more specialized ones (like having an experienced staff to respond to ideas). The goal is not to fix a play or to help a playwright but, rather, to offer unconditional support.

London is a co-author of the book *Outrageous Fortune*, a comprehensive study of the field of new play production. Ninety-four theatres at different levels and locations were surveyed. *Outrageous Fortune* documented a number of problems in the field in new play development such as playwrights feeling like outsiders within large theatre companies, the importance of production, and seeking new play development models that unconditionally support playwrights. Another troubling aspect of the field revealed by the study was the lack of compensation to playwrights and the detriment it has on the field.

Of these things *Outrageous Fortune* happened to be the most noticeable and clear moment of ‘Here’s some information, we all kind of know this stuff, but let’s look at it statistically.’ I think the impact has been to put the stuff that people think was happening into gear. It accelerated the conversation—it

didn't initiate it. It's really called attention to playwright compensation. [...] It has called into question the field disparity of having a theatre made up of administrators, and the artists are on their own. And, also, income disparity. You probably don't have a playwright in the country, even our best playwright making, Todd Haimes' [Artistic Director of Roundabout Theatre Company] salary, and if they made it, it was due to a hit play on Broadway. Our most successful playwrights, unless they are doing film and teaching, are still not hitting six figures. And its not just Todd, because how many executive and artistic heads are making two hundred thousand to four hundred thousand dollars? Right here in New York you have five to six artistic heads who are making more than any playwright in the country. So what does that say about our values? (London, "Personal Interview")

One consequence of playwrights' meager compensation is how many have decided to work outside of the system—going their own way. London notes,

The first thing we started to read that was new to me were writers who were saying, "It gave me the courage that Rich Maxwell and Young Jean Lee are doing—which is do my own work. Do my own work in its own way and not try to compensate myself as if there was a professional track." I wouldn't be surprised that there would be two long-term effects. One, bringing more and more attention to compensation to playwrights in this country and I hope individual artists in general. Second, give up on, in a positive way, a profession that isn't actually a profession. And, third, find a way to do exciting creative work that fuels them and feeds them and, therefore, will



make a theatre much more vital than a bunch of playwrights sitting on their plays waiting for a LORT A or B to produce them. Why am I hitting my head against that wall when I love the theatre and I love to write? I have a lot of really talented people in my life. Why don't we go our own way and make this work? It is a kind of self-publishing actualization. It is a kind of "occupy" mentality, all these culturally democratic ideas are coming at the same time for lots of reasons—the whole do-it-your-selfness of our culture at the same moment.

London's statement demonstrates the passion that playwrights have about their craft and about creating theatre. In poor economic conditions, they will still write plays. However, a theatre industry that does not reward its playwrights calls into question its long-term sustainability.

London's work at New Dramatists has had a large impact on his philosophy and his approach to new play development. London has seen an industry-wide shift from the beginning of his career until now. New play development has become harder to define. "In the 80s everyone was starting a new play development program. And that meant readings leading to, hopefully, a production. We would read the plays around the table and we would have a certain kind of conversation, we'd have a certain kind of talkback afterward, and we all knew what we meant by new play development. I don't think [now] anybody else has a fucking clue what anyone else means by new play development" (London, "Personal Interview"). As the new play development industry has grown, different models have emerged that are harder to codify than the traditional reading and workshop model.

While industry-wide it has become harder to define what new play development means.

London believes the free exploration that these diverse approaches has allowed is a benefit.

Looking forward, London sees new play development as more and more of an individualized process.

I think in the ideal world, developing a new work of theatre would be about supporting the creative process, whatever it may be, with the most extensive and vigorous resources possible. So if you have a field where four hundred playwrights are being produced at any given time, why would we think one play is the same as another? Why would you assume one playwright's process is like another's? Why would we think the locale on any theatre is the same as another? The community, developmental context, the economic context is going to change in every occurrence. If we see it as a system of new play development, we see it as a system of creative support, a system of enlivening. Then we can start to help resources and energies coalesce around the creative process. Sometimes the creative process is fiercely individual, and sometimes it is fiercely collective. I think in every case it needs different things. I think we learn things over time, certain questions help in certain moments, and certain questions don't help in certain moments. Nobody knows as well as the person generating that work, which is the playwright.

London's philosophies on new play development befit the leader of a playwright-centric organization. Despite not producing plays, New Dramatists has been very successful at cultivating and supporting playwrights. The organization's advocacy has helped plays enjoy premieres in New York City and around the country. Through allowing the playwright to

determine their own process, New Dramatists avoids many of the ideas of “play fixing” and “help” that Nelson deplored.

### **Lark New Play Development Center**

Another institution that takes a non-production approach to new play development is the Lark New Play Development Center. Founded in New York City in 1994, the Lark’s purpose from its inception has been to discover and develop new voices of the American theatre. Initially, the Lark produced classical theatre as well as new plays, and toured productions to surrounding schools. In 1997, Producing Director and co-founder John Clinton Eisner transitioned the company’s sole focus into supporting new plays, transforming the company into the new play development center it is today. In 1996 the Lark created its Literary Wing, thirty local experts who review the organization’s yearly play submissions. The Lark receives between five hundred and seven hundred play submissions annually.

In 2012, the Lark reported revenue of \$1.1 million with 96% coming from contributions and grants. Their expenses that year were \$1.4 million. Resources are devoted to supporting playwrights’ processes. Lark Play Development Center currently resides in Midtown Manhattan with its creative and administrative teams all under one roof.

I had the opportunity to discuss Lark Play Development Center with Lloyd Suh, the Director of Onsite Programs. Suh is a playwright and has developed his plays at the Lark and other major theatre organizations. The Lark has many different programs, which

allows it to support writers at different stages of their careers as well as to provide them with a flexible program that meets their individual needs.

We have a lot of different programs. They are really designed to be a resource to writers at any stage in their process or their careers. So there are a lot of different ways in. It is intentionally diverse in terms of the ways of working at the Lark. So there's not a single way of working that is the Lark. That's because different writers have different things that they need. We break everything down in terms of the programming itself. We have some fellowship programs, some public programs, some private programs (we don't really call them private programs, but for practical reasons they are basically private programs). Each thing has a different way of working. The best way to start is to begin describing them. We have a program called Playwright's Week that is one of our longest running programs, in about its twentieth year. That's a process where anyone can apply from anywhere in the world with a play. We've gotten upwards of nine hundred submissions in a year. Each play is read twice by a volunteer group of readers. Then between seven or ten are chosen for a ten-hour development process that takes place over the course of a week. In addition to that ten hours of time with the director and cast in the room, there are events where the seven writers can interact, hang out and spend some time together. [...] There is a fellowship called the PONY Fellowship that is for a writer. We get nominations from theatre leaders across the country. The fellow gets a living stipend for the course of the year, along with an apartment about a block away and program

support. There is a two-year fellowship for a mid-career writer and that is chosen discretionarily. There is a fellowship called the Jerome New York that is for an emerging writer who hasn't had more than two productions above a showcase level. That is an open submission process so anyone who hasn't had more than two productions above a showcase level can apply. One fellow is chosen. That is a two-year program. There is a LNP fellow, Launching New Plays, which is an advocacy program. We take a particular play by a writer and provide enhancement support for four productions of that play over the course of a couple of years. So it's kind of a partnership program where those four producing theatres become a part of that play's development and eventual journey through these four productions. They travel to all four productions. It's really about creating a movement around a play that might have a lot of interest from a lot of people, but has particular production challenges where enhancement money might be useful. (Suh)

The Lark Play Development Center shares philosophical similarities with New Dramatists in that it is very playwright-centered and its goal is not in-house production. The Lark offers a wide range of programs that fill vital needs of playwrights at all stages of their careers—from those seeking a first production to emerging playwrights to those established in the field.

Similar to New Dramatists, the Lark does not mount full productions of the plays that it helps to develop. The Lark believes that writing for production limits playwrights' opportunities to realize their vision because of the costs involved.

It changes the conversation that the writers have with themselves about the way they work, what they are working on, and why they are working on it. So it's not even just about "Oh, I want to write a play that will get a production of it." That can trap you into the mode of where are the places, who are the people? It then becomes about a broader goal. I really do think that production as a goal is very limiting. To say "the goal of writing a play is to get a production" is reductive. I think that is very limiting. I don't think that's true. It's about the right production, with the right people who understand it. And even that is just part one of the goal. (Suh)

Like the trap of writing for a reading, writing for a production can also limit a playwright's vision. Practical concerns like limiting the cast size and number of scenic locations can become part of the playwright's thinking. Suh describes the effect this kind of thinking can have on playwriting as: "Because of the marketplace, it is really production as goal—I am going to write a two-character play with a single set. Hopefully a lot of people will do it. Writers are thinking about the marketplace. I don't think that is bad. There are totally valid reasons why someone would want to do that"(Suh). Economic and marketplace savvy can lead to a greater likelihood of a play getting produced but it might come at a cost to the author's vision and intent. Suh believes that a new play developmental model focused on process over production has great benefits: "I think that when you start the conversation in a different way—what do you want to do; what is burning in you; what is the thing that is occupying your time and keeping you up at night. What is that and how can we provide the resources to you to be able to do that?"

Suh's opinion that production is not the most important aspect of playwriting is surprising and is contrary to many of his colleagues' opinions. I believe that his larger point is that plays do need production but that one should balance that goal against the importance of discovering what a play and a playwright need. Production is a goal—just not the only one.

Yeah, you want to get produced. It is absolutely true that the stuff we do here gets more outside productions than we ever could do if we produced them ourselves. Our history of advancing plays to production is kind of staggering. [...] I think it's because of a couple of reasons. First, there is such an attention paid to "write the play you want to write; if it means something to you it will mean something to somebody else." Don't start with what do you think is going to mean to somebody else. Start with what is going to mean something to you. I think that just makes for better plays. The second thing is we actually do a great deal of advocacy. We do a lot of advocacy in ways I think other places don't do advocacy. It's about relationship building. I think we talk a lot to our fellows about how to build a career. [...] I talk to young writers a lot who [ask] "Do you have advice?" It surprises me that it is a novel idea to find the people you want to work with, find the people that are the right energy to you, whose work you admire, who work in a way you want to work, and work in communities that you want to work with, and put your eggs in that basket. Go see their stuff. Go develop relationships with them.

(Suh)

To Suh, it is extremely important that playwrights write the play which interests them, which expresses their creative vision onstage. He also echoes a desire voiced by many interviewees that there be a stronger sense of community between writers and the theatres producing their plays.

Instead of producing in-house, the Lark advocates for productions outside of its developmental center. The Lark has connections to theatres across the nation so its advocacy network is very large. It seeks to match playwrights with theatres that fit their play.

The way we approach advocacy is not to [...] “OK now this play is ready to go out. Let’s just pick the 25 biggest theatres in the country and send it to them and see if they like it.” Which I think is the model. That’s how it has worked. When is the play ready to go out? We try, whenever it is possible, to be very strategic about getting people in earlier, like identifying stakeholders who are process stakeholders as opposed to product stakeholders. When you get them involved at the product stage, it is really “Let me read this and judge it. Let me listen to it and judge it.” But if you do it in a process way, you say: “This is a play that is in process. There are people who I think would be very invested in what you are doing and how you are working on it. So, maybe, we’ll get them in the room to be a part of that process with you.” They come in and they know this isn’t done, you are working on it. You’re working on it, or maybe they are there from the very beginning. They are in the room. So they are invested in a different way. They are invested in a personal way. And then they can understand the context of what the writer is trying to do



beyond what is on the page. They are invested in the vision. And so they know “I was there when this writer was just talking about it at the idea stage. I was a participant in the conversation when they were talking about what the goal is of the play, what the vision is, what the process of getting it to the vision.” It just becomes a deeper investment. (Suh)

By working to create a connection between resident playwrights and other theatres, the Lark forges a bond between the producers and program participants. A finished script can be moved quickly to production at an outside theatre. Bringing producers in early helps them to see a playwright’s intent and how it evolves and changes through the development process.

The Lark matches a play to producing theatre companies on a case-by-case basis.

We end up doing our own individual advocacy in our own individual ways based on our relationships with the writers we’re advocating for and the people we’re advocating to. We have talked about formalizing a system of advocacy. But, basically, the philosophy of it is, it starts with a conversation with the writer. We talk about who do they have relationships with; who would they like to have relationships with; who may have already seen it; who seems like a good fit; who might be other people we might know and they might know that can advocate for it as well. Advocacy is not just a one thing—there is no template for it. There is no mold. We create a different mold every time. Plays we have advocated for, that have been developed here, have gone to production all over the place—productions off-off Broadway

theatres, off Broadway theatres, they've gone to Broadway, they've gone to the big regionals, small regionals, many regionals at the same time. (Suh)

The Lark's focus on the writing process provides some advantages when helping to create relationships between theatres and playwrights.

We do a lot of targeted advocacy for everything that we do. Because of the fact that we do not produce, we are not in competition with producing companies. So we have a lot of relationships with producing theatres all through New York, all throughout the country, and all throughout the world where we can say, 'Hey, have you seen this?' A lot of producing artistic directors and theatres pay attention when we say, "Hey, here is something you should read." It changes the way we can advocate. And it is a different way of advocating than an agent can do, too. So I think in that sense we are uniquely positioned. (Suh)

Working to build conversations around playwrights and their plays, the Lark can also help to create opportunities for a play to have multiple productions. A flaw in new play development is that new plays frequently only receive one production. Creating buzz around a play can help it to get productions at theatres around the country and expose it and the writer to a wider audience—thus greatly expanding the impact.

We also look at multiple productions as part of the model. To have the broad goal of making an impact on the repertoire rather than having one production that closes—that is unsatisfying. You want to build movement around a play. You want to build a conversation around a play that can exist in multiple communities. A big part of not wanting to think about it as a

product-based marketplace is to really invest in writers over their career. To think about what are you going to write next, what are you going to write after that? So it's not just this play, but "let's talk about your life." (Suh)

One of the goals of this model of play development is to help the writer develop and maintain a career. Instead of focusing on a product, a single production of a play, the Lark aims to facilitate a writer's development over the course of multiple plays.

Production of new plays is vital to the field of new play development. A playwright himself, Suh said, "I don't ever want to say that there is never a time when you don't want somebody to do your play. Yeah, you want people to do your play. As far as the Lark is concerned and the programming here, it's really about making sure that the space is there, to make sure that when writers are really figuring out what they're doing and getting it to the place they want it to be at that they don't have that pressure."

The leaders of the Lark believe that the best use of its resources is to offer playwrights a supportive environment in which to write and develop their plays. 2013-2014 featured playwrights include Lynn Nottage, Marcus Gardley and August Schulenburg. The Lark's Playwright Advisors includes such luminaries as Tony Kushner, Terrance McNally, Edward Albee and Samuel Hunter. Plays that are developed with the goal of production can have workshops, talkbacks and feedback from the outset of the developmental process. While those activities can produce information that is useful to a playwright, they also bring in outside voices that might drown out the playwright's own voice. Production is the goal of every playwright but the Lark believes that it can best help writers by supporting and helping their work without the deadline or pressure of production.

## Chapter Three

### The Major Regional: Denver Center Theatre Company

The allure of a Broadway production has a powerful hold on American playwrights. However, over the last fifty years, major regional theatres across the country have founded new play programs and produced premieres of new plays. In this chapter, I will focus on Denver Center Theatre Company and its Colorado New Play Summit, which is the linchpin of the organization's new play development program. Denver Center frequently uses the commission model to develop new plays. I discuss specifically the journeys of the plays *Ed, Downloaded* by Michael Mitnick and *Grace, or the Art of Climbing* by Lauren Feldman to illustrate the paths that new work can take toward production at Denver Center.

In his article "The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America," Douglas Anderson discusses the desire of playwrights and regional theatre companies to transfer productions to New York City, particularly to Broadway. Writing in 1988, Anderson describes a desire that still exists in the industry today.

But the new play movement, for all its protestations, has always been an adoring groupie of New York for-profit theatre. Success has been measured by how far a script travels in the commercial world. Two theatres forged the model for developmental achievement. The Mark Taper Forum established itself as a major player on the national scene with its premiere productions of *The Shadow Box* (1975) and *Children of a Lesser God* (1979). Actors Theatre, Louisville, had similar successes with *The Gin Game* (1977), *Getting Out* (1978), *Crimes of the Heart* (1979), *Agnes of God* (1980), and *Extremities*

(1981). These plays conquered New York, earning accolades, Tony Awards, and revenue. New plays were the fast track to national prestige. (57)

Today, even more so than in the late 1980s, regional theatre is a major player in new play development. Anderson argues that the New York focus is a detriment.

The industry succumbed to the irresistible lure of what we will call The Dream—The Dream of the Commercial Transfer. This fantasy stunted the artistic growth of decentralization for a decade. For although new productions were scattered throughout the continent, the spirit of the movement was anything but decentralized. The Dream, in fact, recentralized the American Theatre. The glitter of the Taper model transformed the regional theatre into a vast, subsidized out-of-town try-out. The great irony is the fact that New York City, which has long since lost its claim to artistic preeminence, maintains this stranglehold on the imagination of the theatrical community. We may snicker at the kind of obvious hokum typified by a song like “New York, New York,” and yet our theatres for years subscribed to that myth and many still do. Walk into the lobby of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and the first things you’ll see are Tony Awards—stacks of them. The message is clear: if we can make it there, we’ll make it anywhere. (Anderson 57–58)

Anderson brings up the important point that new play development in regional theatre is vibrant but might be misguided. Does a play still need a New York premiere to be considered successful? What if the developmental process is not ultimately oriented toward a New York production? Might regional production be the goal of a viable new play

development model? Regional theatres across the country from Denver Center to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival to the Guthrie Theatre produce new plays that are an important part of their seasons and enjoyed by their audiences.

While admitting that there is a lot of great theatre in New York City, Anderson remarks on some of the flaws in a New York-centric industry.

A cardboard Shakespeare stands in the corner of the office of the Ark Theatre Company of New York. He is quoting the second act of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: “If money go before, all ways do lie open.” The Ark has been out of business for three years. [...] I sat with Don Marcus, one-time artistic director of the Ark, and conducted a postmortem on his unlucky company. Founded in 1978, the company had a lot going for it, including that most precious commodity, cheap space. Its spacious loft on Bleecker Street rented for a mere \$620 per month. An average Ark season would include three new works and an ongoing developmental program with a handful of selected writers. But as the company began to hit its artistic stride it ran smack into the impossible finances of play production in New York. “The numbers today make less sense than they did two years ago, which make less sense than they did five years ago,” lamented Marcus. “And they’ll get worse as time goes on.” Company members held on to The Dream for as long as possible, but eventually, said Marcus, “we learned that there is no reliable commercial mechanism that rewards success. The only thing worse than having a show that was not doing good box office was having a mondo hit,” because efforts to move it always came up short. Even *Chopin in Space*, which drew an

unqualified rave from *The New York Times*, could not find a producer. (59)

Anderson's concerns about the difficulty of production in New York City are shared by industry players today. With its expensive real estate, unions, and intense competition, New York City can be a problematic place for new play development. Garry Garrison, the executive director of creative affairs at the Dramatists' Guild of America, describes some current challenges:

I'm not opposed to readings, but I think, particularly in New York City, we're governed by Equity restrictions. So if I am going to do a reading of my play I have fifteen to eighteen hours of rehearsal. Period. And that includes the two-hour reading or the three-hour reading. And if it's a musical, it's more than that. Then if I want to go to another level of involvement with Equity actors, I'm looking at a workshop. The workshop requirements extend the benefits of having actors in rehearsal, but our expenses rise considerably. Because now you've taken those actors out of the work force for a week or two weeks or whatever. But what you learn about your play in a two-week rehearsal period is so different than what you learn in three hours of preparation.

The funding needed for new play development is difficult to raise and sustain. Garrison believes that the wealthiest companies in New York, mainly the non-profits, have a tremendous advantage. If you are not associated with them, it is more difficult to have your play developed in New York than in other parts of the United States.

I think New York is a difficult city to look at in terms of any kind of a real model. Because you're either incredibly wealthy as an organization—not incredibly wealthy but you have a lot of resources with two, three, four, five

stages and nine rehearsal halls like Lincoln Center. Or you have something that's as big as this room. Off Broadway doesn't exist anymore, as you know. So it's either off-off Broadway or Broadway. The disparity between that is kind of extraordinary. [...] But you'd be really well served to look at Steppenwolf, to look at the Alliance in Atlanta, to look at the Dallas Theatre Center, to look at Portland Center Stage, the Portland Rep in Maine. Look at those iconic regional theatres to see what they are doing. Then after you've looked at those, go to the next tier, which is any number of theatres in Chicago that are not those kind of iconic theatres but that next level down like About Face [Theatre], Lookingglass [Theatre Company]. How do they survive? What do they do? How do they make this work? Because they have much more limited budgets, staff and such. (Garrison)

The gentrification of New York City has raised property values so high that a theatre must be well funded to ensure its survival. Acquiring the financial resources to sustain a year-round physical space, keep a staff, and pay for plays in production is very difficult. New York City is also an incredibly competitive theatrical environment. Many theatre companies are competing against each other for scripts and resources.

Garrison advises his students to go to a major U.S. city other than New York City to develop their plays. If successful, a New York transfer is possible.

I tell my graduate playwrights that the place is Chicago. You'll have a much easier time of getting it produced in Chicago than here. And get it done well there and it will come here. New York will always have this mystique about it, this cachet about it. There's a lot of theatre that goes on here and I'm not



disparaging it at all. That said, I hear there is extraordinary theatre being done all over this country. Los Angeles is booming with theatre, and San Francisco, and Minneapolis and Chicago and Miami. Of course, everyone would like to have a Broadway production—I'd like to have a Broadway production—barring that, I just want a production. I would say that ninety percent of the writers I know just want a production—period.

It is telling that Garrison sees better opportunities for playwrights, especially early career ones, outside New York City.

Each year there are a number of plays that debut in regional theatre and then get their New York premiere. For example, Christopher Durang's *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* premiered at the McCarter Theatre (2012) before moving to Lincoln Center's off-Broadway space, The Mitzi Newhouse, where it played before being transferred to Broadway. Similarly, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, pursuing its goal to develop new plays that tell American history in a way similar to Shakespeare, commissioned Robert Schenkkan to write two plays about Lyndon Johnson's presidency. The first became *All the Way* which debuted at Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2012 and had a successful run. The play moved to American Repertory Theatre where actor Bryan Cranston took over the role of Johnson before opening on Broadway in 2014. The journeys of these two plays show two common paths a new play that starts in regional theatre can take to Broadway.

### **Denver Center Performing Arts and Denver Center Theatre Company**

Founded on New Year's Eve in 1979, Denver Center Theatre Company (DCTC) is a division of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA). A typical season involves

around eleven productions, which are a mix of revivals and new work. DCTC is a large regional theatre, and its mission is to produce classics and new plays and to function as the flagship theatre of the Rocky Mountain Region. In 2012 DCPA reported \$59 million in revenue of which 79% came from program revenue, such as tickets sales, and 17% came from contributions and grants. DCPA reported their 2012 expenses were \$57 million. Denver Center Theatre Company has an annual budget that ranges from \$12-14 million.

Since 2006, Denver Center Theatre Company has produced an annual new play conference called the Colorado New Play Summit. The Summit consists of readings of five to six plays while, usually, it has two full-productions of plays from the previous year's summit running during the conference. The plays are selected from works in development from around twenty commissioned writers as well as from scripts submitted by agents. Each reading receives about a week's worth of rehearsal and then is presented twice, once for the Summit's attendees and once for the general public. DCTC usually selects three plays to be produced in the following season. The Summit uses written feedback from its audience members as the main form of critique.

The Summit's profile has been on the rise in recent years, and nationally it is an important new play development conference. Writing about the 2012 Summit, Denver theatre critic John Moore praised the growing profile of the Summit. "The Denver Center Theatre Company solidified its growing place as a major player in the development of new works for the American theater with last weekend's well-received 7th annual Colorado New Play Summit, which featured works by Lisa Loomer, Samuel D. Hunter, Richard Dresser, Michael Mitnick and Lauren Feldman. It's a rep that's as much on the rise for who came to this year's Summit as for what they saw on the Denver Center's four stages" (1).

Given that three of five plays produced as readings get full productions, the Summit has an excellent track record of putting new plays into production. Michael Mitnick, whose play *Ed, Downloaded* was read at the 2012 Summit and produced in the 2013 season, states:

It's that ratio of turning readings into productions that sets the Colorado New Play Summit apart. [...] It's rare, and as a playwright based in New York, it's heartening. Not only when I sit down to write a play, thinking there might be a home for it some day, but also because I know that they are going to do their best to realize the play to the best that it can ever be. I use the Denver Center as an example to theaters in New York, because there isn't anything like it. (Moore 1)

Producing three world premieres in an eleven-play season demonstrates DCTC's commitment to new play development, and it is an important part of the company's mission. In an interview, DCTC's resident dramaturg Douglas Langworthy and I discussed new play development at Denver Center Theatre Company. Langworthy described DCTC's commitment to new play development:

I just think that there are so many good plays out there, and we want to have access to them through our Summit. Because we're doing more readings, we've also been picking more for the season. A couple seasons now we've picked three plays. This year *Sense & Sensibility the Musical* which is at the end of our regular season is also part of it. And I think that's great that we can up our world premiere quotient or new play quotient each season to three. I think that does reflect [artistic director] Kent [Thompson]'s interest in new plays. I think that if you are interested in new plays, you have to be producing

them. We have an eleven-play season, and I think we can fit three world premieres in there. I think Kent really likes it when we've done that. I think he has felt really good about it.

DCTC frequently uses the commission model. A commissioned play is one that a theatre company pays a playwright to write. The company does not have to produce the play but they usually have the right of first refusal. Some companies charge subsidiary rights for their commissions, requiring playwrights to give them a percentage of the play's royalties in future productions. The theatre company hiring the playwright creates a timeline for completion of the play. When a play is being commissioned, the theatre company can demand it meet certain conditions: for example, it can require the play feature a certain cast size, a role for a certain performer, or that it involve multimedia. Langworthy explains how the process works: "[I]t gives [playwrights] a chunk of money that they can live on, that they can budget because they know when the payments are going to come in. They get a payment, like a third of it, upon signing the agreement. They get another third of it when they send in their first draft. And they get the final third when they send in the second draft." Commissions are desirable to playwrights as it gives them some financial stability in an unstable field. "Playwrights are notoriously underfunded, underpaid in terms of how they live their lives. A lot of them have to have other jobs; a lot of them have to work television, write screenplays, all that kind of stuff. This gives them some stability in their lives especially if they can get several of these going at the same time"(Langworthy).

DCTC frequently commissions four to five writers a year. Recent increases in funding have enabled it to expand that number and to contract with higher profile

playwrights.

We usually do four commissions a year plus one because we now have funds to commission a mid-career to upper tier playwright. Theresa Rebeck's commission [...] is one of these larger commissions. And then Robert Schenkkan, we just commissioned him to write us a play. So it's really five per season, and that's kind of where I'd like to see us stay. If those four commissions or five commissions made up a Summit, and we could only pick three, it's still a good percentage of the commissions that you are actually able to produce. (Langworthy)

Langworthy believes that it is important for DCTC not to over commission. He wants to be able to produce the majority of the plays that DCTC contracts for. He says, "I think if you are not able to produce them, or don't have any intention of producing them, it's hard on the playwright. I think to go into it with the expectation that yes, we are going to try to work with you is a good thing." Of course not all commissions result in a play ready for production, but by maintaining a good ratio of contracts to productions DCTC creates a reputation that it will work with playwrights to get their plays produced.

The commission model offers a number of benefits. One is the money that the playwrights receive which allows them time to write the play. "Obviously, the first thing is you're giving the playwright time to write the play. You are paying him or her for their time to write the play—that's just the basic" (Langworthy). Another benefit of the commission model is that it keeps the playwright connected to a theatre institution.

There is some feedback they'll get from us, whether that's helpful or not, who really knows. It is a way for them to have someone to talk to about the play.

Often I'll have playwrights that will get some feedback. What the feedback does is start a conversation. And the playwright says "and here is what I was trying to do..." It gives them someone to talk to through the process so they're not so isolated. (Langworthy)

The commission builds a relationship between the writer and the theatre. Langworthy and his literary staff are happy to provide feedback when playwrights request it. However, a commission also provides playwright space to work independently.

The idea that you can write for yourself has some advantages to it as well. You can keep yourself out of this noise of feedback that sometimes happens around these processes. What we've been talking about here is when we're working with James we're going to say, "You tell us when you need feedback. We're not going to come after you. This seemed to work for you the last time. Let's try to follow that model for you. When you're ready for that feedback, come to us." (Langworthy)

The commission model strikes a good balance between keeping a playwright connected to a theatre while allowing them financial independence to write their play. The theatre company also benefits by having plays that are in progress and can be produced in future seasons.

DCTC usually commissions playwrights around June of each year, but identifying potential playwrights is a year-round process. Langworthy explains, "Basically we're going to writers whose plays we've been reading, whose plays have been coming in over the years, and who we've been following. That's somebody we'd really like to work with; that's a voice we'd like to have at our theatre. It's really based on their previous writing that has

been sent in to us.” Langworthy speaks to the fact that creating strong relationships between writers and a theatre company is a long-term process. In itself, a commission is a long-term investment in a play and a playwright.

By programming plays that are commissioned as well as those submitted by agents DCTC maintains a good balance between programming mid-career and emerging playwrights. When asked if the model of new play development used at DCTC has a place for emerging playwrights, Langworthy answered:

I definitely do. I think they have to get to a certain level, which isn’t all that high on the totem pole to get an agent. They have to have their work produced. They can’t be an unproduced writer. They have to have their work produced so that they come to the attention of an agent who takes them on. But a lot of agents have very emerging writers under their wings. They look at it as keeping their crop of writers healthy.

As an example of an emerging writer being produced at DCTC, Langworthy cites the experience Lloyd Suh had when DCTC produced his play *Great Wall Story*.

We did the Lloyd Suh play last year. He’s very much at the beginning of his career. He wrote the *Great Wall Story* that we did last year. He’s had a couple of other plays produced around, but he’s still very much at the beginning. I think if there was somebody who was really just emerging that was exciting and had written a great play, it really depends on the quality of the writing. It doesn’t matter who it’s from, if it’s a play that really excites us, we would have no trouble asking that person to be part of our Summit, or maybe commissioning that person.

To be eligible for the Summit a playwright needs to have an agent who can submit his or her script. The Summit is a mix of agent submissions and commissioned plays and DCTC works to program interesting plays no matter the stage of career of the playwright.

Once a play has been selected for the Summit, a dramaturg is assigned for some of the pre-rehearsal period and all of the rehearsal process. If the play is selected for a full production, a dramaturg is assigned for the duration of the yearlong project. Dramaturgs often ask questions of the playwright about the play, serve as a sounding board for new ideas, and occasionally offer suggestions on how to change the play. Playwright Lauren Feldman described her experience working with a dramaturg at DCTC:

I suspect it is different for each playwright. I think every playwright rewrites differently and thinks differently. And good dramaturgs figure out how you work and then figure out how to work with you in that way, as opposed to expecting the playwright to work the way the dramaturg works. Also I find that dramaturgs in general tend to ask a lot of questions as opposed to giving prescriptions. They don't solve it for me. [...] Then we try to put our finger on the problem. When we've done that, we talk together figuring out solutions to the problem. Do we cut it; do we change it; do we re-envision it?

The director is also an important part of the discussion on how the play develops between the staged reading and the full production. In Feldman's case, the playwright, the director and the dramaturg worked as a kind of triumvirate on discussing changes to the script.

In tandem, he weighs in on his point of view for things as the director, she does as a dramaturg, I do as a playwright. We decide on plans of action. I keep sending them new drafts—that's before rehearsals. Once we're in



rehearsals, we're engaging. What is working, what is not; what is landing; what isn't. If things are not landing or working, is it the texture? Is it the performance of it? And we'll tweak it until we figure out which it is (Feldman).

Much of the play development happens between the reading at the Summit and the production of the play. This is when the playwright makes changes and revisions to the script. The collaboration between playwright, dramaturg and director is one of the most important aspects of this model of new play development.

### **The Journey of *Ed, Downloaded***

Mitnick's play *Ed, Downloaded* was commissioned by DCTC; it had a staged reading at the Summit in 2012 and was produced by DCTC in 2013. Tracing the development of this piece sheds light on the way the commission model works at DCTC and across the field of new play development as a whole. *Ed, Downloaded* was different from other commissions from the start as it came out of a DCTC desire to arrange for and produce a multimedia theatre piece. In *Ed, Downloaded*, Ed is a young man suffering from a terminal illness. His fiancé works at a company that can download memories from the terminally ill so they can be experienced after death. Ed meets a woman working as a street performer and falls instantly in love. His fiancé becomes suspicious and jealous, and changes Ed's downloaded memories. The multimedia aspect of this play made it an ambitious project. Langworthy describes the impetus of the idea:

[*Ed, Downloaded*] was a special commission. Charlie Miller, our multimedia specialist/guru/artist had the idea that "wouldn't it be interesting to see

what would happen if a playwright wrote a play with the idea that the media would be incorporated as a narrative element, as a storytelling element, not just as a background or backdrop to the scenes. But actually you couldn't tell the story without it." So that was the challenge we gave Michael Mitnick.

Michael was someone that Charlie knew and had gone to school with. Charlie knew that Michael would have an affinity for that. Michael said yes and has really enjoyed working on this project.

At the time he was offered the commission, Mitnick was still in graduate school and was seeking the financial stability a commission would bring.

When offered the commission, Mitnick accepted and was excited by the challenge of the project. At the time, he was unaware of DCTC's strong record of producing commissions. Initially, he was dubious it would ever be produced but sought to write an interesting play that would get the theatre's attention.

Taking on the commission, I also had something to prove. Although the Denver Center has a great record (which I didn't know it at the time) of producing their commissioned plays, I also heard from all my instructors at Yale that the theatre that commissions you is never the one that actually produces the play. That you write the commission, and it kicks around, and some other theatre picks it up. That in many ways a commission is a good will gesture and a gambling device. That if a playwright happens to write something that is good, then they want to have the right of first refusal. But the commitment to follow through is rare.

The contract's requirement that the play integrate multimedia was also a test that Mitnick

faced. He saw fully integrating the multimedia into the production as a major challenge.

I wanted to see if I could write something that they would want to follow through with. That meant using the one restriction on my play which was multimedia and taking it seriously and seeing if there was a way I could blend multimedia and make it an essential element of the play such that if you were to strip it away you wouldn't be able to do the play any more. And that's when I came up with the idea of *Ed, Downloaded*. It seemed like a perfect kind of fit. I think I floated the concept by Charlie to see if doing this was a good idea. He said I should go with it. (Mitnick)

Sam Buntrock, fresh from directing a successful West End and Broadway revival of *Sunday in the Park With George* (a musical that uses a lot of multimedia), was hired to direct the project. Mitnick was excited about the resources provided by Denver Center:

Denver placed no restrictions on me, but I also didn't have other options. I felt a sense of loyalty to them. But most of all, I found a sense of excitement. It's a great theatre and I wanted to have my play there, so I was working rather diligently on it. Because it involved multimedia in a tricky way and Sam Buntrock who is an established director has rather smart and strong opinions, there was a larger process of asking questions and trying to make sure that we got it right.

Mitnick appreciated the talented artistic team and the freedom DCTC provided him. *Ed, Downloaded* had a successful run at DCTC, and Mitnick is now in discussion with Roundabout Underground for a New York premiere.

Commissions help to provide writers financial stability so that they have the time

needed to write a play. Often playwrights are teaching or working other jobs to support their meager income from playwriting. Feldman, author of *Grace, or the Art of Climbing*, described her financial situation as an emerging playwright and why she wants commissions:

[With a commission] I can afford to write a new play. Otherwise I'm spending all my time trying to make money and not being able to actually write something. If I had this money this is great. I don't have to say yes to that extra part time work. Just write the draft of my new play. And I love teaching. It just gets tricky when I have to teach and pick up side jobs in order to make a living and then I run out of time. I have a hard time writing a new play and teaching at the same time. Ideally it helps me if I'm teaching one semester and writing a different semester and not doing both simultaneously.

Mitnick also agrees that commissions are a good model for developing new plays. The money from his Denver Center commissions allowed him some time in his busy schedule to focus on writing the play.

I think it is a good model because it is incredibly difficult for playwrights to make a living unless they are independently wealthy from their parents. It's why so many of them go to Hollywood for a while and sometimes never come back. And I don't fault them for it because you can't make a living. And you probably know the real figures on what a playwright earns in a year from a theatre, from a commission. I don't know what my Denver Center commission ended up being—somewhere between five and ten thousand dollars. It's not going to cover half of my yearly rent in New York. If I'm giving

a play my full attention, it's going to be a year's worth of work with little things here and there.

Commissions offer playwrights some financial stability to have the time to write their play. They encourage collaboration between theatre companies and writers. Also, importantly, they provide a play a better chance of being produced than an un-commissioned play.

At the Colorado New Play Summit, DCTC uses written forms from the audience to provide feedback on the staged reading. The playwright usually creates the questions and focuses on aspects of the play about which the writer welcomes feedback. It is up to the playwright to interpret the feedback. Mitnick used the written feedback to judge how the audience interpreted small details and to see large trends in audience perception.

[At] the Denver Center, I asked Doug [Langworthy] to go through them and report to me either on minutiae, details that an audience member picked up that was very astute that all of us had forgotten or overlooked or hadn't seen, really smart individual details, or overall trends. So it wasn't just a ton of feedback saying, this is hypothetical, "Why didn't you do this", "I think she should be with him," or all over the place. I wanted it to be "seventy per cent of the people got confused at this point" or "they all had a question about" or "they all laughed at the same thing." That would be the most useful.

The feedback a playwright receives from the director, dramaturg, design team, actors and the audience is one of the most important aspects of new play development. This information can inform revisions in the play though it is up to the playwright to use the information in the way he or she see fit. In our discussion Mitnick provided insight on how he uses notes.

I always welcome feedback. Somewhat reductively, I believe a director can do one of three things: realize the play worse than I could on my own, realize the play as I could on my own, or realize the play better than I could on my own. By bringing his or her insights, his or her technique with actors there is an expectation that the play could elevate beyond the content of the play alone and what talented actors naturally bring to the process. So, I listen. I try to keep an open mind. If a dramaturg is part of the process, I also welcome his or her feedback. Many times, the directors or dramaturgs notice small details—some gap in logic or timeline that I find useful and would have overlooked.

By the time one of his plays gets to production Mitnick is very familiar with it—more familiar with it than the production team.

I rarely have plays cracked wide open by a director or a dramaturg through a note. By the time I give anyone a script ready for production, I've already lived with it for at least a year and have the thing memorized. I know why I've put commas instead of periods. But I think that in a production situation (such as I would be in with a director), if something is brought to light by a note that requires a serious overhaul, I find that suspect. I don't think the playwright has done his or her work. If the play is truly rough and the writer knows that, so whole scenes are written and replaced, that's one thing. But it's not how I work. I'd rather use the rehearsal time for running the piece as many times as possible.

Mitnick has had good experiences where a note from a director improved the play. “Once a director (in a workshop process) gave me an idea for the subject of a final song in a musical I wrote. He said, ‘what about a song where a person riding a train passed Edison's home while Edison was experimenting with electric lighting? What would that person think?’ So I wrote that song and it turned out to be the proper conclusion.” In other instances, notes from the production team have been less helpful.

I have been encouraged to take notes that demonstrated a deep, fundamental misunderstanding of my work. [...]I was once encouraged to cut an entire scene of a play that I felt accomplished many important details (and it was also, in my opinion, the best in the play). I didn't cut it. And that's the scene that is published in “best scenes” anthologies. I'm glad I didn't cut it. But really just because I knew it was a bad note and the play needed that scene. I'm certain I've taken thousands of notes that both improve and weaken a script, but I don't believe I've taken a note that made or broke the piece.

Mitnick welcomes feedback from the audience, though the experience has been hit or miss.

I'm far more interested in the aggregate opinion. Audiences as a whole are smart. Audience members individually are ... dangerous. Most people just want to have their opinions heard. They throw out words that don't mean very much with specifics—“deeper,” “likeable,” “deus ex machina” – terms they know they want to show off. [...]Other times, I get some tiny note that is so smart I pop it right into the play. If there is a talkback element or notecards, a growing trend at most nonprofits, I ask that the director or

dramaturg go through them. I want two kinds of notes—small details that are objectively right. The other kind of note is the broader note that appears again and again—a trend. If 70% of the audience articulated that a murder plot was confusing, I know they're probably right.

Like a lot of playwrights Mitnick finds the written feedback from the audience helpful because it provides a lot of data. The way the director and dramaturg present that data helps to prevent him from becoming too focused on a specific comment.

*Ed, Downloaded* has been produced by other theatre companies after its premiere at DCTC. The script has changed since its premiere, Mitnick describes this process as:

I did edits for both the Roundabout workshop of ED and for the West Coast production. [...]I cut sections from the second act to make the play tighter – non-essential tricks and fun that didn't warrant their stage time. In general I polished all the dialogue. I know I rewrote the first page of the play. I wanted a more solid laugh to start the play than I had in Denver. If you can make an audience laugh early in any play, they trust you and are generally faster to warm to the experience.

### **The Journey of *Grace, or the Art of Climbing***

Feldman's play, *Grace, or the Art of Climbing*, took a different route to production at Denver Center; it was a script submitted by an agent. Like *Ed, Downloaded*, *Grace, or the Art of Climbing* had a staged reading at the Colorado New Play Summit in 2012 and was produced in DCTC's season in 2013. *Grace, or the Art of Climbing* is about a young woman, Emm, who has returned to her deceased father's house to find emotional space after a bad



breakup. Throughout the play, she interacts with characters from her past. Her father who taught her rock climbing serves as a part-time trainer as she relearns the sport in an attempt to break out of her depression. Feldman had a very positive experience working with DCTC. Seeing her play produced was a very valuable part of the process.

I think the thing that works the best is giving a play a production. Because what we learn through rehearsals and three-dimensional exploration and embodiment is irreplaceable with a reading or a multi-day rehearsal process right beforehand. If I look at the differences in the changes, I made small changes that caught the light for the Summit, and I made massive changes that made for a better blanket in the rehearsal process for this production.

A full rehearsal process provides time with the script that is essential to developing new plays. Feldman observes that readings occur at a point when the playwright is infinitely more familiar with the play than her collaborators.

If it took me years to write a new play, I can't expect that someone is going to be able to read a draft of it, have a four-hour rehearsal process—or even a three-day rehearsal process—and be able to have cracked it enough to give me enough material or enough smart integrated choices for me to see what is working or is not working. Most of what I am seeing then, if they are just throwing it up on its feet or even not on its feet, most of what I am seeing are the choices that people are making that don't yet work. There's not enough time to make new choices and see what choices are effective for the character of the story. So all I'm doing is seeing the first draft of their take on it which feels about as successful as my first draft of the first script that I

wrote—which is not what I am sharing with people—I’m sharing with people like the fifth or eightieth draft.

Feldman’s point is that people working in new play development come to a play thinking they can provide help or ideas about it. However, it is easy to forget the amount of time a playwright has invested in its development and how long it can take to dig deep enough to understand the material.

In essence, the production of a play gives the artists involved the necessary time to understand the play. Writers complain about their frustration with having numerous readings of their play without it ever reaching full production. A staged reading at the Summit works because it usually leads to a production. Feldman expresses frustration with the reading-only development model:

A lot of theatres have had readings of plays of mine. I have a hard time developing something over the course of a reading because it is such a short rehearsal process. It doesn’t give me enough information to make smart decisions about changes. And/or it doesn’t give me enough time to implement those. If I gauge something needs to be fixed, I can give it a first stab, but it takes a few stabs before I land on it—okay, there it is. I’ve refined it to the point where it looks like its seamlessly part of the fabric as opposed to an iron on patch. So I can’t do that work that quickly in a reading. Yes, I’ve had some reading development experiences, but they usually feel less useful development wise.

Feldman used the written feedback in a similar way to Mitnick; she had the director of *Grace or the Art of Climbing* give her a general sense of what the feedback said.

You know, I didn't look at a single one. I thought I would. They asked us what questions we wanted to ask. They told us what five or six questions do we want, and I picked them, and I told them. If they were stock questions, they may not apply to what I am actually after. But they are thick, the packets that we get. They said do you want us to mail you a copy, and Mike said yes. And he read them first and he said, "You know, I don't think you need to read them because there are so many different opinions. By and large people enjoyed it and here are the trends that I see and what people said." There were a couple of people who vehemently disliked it or had these outlying opinions. Anything he thought was useful, he told me. I kept them in case I ever wanted to go back to them. But I felt like he was able to give me—to pare it all down and tell me—what was important to know without having to slog through hundreds of opinions separately written in other people's handwriting on my own.

Both playwrights found the written feedback more helpful than having a talkback with the audience at the reading's completion. Having questions provided by the playwright helped them get a better sense of specific moments in the play. This allowed them to test audience reaction to parts they were unsure about. Playwrights generally find a large audience talkback too unwieldy. They can feel put on the spot, one person on stage taking comments from hundreds of people. Unstructured criticism can be detrimental to new play development as it can be unpredictable. Allowing the playwright to structure what feedback is presented has proved successful.

The ratio of plays read at the 2012 Summit to plays produced by DCTC is 3:5, that is

60% of the plays read will find their way to fully mounted production. This is a high and, to the playwright, a reassuring number. Playwrights can find intimidating readings or workshops that function essentially as an audition. Mitnick reports:

I'm going to have a show at Playwrights Horizons next year, and we're doing workshop after workshop and fine tuning the ending to try and understand it before we've gotten into our first rehearsal. There's that desire to get it perfect because they're now competing with commercial theatres so there's this feeling its audition for Broadway. A workshop is an audition for a production, which is detrimental to the process. Anytime I'm lucky enough to have a play that is being work-shopped, I have to realistically view it and ask if this is an audition for my play at the theatre, or is it a real opportunity for me to develop a play? Then what we're doing on that last day for our invited friends, family, and the literary staff that comes is totally different. If it's an audition for the theatre, it's all about product. It's about how do we hide the problems. How do we make it a shiny thing—a sparkly, exciting thing? How do we cast it in such an exciting way with people that we know the artistic director loves, their favorite actors, so that they're mesmerized and want to program it?

Mitnick discussed with Roundabout Theatre Company the possibility of producing *Ed, Downloaded*. Mitnick thought the play had some issues that could be solved by a workshop, but he also treated the workshop like an audition for Roundabout and its Artistic Director, Todd Haimes.

I'll do a workshop for either reason: as an audition, that is what the *Ed*,

*Downloaded* workshop is going to be at Roundabout in the fall. There is still a lot of work on the play that Sam and I need to do. Something that I said to Sam, and he said back to me, is that this is an opportunity, too, and let's use the resources they are going to give us to make the play better. We know that this is an audition for Todd, the artistic director, to say, "Yeah, do it." That's the goal of it. That has to be the primary goal of it.

Since our interview, Roundabout decided not to produce *Ed, Downloaded* in its off Broadway theatre, the Laura Pels. In Mitnick's mind, the play had a successful workshop at Roundabout, but he was told that the theatre declined it because "the older subscriber base would have difficulties with the fractured nature of the storytelling and the heavy reliance on technology."

Writing for production rather than writing from the artist's own vision can harm the uniqueness of a play. Over time, this changes how a playwright writes and conceives the play. "Generally, theatres don't put restrictions on what you're writing; instead, playwrights put restrictions on themselves, I think limiting what they are capable of writing because they know what kinds of plays get produced—a one set, small three-character play, about domestic problems with a feel-good ending, a kind of elevated movie of the week—my very negative way of looking at things. There are more restrictions that happen within the playwright's head than happen coming from theatres" (Mitnick). Mitnick's quote is really interesting in that he says writers are the ones who place restrictions on their plays, not the theatres that are developing them. It is as if the writers are over-thinking what a theatre company wants in a play, even though it has not been requested.

Mitnick believes that organizations like the Lark Play Development Center, whose model is to fund writers without the pressure or deadline of producing a play, help break this system. "The Lark is a fantastic organization because they are one of the few institutions that I know that genuinely take blind submissions for their plays, non-agent submissions and take them seriously." From his first hand experience, Mitnick believes that the pressure for and desire of a production is changing how playwrights write and conceive their plays.

Denver Center Theatre Company is a regional theatre with a strong focus on new play development. DCTC produces the Colorado New Play Summit annually, and 40-60% of plays read during the Summit are chosen for production in the next year's season. Denver Center frequently uses the commission model and contracts with playwrights on around three to five plays a year. The Summit is made up of these commissions and agent submitted plays. The benefits of this model are that it allows playwrights some financial security and a good chance that their play will receive a full production. It also opens a place for emerging and early career playwrights.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Major Non-Profits: Lincoln Center and Signature Theatre**

#### **Introduction:**

In this chapter I examine Lincoln Center Theater and Signature Theatre, two major non-profit theatres located in New York City. Both companies produce revivals but new play development and production of new plays are also important objectives. Lincoln Center Theater is the largest non-profit theatre in New York City. Signature is smaller and only produces off-Broadway but is growing rapidly. Each organization is led by an artistic director who is a major leader in the field of new play development. I will examine how Andre Bishop's work at Playwrights Horizons influenced the philosophy of new play development at Lincoln Center. James Houghton founded Signature Theatre on the premise that a theatre company and season can focus on a single playwright. These companies create and nurture long term relationships with legendary and mid-career playwrights. They commit to these playwrights as core members of the company and to producing premieres of their work. Both companies are bringing the playwright back into the creative ensemble.

In his "Dream Machine" article, Anderson uses Playwrights Horizons as an example of the success of playwright-focused theatre companies engaged in new play development. Playwrights Horizons is a theatre dedicated to the support and development of playwrights, lyricists, and composers while focusing on producing their work. The company is currently led by Tim Sanford; at the time of Anderson's article it was led by Andre Bishop. In

Anderson's article, Bishop discussed the difficulties of new play development in New York City.

"I don't think it's possible to be successful in the old sense of the word anymore in the sense of becoming rich and famous. And in a sense it makes it much easier because the possibilities are virtually nil in which case one is doing it for different reasons, or better reasons." [Anderson continues,] Playwrights Horizons has had a good deal of what most would consider success. It seems to have moved its scripts almost at will, the works of its distinctive set of writers (among them Christopher Durang, Wendy Kesselman, and William Finn) settling in for long off-Broadway runs. (Anderson 59–60)

Bishop illuminates the point that commercial runs can give a theatre company visibility and the aura of success without actually making money. Raising the funds for a Broadway transfer is hard, especially for smaller non-profit companies. Eventually it will take up a large part of the institution's financial and human resources, and the chance of success is difficult to predict.

Anderson portrayed Playwrights Horizons as a company that is able to make this model work and, therefore, was surprised to learn of the company's financial struggles.

I assumed that Bishop's clutch of impressive titles had long since put the company on Easy Street. "What's off about New York Theatres is the public view of them versus what's really going on," Bishop said, explaining that the total income from years of transfers had netted Playwrights Horizons a mere \$300,000—barely one-eighth of one year's operating expenses. "There never



was a fortune to be made in commercial venues.” So success has not translated into dollars. “I went cuckoo when I couldn’t relate our ‘eminence’ and acceptance as a theatre in the press, funding, etc., with the despair and lack of money. We won the Pulitzer for a show we did, on the one hand. On the other—we have no hot water.” (60)

Bishop’s comments speak to the difficulty of producing a successful commercial run of a new play. Companies struggle to identify how a work will be perceived by a much larger audience base. This is still an important and difficult challenge for theatre companies today.

Over time, Playwrights Horizons became focused on supporting fewer writers. Instead of taking unsolicited scripts, they became pickier about the plays they produced. The goal was to give more resources to a smaller group of playwrights in order to provide a greater benefit to them. Anderson describes this transition:

The company has gone through two distinct phases in its work with writers. The first is characterized by founder Robert Moss’s now-famous phrase, “fanning every flame”—encouraging dozens of writers, producing as many as possible, creating a frenzy of development in the hope that a handful of real talents would emerge. But the early 1980s saw a period of retrenchment, a move that was mirrored throughout the industry. Companies ceased to accept unsolicited manuscripts. Shotgun commissioning tapered off. Playwrights Horizons and other companies like it began to focus their creative and financial energies on the few major talents it had previously unearthed. For Bishop, this commitment to a small group of writers stemmed, in part, from the collapse of the commercial market. “I realized that for most

writers, even our very best writers, this is their career. This is the life their play will have—the subscription run at Playwrights Horizons.” (59–60)

Since 1992 Bishop has been the Artistic Director of Lincoln Center Theater. His idea to offer more support to fewer playwrights, first implemented at Playwrights Horizons, now is part of the philosophy of Lincoln Center Theater.

### **Lincoln Center Theater**

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts was founded in 1959. President Eisenhower was present at its ground breaking and “saw the Center as a ‘mighty influence for peace’” (Young 5). Today, Lincoln Center for the Performing arts is a very large and well-funded art organization. In 2012, it had a revenue of \$159 million and expenses of \$167 million. It received 58 % of its revenue from contributions and grants with a relatively large part of the remainder coming from ticket sales. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts occupies a sixteen-acre complex on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. Among its many resident institutions there are The Metropolitan Opera, The New York City Ballet, The New York Philharmonic Opera and Lincoln Center Theater. In 2012, Lincoln Center Theater had an operating budget of \$38 million.

Lincoln Center Theater, like Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, was founded with grand expectations. “In 1958, Vivian Beaumont Allen gave \$3 million to Lincoln Center, hoping to build a national theater ‘comparable in distinction and achievement to the Comedie-Francaise’” (Sheehy 4). From its origins Lincoln Center Theater has sought to be something akin to America’s national theatre. However, its early history was troubled.

Originally called the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, Lincoln Center was

founded under the leadership of Robert Whitehead and Elia Kazan.

They planned to bring together the best theater artists in the country and “make art, not business.” Whitehead warned, “It may take a lifetime.” The news was greeted by hyperbolic praise and anticipation. After all, the theater at Lincoln Center would be the first new theater built in New York since Ethel Barrymore in 1928. [...] The *New York Times* proclaimed, “This is the first seismic tremor in what may prove to be a great earthquake in the American theater.” (Sheehy 4)

For Lincoln Center Theater’s debut production, Kazan directed Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall*. Although the critical response was mercilessly negative, ticket sales were strong; audiences were attracted by the star power of the director and Lincoln Center’s debut. By the mid 1960s, frustrations had mounted within the Whitehead and Kazan leadership team, and Herbert Blau and Jules Irving were brought into revive the troubled company. It was an intriguing choice for a company with such grand aims, “never mind that it had taken England more than a century to create its national theater—the board members wanted immediate results, so they searched for new dreamers. This time they traveled three thousand miles west and found perhaps the unlikeliest candidates in American theater—Herbert Blau and Jules Irving, co-founders of the Actors Workshop in San Francisco” (Sheehy 4). After a year, Blau returned to academia and Irving was left to keep the troubled theatre afloat.

In 1972, Irving resigned in protest after a season was cancelled due to poor finances. “Into the vacuum stepped Joseph Papp, then fifty-two, the self-made son of a Polish immigrant and a man who dominated New York theater, moving easily between a

summer season of Shakespeare in Central Park and his Public Theater downtown” (Sheehy 6). Papp’s first production was the premiere of David Rabe’s play, *In the Boom Boom Room*. It was successful, garnering a couple of Tony nominations, but its controversial subject matter unsettled the traditional audience and donor base of Lincoln Center. Papp sought to use Lincoln Center Theater as a bridge between the commercial theatre and the avant-garde. “Papp mated experimental directors with classics, producing Richard Foreman’s version of *Three Penny Opera* and Andrei Serban’s production of *The Cherry Orchard*. Suddenly just as audiences were beginning to respond to his experiments, Papp resigned, saying that he felt ‘trapped in an institutional structure both artistically and fiscally’ (Sheehy 6). In 1980 Lincoln Center Theater turned to Richard Crinkley to manage the theatre. Crinkly produced one unsuccessful season before the theater was closed.

By the mid 1980s, Lincoln Center Theater’s leader was Bernie Gersten, Papp’s former right hand man. Gersten described his philosophy towards the company as

We said the theater ought to just exist, and it ought to be the best theatre we could create. And what would it be? Would it be a theater of classics, a theater of new plays? Would it be a theater of plays or would it be a theater of musicals? Would it be a theater of American works or international works? Our answer was “all of the above,” and we distilled it to a very simple slogan that we used as our operating slogan: “Good plays, popular prices.” (Stamas, 33)

Gersten was Lincoln Center Theater’s Executive Director from 1985-2013. He was the first person to make Lincoln Center Theater financially viable. He initially came up with the model while teaching a graduate class on theatre management.

I was teaching theater management at Columbia in the graduate school. One of the things I would do with my students was create a model for running the Vivian Beaumont Theater, which had been empty for many years. I would say, “I don’t know what the big problem is with the Beaumont, but here’s what needs to be done there.” So we discussed producing about three plays a year at the Beaumont, and two or three plays a year at the Mitzi Newhouse. We discussed what they would cost, and how long they should run. It was a model. (Gersten, 9)

When hired Gersten implemented this model at LCT. At the time of his hire Lincoln Center Theater’s operating budget was around \$12 million. A major factor in Gersten’s success at LCT was his ability to understand financing and explain it clearly to LCT’s board of directors.

Gersten sought to improve Lincoln Center Theater’s standing with artists in the field and to create a permanent home for theatre practitioners to work. “I said that it must achieve the trust of artists. That it should be built upon the willingness of artists or, better, the eagerness of artists, to entrust their artistic lives to this theater. And that trust—that was the thing that had to be created at Lincoln Center, because it didn’t exist” (10).

Gersten’s first major success at Lincoln Center was John Guare’s *House of Blue Leaves*. It transferred from the off Broadway Mitzi Newhouse Theater to the Broadway Vivien Beaumont Theater. Gersten describes how this decision was made:

I believe you just had to win the trust of the artists by virtue of how you behaved, what artistic choices you made, and what administrative choices

you made. One of the best examples was the second play that we put on, John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves*. It was a very popular play. We opened at the Mitzi Newhouse, and we had more customers than seats. The Beaumont was empty, and one day we scratched our collective heads. And I don't know which head was being scratched, or who the scratcher was, but we said, "What would happen if we moved it up to the Beaumont?" And the conclusion was that we would sell out and the Beaumont would be open. In all the history of the two theaters, nothing had ever moved from the Mitzi to the Beaumont. But saying, "Here's a show that's playing in this three-hundred-seat theater, it's very popular, and could probably play very successfully in a thousand-seat theater, let's move it!" was very innovative, especially since the show was perfect in the Mitzi, a perfect fit. (10)

In 1992, Lincoln Center Theater hired Andre Bishop as Artistic Director. Coming from Playwrights Horizons, Bishop brought expertise in developing and producing new plays. "Bishop at the time was the golden boy of the New York nonprofit theater, having put a distinct stamp on the work of Playwrights Horizons and, in the process, produced a number of extraordinarily successful new shows, including three Pulitzer Prize winners: *The Heidi Chronicles*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and *Sunday in the Park with George*" (Sheehy 7-8). Today, Lincoln Center Theater is committed to producing new plays. It opened a third theatre called "LCT3" which is dedicated solely to producing new plays. Lincoln Center Theater has also produced the Broadway premieres of such hits as *The Coast of Utopia* and *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*.

In my interview with Anne Cattaneo, Lincoln Center Theater's long time dramaturg, she discussed Lincoln Center's and Bishop's philosophies on new play development. From his first days as Artistic Director, Bishop has been interested in developing new plays. "Andre, I think like all of us, started in the new play movement. Playwright's Horizons was a very small theatre. He was the literary manager and took over as artistic director. His success there was with plays and with musicals. [...] So when he came here, one of his primary missions was to work with new writers." Bishop sought out a group of writers that he had worked with and promised them that Lincoln Center would produce whatever they wrote.

He chose six people—John Guare, David Mamet, Mike Nichols, Wole Soyinka, Elaine May—and what ever they wanted to do they did. [...] Andre's instinct was to make it about new plays, which is what he'd done. We started because we had been doing new plays in the same way we had done them in the seventies, before Lincoln Center Theater went dark. (Cattaneo)

Over the course of his tenure, Bishop has included in the group of writers supported by Lincoln Center playwrights Richard Nelson, Christopher Durang and Tom Stoppard, among others.

Bishop's philosophy is to identify established playwrights whose works he admires or finds interesting and to offer them the full commitment of producing whatever they write. Unimpeded by the demands that producing might require, playwrights are more free to conceive of the vision of their plays.

The writers that we work with, they are still around; they are still writing, we have a commitment to them. You don't want to send Richard Nelson packing;

you want to keep him writing. That is the problem with [Todd London's book] *Outrageous Fortune*, there are too many playwrights. It is never going to be possible to produce all the plays by all the playwrights in America.

There are just not enough opportunities. (Cattaneo)

Lincoln Center Theater's commitment is especially important for legendary playwrights. It allows them an outlet for their work to be produced and to develop their own unique theatrical visions.

Developing relationships, essentially friendships, with playwrights is vital to Lincoln Center.

An ongoing friendship with writers is something that creates an artistic constituency. Here it's John Guare, it's Robbie Baits. [...] All the people I'm mentioning are just friends. We have known them for a long time, we listen to them, and I sometimes say "I'm scared of them, they have the control." The other piece of this puzzle that is very important is we don't take money from writers. When we do a new play, we don't take a percentage of the authors' royalties from writers. That is very rare. The question is why is it so rare? I end up sounding like a Marxist, but you follow the money. There are playwrights I know where the author gives away seventy percent of the income of the play—ten percent to this person who did a reading, ten percent to someone who did a production. This is not a viable situation.

(Cattaneo)

Here Cattaneo mentions a contentious issue in the field of new play development—playwrights being asked to give a portion of their royalties to companies that developed



the play. This percentage of the royalties is called a “subsidiary right.” It is not uncommon for theatres to charge a playwright ten to twenty percent in subsidiary rights. In fact, Roundabout Theatre Company once charged as much as forty percent of playwright’s royalties. However in a recent organizational change Roundabout Theatre Company

now will negotiate a percentage only for works that are major hits at Roundabout and run for more than 18 weeks at its off-Broadway theater, the Laura Pels, and will not seek a percentage from plays done in its Black Box theater. “In talking to the artists, we realized that the question really came down to them wanting to feel a sense of ownership over their work, which I absolutely understand,” said Todd Haimes, Roundabout’s Artistic Director. The policy change is not expected to cost a significant amount for Roundabout, which has a \$52 million operating budget and produces many revivals in addition to new plays. (Healy, “Policy Change to Benefit Playwrights”)

Subsidiary rights can be very difficult for playwrights since they already find it hard to make a living writing plays.

Christopher Shinn, a playwright whose Off Broadway credits include *Dying City* and *On the Mountain*, said in an interview that subsidiary rights could be a greater drain on playwrights’ livelihood than some theater companies may realize. “A 40% subsidiary right would take a lot of money out of the playwright’s bank account,” he said, referring to Roundabout’s former policy. “If you really want to be a playwright, this is crucial money. One of the challenges of being a playwright right now is that a lot of theaters assume

you're writing for film or television, and don't realize how important this money is." (Healy, "Policy Change to Benefit Playwrights")

Lincoln Center has been steadfast in not asking for subsidiary rights from playwrights. This decision speaks to the importance of understanding playwrights' economic struggles.

Among other major nonprofit theaters in New York, Lincoln Center Theater has never sought subsidiary rights on any work, [...] André Bishop, artistic director of Lincoln Center Theater, said his institution's leaders and board had chosen in the 1980s to waive the potential revenue stream of subsidiary rights because they wanted to support playwrights struggling to pay rent, buy health insurance and otherwise support themselves. "Playwrights write only so many plays and have only so many opportunities to earn money," Mr. Bishop said. "Since Lincoln Center Theater has the ability to give a play a long run, if it is warranted, there seemed no good reason to take these rights."

(Healy, "Policy Change to Benefit Playwrights")

Due perhaps to his background leading Playwrights Horizons, Bishop is sensitive to the difficulty playwrights face in making a living.

Many of the greatest playwrights in the history of theatre worked within a theatre company. Shakespeare was a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Moliere ran his own theatre company, and Chekov was an important contributor to the Moscow Art Theatre. These playwrights wrote for their shareholders, friends and compatriots. Cattaneo believes that playwrights writing for people they know, their community, is vital to the art.

Whenever you think of a great playwright—Samuel Beckett, Brecht, Arthur

Miller—you always think of the actors that created the roles for those writers. I think that's the case with Sam Shepard, Mamet, and the case with Lanford [Wilson]. There were actors who were key members of that ensemble. [...] John Lee Beaty, talking about Circle [Repertory Company], mentioned "Lanford Wilson would write things into his play, for me, the set designer." It comes out of a conversation and he knew what I was thinking. It came out of things like having a beer at a bar. It comes out of proximity, it comes out of friendship, and it comes out of the knowledge of the person.

Lincoln Center Theater's philosophy on new play development is to cultivate relationships with major playwrights and then to promise them a play production. The playwrights dictate the development process; they get what they need to produce the play. They are not subjected to a cookie-cutter kind of process. For example, Lincoln Center does not do a reading unless the playwright requests one. According to Cattaneo the freedom of this process lets writers create innovative work.

The plays that I have had the privilege to work on in my career and the plays that I have loved the most as an audience in my life, are the plays that never could have emerged from a reading. They are plays that would have looked bad in a reading. They are plays that could only be discovered and understood in the course of a longer rehearsal, because they were written in a way that needed a deeper exploration both of the characters and the plot. If you have no contact with rehearsal, no experience with rehearsal and all that you have is a reading, you only know how to write for a reading.

A reading-centric model can create plays that thrive as readings but are not interesting in

production. Cattaneo continues,

There is a famous quote from Lois Smith, “I do readings of plays every week. I do productions, Shepard and Horton Foote. And what I do in a reading bears no relationship to what I do in a rehearsal. What I do in a reading is I know how to show a color; I make a fast choice. I know how to do certain things that will make a reading look good.” But these shortcuts are the opposite of what will make a play deep and rich; because, instead of investigating something you put a patch on it to make it look good. So if you have never had a rehearsal, as a writer, you don’t know how to write the way Shakespeare wrote, the way Chekov wrote. And there is a certain kind of play that you see, that you can just tell it came out of a reading. It’s sort of clear, it has a sort of interesting take on something; but, it is shallow on some level, it is unsatisfying. It might be fine for an evening in the theatre. But it’s not the *Good Woman of Szechuan*, *The Three Sisters*, *Death of a Salesman*. It’s not going anywhere big. And that is the kind of play that our theatres are producing right now.

A model that only uses readings to select which plays to put into production will eventually create plays that are written to succeed in a reading rather than in an actual production. These plays might have fewer characters and locations and plots that make them easier and cheaper to produce. Many of these restrictions come from limited funding and resources. Because Lincoln Center Theater is so well funded, it can afford to freely and unstintingly support the playwright’s vision.

In the end, Cattaneo believes that commitment is the most important aspect of

successful play development.

To me the ultimate criterion for all play development is commitment. [...] If we are working on a play, which is to say, we are producing the play, with a director and a cast who are smart and committed, that play will move to a certain place, with these actors and in this production. It will grow if it changes in a particular way. To simply offer advice in a void, without a production, without a context, I don't know really how helpful that is. It is like John Guare used to say "the best dramaturg I ever had was the second balcony usher at the Belasco." Sometimes somebody can say something to you and you say, "Oh gosh I never thought about that." But if you are working and committed and in a rehearsal you can say things and a writer can listen to them or whatever; but if you are just listening to too many people, I wonder if it's a good thing.

To Cattaneo, commitment means supporting the writer in ways such as having an experienced production staff off which to bounce ideas. Like Garrison, she believes a long rehearsal process is essential to new play development because it allows the creative team and the playwright the opportunity to spend enough time working together to grasp the play's strengths and weakness. Commitment also means believing in the writer's vision and working to understand it rather than just forcing clarity on a script. "Another thing I always say, Sarah Ruhl said, 'clarity is overrated.' One thing you hear often in discussion, 'It's not clear to me why...?' It isn't clear to me why King Lear doesn't believe Cordelia? I don't really know that, but in a way I don't want to ruin the play by knowing that. So the kind of things that audiences ask doesn't help the plays. It's like TV fixing, it just makes things clearer"

(Cattaneo). The themes and ideas behind great plays are often nebulous or do not fit into a formula. These plays can be large and expensive to produce, but they are the great art that new play development seeks to help nurture.

An industry-wide problem that Cattaneo sees in non-profit and regional theatres is that they have become more focused on raising revenue (ticket sales, personal contributions and grants) than on supporting artists.

Whether the theatres are the big flagships in the cities to off-Broadway, to the less established in the big cities, they have become more corporate in nature. [...] Corporate forces have contributed to a certain kind of uniformity. It is always easier for boards and consultants to understand what administrators do rather than what artists do. I think the pendulum has swung as about as far as it can swing in that corporate direction. The artists have all left the theatres; everyone is administrative. This particular theatre has had a philosophy from the beginning that the staff should be very small; we don't have any interns here, that the primary focus of this theatre should be the artists. We are an unusual theatre. I often go to other theatres and look at the program, and I can't believe how many people work there. What is everybody doing there? (Cattaneo)

There has been a push to increase administrative and development staffs at theatres nationwide. For example, few companies employ artists year round. Frequently, the Artistic Director is a theatre director but resident acting companies are rare and playwrights on staff are even less likely to be found. The lack of theatre companies that employ theatre artists is a major concern in the field.

Despite its troubled history, Lincoln Center Theater is the dean of the major non-profit theatres in New York City. It is well funded and has a clear philosophy on new play development: to create connections to important playwrights and commit to produce their work whatever it takes. Lincoln Center works to create a sense of community between its artists and to keep its administrative staff lean—the mission of the company is to focus on the art.

### **Signature Theatre Company**

Founded in 1991 by James Houghton, Signature Theatre Company is a non-profit off-Broadway theatre in New York City. Signature's mission is to honor and celebrate the playwright. Houghton created the unique model of devoting a whole season to the work of one living playwright. Signature makes a commitment to this work and involves the playwright in every part of the creative process.

Signature is the first not-for-profit theatre company in the United States to devote each season of productions to the work of a single living playwright, including such treasured writers as Arthur Miller, Lee Blessing, Edward Albee, Romulus Linney and Maria Irene Fornes. Since the theatre's founding in 1991, Signature and its artists have received many honors including the Pulitzer Prize, Obie Awards and Drama Desk Awards. (Wright 37)

In the last few years Signature has grown significantly. Signature's total revenue in 2012 was \$61.5 million, and its operating expenses were around \$50 million. This is a jump from the past year when revenues were \$16 million. Signature generates 89% of its revenue through contributions and grants. An example is the Signature Ticket Initiative

that is underwritten by a large grant from The Pershing Square Foundation. This organization underwrites Signature's ticket prices thereby enabling the company to offer twenty-five dollar tickets to all of its shows. It is committed to funding twenty-five years of subsidized seats.

Much of the recent increase in Signature's budget can be traced to its opening of the Signature Center, a \$66 million dollar theatre complex. The Center has three theatres plus an immense and comfortable lobby and lounge. This architectural development has greatly increased the company's artistic scope.

Despite the higher profile, Signature is still playwright-centric. Houghton has sought to keep the philosophy and feel of the old Signature Theatre but on a larger scale. He said, "What mattered most in creating the center was proposing a bigger scale for Signature—the sort of scale that would excite major donors—while at the same time making clear that our mission would remain steady. [...] We're not going to start creating a bunch of new musicals. We're not going to start casting celebrity actors or aim things to transfer to Broadway" (Healy, "Signature Theater Opens New Home in a Frank Gehry Building"). The opening of the Center and the large budget increase show that this is a time of growth for Signature. Signature is expanding as an off-Broadway institution and so too, is its commitment to producing new plays. Patrick Healy of *The New York Times* reported, "Mr. Houghton estimated that Signature would produce forty-five plays over the next five years, with about thirty-five of them new works. By comparison, over the previous five years, Signature produced about twenty plays, and about two-thirds were revivals" ("Signature Theater Opens New Home in a Frank Gehry Building"). Opening the Signature Center has expanded the scope and range of Signature's investment in new play development.



Signature Theatre offers three different kinds of residencies related to new play development. The first is called Residency One. I interviewed Christie Evangelisto, Signature's literary manager, who described the goal of Residency One:

We are most known for having a playwright in residency for a year. We produce older works of theirs, mid-career works, and new plays as well. We want the audience to sit back and look at the entire work of a playwright. That is what everyone thinks of as Signature's thing—spending a whole year with a playwright and getting to see his or her body of work.

Residency One is usually given to a high profile playwright such as Tony Kushner, Charles Mee or August Wilson. In his many years in the field, Houghton has cultivated relationships with a large number of playwrights. These connections can lead a playwright to be selected for Residency One, which results in three to four productions of his or her work produced over the course of a season.

Residency One can provide audiences with a unique look at a playwright's work.

The audience is really granted access to what that playwright does in a way they aren't when they are seeing one play. You are really getting to know a playwright, and you are seeing what happened in their career from start to the present. [...] Our audiences know Athol Fugard now; we spent a long time with his work, showed a documentary about him, had his books in the bookstore. I think it's a more intelligent and thorough way to get to know a playwright. Now that I work here, I think, "Why doesn't everyone do that? It makes so much sense." (Evangelisto)

Residency One allows playwrights to rework previously written plays as well as to

debut new plays. In 2013, David Henry Hwang was in residence and Evangelisto described his experience there as:

With *Dance and the Railroad* you see a play that David wrote in his twenties when he was just starting out. By the end of the season, you'll see *Kung Fu*, his brand new play, that he has written while in residence with us. I think that is an amazing gift to dive that deep into a playwright's body of work. [...]

We look for plays that have been forgotten or overlooked. Or the playwright felt there was something that was overlooked with the play, or something left undone with the play. With *Golden Child* by David Henry Hwang, that was a play that he felt that he didn't get the right ending, that there were things about it that he wanted to continue working on. That was a great fit for us because we always encourage that kind of conversation about plays and with playwrights.

A second new play development program that Signature has created is its Legacy program. The Legacy program was launched in 2000 to celebrate Signature's tenth anniversary. The program serves as a homecoming for Signature's playwrights in residency. It produces New York or world premieres of their work or a revival of a work they are well known for. Recent productions have included *Old Hats* by Bill Irwin, *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson, and *Landscape of the Body* by John Guare. The Legacy program is an important part of keeping playwrights involved at Signature after their residency has ended. This allows them to remain important contributors to the company. "[The Legacy program] is where playwrights that have been a part of the artist in residency program come back with a new show or a reimagining of a signature work. [...] *Old Hats* is a legacy

show too. [It is] Bill Irwin coming back and working on a brand new piece” (Evangelisto). A good example of the way the Legacy Program works grows from Houghton’s relationship with Edward Albee; Signature is committed to premiering his next play.

Signature is also continuing to develop a new play by the three-time Pulitzer Prize winner Edward Albee, *Laying an Egg*, which was initially announced for the 2011-12 season and then for the 2013-14 season, but postponed both times so Mr. Albee could write further. Asked about the status of Mr. Albee’s play, James Houghton, founding artistic director of Signature, said through a spokesman: “Edward continues to work on ‘*Laying an Egg*’ as well as other projects. When he is ready, we will produce it. (Healy, “Signature Theater Season to Spotlight A.R. Gurney and Naomi Wallace”)

By committing up front to produce a former resident playwright’s new work Signature’s Legacy program frees the artist to take the time needed to write it.

Signature’s most recently developed new play model is called Residency Five. Over a five-year period, Signature guarantees to premiere three plays by each playwright in residence.

The newest program is called Residency Five. In Residency Five you are in residency here for five years. We guarantee three full productions of new plays of yours. [...] They are given office space here at the theatre to work. They have all of the resources, financial and human, of the center. If they want to do readings and workshops we are here to do that with them. If they want to use a theatre and play with some sound choices we can provide a designer and the use of space. We are basically here to support what they

need to keep writing. (Evangelisto)

Residency Five currently has seven playwrights in the program: Annie Baker, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Martha Clarke, Will Eno, Katori Hall, Kenneth Lonergan and Regina Taylor. This impressive roster of playwrights is filled with popular and mid-career writers. In fact, “the playwriting residencies [at Signature] have provoked some private grumbling among a few theatre executives and playwright’s agents, concerned that Signature is hoarding the talent” (Healy, “Signature Theater Opens New Home in a Frank Gehry Building”).

Houghton’s passion for new play development was a major reason for Eno, a 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist, to accept the residency. “Like almost no one I know, he managed to have both a deeply comprehensive and specific vision of things, along with a really wide-open and kind of down home way. It makes you feel very comfortable to be around someone who with is both so aggressively detail-oriented and who’s also so generally calm” (Healy, “Signature Theater Opens New Home in a Frank Gehry Building”). The compensation, multi-year commitment to production, and Houghton’s compassionate approach make Residency Five a unique play development program.

With Residency Five, Signature hopes to offer writers more financial stability than a commission. The residency involves access to Signature’s theatres and staff, a cash prize, health insurance, and as Evangelisto mentions, “a theatre-going allowance. If Kenneth Lonergan wants to go see a play downtown because there are actors in it he’s interested in, we have money to do that.” Similar to being a participant in Residency One, all playwrights who complete Residency Five can be a part of the Legacy program. As Evangelisto says, “Once you are a playwright here you are always a part of a family.”

Houghton and Signature's literary department are always searching for the next participants in Residency One and Five.

For Residency One and Residency Five, we are always actively looking for candidates for those programs. We do a lot of readings; we have a script reading committee that we run. We are always seeing things; we go to a ton of readings; we are always zeroing in on people that we think would be a great fit of either program. We are in constant conversation with Jim Houghton about who might be a new candidate for Residency Five. That is another big part of the job—scouting—looking for people for both programs. Once we narrow it down, we do a ton of research on those people. We try to gather as much information about people as we can. That is a constant ongoing process that never stops; there is not a part of the year that we are not working on that. (Evangelisto)

According to Evangelisto, Signature is playwright-driven and the literary department and most of the company are there to serve writers' needs. "Everything here is very playwright-driven—they are at the center of the process. They let us know what they need. We don't ask for anything specific as to what they do with their time here. They are very much running the show. I feel like they're my boss, I'm here to work for the playwrights." Like Andre Bishop at Lincoln Center Theatre, Houghton cultivates friendships and long-term relationships with playwrights across the field.

[James Houghton's] philosophy is reflected in the way that we program. It is really about playwrights being at the center of everything. Looking at a playwright via their entire body of work, not just looking at the hot play by

the writer, but also seeing the whole body of work in context. For Jim it is a lot about relationships. It is about growing and nurturing a long-term relationship with a writer. When you work here, we will always work with you; you are a part of what we are doing. Even if you are not being actively produced, your portrait is on our wall, your history is on our touch screens. That is how Jim has always approached his work and he is really good at actualizing that. (Evangelisto)

Houghton has been involved in new play development for decades. From 2000 to 2003 he ran the O'Neill Playwrights Conference. Houghton replaced the popular and influential Lloyd Richards and implemented his own ideas and changes in the conference. Some of these ideas were more successful than others, but examining them sheds light on his philosophy on new play development. Describing the culture of the O'Neill that he inherited, Houghton says,

You have a writer who gets accepted through a cold submission and is from the outside; the writer is the only new person there on the team working on the play. I felt that was an unfair advantage for the other participants, and a little overwhelming for the writers. I also felt it was limited where the O'Neill could go. At that point it was called the National Playwrights Conference, and while it was true that the writers came from all over the country, most of the other participants came from the East Coast. One of my key intentions was to open the place up as much as possible, to bring as many new people into the fold and to slowly, one person at a time, begin to influence theatre artists to be sensitive to the writer's process. (Wright 38–39)

Many theatre companies that focus on new play development function as Houghton lays out. Writers are selected through cold submission and are often the only new people working on the project. By contrast, the directors, actors, and literary management team work again and again at the theatre. Built into this model is that the playwright is the newcomer or outsider and can be at a collaborative disadvantage.

Houghton made changes to the rehearsal process at the O'Neill. One of those changes was to have the playwright read the play solo at the first rehearsal. Houghton explains the importance of this as,

One thing I ask all writers to do [...] is to read their plays to their company; every rehearsal period starts with the writer reading the play. The majority of actors have never heard a writer read a play, and frankly the majority of directors haven't either, and it makes for more sympathetic collaborators all the way around. The actors discover the world of the play through the subconscious connection the writer has to the material. It's not an exercise in line readings or point of view, but the whole play sort of washes through you when the writer is reading because you're that much closer to the creative impulse that gave birth to the story to begin with. The actors experience this, and the director and dramaturg as well, and the writer has to actually stake a claim to every one of those words and be in an incredibly vulnerable and difficult position in reading that play to all those other people. Which makes them more sympathetic to the actors, who have to go through that, and the director. And the most important thing is that it puts the writer at the table in a very real way. It's not some highfalutin' situation of "There's the writer

over there sitting in the chair and we'll ask the occasional question." [...]

"Instead, it's "This person who wrote every one of these words is at the table."

Not to be precious about it but it puts the writer there in a tangible way.

(Wright 43)

Having the writer read his or her play seems like a simple idea, but it has many benefits. As Houghton explains, it demystifies the writer's position in the rehearsal room making him or her more accessible. Houghton also changed the way critiques were given at the Conference by getting rid of open critiques. Unlike previous seasons, a writer was not forced to stand in front of a group and take critique and feedback. Instead, befitting Houghton's determination to make new play development more writer-centric, writers seek out one-on-one discussions for feedback. Over that time, he has developed many relationships in the field with emerging and mid-career playwrights and he has used these friendships to help develop their work and program Signature's seasons.

Like Bishop, Houghton has worked to put the writers at the center of the creative process and to provide them the support needed for their work. This model of resident playwrights works very well for established writers since it allows them access to premieres of their work at major theatres. However, this model does not work well for the beginning or emerging playwright: how does one develop artists at an early stage of their careers so as to qualify them for the tremendous opportunities offered by Lincoln Center Theatre Company or Signature Theatre?



## **Chapter Five**

### **The New Black Boxes: LCT3 and Roundabout Underground**

#### **Introduction**

In my final chapter, I will examine new play development programs recently created at Lincoln Center and Roundabout Theatre Company; Lincoln Center Three (LCT3) and Roundabout Underground, respectively. Lincoln Center Theater and Roundabout Theatre Company are relatively recent entrants into the field of producing emerging playwrights. In the last five years, both of these large non-profit companies have built theatre spaces devoted exclusively to producing new plays. The theatres are fairly small, each with a seating capacity of less than one hundred and fifty persons, and share the goal of removing financial pressure from an emerging playwright's debut. Both LCT3 and Roundabout Underground are playwright-focused. Neither theatre makes prescriptive requests while writers are developing scripts, and playwrights are free to take a play where they think it should go. The companies are also committed to bringing these new playwrights and the directors, designers and the actors who work on them into the theatrical community. LCT3 and Roundabout Underground seek to create a new audience base with these programs by marketing to a younger demographic and capping all of their ticket prices at twenty dollars.

#### **LCT3**

Lincoln Center Theater's LCT3 is devoted to developing new playwrights. The program was created in 2008 and produced its first four seasons off site. In 2012, the

Lincoln Center Theater Company built the 112-seat Claire Tow Theatre, located directly over its Broadway house, the Vivian Beaumont theatre. The Claire Tow is now LCT3's home. The program works under the mission: "New Artists, New Audiences." LCT3 has a budget of around \$2 million, and its season consists of three to four productions a year. LCT3 shows are written, directed and designed by theatre professionals younger than Lincoln Center Theater usually hires. As Artistic Director Andre Bishop explains, "I see this as a legacy—all these young writers, directors, designers are now part of our world. It means I, as an artistic director, don't have to do artistic direction by shopping. It's fun to see people grow under your own roof—on top of your roof" (Pogrebin). All of the tickets for each production are twenty dollars, and the company seeks to attract a younger audience to Lincoln Center Theater.

I interviewed LCT3's Artistic Director Paige Evans. She identified Bishop as the impetus behind LCT3.

The idea, I think, has been a really long-standing one for Andre Bishop. He came here from Playwright's Horizons, and one thing that he missed there was having one small theatre to do new work and take those kinds of risks. When he came here from Playwrights, he brought over a number of artists whose work he had produced at Playwrights. Andre is someone who really believes in creating a home for artists, and he did that here. But he got to a certain point where he knew a whole new generation of artists had to be brought in.

Evans created the mission of “New Artists, New Audiences” for the company:

We are aiming to bring in new artists to give them full productions at LCT3. That is everyone from the designers to the director to the playwright. Even some of the actors have gone on to work on other stages here at Lincoln Center Theater. Also, to bring in new audiences, we have twenty-dollar ticket prices. With the younger audiences, which are what we are aiming for, it's a challenge, but that is what we are trying to cultivate.

Moving to a permanent space was a significant development as it gave Evans flexibility to program and brought the theatre artists working on LCT3 shows to Lincoln Center's main campus.

There are a number of different reasons to have a space here: the primary one is we wanted it all to be in one place—for the artists to feel they are really here and part of the life of Lincoln Center—I think it does make a difference. It also has given us more flexibility with our runs. We have six-week runs instead of four-week runs, it is a little smaller house, and we have been able to extend two of the three shows. (Evans)

Bringing emerging and new artists to Lincoln Center Theatre is a major goal of the program. Having LCT3 in the same vicinity as Lincoln Center Theater's Broadway and off-Broadway venues has created a greater sense of community.

To be eligible for production at LCT3, a play cannot already have had a premiere in New York City. LCT3 does not accept unsolicited scripts; all scripts are submitted by an agent or suggested by a director. Evans describes this process as:

We don't take unsolicited scripts. When we started out it was just me, and we don't have script readers or a big literary staff. So we only take submissions from agents, directors and designers. Part of my job is meeting with theatre artists. I meet with people constantly to get to know their work—and a lot of directors and people will send me work afterwards. So they come to us in different ways. Some plays come without a director attached; [however], it is more and more common for it come with a director attached since the play has sometimes been through some development already and the director was a part of that. The larger agencies, such as Creative Artists Agency and William Morris, like to package the play and represent both the director and the playwright so they can get a twenty percent cut. So there is a stronger connection to the agency.

In season selection for LCT3, Evans looks to select writers from a variety of stages in their careers as well as plays that have not been produced frequently outside of New York City.

Generally, I veer away from plays that have gotten lots and lots of productions. But that is not a part of the mission. I like the fact this season, for example, that Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* was really his first produced play. It had a production before in Chicago before we produced it. *Luck of the Irish* had a production at the Huntington, which had commissioned it before we produced it, but Kristin [Greenidge] had a number of productions before. She is a more experienced playwright. And then Daniel [Pearl], it is his first production. But I didn't choose that on purpose. I like the fact that it happened, and it does go into my thinking to a certain degree. (Evans)

Daniel Pearl is a recent graduate of the New School. LCT3's production of his play *A Kid Like Jake* was his first professional production of any kind. LCT3's commitment to producing work by writers who range from emerging to established can be seen in the 2013 season which featured a play that would go on to win the Pulitzer (*Disgraced*). An emerging playwright, Ayad Akhtar, gained the prestige that comes from winning such an important award.

Each play's development is specific to the needs of the playwright and the play. Unlike the Lark or New Dramatists, however, LCT3's goal is to develop plays towards production.

[The development of plays by LCT3] is specific. We develop plays for production. We do commissioned plays, and on commissioned plays I will work with the playwright and the director to develop them to a certain degree even if the play is very early on and I haven't committed to producing it. But aside from the pieces we commission, we only develop towards production. [...] Once I commit to producing a play we will develop it towards production, and [the structure of the development] depends on when rehearsals start. (Evans)

How much a script changes during its time at LCT3 is largely dependent on the writer.

A play like *A Kid Like Jack* went through few changes while a play like *Disgraced* went through a lot of changes. We do these three-day readings to develop the play. For *Disgraced* we did two three-day readings over the course of the summer before we went into rehearsal. I committed to it late, and we did a reading in late June and then again in August and rehearsal

began in September. Ayad did a huge number of rewrites from those readings and I think he made the play much stronger over the course of that.

(Evans)

The flexibility of having a permanent space allows LCT3 to program two weeks of previews for each production. For a new play at a small theatre, two weeks is a long preview period. A long preview period is important, however, for it allows the playwright time to digest audience reaction and make needed changes.

They do a huge amount of rewrites in previews. For example, Kirstin Greenidge did on *Luck of the Irish*; Ayad did a lot on *Disgraced* even though he'd already had a production of it. With *A Kid Like Jake* I don't expect Daniel Pearl to do a huge amount of rewriting. It is just not his process—and I think the play is good as it is. Different writers have different processes. Sometimes the playwrights used previews to rewrite; sometimes it is more focused on getting the production as strong as it can be. (Evans)

What playwrights take out of the preview period differs from person to person. Some, like Akhtar and Greenidge, use it to make substantial changes while others decided to leave the work pretty much as it is. A long preview period is one of the major advantages of having a play produced by a large theatre company.

At LCT3, Evans also functions as the dramaturg and provides feedback to the playwright through the development process. Actors, designers and the director do the same.

The director gives them feedback; I give them feedback; and the actors ask them lots of questions. One of the things about these readings is that they are

in the room with actors and a director for three days. They get a lot of the questions they would get in early table work. The designers usually come to one of the read-throughs, and we get all the production and dramaturgical conversations started. Usually, I've met with the director and playwright in advance of the developmental reading. We discuss what the playwright feels first, and I ask what the playwright wants to work on. The director has ideas too, generally not prescriptive ideas, like you should write this, but questions. I try to stay general in my feedback and questions as well. Just asking or stating things that I don't tend to understand or areas I think are stronger. It depends on the play and the writer. Most of the directors we have had here are really astute dramaturgically, too. (Evans)

Evans does not attend every rehearsal, so playwrights at LCT3 depend more on input from directors than in other new play development models. Kristen Greenidge, a playwright in the 2013 season, describes the playwright-director relationship.

Rebecca Taichman and I have worked together often, and I trust her implicitly. She is adept at cutting and shaping new work in a way that I am not, and so to have Rebecca work on a play of mine in the early stages is invaluable. She also has exquisite taste. I know that any production she works on will look stunning.

Greenidge's *Luck of the Irish* ran at LCT3 in the winter of 2013. The play is about a housing dispute over a house that an African-American family has owned since the late 1950s. The play begins in this century and focuses on the disputed purchase of the property; the title might not have been transferred properly back in the 1950s. The play

travels back in time to examine the relationship between the African-American couple who bought the home and the Caucasian couple that sold it to them. Greenidge interweaves scenes from the present and past throughout the play.

Greenidge and I discussed the development of *Luck of the Irish* and her experience at LCT3. The play had been through development at a couple of different theatres before arriving at LCT3.

[*Luck of the Irish*] is a reimagined version of the story of how my grandparents bought their house in Arlington, Massachusetts in the mid 1950s. It was a commission for South Coast Repertory Theater, and then it was re-commissioned by the Huntington Theater Company in Boston. In between, it was work-shopped once at the McCarter Theater and then twice more at The Huntington. We did two more workshops of the piece at LTC3 before heading into production. (Greenidge)

A developmental workshop at LCT3 consists of the playwright, director and actors working together over a three-day period. The structure and process are left up to the playwright. "*Luck of the Irish* was a play where she did huge rewrites on it. Rebecca Taichman the director scheduled the reading days so that Kirsten had until noon everyday and then Kristin would bring in rewrites and they would work through those" (Evans).

Greenidge feels one of the strengths of the LCT3 model is its focus on the playwright.

The focus of the LTC3 workshops was to make Nessa's arc clearer, as well as, refine the question of the deed in the play as it relates to Hannah's



journey. We were also able to see how the play read using different actors for specific roles. LTC3 gave a tremendous amount of artistic freedom to me and to Rebecca [Taichman]. We met frequently with Paige Evans but at no point did either of us feel stifled in terms of rewriting and mounting the piece. I think that is a strength in terms of new play development. We also had many previews to be able to work on the piece before opening it officially. That is the best way to learn about any new play: by seeing it many more times than once.

Greenidge found the long preview period of LCT3 beneficial.

I have been extremely fortunate to have worked at theaters that build substantial preview periods into their production and performance schedules. Honestly, I think it is a bit reckless not to have substantial preview periods for new plays in our current new play culture. A play rarely finds itself right away. Having the time to rewrite and refine, to marry technical aspects to what is on the page and what the actors are doing, and how the director has rendered the piece is important. So, I have found healthy preview periods to be successful for me.

LCT3 provides opportunities for emerging to mid-career playwrights to develop plays for production. Being a part of Lincoln Center gives everyone involved in the production a connection to a major non-profit theatre company. This, along with the long preview period, is one of the many strengths of LCT3's model of new play development.

## Roundabout Theatre Company and Roundabout Underground

Roundabout Theatre Company (RTC) is a non-profit theatre company in New York City. It operates three Broadway Theatres—the Stephen Sondheim, Studio 54, and the American Airlines Theatre—and one off-Broadway theatre, the Laura Pels. In 2012, RTC brought in \$64 million in revenue and had \$66 million in expenses. 78% of the company's revenue came through program service revenue showing that RTC is reliant on ticket and subscription sales to meet its expenses. In the early 2010s, RTC saw a precipitous drop in the number of subscribers before it stabilized last year around forty thousand. The company faced a \$5 million deficit last year and re-mounted its popular revival of *Cabaret*, in part, to generate more income.

Roundabout Theatre Company was founded by former Artistic Director Gene Feist and a group of friends. In an interview, former RTC General Manager Catherine Guiher explained the company's beginnings. "It was Gene Feist, his wife and a few friends who were in the shows. They designed the shows. They produced the shows. It was more like community theatre and then it took off from there." The company started in a one hundred and fifty-seat theatre that was a converted supermarket basement.

[Looking] at the bigger picture, which is in New York in the 60s, this was part of the beginning of the off-off Broadway theatre movement. It is a lot of people doing theatre in basements, garages, getting their friends together doing shows. They were never looking at a long term, "Where are we going to be thirty years from now?" It was just, "Hey kids, let's put on a show."

(Guiher)

Roundabout's initial mission was to produce revivals of classic plays and musicals.

RTC had a troubled beginning financially and for years struggled with bankruptcy and raising money.

Roundabout had a very checkered beginning. [...] They were in Chapter 11, and they had financial problems. Gene [Feist] could be difficult. He had a bad reputation in the industry. A lot of people wouldn't work at the theatre because of him. So the Board was really trying to get him to go. But he didn't want to go, which was understandable. He founded the theatre; he considered it his own playpen; he was not interested in moving it into a more professional organization. (Guiher)

Roundabout's board worked to replace Feist eventually settling on Todd Haimes. Haimes had recently graduated from Yale University, and he brought a very different perspective to the company. "He was an MBA, and he came from a financial and business management background, which is why they hired him. They were in Chapter 11 and they needed to get the theatre financially stable. You can't do any theatre if you don't have financial stability. They wanted to turn that around" (Guiher). Most artistic directors are interested in directing in the company's season, but Todd Haimes had never worked as a director. Instead, Haimes focused on turning around the company's financial and artistic reputation.

Todd was very hands-off. He would hire the director and the design team and he wouldn't even go to rehearsal. If the actors were complaining about something, or the director's like "Oh, my star is a diva, and I can't do it" then he would come in and try to mediate. But, I think, the Roundabout did as well as it did, especially with the stars and directors, because he didn't get involved. He stayed out of it. If it went down the toilet, it went down the toilet.

That was the choice of the director and the creative team. If it was bombing, he would try to save it if he could. But he was not nit-picking the thing and he never directed himself. (Guiher)

When Roundabout was in Chapter 11, it was unable to secure funding from the city or state. This made the company focus on expanding and retaining its subscriber base.

It was all about the subscribers because they had no other income they could rely on. Government funding, foundations, corporations—they came, they went, they weren't eligible. They decided the audience was where it was at, and they worked that angle very successfully. They went from about five thousand to forty thousand subscribers when I was there. [...] But Roundabout was so attuned to the audience in terms of customer service, in terms of cultivating those people and making sure their experience at the theatre was [comfortable]. If you go to a commercial Broadway theatre, and your seat is uncomfortable and the food is terrible you don't care, you are only there once. [At Roundabout] you're there five, six, seven shows. The seat has to be comfortable, the bathroom line can't be too long, and they understood that. (Guiher)

Roundabout created a large donor and subscription base over time. Eventually, it escaped Chapter 11 and currently receives state and local funding.

In the mid-2000's, Roundabout began constructing a black box theatre beneath the Laura Pels theatre. In 2007, this theatre opened as Roundabout Underground. Roundabout Underground's mission is to foster new work by emerging theatre artists. The theatre is much smaller than Roundabout's other theatres and allows for greater artistic risks such as

granting debut productions to emerging writers. Roundabout Underground has produced one production a year since 2007 and has added an annual play reading series.

In June of 2013, I interviewed Jill Ralfson, associate producer of Roundabout Underground and the company's literary manager, about the history and the growth of Roundabout Underground. Ralfson is the driving force behind Roundabout Underground as she is the only in-house person devoted fully to working on the project. She is assisted by two new play development consultants, Robin Goodman a founder of Second Stage and previously with Manhattan Theatre Club, and Goodman's associate, Josh Fiddler. Ralfson describes their work: "Between the three of us, we are the ones actively reading the plays that will get selected for the Underground and having meetings with the writers and directors. The three of us form the position of dramaturg, but no one at Roundabout officially has that title going in, we are little bit less formal."

The impetus for creating Roundabout Underground was to create a smaller space to produce plays that might be too experimental or risky for Roundabout's subscribers. In 2005, the company produced the New York debut of *Mr. Marmalade* by Noah Handle in Roundabout's off Broadway Laura Pels Theatre. Haimen was excited about the play, but it was poorly received by the subscribers.

*Mr. Marmalade* had been programmed at the Pels, and Todd, our artistic director, loved that play. It is completely his kind of humor—that kind of darkness. That production went up, and our audience hated it with a passion I had not seen before or since. We were getting phone calls, "Why are you doing this?" And here Todd thought he was giving Noah this great thing—his professional New York debut in front of a Roundabout audience. In the end

maybe he thought “I’ve done this play a disservice, maybe I’ve put it up in front of the wrong people. Putting it onstage in a four hundred-seat proscenium theatre, maybe I set the wrong expectations for it?” (Ralfson)

Not long after, Haimés wanted to produce Stephen Karam’s *Speech and Debate* but was worried about the failure of *Mr. Marmalade* and puzzled over whether to include it in the season.

Less than a year later, Jason Moore brought us Stephen Karam’s play *Speech and Debate*. We read the play and loved it; put up a reading of it, everyone loved it. Todd started torturing himself, “I love this play, and I want to do this play, and the same thing could happen to Stephen if I do this play at the Pels, because it feels like a younger person’s play, so what do I do?” So he thought about it over the weekend and came back in and said, “You know that weird space we don’t really do much with yet? Can we make that a theatre?” (Ralfson)

Roundabout Underground has allowed RTC to take risks on more experimental and emerging playwrights. The core mission is to provide a safe space for a play that is not yet ready for Broadway level scrutiny.

[The idea was] let’s make a safe space where we do new work by lesser-known playwrights where the success of Roundabout does not live or die based on how their play does. So that was how we then developed the idea that the mission of this program will be to give them their professional New York debut. We will set the ticket price at twenty dollars so we get the right audience in there: [one] that will want to see these plays and is willing to

take a risk on twenty dollars on an unknown quantity. It all developed from there. (Ralfson)

It may seem unusual for a company dedicated to producing revivals to get into new play development. Ralfson describes Roundabout's reasoning as:

Roundabout historically is a theatre of revivals. When we first started getting into new plays at all, it was Todd saying, "When Harold Pinter has a new play you say 'Yes'; when Brian Friel says he had a new play you say 'Yes.'" Then we sort of wandered our way towards to doing plays by people you don't already know. To me, it felt organic to go even beyond that and into the emerging area, because we do revivals. To create a new canon you need to keep refreshing the theatrical canon, because people are going to get sick of seeing *Mrs. Warren's Profession* once a decade. If we are going to continue to be a theatre that produces the classics—there are going to be new classics. If we want to make sure that those are great, we should be involved in the development of them. We should make sure the writers we believe in now are getting the opportunities to get full productions now.

Even a theatre company founded on revivals needs new classics to revive. Cultivating the creation of new plays was an important change in the mission of Roundabout. It also has involved one of the biggest non-profit theatres in New York City in new play development.

Roundabout Theatre Company seeks to create long lasting relationships with the playwrights working in the Underground. RTC offers commissions to playwrights who have been in the program demonstrating a commitment to them after their play is produced.

A huge part of the program is that we ended up deciding to commission all of the playwrights. When we looked at all the new play development programs out there, we did not want to be one offs: it was very important to us to do your play and form an ongoing artistic relationship. You are getting your professional debut and finding an artistic home at Roundabout. It was important that we would commission your next play regardless how the first one did. They all take different amounts of time to write that next one. *Sons of the Prophet* was Stephen Karam's commissioned play that came out of *Speech and Debate*, and that we produced at the Laura Pels Theatre. And that went on to be a Pulitzer Finalist and one of our most successful new plays ever.

Hopefully this cycle will continue. (Ralfson)

Along with helping to create an artistic home for emerging playwrights, Roundabout Underground has given RTC the opportunity to expand its commissions to playwrights since now it has a theatre in which to produce their work.

We are definitely doing more in-house development than we used to purely because our commissioning has expanded a lot. When I first got here, we had two commissions that were in development, and we didn't do either of them. Now we usually have about ten going at any time. A lot more is coming from our in-house development purely because we are more active about it.

(Ralfson)

Roundabout Underground has allowed a theatre company that was not focused on new play development to expand the number of commissions and to use them in programming a season.



Roundabout Underground produces emerging playwrights who have not had a major debut in New York City.

We started at almost the exact same time as LCT3, and the only major difference is that we are very strict about doing people who have not had a big New York premiere before. They are more willing to do somebody that is in the category of emerging. We have done a play that was done in Chicago first, but the playwright was brand new to New York. It's more about introducing a playwright to a New York audience, and giving them the big support of an institution of our size. (Ralfson)

Roundabout's big support includes a full rehearsal and preview period.

We also saw that some theatres don't give as many rehearsal weeks to the new plays that they do in their emerging writers programs and it was really important to us to set up the same exact model we use on our full productions on our main stages—same rehearsal weeks, same previews. That is the problem that can happen with emerging writers in downtown or smaller theatres—they can't do as many previews because they need to get the play open so they can get the reviews to sell tickets. That means that they don't get to do the play development work in previews that they want to get done. So we decided that it was very important to have three-plus weeks of previews so they can do that work. We can afford to keep them going without the reviews coming out early in the run. (Ralfson)

The longer rehearsal and preview period allows the playwright crucial extra time to rewrite and tweak a script. Importantly, Roundabout Underground affords a playwright the

resources and support similar to Roundabout's Broadway productions but without the financial pressure to make or break the company's financial success.

Roundabout Underground's season consists of only one production and a play reading series. Ralfson would like to increase the number of plays Roundabout Underground produces but the program is held back by a lack of funding. "Part of it is the cost of doing something in an institution like this with our contracts and all those rules. It is more expensive than people expect. It's like a quarter of a million dollars to mount a show with four characters and one set." The play reading series was started in 2012 and usually features the reading of five plays. Each play has one reading and includes a post show reception.

Roundabout Underground's philosophy with respect to dramaturgy is more hands-off than in other institutions.

We try not to be rehearsal room dramaturgs. Our goal is to do a lot of advance work. Provide as many readings and note sessions as the individual playwright might need. It is really important to us once a director is on board to go through them. [...] [The literary team] always gets on the same page and give a very clear set of agreed upon notes in advance—otherwise, it is just overwhelming. When we get closer to production, we like to put all that through the director's lens because it is their production in the end. Especially because it is the Underground, we want them to have a lot of freedom. It should be their vision on stage; we picked them because we trust them. We like to give them the opportunity to use us as more objective observers. We go to the first read-through, and then we go away for a couple

of weeks. When they are ready to show us a run, we can come in and ask the question that if you've been in the room the whole time maybe you can't think about anymore because you are focused on this one tiny thing that is bothering you. So we like to come in as fresh eyes. And we do that in previews as well. We give notes as often as they want notes and have as many conversations that would be helpful. (Ralfson)

Roundabout Underground's model of new play development is focused on producing plays. The directors and dramaturgs provide comments and notes, but the playwrights have the freedom to develop their play in the way that they want. Ralfson is also adamant about offering playwrights suggestions—not prescriptions or demands.

Like Signature Theatre and LCT3, Roundabout Underground seeks to develop a new and younger audience base. Ralfson is worried that the competition by these theatres for the same audience will be detrimental but, so far, all three companies are surviving financially: "It'll be interesting to see how it keeps evolving, but I'm encouraged there seems to be audience for all of these programs. Which was my main fear. If we're all offering twenty dollar tickets, are there enough people who actually want to see new plays, and who will come out no matter how cheap the ticket?" For Roundabout, a theatre company historically supported by subscribers and individual donors, connecting with new audiences could allow the opportunity of creating a larger subscriber base.

I think the next phase is to see if we can turn those people who are willing to pay twenty bucks to see a new play into devotees of our theatres. Will they turn into subscribers in the future? The subscription model has changed so much many theatres have changed to membership. Roundabout was created

as a subscription theatre, so it will be really interesting to watch that trend.

(Ralfson)

The original and still main intent of Roundabout Underground is to create a place for a playwright and play to develop without the harsh scrutiny of Broadway. Haimes and Roundabout's board believe that premiering new work on Broadway is too financially risky.

Todd's feeling is that new work should be done off-Broadway, so at the [Laura] Pels and the Underground. [...] He's more hesitant about that than he used to be. I think a lot of that has to do with the environment for new plays on Broadway right now. How hard it is to get them going. We are really cautious about putting new work on Broadway. So that limits the number of productions available to new plays each year. Our board is also cautious because they don't believe that we are going to sell tickets to new plays even off-Broadway. We haven't really yet done a full season of new plays at the Pels. They always ask us to throw in one small revival, which is fine because that's what we were founded to do. A small revival like *Tally's Folly* this year is fantastic, and I love that production. But I would love to see a full season of new plays, but people still see it as a greater financial risk. (Ralfson)

The staff at RTC are committed and excited about Roundabout Underground.

There is so much affection for this program within the company. An absurd amount of love and affection is put into that program. This is why we all got into this. I don't think most people got into non-profit theatre to do [a star studded] revival of *Anything Goes*. It was great fun, but I think a lot of us are here because we want to be doing the work that is happening in the

Underground. For our staff it is a huge touchstone and is something that everybody loves to support. Todd does too, and he literally makes fun of us for the disproportionate amount of time and energy we dedicate to the Underground because the staff likes it so much. So that gives me hope that it will not go away. (Ralfson)

It is encouraging to hear Roundabout's devotion to new play development. It speaks to how important developing new plays and creating new American classics is to theatre professionals working in the field.

LCT3 and the Roundabout Underground feature small black box theatres housed in large non-profit institutions. This is an interesting model of new play development and a recently developed one (unmentioned by Anderson in his 1988 "Dream Machine" article). On one hand, these programs provide emerging writers a chance at a New York City debut and the support of a major theatre company. On the other hand, black box theatres can limit the types of plays produced. Having new plays premiere only in small theatres could be a detriment to the field.

Todd London of New Dramatists sees positive and negative effects of the black box model. Among the positives he includes:

The more new work the merrier; the more resources dedicated to it is great. A place like Lincoln Center or the Roundabout, with those enormous resources, should be throwing their weight behind new work by lesser-known writers. It's exciting that LCT3 built that new space. It is exciting that Roundabout has turned its attention to new work. I think it's a big learning curve for them. I think that is only for the good; they have the money to

commission new work; they have the names, the ability to call attention to those writers when they work in their space. I think all of that is great, especially when it is done with care and attention.

London is right that more and better-funded opportunities for playwrights to have their new plays produced are a good thing. However, he also worries the black box model harms playwriting in the long run.

What I worry about is the ghettoization of new work in small spaces. It shrinks our expectation; it shrinks the energy behind audience development for new work; it shrinks the dedication to educating good numbers of people to the new. It also shrinks the vision of the playwrights; inevitably a small space means a smaller play, a smaller vision. [...] It is really interesting to see an Anne Baker play in an intimate space because they are really intimate plays. It is another thing to think that *A Bright Room Called Day* or *Angels in America* couldn't have happened in a big space because all those spaces were shrunk down. It goes to cast size, the size of an imagination; it goes to design capabilities. If everybody was using these new beautiful open spaces to do kick ass imaginative productions, even poor theatre productions of big and ambitious work, it would be fantastic. But they don't necessarily. They do intimate productions of small plays that tell a story in a certain way that everybody can get behind to make stars of newer playwrights. That is where I feel it could be a potentially detrimental thing.

The black box theatres at Roundabout and Lincoln Center Theatre seat less than two hundred patrons and have much smaller stages than Broadway theatres. Certainly there

has been great work that has come out of this model. London's example of Annie Baker is a terrific one. Baker's plays are popular and, as the 2014 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play *The Flick*, she is certainly well thought of in the field. Her plays are intimate and smaller in scope—a perfect fit for a small theatre. But if all new play development happens in theatres with small stages, where do plays with bigger ambitions premiere or develop?

## **Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I examined twenty-first century models of new play development. Looking at Lincoln Center Theater and Signature Theatre, I considered major non-profit theatres that seek to create life-long connections to legendary playwrights. I studied new play development at a major regional theatre, Denver Center Theatre Company, and showed how the use of commissions contribute to its new play development program, the Colorado New Play Summit. Described thus far, my research updated that of Douglas Anderson in his seminal article, “The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America.” I went beyond Anderson when I investigated New Dramatists and the Lark New Play Development Center, which do not produce but cultivate emerging and mid-career playwrights. I also examined a new model of play development that has arisen in recent years—the use of small black box theatres housed in large non-profit theatre institutions. Lincoln Center Theatre Company’s LCT3 project and the Roundabout Underground at Roundabout Theatre Company exemplify this new model. In sum, I found that some of the models described by Anderson continue to function, and I also described other models not addressed by him.

### **Do theatres today still use the models of new play development identified by Anderson?**

What Anderson identified as the South Coast Rep model is alive and well. Denver Center uses commissions in a way that is similar to South Coast Rep’s “furiously fanning every flame” of new playwrights. South Coast Rep, a “company [that] is up front about the fact that it is looking for product”(Anderson 69), also sounds very reminiscent of LCT3 and Roundabout Underground which seek to develop plays for production. Anderson’s “The



Dream” model certainly still exists as playwrights’ aspirations still include a Broadway debut. Changes in how they find that debut reflects some of the ways the industry has developed in the last thirty years.

The dream of a commercial Broadway transfer is still present, but has been supplanted somewhat by the dream of a regional premiere. As regional theatres have grown, the stature of their premieres of plays has increased as well. Many of the most successful new plays on Broadway have had productions or have been work-shopped in regional theatre. Garrison’s advice to his students that getting a regional premiere can lead to a New York debut seems perceptive. Samuel D. Hunter, for example, has moved from an emerging playwright to becoming a member of Signature’s Residency Five program based in part on the success he has had with productions and workshops at major theatres outside of New York City. Greenidge’s *Luck of the Irish* was previously produced at the McArthur Theatre and had workshops around the country before it came to LCT3. The dream of a Broadway production and winning a Tony Award is still strong, but the growth of regional theatre has created many other worthy options. Given new play development programs all around the country, there are many paths to a play’s and a playwright’s success.

Anderson starts his article with a provocative quote from Terrence McNally: “I think a dramaturg can do more harm than good. [...] I have seen plays so rewritten and improved at the behest of a well-intentioned dramaturg that the actual life force that caused them is stifled. One shudders to think what hoops a structurally minded dramaturg would have wanted O’Neill to jump through” (Anderson 55). Richard Nelson expressed similar concerns about the new play development industry. It is troubling that two influential

playwrights would have such negative feelings about new play development, however, based on my research, the culture has changed or is in the process of changing. All of the playwrights I interviewed spoke highly of their relationship with their director and dramaturg during the developmental process. In most cases, it was one of the best aspects of the program. In my conversations with artistic directors, literary managers and dramaturgs, I found a sincere urge to be supportive and collaborative. They worked to develop a script by asking questions of the playwright and making observations. In general their goal was to be non-prescriptive. The idea expressed by Nelson that “the playwright needs help” seems to be shifting toward “the playwright needs time, freedom and support.” My research is not exhaustive enough to know how broad this change is, and it is possible that patronizing attitudes towards playwrights remain. Still, the theatre professionals I interviewed were passionate about the importance of a process under the writer’s control. Evans and Ralfson spoke about producing for production—essentially giving playwrights whatever they need to fully realize their play. The new play development industry has shifted away from the ideology that plays need to be fixed: the playwright has gained greater control over new play development processes.

### **Have old models been revised or new models been introduced?**

One model that has grown considerably since the late 1980s is the use of commissions. This model is barely mentioned in Anderson’s article other than his noting the growing frequency of commissioning playwrights. This is a very beneficial model to playwrights. It provides them with some financial stability and creates a connection to a theatre company. Rob Urbinati, Director of New Play Development at Queen’s Theatre in

the Park and a playwright, believes commissions are a positive aspect of new play development:

I support commissions. They're certainly beneficial to the writers who receive them. They give playwrights the time to write. Most writers do other work to make a living. A commission provides the playwright with the opportunity to devote themselves fully to a specific project.

Urbinati has also been satisfied with the opportunities to develop a relationship with theatre companies that commissions have afforded. "I've been very satisfied with the commissions I received, for the reasons I've mentioned above. In all cases, a production was scheduled (which is not always the case), although the producing organizations had the right to cancel the production if the play did not meet their needs. These commissions helped me establish a solid relationship with the producing organizations." For theatre companies, commissions provide plays that will make up future seasons' programming. For playwrights, they offer some financial security to pursue their art.

A major drawback to the commission model is that many commissions are not produced. While it is impossible to know exactly the ratio of commissions to productions, Langworthy estimates it at DCTC: "Our ratio is 2:4 or 2:5. That means two productions for every four or five commissions. I'd say it varies widely from theatre to theatre, and I would say that in the rest of the country it's more like 1:5 or 1:6." I believe the nationwide ratio of commissions to productions needs to improve. Playwrights write their plays intending for production, just as they are frustrated when a play is stuck in developmental hell it can be frustrating for playwrights to not have their commissioned play produced.

Anderson does not address theatre companies like New Dramatists and the Lark Play Development Center that are focused on supporting a playwright's development but do not produce plays themselves. Founded in 1949, New Dramatists is the oldest new play development company in the United States, and the Lark has been focused on new work for almost thirty years. These programs are essential to the field; they are where many beginning and emerging playwrights get their start. Without them, the experience and quality of playwrights who are being produced at major theatres would be significantly decreased.

A major change in the field of new play development is the emergence of small theatres run by major non-profit theatre institutions that are devoted to producing the work of emerging playwrights. New plays long have premiered in small theatres, at least since the independent theatre movement in late 19th century Europe, but being able to utilize the resources and advantage of a major non-profit theatre in New York City is the key aspect. Being leaders in the field, major non-profits like Lincoln Center Theater and Roundabout Theatre Company bring attention to a playwright's work and career. The smaller venues also reduce the harsh glare of media scrutiny. Anne Cattaneo believes the overwhelming attention of debuting a new play on Broadway can be harmful to a play's development.

The [Vivian] Beaumont is not a viable option for a world premiere of a new play, because for every opening there are sixty-two critics in the audience, the expectations are too high. Gregory [Moser, former LCT Artistic Director] had done a play called *Bodies Rest in Motion*: good cast, good director good production, but the critical reception was so vicious, like what happened

with Kazan, like what happened with Blau. This place was always [been] just a magnet—people are just nasty about it. That play was never produced again. It was like it was killed, and it wasn't a bad play. So we have done many plays in the Mitzi [Newhouse Theatre] and moved them upstairs after they've safely gotten their reviews. Like *Six Degrees of Separation* or *Serafina* there are many examples of new plays that once they've gotten the reviews we have moved them upstairs.

The most important aspect of the black box model is that it blends the resources of a major theatre company with the safety and intimacy of a small theatre. Without the platform of Lincoln Center Theater, it is possible that Akhtar's *Disgraced* would have not have been noticed by the Pulitzer committee. The production at LCT3 allowed him to gain the recognition that comes from winning a career-changing award. While the smaller scale might not be a good model for mid-career or legacy playwrights, it has worked well for emerging playwrights.

According to London, a weakness of this model is that black box theatres are effective only at producing plays small in scope. I think London's concerns are valid but would like to make two observations about them. First, there is not yet a sample size large enough to determine whether black box theatres are only producing small plays. Second, black box theatres cannot be the only factor driving the rise of small cast plays in the early twenty-first century; tight budgets are more likely at the root of this trend. That said, more development opportunities are always beneficial to playwrights. The black box theatre model has jump-started the careers of a number of playwrights and the importance of that should not be understated. Also, Broadway and large regional theatre companies have been

producing smaller plays, with smaller casts for years—production size is not always determined by the size of the theatre.

**What appears to be the most effective method for developing new playwrights and new plays in the twenty-first century?**

It is important to point out that no model or method works best for everyone. Playwriting is a very individualized process and a model's effectiveness depends greatly on a playwright's experience, method and goals. In our interview, Todd London discussed the problem with strictly defining models and the importance of treating new play development as a fluid and individualized process.

A theatre institution has to codify certain practices. You can't exist as an organization if you have to re-invent every time. If you look at the field, the field means certain things by new play development: "here's kind of what it means in these new play labs, here's kind of what it means in these summer play labs, here's kind of what it means in these producing theatres who only work with senior artists." They all kind of mean this system of table readings and workshops, they kind of mean feedback from dramaturgs and artistic directors. From the outside looking in you can define new play development. From the inside view, it is a much more fluid and individualized thing—like how a work of art is a fluid and individualized thing. So I think you should speak the truth, which is a complex one. Ideas in the field become rigid in some ways—they become systematized. The thing with the American theatre's new play development process was that they became so systematized that they stopped serving anybody. So the energy has been to

un-systemize them—to blow them up. Those terms are meaningless; those systems aren't doing anyone any good. You have to reinvent it each time, because otherwise it just hardens, and hardens and hardens until everybody gets choked in the pipeline.

It is also important to note that the effectiveness of play development models depends on where a playwright is in his or her career. For example, let's follow this imaginary scenario. Starting out, the playwright graduates with an MFA in playwriting. This person's next stop would likely be a place like the Lark, one that supports the writing process and helps to connect the playwright to industry professionals. To reach the next tier, the writer must find an agent since many theatres, like Denver Center Theatre Company, require that scripts be submitted by agents. After a production at a major regional theatre, a residency like Residency Five at Signature Theatre would be a good career step next. Finally, after moving through all these different models, and gaining acclaim from the theatre industry, the playwright would be ready for Residency One at Signature or a major production at Lincoln Center. The models that are effective for an emerging writer will not be the same ones that are effective for legacy playwrights. For American play development to function best, there must be many different models of development available to playwrights at different stages of their career.

Through my research I have noticed a number of trends in the field of new play development. One is that there is a deep desire by theatre professionals involved in new play development to center the process on the playwright. At development centers like New Dramatists and the Lark, the playwright is in complete control of the process; the structure of the residency is focused on the person's and the project's needs. Signature's

literary manager, Christie Evangelisto, described how all the resources of the theatre company, from office space to use of a theatre and a sound designer to test sound choices, are available to the playwright.

An outgrowth of focusing on the playwright is the desire to pay more attention to developing a playwright's career. Garrison used Samuel D. Hunter's career as an example of the importance of nurturing playwrights for the long term.

I think that it's wrong minded to pin it on any one play. I think what you have to do is you have to invest in the playwright. So you have to invest in Sam Hunter and whatever comes out of Samuel Hunter's head, mouth, heart, and soul [whether it is a] one act, ten minute, or full length [play]. While *The Whale* is a lovely play and I'm glad it made its trajectory here, had success here [New York City], it's wrong minded to put all of our attention on the play. As a community it's more responsible to look at the playwright and ask, "What can we do to help the playwright's career?"

It is interesting that Garrison mentioned *The Whale*, as it premiered at Denver Center Theatre Company and was developed in the Colorado New Play Summit before having its New York City debut at Playwrights Horizons. Hunter is now a member of Residency Five at Signature where the focus is not on one play but, rather, on three plays spread out over the course of five years. Three plays can represent a major part of a playwright's body of work. Supporting that number of projects reflects the theatre's push to sustain playwrights over their career.

Working to find playwrights an artistic home is also a major goal of new play development programs.



Finding “an artistic home” is certainly useful for any writer. There are all kinds of “homes.” Theatres such as Signature and LCT that are willing to provide their ample resources to established and emerging writers are doing a great service to these writers. Signature’s residencies, which result in multiple full productions, are somewhat unique. LCT’s arrangement is looser—they have long-term relationships with writers, [...] but there are no residencies. They also offer a lot of commissions. There are other companies (Playwrights Realm, New Dramatists, Lark Play Development Center) who use the residency model. [...] Artistic homes and residencies are extremely valuable to new play development. (Urbinati)

At Lincoln Center, Andre Bishop has cultivated years-long relationships with legendary playwrights and is committed to producing their plays on the writer’s timeline. At Signature Theatre, once playwrights have completed Residency One or Residency Five, they are considered a member of the theatre company and are encouraged to return with new work. LCT3 and Roundabout Underground are working with less experienced theatre professionals but the desire to bring these new talents to their theatre companies is one of the missions of their respective projects. Ralfson supports the Underground’s commitment to commission new plays by playwrights that have participated in the program. At Lincoln Center, Bishop thinks of LCT3 as something akin to a farm team in baseball—a way to bring new talent and ideas to future projects at Lincoln Center Theater.

A long-held desire of playwrights is the importance of putting plays into production. Feldman described how going through a series of readings that do not lead to production could frustrate a writer. When playwrights talk about being stuck in “developmental hell,”

they are referring to plays that have had some new play development work done but are not progressing towards getting a full production. Being able to tell a story to an audience is essential to being a playwright. Garrison describes its importance as:

A playwright needs to hear his work in front of an audience. They are storytellers, and they need someone to tell their stories to. You get a response to how that story landed or was responded to. So, at least in my mind, I think I'm a little different from most people in this though, to me that doesn't [always] mean a five-hundred-seat theatre. That can mean a fifty-seat theatre. So we go back to that notion that playwrights are storytellers, and what they need most is to tell their story to a gathered group of people. If you start there, after that everything is icing on the cake.

Professionals throughout the field, from playwrights to directors to literary managers, expressed the importance of putting plays into production. Even organizations like New Dramatists and the Lark understand that production is the ultimate and most important goal (though the Lark's Lloyd Suh qualified that goal by balancing it against support of the playwright's unique voice and process). While New Dramatists and the Lark do not provide in-house productions, they advocate for writers in their programs and are very successful at helping to get plays produced. Clearly, developing plays for production is the central goal of the black box model as Evans demonstrated when discussing LCT3.

It would be naive to believe that playwrights ever will be able to avoid entirely "developmental hell." From the lack of financial support to the simple fact that there are more plays and playwrights in America than there are production opportunities, there are many reasons why not every play developed will be produced. That said, it is evident that

leaders in the field know how important it is for playwrights to see their play in front of an audience. While the idea of the traditional talkback, the playwright sitting onstage fielding questions from the audience, is on the wane, the insights that playwrights can receive from audience reactions in performance and from audience member's written feedback are invaluable.

New play development in the United States is an enormous field and there are many avenues for future study. I would be interested in researching the impact that devised work and performance art have had on the industry. From the Happenings of the 1960s to the collaborations with visual art, dance and multimedia of the 1970s and 1980s, work has been devised for about as long as the new play industry has existed. For example, London mentioned the Wooster Group as a new play development company. The play they produce may look considerably different on the page and stage than a play written by an individual playwright, but their development process has led to many new plays. Productions like *Einstein on the Beach* and companies like the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Mabou Mines have been receiving federal and corporate funding for decades. At the time of Anderson's article, devised work and new play development were separate things. That has changed as more of the industry embraced these different processes. LCT3, for example, recently commissioned a play from a theatre company that specializes in devising. Evans described this project:

Now, next season we have an unusual season. We commissioned a piece from a group based in Austin called the Rude Mechs. I read a blueprint script but it was very early on. They are a devised theatre so they are not totally script based in what they do. I went down to Austin in May and saw a workshop

and committed to producing it. They are doing another extensive workshop in August and early September to get ready to go into rehearsal in December.

This play, *Stop Hitting Yourself*, will open at the Claire Tow Theatre in January 2015. The late twentieth and early twenty-first century has seen an evolution in what performance and theatre mean. I would submit that the nature of what a play can be is evolving as well. Examining how different types of plays are created would be very informative.

Another area for further study is new play development in the University system. Many universities offer playwriting classes, and produce new plays and play festivals. MFA programs in playwriting have proliferated across the country and continue to grow. Many playwrights enter the new play development industry with graduate degrees from prestigious universities. It would be interesting to examine the effect that graduate training have on playwriting and new play development in the United States.

In his article Anderson writes, "What ultimately indicts the Dream Machine [new play development] is the fact that few, if any, great plays have come out of it" (75). This seems like an overly pessimistic statement even for 1988. The attributes and qualities that make up a great play are subjectively determined, but the works of David Rabe, Sam Shepard, John Guare and Wendy Wasserstein (just to name a few) come to mind as examples of great plays developed through processes like those I have discussed in this dissertation. Still, the question remains how much is a great, or good play for that matter, developed? One way to examine this question would be to conduct a research study that selected plays deemed to be "great" and examined their individual paths through development and into production.

For more than a half century new play development has been an important aspect of American theatre production. It has helped American playwriting become what it is today.

What is that state? I agree with the expert opinion of Rob Urbinati:

I think American playwriting is in fine shape. As a frequent theatregoer in New York City, I am consistently impressed by the number of good and great plays I see every year. And as Director of New Play Development at Queens Theatre and Literary Manager of The Private Theatre, I am astounded by the number of quality submissions I receive. New play development, although not without risks and challenges, has helped many emerging writers find their voice.

Creating different models of new play development has made the industry more successful. Because new play development is not “one size fits all,” it is important to make the models more playwright-centric. Over time the new play development industry has begun to provide playwrights artistic homes and become more writer centric. Through productions, residencies, and commissions, theatre companies and playwrights have found common ground for a stronger artistic collaboration. Certainly not every play or model but new play development has made easier the difficult path of becoming a playwright in today’s United States.

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