

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for
Theater

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief explores the giving of private foundations, corporations, community foundations and major donors to nonprofit organizations that produce plays and to theater professionals. The typical nonprofit theater organization earns its revenue from a mix of earned income (notably subscriptions and ticket sales) and “unearned sources”— that is, not program revenue but charitable giving or public funding. Individual donors play an outsized role across the sector, while support from institutional and donor-advised fund support exceeds that of dance, but trails music.

The entire performing arts field was transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The nonprofit theater world was struggling before the pandemic, due to a confluence of issues including the decline of the subscription model and a decline in individual giving. While private and public funders stepped up to respond to the emergency of 2020, as of 2024 many nonprofit theaters are still budgeting for a deficit and advocates say theaters need more time to fully recover – and more contributed income to make up for the continuing gap in earned income.

There are long-term factors and trends that every funder and fundraiser in the arts should keep in mind, and which are explored in-depth in this brief:

Who’s Giving

- Private and family foundations play an influential role in the world of theater. These entities focus on priorities like general operating support, projects and performances, generally providing relatively less direct support for individual artists.
- Corporate funders play a relatively small role in overall support for nonprofit theater, but an unusually large amount of it comes in the form of sponsorship dollars, compared to other types of nonprofit organizations.
- Individual major donors tend to earmark gifts for capital projects, programming and educational activities. These donors can be more difficult to cultivate than other sources of funding, and their giving has been declining.
- The theater sector enjoys a robust network of entities providing funders with networking, advocacy and data gathering. Regrantors play an outsized role.

Who’s Getting

- The bulk of private giving flows to medium-to-large theaters reliant on subscription audiences and single-ticket buyers.
- Historically, theater organizations receiving substantial grant support have benefited from the fundraising acumen of their well-connected leaders. But in recent years, trustee giving is on the decline.
- Regrantors focused on historically underrepresented communities have been moving funds to support a more diverse, equitable theater world.

The Big Issues & Funding Trends

- Racial equity has been taking center stage at nonprofit theater organizations across the nation.
- Over the longer term, audience engagement and the aging of audiences remains an existential concern for nonprofit theaters.
- “Trust-based philanthropy” practices such as embracing general operating support and streamlining reporting requirements have been trending in the theater world for years.
- Theater organizations are increasingly aware of the interconnectedness of multiple issues philanthropy tries to address. For example, the impacts of climate change, including floods and wildfires, affect theater facilities as well as productions. And some nonprofit theaters are making an impact – and connecting with different kinds of funders – by addressing issues such as health and civic engagement through theater.

Equity in the Sector

- Confronted with a growing body of research underscoring persistent inequities across the field, leaders in theater’s funder community have been pursuing a wide variety of strategies to advance equity on multiple dimensions, tackling challenges facing Black, female, disabled, LGBTQ, immigrant and Indigenous artists.
- Growing from earlier sector-wide conversations about representation, theater funders are expanding notions of what constitutes a “theater” organization, revisiting grant application processes, actively soliciting proposals and conversations with BIPOC-led organizations, providing awards to cultivate underrepresented playwrights, and ramping up support for school theater programs, among many other initiatives outlined in this brief.

Theater organizations and artists are facing “a series of compounding crises,” in the words of the Theatre Communications Group. Climate change, inflation, rising labor costs, changing models, a decline in donations, and the continued impact of the pandemic are all affecting nonprofit theater budgets as of 2024. Philanthropy could play a big role in keeping nonprofit theater alive and thriving in America, but on the whole private funders and donors have not yet stepped up at the level that would require.

Introduction

This brief defines nonprofit theater organizations in accordance with the IRS' National Taxonomy of Expert Entities' Arts, Culture & Humanities Activity Code. Applicable subcodes for the theater sector include, but are not limited to, theater ("organizations whose primary activity is the production of plays"), Performing Arts Centers ("organizations that operate facilities including theater for the performing arts"), and Folk Arts ("organizations that produce, promote and disseminate information" on traditional theater).

The brief also considers nonprofit educational institutions that receive philanthropic support for theater-related activities and programming and individual professionals, like playwrights, actors and lyricists. State of American Philanthropy briefs explore the big issues and trends affecting these nonprofits with a special focus on how they interact with a range of funders, especially private foundations, corporations, community foundations, major donors and funder associations.

Given the breadth of the U.S. theater sector, some additional context is in order. Nonprofit consultant and theater professional Rob Meiksins lists [five basic types of theater](#) in the U.S.:

- [Broadway theater](#) is mounted in a venue in a specifically defined area in Manhattan known as the "Broadway Box." These theaters are typically managed

commercially. Owners generally do not develop or create the production, but rather rent the space. There are a few nonprofits that own Broadway stages, but many more whose productions make it into commercial Broadway theaters.

- [Off-Broadway theaters](#) are productions performed in theaters in Manhattan but outside the Broadway Box, and with fewer than 499 seats.
- [Off-Off-Broadway theater](#), which is often experimental in nature. The term has come to mean theater with fewer than 199 seats.
- [Regional theater](#) encompasses two sub-categories: medium-to-large theaters—also known as "resident theaters"—located in major cities that are mostly nonprofit in nature and run a season of plays to a subscription audience and single-ticket buyers; and smaller theater companies in major cities, most of which are also nonprofit and lack a permanent home.
- [Community theater](#) is the most local form of theater; troupes, many of which are nonprofits, often consist of amateur community performers.

The nonprofit theater space competes with Broadway, where, during the 2022/23 season, productions generated over \$1.57 billion. Susan Medak, former managing director of the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, told Inside Philanthropy: "So someone who, 20 years ago, would have donated to a nonprofit, now invests in a Broadway show."

The nonprofit space also complements the commercial Broadway world. Some nonprofit companies produce work in Broadway venues or even own their venues outright.

TheatreFacts 2022, produced by Theatre Communications Group, estimates that 2,006 nonprofit theaters supported the employment of 82,000 artists, administrators and technical production staff; served more than 10 million audience members; and added over \$2.3 billion to the U.S. economy in 2022.

According to a survey conducted by Americans for the Arts in 2023, two-thirds of American adults attended an arts event (including theater) in the past year.

Tim Donahue and Jim Patterson, authors of “Stage Money: The Business of the Professional Theatre,” illustrate the distinctions between commercial and nonprofit theater as follows:

	Commercial	Nonprofit
Longevity	Typically formed as a partnership or company to produce one play only and then disband.	Theoretically continues forever. Usually produces a slate of plays each season.
Production run	Often planned as an open-ended run, playing for as long as ticket sales support it.	Rarely planned as an open-ended run; nonprofit theaters generally have closed runs, with established ending dates.
Ownership of space	Producers do not necessarily own and operate the theater where the show is playing	After the starting years, most groups own or lease long-term and maintain their own theater space.
Box office revenues	Box office results determine if a show runs.	30 to 60+% of the budget comes from box office.
Excess income	Profits for investors are taxable; losses are deductible for the most part.	Income in excess of costs, or “surplus,” is maintained by the theater for another use. Donations to the not-for-profit theater are deductible for the most part.

TCG estimates that in 2022, nonprofit theaters earned about 33% of their income and attracted the other 67% through contributed support. This ratio varies by organization size: the largest theater companies tend to earn more income and rely less on contributed income, while the opposite is true for smaller ones.

“The small organizations have a core group of supporters, so it is easier to maintain relationships,” said Zannie Voss, director of SMU DataArts National Center for Arts Research. “They are nimble, despite their resource scarcity. But as the organization grows, the portfolio of donors typically grows, as well, and it becomes more difficult to manage. When you are a medium-size theater, you are in the uncomfortable middle, where you don’t have the resources or name recognition of the larger organizations. You want to grow, but you must make the expenditures to get the return.”

The overall balance of earned versus contributed income has shifted significantly in recent years. In 2019, for example, the typical nonprofit theater earned 53% of its income and attracted 47% through contributed support. By 2022, as noted above, contributed income was a much larger share, emphasizing the importance and potential impact of philanthropy at this time.

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

The theater funding ecosystem outside of earned revenue consists of private and family foundations, donor-advised fund managers, individual donors, corporations and government agencies.

For years, funders like the Shubert, Mellon, Gilman, and Davee foundations have provided a substantial portion of the total support from institutional grantmakers. The Shubert Foundation and Howard Gilman Foundation are stalwart theater funders that provide general operating support.

15 Theater Funders to Know

Shubert Foundation

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Howard Gilman Foundation

Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

MacArthur Foundation

Ford Foundation

Ahmanson Foundation

Creative Capital

New England Foundation for the Arts

Davee Foundation

Knight Foundation

William Penn Foundation

Richard King Mellon Foundation

Reva and David Logan Foundation

Bonfils-Stanton Foundation

Donor-advised funds (DAFs) such as the Fidelity Charitable Fund and Schwab Charitable and a number of community foundations also provide support to theater organizations. DAF managers are not traditional foundations in the same vein as grantmakers like Shubert and Mellon. By funding theater organizations recommended by donors, DAFs essentially act as proxies for individual donors.

A large percentage of community foundation giving to the arts is through DAFs. For example, the nation's largest community foundation, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, awarded over \$123 million in "Arts and Culture" grants in 2022. The foundation's [grant database](#) reveals that the vast majority of this funding flowed from donor-advised funds. Therefore, it would be more accurate to think of funding allocated from DAF providers like Fidelity and Schwab and community foundation DAFs as expressions of individual donor support for theater.

There is not great data available on the largest source of private funding for theater organizations: non-DAF individual donors and the many under-the-radar family foundations. "People think of foundations like Mellon and Wallace making up a bulk of organizations' revenue base, but that's not borne out in the data," the Wallace Foundation's former director of communications, Lucas Bernays Held, told *Inside Philanthropy*. *Candid* does not track donations by individuals, but does pull data from every 990 filed by family foundations; however, that data is far less accurate than information supplied directly by funders.

To Held's point, SMU DataArts' 2019 Fundraising Report states: "Individuals are the

leading source of contributions for the average [arts] organization.” The same can be said for theater organizations. That said, individual giving for theater has been declining in recent years, while foundation giving has remained steady. In its 2022 Theater Facts report, Theatre Communications Group profiled 174 nonprofit theaters and found about 18% of contributed funding coming from trustees and other individual donors, and about 15% from foundations.

Individual giving often flows to theater or performing arts construction and renovation projects. For instance, in 2018, local donors James and Elizabeth McDonnell gave the Municipal Theatre Association of St. Louis a \$20 million pledge for the theater’s capital campaign to support the maintenance and upkeep of its campus. The couple’s one-time gift was equivalent to the giving of one of the sector’s largest institutional funders, the William Penn Foundation, from 2014–2017. As American Theatre Wing’s Hitchens told IP, “there’s an unlimited potential for individual fundraising.”

Corporate giving has “never been a great panacea” for performing arts organizations, said SMU Data Arts’ Zannie Voss. The same can be said for government support. According to a [2017 Grantmakers in the Arts](#) report, total public arts funding, when adjusted for inflation, decreased by 12.8% over the past two decades. In real dollars, state arts agency appropriations decreased by 25%, local funding contracted by 9% and federal funds have remained virtually flat. Emergency relief funding during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a huge, historic influx of government funding for theater. A few years

later, it is too soon to tell what the future of public funding for theater will be.

Regional funders of theater are also major players. Chicago is home to theater funders such as the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, the Reva and David Logan Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. Los Angeles boasts the Ahmanson, Annenberg, Edgerton and Ralph M. Parsons foundations. Prominent funders supporting New York City area theater include the Axe-Houghton Foundation, the Laurents/Hatcher Foundation, the Jerome L. Greene Foundation, the Leon Levy Foundation, the David Rockefeller Fund, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and the Tow Foundation.

Other cities with especially vibrant nonprofit theater scenes and their respective funders include Boston (Barr and Boston foundations), Denver (Bonfils-Stanton Foundation), Houston (the Brown Foundation and the Houston Endowment), Minneapolis (Jerome and McKnight foundations), Pittsburgh/Southwest Pennsylvania (Heinz Endowments and Richard King Mellon Foundation), and Philadelphia (William Penn and Wyncote foundations).

The theater funding ecosystem also includes arts services organizations and regrants like the Alliance of Resident Theatres, American Theatre Wing, A.R.T./New York, the National Alliance for Musical Theatre, National New Play Network, National Performance Network, the Network of Ensemble Theaters, the New England Foundation for the Arts, the Playwrights’ Center, and Theatre Communications Group.

Who's Getting

Most giving from foundations flows to medium-to-large theaters. These organizations often receive grants from prominent funders like the Howard Gilman Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Shubert Foundation, as well as local supporters.

Many of these organizations benefit from the fundraising acumen of their well-connected leaders. Liz Lefkofsky, the wife of billionaire Groupon founder Eric Lefkofsky, is on the board of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. William H. Ahmanson, president of the Ahmanson Foundation, is the chair of the board at Center Theatre Group. In contrast, smaller theater organizations “don’t have the networks of the rich board people,” said American Theatre Wing President and CEO Heather Hitchins.

Some of the more well-funded nonprofit theaters roll out ambitious construction or renovation campaigns that attract substantial funding. In 2012, Chicago Shakespeare Theater launched its “Our City, Our Shakespeare” endowment and capital campaign. The theater raised \$61.6 million; approximately \$38 million was earmarked for investments in The Yard, a 35,000-square-foot theater that opened in 2017. The campaign received 14 gifts of over \$1 million from donors and local foundations.

In 2016, Steppenwolf Theatre Company launched its \$73 million capital expansion program. Two years later, the Municipal Theatre Association of St. Louis announced its \$100 million Second Century Capital Campaign to support improvements to the theater; as of November 2020, it had raised \$85 million.

10 Theater Grantees to Know

Center Theatre Group
Lincoln Center Theatre
Manhattan Theatre Club
New York Shakespeare Festival
Oregon Shakespeare Festival
Roundabout Theatre Company
Seattle Repertory Theater
Steppenwolf Theater Company
TheatreWorks Silicon Valley
ZACH Theatre

Conversely, TCG’s TheatreFacts 2018 found that theaters with budgets below \$1 million “tended to operate in rented performance and office space.”

The pandemic upended conventional wisdom across the broader theater sector. Heather Hitchins, president and CEO of American Theatre Wing, told IP that prior to 2020, experts agreed that a subscription-based revenue model constituted a “best practice.” But then theaters were shuttered, and have not yet recovered from the period of closure. Earned income from subscriptions and ticket sales as a percentage of total expenses for nonprofit theaters studied in TCG’s Theatre Facts hit an all-time low in 2022.

Moreover, in the past, theater organizations that owned facilities tended to attract support from national funders that tied grants to an organization’s size. Now this asset can be a liability. “While these assets can be a source of stability, they also come with a set of fixed costs that can lead to less flexibility,” said Maurine Knighton, program director for the arts at the

Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, which provides theater funding through programs administered by Creative Capital Foundation, MAP Fund, National Performance Network and New England Foundation for the Arts.

Some theater organizations have a greater degree of financial flexibility compared to their peers in other sectors. Gary Steuer, president of the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation, told Inside Philanthropy that many of the theater grantees that his organization supports “typically cast actors show-by-show. It’s not as if they have a company of 20 actors on payroll, as is often the case in classical music.”

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

Research by the Theatre Communications Group shows that foundation giving to nonprofit theater organizations remained relatively consistent (after adjusting for inflation) from 2018 to 2022, while trustee and non-trustee individual giving declined.

Trustee giving was 36% lower in 2022 than in 2018. Non-trustee individual giving has also decreased, after peaking in 2019, TCG reports, based on data from 131 nonprofit theaters.

Funding Priorities

Operations
Performances
Festivals
Education
Residencies

Individual giving often flows to schools or capital campaigns, while foundation and DAF grants tend to go to operations, performances, festivals, theater arts education, and residencies. Some institutional grantmakers provide prizes, fellowships and residencies for aspiring professionals, like the American Playwriting Foundation’s Relentless Award, which is awarded to a playwright in recognition of a new play.

Funders also provide theater support under the larger “performing arts” rubric. For instance, the Jerome L. Greene Foundation gave the Juilliard School a \$7 million gift to expand the Jerome L. Greene Fellowship for dance, music and drama.

An Inside Philanthropy survey on the state of fundraising found that about half of respondents cited revenues from “private and family foundations” as increasing in importance. About 4 in 10 respondents noted an increased importance in “smaller individual donors through general fundraising and online campaigns,” large individual donors, donor-advised funds, and community foundations.

Not surprisingly, about 6 in 10 respondents cited “program revenue” as the top decreasing revenue source, followed by corporate foundations (about half), government grants and contracts (4 in 10), and smaller individual donors through events, including virtual events (3 in 10). This concurs with the findings in TCG’s Theatre Facts 2022, which show earned income on the decline and corporate giving decreasing by 24% between 2018 and 2022.

Theater’s pre-2020 success in tapping individual donors is far from guaranteed in a world transformed by the pandemic, calls for social

justice and equity, climate change, inflation, and rising costs. Theaters are “competing for funding with social service, healthcare, and other organizations that more directly and obviously address these issues,” said Theatre Forward’s Gretchen Shugart. “The theater industry has to demonstrate and communicate clearly about its work in these areas, which may be more subtle, but can also positively affect attitudes and lives.”

The Big Issues & Beyond

Prior to 2020, equity advocates were already calling out philanthropy’s lack of support for BIPOC-led organizations and individual artists across the performing arts field. Now, this issue is intensifying. The field is also deeply concerned with long-term financial sustainability. In 2023 alone, several important theater festivals and nonprofit theaters closed or paused their seasons amid financial struggles.

In 2015, Grantmakers in the Arts published its “Racial Equity in Arts Funding Statement of Purpose” that “made racial equity in arts funding a primary focus.” Two years later, a study by Helicon Collective found that only 4% of arts funding flowed to groups whose primary mission is to serve communities of color.

To be clear, foundations were interested in advancing equity long before 2020. “The words ‘equity, diversity and inclusion’ were everywhere,” said Meggan Gomez, the former executive director of Theatre of the Oppressed NYC. Rather, Gomez told Inside Philanthropy, funders would give grants to “big, predominantly white institutions for diversity initiatives that ultimately wouldn’t lead to anything.” Meanwhile, grantmakers continued

to underfund BIPOC-led organizations that were already serving diverse audiences at scale. “If you gave a small nonprofit like this \$100,000, the work would be so much more impactful” than that of their affluent counterparts, Gomez said.

Efforts to boost diversity and equity transcend funding issues. “Many of these institutions were founded 50-plus years ago, and face deep-rooted, historic perceptions of who and what they are, both internally and externally,” said Theatre Forward’s former executive director Bruce Whitacre. Moreover, Whitacre told IP, a “lack of funding for arts education and field trips” created a divide “within communities among those who have access or who feel a connection to theater, and those who do not.”

Notable efforts to boost engagement include the Hamilton Education Program, which received \$6 million from the Rockefeller Foundation to fund a national expansion of its partnership that provides public school students with tickets to the Tony-award-winning “Hamilton,” and Theatre Communication Group’s Audience (R)Evolution program, funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, which documents effective strategies to engage “multigenerational” audiences.

Demographics demand that funders maintain their commitment to broadening engagement efforts, argues Soyica Colbert, associate director at Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. “As America becomes more diverse demographically, the theater has to respond to who audiences are, what are the demographics of our cities where a lot of regional theaters are, and how to be in conversation with those communities.”

Events of 2020 ultimately amplified what theater professionals had been asking for all along—more financial security and increased support for BIPOC-led organizations and individual artists.

Funders grasped the severity of the pandemic and quickly pivoted to provide critical emergency support and help theater organizations roll out their virtual presence. The sector’s leading grantmakers, including the Shubert, Andrew W. Mellon, Doris Duke Charitable, Ford, W.K. Kellogg, and John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur foundations, all unleashed enhanced grantmaking to address the emergency. The New York Community Trust stepped up as well.

Speaking with Inside Philanthropy, Suzanne Appel, managing director of Vineyard Theatre, said the trust’s emergency fund “gave us a lifeline.”

While this huge outpouring of support was indeed a lifeline for many nonprofit theaters amid the pandemic emergency, a few years on, nonprofit theater has not yet recovered. “What we’re dealing with now is not one economic shock but a series of compounding crises,” said TCG Executive Director Teresa Eyring in a 2023 email to IP. “The ongoing impacts of COVID-19 have intensified pre-existing challenges, including the decline of the subscription model and persistently negative working capital,” and “inflation and rising labor costs have made everything more expensive.”

Meanwhile, foundation giving has remained consistent after adjusting for inflation, TCG reports, while individual giving has declined. As

of 2024, there is a significant need for more funding to keep nonprofit theater alive as it continues to recover from pandemic closures while also facing the “compounding crises” TCG describes.

Collaboration Spotlight



MOSAIC NETWORK & FUND
IN THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY TRUST

Multiple interviewees cited the Mosaic Network and Fund as a promising collaborative model to bolster equitable arts grantmaking. The fund is housed at the New York Community Trust and guided by funders and arts practitioners serving African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, and Native American (ALAANA) communities. Launched in 2019, the collaborative pools funds between 27 donors to support arts groups including Noor Theatre Company and ID Studio Theater. Fund co-chair Kerry McCarthy told Inside Philanthropy that the fund’s model is an “effective tool to tackle larger agendas and longer-term challenges.”

Funding Trends & Strategies

Prior to 2020, performing arts organizations implored funders to cut red tape and give a greater voice to the communities they serve. When the pandemic struck, grantmakers responded. “It takes philanthropy a while to change or even consider making a change; we don’t have that luxury anymore,” said Howard

Gilman Foundation’s Campbell. The major trends in the theater funding space include related “trust-based philanthropy” practices such as embracing general operating support and streamlining reporting requirements.

“General operating funding is the most flexible form of funding, and puts the organization in control of how it gets spent,” said Cate Fox, former senior program officer of the MacArthur Foundation’s Chicago Commitment.

“General operating support is like gold—there should be more of it,” said Karen Newell, director of external affairs at the Baltimore-based Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation.

Organizations have long complained about funders’ complicated application processes and reporting requirements. The pandemic compelled funders to cut red tape, much to the relief of besieged theater organizations. “In the last four or five months,” Theatre of the Oppressed NYC’s Gomez said in August 2020, “I have seen foundations saying, ‘Let’s get the money out of the door.’ It showed me they could release more money, and faster if they had less restrictions on how the money is spent and on the arduous and long application process.”

A few years later, nonprofits hope these shifts will be sustained, though it is still too soon to tell.

Perspectives on Equity

The world of theater has been the subject of equity critiques for decades. But the field’s nonprofit and foundation leaders were discussing and working to address equity

challenges in theater long before the current upsurge in public demands for racial justice. In an IP survey of readers, professionals in the performing arts field cited “centering racial justice” as the strategy most worthy of “increasing attention and commitment from the philanthropic sector.”

Confronted with a growing body of research underscoring persistent inequities across the field, leaders in theater’s funder community have been pursuing a wide variety of strategies to advance equity on multiple dimensions, tackling challenges facing Black, female, disabled, LGBTQ, immigrant and indigenous artists.

These strategies include encouraging theaters to apply diversity and inclusion principles across the organizational culture, reconsiderations of funding smaller organizations and BIPOC-led theaters, expanding notions of what constitutes a “theater” organization, revisiting grant application processes, actively soliciting proposals and conversations with BIPOC-led organizations, providing awards to cultivate underrepresented playwrights, and ramping up support for school theater programs.

Inside Philanthropy Survey

“[There is a] long overdue response to racism in the field (theater). People are increasingly tightening their focus on specific problems (which are many) and do not having the bandwidth for broader social perspective.”

—Fundraiser, Santa Rosa, California

A 2021 report from the Asian American Performers Action Coalition found that approximately 18% of all NYC theater productions in the 2018/19 season were shaped by BIPOC directors. White actors continued to be over-represented relative to their population size, the report found.

In 2020, five Black theater professionals launched the Black Theatre Coalition, which aims to increase employment opportunities for Black professionals by at least 500% by 2030. Around the same time, a coalition of BIPOC theater makers calling themselves We See You White American Theatre released a [list of demands for change](#) in areas like hiring, work conditions and philanthropy. The group asked funders to eliminate budget-size qualifications for major grants and make more general operations funding available to BIPOC organizations, among other demands.

The League of Professional Theatre Women's "50/50 in 2020" campaign called for female playwrights, directors and designers to achieve parity in the sector by 2020. Yet as of 2019, plays written by women accounted for only 29% of all plays produced, according to "The Count 2.0," a report released by the Dramatists Guild of America and the Lilly Awards Foundation. The numbers for female writers of color only accounted for 6% of productions nationwide.

"Disabled artists have not received funding on the same levels as abled artists and institutions," says cultural producer [Claudia Alick](#). "When disabled design is centered and valued, we will innovate for a post-pandemic age of true inclusion." Advocates for disabled artists are

calling on theaters to move beyond token roles for disabled actors and cast them for all types of roles, commission work by disabled playwrights and produce work that speaks to the authentic experiences of disabled individuals, hire disabled staff, and improve physical accessibility for disabled actors and audience members.

Funders are supporting organizations that advance these goals. From 2018 to 2023, the National Disability Theatre produced large-scale professional work run entirely by people with disabilities. NDT received several grants from the Ford Foundation. In 2019, the Boston-based Ruderman Family Foundation partnered with the Yale School of Drama to support training for actors with disabilities.

In 2020, the Ford Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation launched the Disability Futures Fellows, the only national award for disabled arts practitioners. With cohorts in 2020 and 2022, the fellowship has directly supported the work of disabled artists, actors, dancers and more across the country, with each receiving a \$50,000 grant administered by United States Artists.

"While the theater world has long been enriched by the contributions of LGBTQ composers, playwrights, choreographers and performers, explicitly queer theater companies are rare," says the Stonewall Community Foundation. In 2018, the National Queer Theater (NQT) launched to foster and support LGBTQ communities through social justice in the performing arts. NQT receives funding from the Stonewall Community Foundation, the Alliance of Resident Theaters/New York, and the Gilead Foundation.

International playwrights and theater artists have long faced a litany of challenges while working in the U.S., like tracking visa and green card applications, maintaining status requirements, and abiding by international travel restrictions. COVID-19 magnified these issues, especially for low-income immigrant theater workers. “Applying for unemployment benefits is a huge risk for them, and many times, they are not even eligible to receive benefits,” said lighting designer Cha See. “Visa holders are issued their visas to allow them to do specific work in the U.S. so they cannot even seek work outside of theater design legally.”

In June 2020, See launched the See Lighting Foundation to provide monthly grants to immigrant workers in need of financial support due to the theater shutdown caused by the pandemic. Four months later, the Playwrights Realm, a nonprofit organization that receives support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Howard Gilman Foundation, announced the launch of the International Theatermakers Award to help international artists navigate legal challenges of working in the United States. Producing director Roberta Pereira said she hoped the program “lightens the burdens of artists and casts a spotlight on the undiscussed issues of working in American theater without American citizenship, modeling a more welcoming and inclusive industry.”

In 2019, the *New York Times*’ Siobhan Burke asked Indigenous artists to explain the lack of visibility for Indigenous performing arts groups across the U.S. “Here, it’s kind of stuck into a corner of folk or community practice, or traditional or ritualistic,” said Vallejo Gantner,

the former director of New York City’s Performance Space. Playwright Muriel Miguel, who founded Native American feminist collective Spiderwoman Theater in 1976, said, “Diversity means if you check the box, well, you did diversity. I’m always a little leery about, how do you get diversity? It seems to me that it needs to be more than just checking the box.”



“We operate in an untenable, if also infinitely engaging, 52-week season. If we are meant to be programming that much, then how could we possibly deliver resources in such a way that is both equitable and responsive to the needs of the artist and audience alike? I no longer believe that increased volume should be the primary response to questions of equity. We must learn to work in a generous, collaborative, deeper way. As a white curator, I think this means I have to listen more and do less.”

—Risa Shoup, interim executive director, Alliance of Resident Theatres (A.R.T./NY)

Burke’s piece coincided with the launch of a pilot program, the Global First Nations Performance Network. Developed during the 2019 First Nations Dialogues Lenapehoking/New York, a series of Indigenous performances and discussions funded, in part, by the Jerome Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the network

will include 15 institutions from Canada, Australia and the U.S. dedicated to commissioning and presenting works by Indigenous artists.

The First Peoples Fund, a grantmaker that supports First Peoples artists and culture bearers, awards First Peoples Fund Cultural Capital Fellowships to “artists who perpetuate generosity, wisdom and integrity in their communities.”

In 2020, Minneapolis’ Guthrie Theater received a grant from the Joyce Foundation to commission a piece from Indigenous Direction, the nation’s leading consulting company for Indigenous arts and audiences, that “centers the stories and experiences” of the Dakota and Ojibwe people. Larissa FastHorse, playwright, MacArthur fellow, and co-founder of Indigenous Direction, encourages organizations to dig deeper to identify and amplify Indigenous voices. “While the contemporary American theater field is catching up to commissioning and producing stories of Native people, written by Native people, publishing has not,” she said. “It can be a challenge to find Indigenous scripts, and some of our best playwrights in the field are not represented by agents or managers.”

Additional resources for Native American theater professionals include the New Play

Exchange, Native Voices at the Autry, the Eagle Project, and American Theatre’s [list of Indigenous theater-makers](#).

More broadly speaking, funders looking to advance equitable grantmaking can pull from the following insights on issues like organizational management, participatory grantmaking, grant eligibility requirements, community outreach, balancing support for larger and more affluent grantees, prizes for emerging playwrights, and theater education.

Former Theatre Forward Executive Director Bruce Whitacre encouraged organizations to “position ideas like equity, diversity and inclusion in the context of all aspects of the theater’s work, from play selection, casting and staffing, to core mission statements, to community-based programming and administrative practices (hiring, training, organizational culture).”

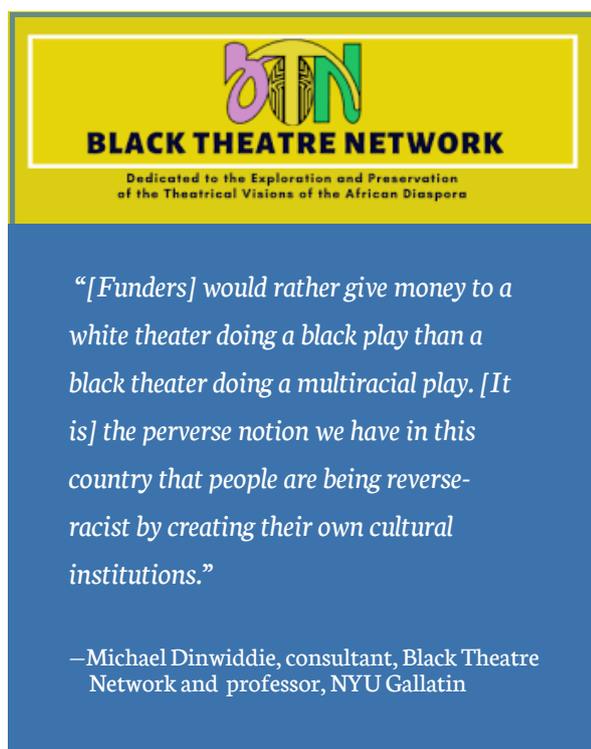
In a 2023 report evaluating 10 years of the National Theater Project, the New England Foundation for the Arts found that diversifying the pool of advisors who made decisions about NTP grants led them to “organically support more artists of color, more rural artists, more artists that are expanding the definition of theater.”



“While the contemporary American theater field is catching up to commissioning and producing stories of Native people, written by Native people, publishing has not. It can be a challenge to find Indigenous scripts, and some of our best playwrights in the field are not represented by agents or managers.”

—Larissa FastHorse, playwright, MacArthur fellow, and co-founder of Indigenous Direction

Linking grant size to organizational budget size shuts out organizations of color that, broadly speaking, “may not have the kinds of fixed assets that a larger organization will have,” said Doris Duke’s Knighton. This model creates an environment where “the biggest institutions absorb a disproportionate share of your philanthropic capacity, and as they grow, that ratio needs to be sustained,” said Bonfils-Stanton’s Steuer.



Funders have taken note. MacArthur’s “Culture, Equity, and the Arts” initiative does not link grant amounts to an organization’s size, nor did Ford’s “America’s Cultural Treasures” initiative. In a similar vein, foundations have been bypassing predominantly white intermediaries and funding BIPOC theaters directly. Examples here include Ford’s “American Cultural Treasures” and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s support for the Black Seed initiative, which awards grants to Black-led theater companies.

Helicon Collaborative’s co-Director Alexis Frasz told Inside Philanthropy that funders must recognize that many diverse organizations may not look like typical “arts organizations” since they often do intersectional work across multiple areas like housing, youth development and economic development.

For example, before launching its “Culture, Equity, and the Arts” initiative, the MacArthur Foundation defined an arts organization as one whose sole mission was the “creation and exhibition or production of art.” While this definition covered organizations that primarily served white audiences, like symphonies, it “had the unintended consequence of excluding significant parts of the city’s population and a variety of art forms and genres,” according to MacArthur’s Fox.

Funders’ restrictive grantmaking model creates an environment where leadership lacks a deep network of small organizations serving communities of color. There is an increasing number of examples of how performing arts funders are expanding their footprint with historically under-engaged BIPOC organizations. Jennifer Coleman, who oversees the George Gund Foundation’s Creative Culture and Arts Program, told Inside Philanthropy she drew up a list of BIPOC arts organizations that had been “shut out of the grantmaking process” by going online, cold-calling groups, and asking nonprofit leaders to recommend peers.

Many theater funders have concluded that it’s more effective to partner with an experienced third party than to build a diverse organizational ecosystem from scratch. Strategies include

funding regrants, working with third-party consultants, and paying representatives at front-line organizations.

“Grantmakers can best advance equity in performing arts by granting multi-year support to organizations that are by, for and about people of color, people with disabilities, trans people, etc.,” said Eddie Torres, president and CEO of Grantmakers in the Arts, a consortium of the sector’s most influential foundations.

Funders bankroll prizes, fellowships and residencies to cultivate playwrights from historically underrepresented demographics. For example, with support from the McKnight and Jerome Foundations, the Playwright Center’s Many Voices Fellows supports early-career BIPOC playwrights. Launched in 2010, the annual Lilly Awards, which receives funding from the New York Women’s Foundation, honors the work of women in the American theater.

Philanthropy can boost equity in theater by investing in school theater, which Julie Cohen Theobald, former executive director of the Educational Theatre Association, calls “the beginning of the pipeline” for the theater and entertainment industries. “If we are to address racial disparity, we need to open up school theater to all students, including those in underserved schools, and truly be inclusive,” she told IP.

Collaboration Spotlight

THE BLACK SEED

The Black Seed is the “first-ever national strategic plan to create impact and thriving for Black theater institutions.” The initiative aims to advance systemic change in the country’s arts and culture landscape through three main vehicles: the Black Seed Fund, the Black Seed National Leadership Circle and the Black Seed Cohort.

The Black Seed National Leadership Circle serves as a “platform for major donors to invest in Black theater institutions.” The Black Seed Cohort is a network of Black theater associations and affiliates that meets twice per year to develop avenues in which they can work together to combat racial justice and inequity within the nation’s theateric community.

The Black Seed Fund has announced plans to award grants to 100 Black-led theater institutions across the country.

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private & Family Foundations

As noted in the “Who’s Getting” section, private and family foundations play an influential role in the world of theater. These entities focus on priorities like general operating support, projects, and performances, generally providing relatively less direct support for individual artists. The theater sector’s most prolific funder, the Shubert Foundation, only provides general operating support. Seventy-four percent of the foundation’s funding flows to theater organizations.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, another large institutional funder in this sector, supports four priorities in its theater grantmaking: Artists and New Work, Adaptive Organizational Practices, the Public Value of the Arts, and Diversity and Inclusion. The foundation has also partnered with the Alliance of Resident Theatres in administering the New York Theater Program, which awarded over \$4 million in grants to the city’s small and mid-size organizations. In June 2020, the foundation’s trustees announced it was adjusting its mission to prioritize social justice.

Most of the Howard Gilman Foundation’s funding comes in the form of general operating support. Anna Campbell, senior director of programs and planning at the Howard Gilman Foundation, told Inside Philanthropy that the funder’s commitment to this kind of support is predicated on the idea that organizations can “round out the edges” by “using the money as

needed,” particularly in concert with other funders. The foundation also provides what Campbell called “capitalization mechanisms to allow organizations to have appropriate funds for appropriate needs,” like additional support for cash and building reserves.

Among the other top donors to theater in the United States, the William Penn Foundation provides theater grants to Philadelphia-based organizations. The Ford Foundation focuses on national organizations; recipients of the foundation’s “America’s Cultural Treasures” initiative include St. Paul, Minnesota’s Penumbra Theatre and Los Angeles’ East West Players. The Walton Family Foundation primarily funds Arkansas-based theater troupes.

A subset of smaller funders provides integral support to individual theater professionals through fellowships, commissions and residencies. These funders include the Virginia Toulmin Foundation, the Tow Foundation, the Kleban Foundation, the Fred Ebb Foundation, the William and Eva Fox Foundation, the Dramatist Guild Fund and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation.

Speaking to American Theatre’s Marcus Scott, A.J. Muhammad, associate producer and director of the Fire This Time Festival’s New Works Lab, expressed a need for alternative sources of support beyond funders like Ford, Axe-Houghton, and Shubert Foundations, which are New York-based and predominantly white-led. “Are there Black-run philanthropic foundations that are comparable to the ones I mentioned?” he asked. “There is Black wealth, but when it comes to our arts organizations, I don’t know if

connections are being made between the Black philanthropies and our institutions.”

Corporate Giving

Corporate giving accounts for a very small share of unrestricted contributed revenue for nonprofit theater.

“Corporations need to see ROI,” American Theatre Wing’s Hitchens told IP, “and it’s hard to show them the ROI they want. Even their grants are a business decision.” To her point, corporate support for theater frequently takes the form of sponsorships—a business transaction in which the sponsor pays or gives the organization money in exchange for something “that will help them make more money, be it through alignment with the property,” or through sales, brand development, public relations or employee engagement, according to the Partnership Group.

Unlike donors, sponsors receive something of value in return for their investment. Sponsorships are “never disguised as philanthropy,” Hitchens said.

For example, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Association offers a production sponsorship opportunity for businesses that give \$50,000 or more. Sponsors receive “special benefits customized to your community message and marketing,” complimentary tickets, a link on the festival’s website, an “invitation” to present the business’s message on the festival’s publications, and more.

Research from International Events Group (IEG) found that banks are more likely to sponsor the arts than other categories of business.

Program Spotlight Bank of America ACTivate Awards

Bank of America provided funding for Theatre Forward’s Advancing Strong Theatre Grants, which were later renamed the Bank of America ACTivate Awards in recognition of the bank’s continued support. The program supports theater programs that accelerate change in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and expand the audiences and communities engaged with theater throughout the country.

2022 recipients included the Alley Theatre in Houston, Actors Theatre of Louisville, and the Old Globe in San Diego.

Bank of America’s global arts and culture executive Rena DeSisto told IP, “This is a well-thought-out, systemic program that we believe will continue the work that needs to be done around creating social capital in communities that is within everyone’s reach.”

Surveys on corporate giving for the arts often fail to differentiate between charitable contributions and sponsorships, making it difficult to gauge the true extent of corporate philanthropic support for theater.

In 2022, the Conference Board reported that while the percentage of companies responding to its survey that are supporting the arts dropped

from 2019 to 2021, those that are still giving for the arts expect their giving to remain steady or increase. They also reported, “Companies are moving away from conventional arts funding—donations to major arts institutions, such as concert halls and museums—to align their arts giving with broader corporate citizenship and business goals,” such as DEI efforts, community enrichment, and supporting workforce creativity and wellness. Seventy-five percent of companies surveyed supported the arts in 2021. An earlier report by the Conference Board stated, “Financial contributions typically come from philanthropy/foundation budgets, but companies often fund their support through

sponsorship budgets, as well, which could explain the high response rate of companies making financial contributions.”

Companies also set up corporate donor-advised funds to serve as their corporate foundations. For example, in 2022, more than 3,600 employees used their employers’ matching dollars to donate more than \$13 million to charities through the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation.

The following list includes major corporate supporters for theater—with the caveat that some of this support may take the form of sponsorships rather than charitable giving: 3M, Allstate Corporation, American Airlines, American Express, Ameriprise Financial, AT&T, Boeing, Best Buy, Capital One, Cargill, Chevron, Citibank, Conagra, Delta Airlines, the Walt Disney Company, Exelon, Exxon Mobil, HBO, IBM, KPMG, JetBlue, Estée Lauder Companies, Lincoln Financial Group, Metlife, Microsoft, the New York Times Company, PNC Financial Services, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Prudential Financial, Salesforce, Goldman Sachs, Schlumberger Limited, Shell, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Target, Time Warner, United Airlines, Viacom, US Bank and Wells Fargo.

Funder Spotlight



HOWARD GILMAN
FOUNDATION

In 2023, the Howard Gilman Foundation awarded more than \$30 million in grants to more than 200 performing arts organizations in New York City. The foundation takes a “what do you need?” approach to grantmaking, inviting grantees to share what they really need, and then working with the foundation to build grants to meet those needs. . According to Anna Campbell, senior program officer at the foundation, Gilman’s commitment to this type of funding allows grantees to use “the money as needed,” while also providing “capitalization mechanisms to allow organizations to have appropriate funds for appropriate needs.”

Community Foundations

Community foundations provide critical support to theater organizations. As with corporations, “arts and culture” represents a small percentage of total community foundation grantmaking—typically between 5 and 8%. Community foundation giving to the arts frequently flows from donor-advised funds, which, as noted, is essentially individual giving.

The Greater Kansas City Community Foundation (GKCCF) is notable in its significant contributions to theater. The foundation's support for theater organizations and artists comes from an array of DAFs and organization-designated funds like the New Theatre Guild Scholarship Endowment Fund and Gail Prieb Theater Scholarship Fund. The foundation also supports local theater organizations through its Black Community Fund.

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the largest community foundation in the U.S., awarded over \$2.5 billion in grants in 2022 to local, national and international organizations, \$123.5 million of which went to "Arts and Culture." According to the foundation's [grants database](#), in 2022 corporate-advised and donor-advised grants from SVCF to nonprofits with the word "theater" or "theatre" in their name totaled around \$750,000.

The Columbus, Ohio-based Columbus Foundation allocated \$328 million in grants in 2022. Of this amount, it gave 6% percent to the arts.

Major Donors

Individual major donors tend to earmark gifts for capital projects, programming and educational activities. Theater professionals find that these donors can be more difficult to cultivate than other sources of funding.

Theater donors often make large donations for construction or renovation projects, like billionaire philanthropist T. Denny Sanford's \$3.5 million gift to the Sioux Falls State Theatre's restoration efforts. Donors "tend to want their

name on something," said American Theatre Wing's Hitchens. "They want to leave legacy." For example, New York's Signature Theatre christened the Diller-von Furstenberg Grand Staircase in recognition of a \$3 million gift from billionaire Barry Diller and Diane von Furstenberg.

Examples of gifts earmarked for theater programming include Qualcomm co-founder Dr. Andrew Viterbi's \$5 million gift for San Diego's Old Globe's artistic and arts engagement programs, and Julianne Argyros's \$5 million gift to create a new production of "A Christmas Carol" at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California.

Major Donor Spotlight David Geffen

In 2021, media mogul David Geffen gave the Yale School of Drama \$150 million to cover tuition for current and future students. Yale announced it as the largest gift in the history of American theater. As with many major-donor contributions, the gift was recognized with a naming: the drama school is now named the David Geffen School of Drama at Yale University.

Geffen's philanthropy spreads across the arts, with major gifts to Lincoln Center (music), as well as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art (visual art), among others. Geffen has also made major gifts to cover tuition at the UCLA School of Medicine.

Theater patrons frequently make large gifts to universities. The late Joan Gillings gave the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill's PlayMakers Repertory Company and Department of Dramatic Art a \$12 million gift to expand educational opportunities for students and enhance performance and outreach offerings to the community. Harvard University received a \$100 million gift from David E. and Stacey L. Goel to fund a research and performance center that will house the American Repertory Theater. And in 2021, media mogul David Geffen gave \$150 million to cover tuition for current and future students at the Yale School of Drama, in what Yale described as the largest gift in the history of American theater.

Prominent theater donors hailing from the entertainment industry include Geffen, former NBC Chairman Robert Greenblatt, Meryl Streep, Diane Lane, and "Hamilton" creator Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Donors also provide support through donor-advised funds housed at community foundations and DAF sponsors like Fidelity Charitable.

Theater fundraisers' growing reliance on individual donors has led to "more of a sense of relationship-building, of raising a donor's understanding of what is needed in terms of commitment to an organization, and nourishing that commitment over a period of time," according to SMU DataArts' Voss.

This kind of commitment is more labor-intensive than trying to elicit funding from the government, corporations or foundations, argues Jill Garland, former senior director of development for New York City's Public Theater.

"That's work you can get done during the day—writing grant proposals, or visiting council people, or making a marketing pitch to corporations," she said. "But most theaters are doing their work with individuals at night, maybe with a dinner and then the theater."

Looking ahead, theater organizations will become increasingly reliant on small donors and crowdfunding platforms. "Philanthropy can mean a lot of things, and issues like equity are bigger than institutional philanthropy and foundations," said the Howard Gilman Foundation's Campbell. "We need to include all types of giving."

Associations & Intermediaries

The theater sector enjoys a robust network of entities providing funders with networking, advocacy and data gathering.

Regrantors play an outsized role in the sector relative to their grantmaking budgets. Since its founding in 1961, Theatre Communications Group has awarded over \$43 million in grants, subsidies and scholarships to individuals and theater organizations in partnership with a number of foundations, including the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Howard Gilman Foundation, Knight Foundation and many others. The [Theatre Communications Group](#) is the national organization for theater, with a network of 500+ member theaters and over 250 university, funder, trustee and business affiliates, and over 10,000 individuals. TCG's [Trustees Corner](#) includes research and resources aimed at educating trustees at theater organizations.

Other regrantors give to a specific field facing unique challenges. For instance, the New England Foundation for the Arts' (NEFA) National Theater Project promotes the development of artist-led, ensemble and devised theater work. These organizations are “not going to have a subscription series,” Quita Sullivan, NEFA’s senior program director for theater and director of the National Theater Project, told Inside Philanthropy. “They make their money by performing. Even those that are seemingly well-funded are operating from project to project.”

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“Arts organizations face a severe threat in the current environment. With such a heavy focus on basic human needs, I don't think funders realize how critical the arts are to local economies, children's education, racial equity work, and the mental health of the country.”

—Fundraiser, Hartford, Connecticut

[Grantmakers in the Arts \(GIA\)](#) is strictly a funder affinity group, bringing together the most foundations supporting theater. It is a national network of private, public and corporate arts funders (including other art forms like visual arts, music, etc.) focused on providing “leadership and service that advances the use of philanthropic and governmental resources to support the growth of the arts and culture.” GIA’s [Black Arts & Cultural Funding and Justice Resource Hub](#) aims to amplify funds and resources that explicitly center Black artists, cultural communities, and experiences.

[Americans for the Arts](#), whose primary focus is advancing the arts broadly in the United States, provides useful resources for performing arts organizations, including white papers and research on fundraising trends and best practices.

The [Performing Arts Alliance](#) is the national policy advocate, leadership forum and learning network for America’s nonprofit performing arts organizations, artists and allies. The alliance’s site includes a page devoted to [charitable giving resources](#) and information. Members include the National Alliance for Musical Theatre and the Network for Ensemble Theaters.

[SMU DataArts](#)’ mission is “to empower arts and cultural leaders with high-quality data and evidence-based resources and insights that help them to overcome challenges and increase impact.” SMU DataArts provides resources for arts organizations, fundraisers and arts grantmakers.

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

Facing a series of challenges that were compounded by the pandemic and later inflation, the theater community is in crisis. The funders of nonprofit theater are looking for ways simply to sustain this art form in an era when permanent closures of a large number of organizations is a real possibility. Beyond the main priority of ensuring the sector's survival, experts interviewed for this brief encouraged funders to explore collaborations that drive maximal impact, ramp up advocacy for the performing arts and under-capitalized artists, and boost support for equity initiatives and efforts to engage younger donors and subscribers.

The pandemic and growing calls for social justice have forced funders to clearly and consistently articulate the social and economic benefits of a vibrant performing arts field.

The New York Community Trust's NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund serves as an effective model moving forward, said Kate Levin, who oversees Bloomberg Philanthropies' arts program. Levin called the fund "a significant acknowledgment by a consortium of donors that cultural organizations are essential to the city's identity, resilience and future dynamism."

Recognizing the importance of theater and other performing arts to a community's quality of life, in 2024 the Richard King Mellon Foundation awarded \$2.5 million in special funding "to help Pittsburgh's downtown performing arts organizations overcome daunting challenges." The foundation's press release noted that these

organizations are both essential to a community's quality of life and "under significant stress." This kind of special funding may be what is needed to help nonprofit performing arts organizations across the country get through an extended rough patch and find their way to a new model of sustainability.

Performing arts grantmakers can also remain relevant by embracing intersectionality, an integrated approach where programming acknowledges overlapping identities and may address social issues like poverty, PTSD and hunger.

"Artists are already looking at these intersections," said NEFA's Sullivan, who pointed to theater's growing awareness of environmental issues. The artist asks, "How much material are we going to use to create this work? Where is the material sourced from?" Philanthropy is "often responsive, and so I think that . . . we'll see environmental funders saying, 'This is an interesting effort by these theater artists; maybe we can broaden our scope.'"

One example of an intersectional grantmaker is the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund's Arts in Health Initiative, which supports organizations like Theater of War Productions, which works with actors to present dramatic readings of seminal plays followed by town hall-style discussions designed to confront social issues.

"Arts in health' isn't an either/or proposition," Rick Luftglass, the fund's executive director, told Inside Philanthropy. "But it can be hard for all of

us to fund across traditional boundaries. More funders have been expressing interest in this intersection, so we think that’s going to change.” Grantmakers in the Arts’ website tracks [ongoing collaborations](#) between arts and health funders.

Another opportunity for theater funders is to reimagine support systems, Inside Philanthropy’s interviews indicate. COVID-19 showed that “our social infrastructure is not designed to support arts and culture practitioners,” said Surdna’s Torres. Funders are poised to collaborate beyond short-term emergency aid toward more fundamental and systemic reforms, like increased protections for gig workers, support for ongoing training, and improved access to healthcare and capital, plus new funding models. “Grantmakers’ funding coalitions have the ability to more equitably resource an ecosystem and not just siloed institutions and organizations,” Torres said.

Interviewees from the theater field said that funders need to recognize “change takes time, and may also take money—for hiring, training and programming,” said Gretchen Shugart.

For example, We See You White American Theater has asked theaters to eliminate the six-day rehearsal week and “10 out of 12,” a common industry practice that says that when actors are called in for consecutive 12 hours of tech rehearsal, they can only work 10 of those hours. “When these practices are in place, the growing and nurturing of the BIPOC family structure is imperiled,” [the coalition states](#). “Many BIPOC artists have been forced to make a choice not to have families.”

Vineyard Theatre’s Appel agrees with this demand, but acknowledges that by doing away with these practices, theaters will need to schedule extra rehearsals—“and that’s not free.” Moreover, “it’s not as if you can do anti-racist training and think you are done,” she said. “This means a regular budget, supported staff training and board training, money for recruiting and creating new positions—and funders hate the idea of paying for job positions.” If funders ultimately want to see real and sustainable change within the sector, Appel said, “there needs to be targeted investments to go above and beyond general operating support.”

With millennials and Generation Xers poised to inherit billions from their baby boomer parents, grantmakers and coalitions like M+D’s Arts Funders Forum, which launched in 2018 with support from the Knight Foundation, are looking to unlock more arts giving from these demographics. “The social justice issue is huge,”

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“Small town USA arts needs funding. Their usual source has virtually dried up as small businesses fight to stay alive. Large foundations, private citizens, and other philanthropic professionals need to reach down and light those small torches that keep the arts affordable for the general public. That allows community theaters to stay alive and build bridges to the youth and retirees. Both desperately need purpose in their lives.”

—Major Donor, Tavares, Florida

AFF founder Sean McManus told IP. “It’s one thing to experience traditional works of art, but what are institutions doing to drive social change?”

Berkeley Repertory Theatre’s former managing director Susie Medak concurs. Unlike their baby boomer predecessors, these donors are “about effecting change, not sustaining anything,” she said. “We have to approach generational philanthropy differently. We’d be nuts not to. Motivations, style, passions... they are different. But our goal, the holy grail of philanthropy, is likely to always be a committed, shared sense of values and priorities. So while younger philanthropists may start out with a different point of view and different approaches to giving, I think we have to play the long game on this.”

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Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project, each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. This brief was originally posted to Inside Philanthropy in November 2020 and updated in May 2024. It has not yet been updated. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.org.