

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.

AUTHORS: Mike Scutari with Fundraising Now contribution by Beth Rowan

EDITOR: Michael Hamill Remaley

COPY EDITOR: Chris Packham

GRAPHICS & DESIGN: Sue-Lynn Moses

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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 roughly half of its revenues from “unearned sources”—that is, not program revenue. 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 is being dramatically transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic and growing calls for social justice. A May 2020 [Americans for the Arts survey](#) of 11,500 performing arts professionals found that 95% of respondents’ organizations canceled events due to COVID-19. In response, funders loosed restrictions and provided emergency support to shuttered theater organizations.

Beyond the events of the COVID-19 era, which have been extraordinarily difficult for the theater community, there are long-term factors and trends 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 especially 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 theater 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 have become more concerned with organizations’ pandemic-era plans for longevity.
- 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.
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the theater organizations at the top of the grant recipient lists benefited from the fundraising acumen of their well-connected leaders. Many had rolled out ambitious construction or renovation campaigns that attracted substantial funding.
- The pandemic upended conventional wisdom across the broader theater sector. With theaters shuttered, organizations worried that patrons wouldn’t renew their subscriptions, forcing staff to double down on large funder engagement and retention efforts.

The Big Issues & Funding Trends

- Prior to the pandemic, racial equity issues were taking center stage among theater organizations across the nation, but now, most organizations are consumed with mere survival as performing for live audiences remains untenable and cripples the sector.
- Over the longer term, audience engagement and the aging of audiences remains an existential concern for theater and other forms of foundation-supported arts.
- “Trust-based philanthropy” practices such as embracing general operating support and streamlining reporting requirements were already big trends, but significantly expanded in the pandemic era.
- Support for optimizing and monetizing virtual presentation of theater has also taken on a larger priority for funders and the theater organizations they support.

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.

Fundraising Now

- While earned revenues from live performances have largely vanished after the March 2020 pandemic shutdowns and theaters slashed payroll budgets for actors, directors and other producing staff, donations have been steady and theaters’ administrative operations continue.
- Many fundraisers say moving both fundraising events and theater performances online had the effect of broadening audiences and establishing a precedent for continuing virtual audience development even after audiences return to the live experience.

Theater organizations and artists are tenuously planning for a limited reopening in the fall of 2021 that will likely require substantial investments in precautionary health measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. In the interim, funders’ responsibility can best be summed up in two words: “organizational survival,” according to Zannie Voss, director of SMU DataArts.

An Inside Philanthropy survey of 187 performing arts fundraisers and foundation professionals found that almost half of respondents said they’ve noticed “reduced funder interest and resources” as a result of the current shifting of funds for COVID and racial justice. But reduced funder interest and resources for theater is a result of a gradual trend over the years, over 1 in 10 said.

The death of George Floyd and the protests that followed amplified calls for addressing underlying conditions of racial injustice and funding inequities across the performing arts sector. Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) artists and organizations are calling for the dismantling of systemic racism with a renewed energy, and many arts funders are responding in robust, thoughtful and committed ways.

The pandemic also underscored how working actors, reliant upon supplemental income, don't have a reliable and durable safety net. Funders have ramped up support for artists while eyeing deeper structural reforms to enable actors to withstand the next crisis. As institutional grantmakers and donors remain focused on critical pandemic-related needs, the long-term outlook for the nonprofit theater sector is far from certain.

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 less 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 2018/19 season, musicals generated over \$1.43 billion. Pre-COVID, Broadway was "awash in more money than anyone can remember," Susan Medak, executive 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 2019, produced by Theatre Communications Group, estimates that pre-COVID,

the sector’s 1,953 nonprofit theaters supported the employment of 145,000 artists, administrators and technical production staff, served an estimated 38 million audience members, and added over \$2.8 billion to the U.S. economy through direct payments for goods and services. “Future reportings are likely to look very different,” the report read.

According to a survey conducted by Nielsen Scarborough in spring 2016, over 47 million Americans had attended a live theater event within the past month. Tim Donahue and Jim Patterson, authors of “Stage Money: The Business of the Professional Theatre,” illustrate the distinctions between commercial and nonprofit theater accordingly:

	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.	40 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 is called “surplus” and is maintained by the theater for another use. Donations to the not-for-profit theater are deductible for the most part.

TCG estimated that in 2019, the typical nonprofit theater earned 53% of its income and attracted the remaining 47% 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. Theaters with total expenses of \$500,000 or less earned 49% of total income and obtained 51% from contributions.

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 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

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. According to Candid, the 15 foundations and DAF sponsors giving the most to nonprofit theater organizations from 2014–2018 are as follows:

Top 15 Theater Funders 2014 - 2018¹

Grantmaker	Dollar Value of Grants Awarded
Shubert Foundation	\$98.52M
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation	\$50.66M
Howard Gilman Foundation	\$24.53M
Davee Foundation	\$23.45M
William Penn Foundation	\$20.07M
Ford Foundation	\$18.64M
James Irvine Foundation	\$16.22M
Shelby Cullom Davis Charitable Fund	\$16.02M
Walton Family Foundation	\$15.80M
David H. Koch Charitable Foundation	\$15.00M
Wallace Foundation	\$13.67M
Wyncote Foundation	\$13.28M
Lily Endowment	\$12.71M
United Performing Arts Fund, Inc.	\$12.04M
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation	\$11.74M

Source: Candid

These top 15 institutional grantmakers gave \$348 million to theater organizations from 2014–2018. This figure is less than music (\$592 million) and more than dance (\$297 million) during this same period.

Funders like the Shubert, Mellon, Gilman, and Davee foundations provided over half of the total support from institutional grantmakers from 2014–2018. The Shubert Foundation and Howard Gilman Foundation only provide general operating support, which [Candid defines](#) as “grants to organizations for day-to-day operating costs or to further the general purpose or work of an organization, rather than for a specific purpose or project.”

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 individuals.

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 \$133 million in “Arts and Culture” grants in 2018. The foundation’s [grant database](#) reveals that 99% of the funding flowed from donor-advised funds.

Therefore, it would be more accurate to think of funding allocated from DAF providers Fidelity and Schwab and community foundations DAFs as expressions of individual donor support for theater.

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Candid does have great data on the largest source of private funding for theater organizations – non-DAF individual donors and the many off-the-radar family foundations that don’t report to Candid. “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 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.

Here’s a full breakdown by specific source:

Unrestricted Contributed Revenue Source	Percent
Other Individuals	11%
Foundations	6%
Trustees	4%
Corporate	3%
Government	3%
Other Contributed Revenue	17%

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. The report found that 15% of the 44% of expenses covered by “unrestricted contributed revenue” at theater organizations came from individuals and trustees in 2017.

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 is equivalent to the sector’s fourth-largest institutional funder from 2014–2017, the William Penn Foundation. As American Theatre Wing’s Hitchens told IP, “there’s an unlimited potential for individual fundraising.”

The table also confirms Voss’s assertion that corporate giving has “never been a great panacea” for performing arts organizations. 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.

Some of the largest national grantmakers to theater that don’t quite make Candid’s list include Bloomberg Philanthropies, Creative Capital, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, John Gore Organization, Hearst Foundations, United States Artists, and the Knight, Kresge, Surdna, Wallace foundations.



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 the 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 Philadelphia (William Penn and Wyncote foundations).

The theater funding ecosystem also includes arts services organizations and regrantors like the Alliance of Resident theaters, American Theater Wing, A.R.T./New York, MAP Fund, the National Alliance for Musical theater, 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

Candid's data from 2014–2018 shows that most giving from foundations flowed to medium-to-large theaters reliant on subscription audiences and single-ticket buyers.

Organizations on Candid's list received funding from prominent funders like the Howard Gilman Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Shubert Foundation, which has provided critical unrestricted general operating support to at least nine of the 10 theaters on the list, plus local supporters.

Top 10 Theater Grant Recipients 2014 - 2018²

Grantmaker	Dollar Value of Grants Awarded
Two River Theater Company	\$78.53M
New York Shakespeare Festival	\$48.21M
Sundance Institute	\$49.72M
Alley Theatre (Houston)	\$30.34M
Steppenwolf Theatre Company	\$28.89M
Chicago Shakespeare Theater	\$26.58M
Guthrie Theatre Foundation (Minneapolis)	\$26.57M
Roundabout Theatre Company	\$26.07M
Municipal Theatre Association of St. Louis	\$25.81M
Oregon Shakespeare Festival Association	\$24.26M

Source: Candid

Many of these organizations benefit from the fundraising acumen of their well-connected leaders. Billionaire Groupon founder Eric Lefkofsky is the chairman of the board of trustees of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Robert Redford is the president and founder of the Sundance Institute. In contrast, smaller theater organizations “don't have the networks of the rich board people,” said American Theatre Wing President and CEO Heather Hitchins.

Theaters on Candid’s list have rolled 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 June 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. 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 Hitchens, 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 with theaters shuttered, organizations worry that patrons won’t renew their

subscriptions, forcing staff to double down on engagement and retention efforts. “Without advance subscription revenue, it may be difficult for many theaters to restart when the time comes,” Theatre Forward Executive Director Gretchen Shugart told Inside Philanthropy.

Moreover, pre-2020, theater organizations that owned facilities tended to attract support from national funders that tied grants to an organization’s size. Now this asset is 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.”

Year	Dollar Value of Grants	Total Number of Grantmakers	Total Grants Awarded	Total Number of Recipients
2014	\$373.74M	6,565	19,718	3,413
2015	\$526.40M	7,749	27,681	4,084
2016	\$517.07B	7,591	28,894	4,441
2017	\$473.65B	7,024	19,666	3,681
2018	\$518.87B	6,883	19,061	3,642

Source: Candid

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

Candid research shows that total funding to theater organizations jumped significantly from 2014-2015 and remained steady through 2018.

A strengthening U.S. economy helps to explain the 41% jump in giving between 2014-2015. According to Reuters, “U.S. economic growth in 2015 **was the best since 2005.**” However, that “momentum ebbed significantly in 2016, with the economy notching its weakest performance since the recession,” which can account for the 1% decrease in total giving from 2015-2016.

Funding for theater organizations rose 3% from 2015 to 2018—a relatively small increase during a period in which the S&P 500 Index grew 22%. This may be an indication that, while resources and disposable income increased significantly among the stock-holding classes, interest in donations to theater nonprofits did not increase commensurately among that class of donors.

Candid’s data appears to contradict SMU DataArt’s 2019 Fundraising Report, which found that average unrestricted contributed revenue to theater organizations **increased 11.9%** from 2014-2017.

Theaters, SMU DataArts’ Voss said, “have been able to continually make investments in fundraising that generate additional contributed revenue, which is not the case for many sectors.” This apparent discrepancy can be explained by the fact that Candid’s data omits the lifeblood of the typical performing arts organization—non-DAF giving from individual donors. “In recent years, there has been, in most parts of the country, less money from corporations, and (especially in the arts sector) less from the government and foundations, as well,” writes American Theatre’s Stuart Miller. “The result

has been an increased emphasis on the individual donor.”

Institutional grantmakers provide an array of prizes, fellowships and residencies for aspiring professionals, like the American Playwriting Foundation’s Relentless Award, which, at \$45,000, 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.

Candid found that \$348 million in foundation and DAF grants that flowed to theater organizations from 2014-2018 could be linked to one of the following five priorities:

Subject	Amount Funded
Operations	\$252.81M
Performances	\$72.78M
Festivals	\$8.10M
Education	\$7.86M
Residencies	\$5.96M

Source: Candid

Inside Philanthropy’s August 2020 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).

Theater’s pre-2020 success in tapping individual donors is far from guaranteed in a world transformed by the pandemic and growing calls for social justice. Theaters are “competing for funding with social service, healthcare, and other organizations that more directly and obviously address these issues,” said Theatre Forward’s 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. But in the COVID-19 era, when live performances have largely been suspended indefinitely and companies are struggling to survive, the most pressing issues for the field of theater revolve around long-term financial sustainability, including general operating support, organizational cash reserves and support for individual artists.

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.

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

“I think that the arts are the perfect place to hold difficult conversations in a non-threatening manner. I think the arts receive less funding than they deserve, particularly in today’s climate with its focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and social equity. Social equity squarely live within the arts and culture, but I think it is an underutilized and under-resourced tool.”

—Fundraiser, Santa Fe, New Mexico

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.” (Whitacre stepped down as executive director in 2020 and was replaced by Gretchen Shugart.)

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, 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. In June, the sector’s most generous grantmaker, the Shubert Foundation, awarded a total of \$32 million in 2020 grants to a record 560 performing arts organizations. “COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the field, creating the greatest need in the history of the foundation,” said Diana Phillips, who assumed the role as foundation president earlier in the year.

That same month, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s board of trustees approved a plan to boost giving in 2020 from \$300 million to \$500

million. Mellon’s commitment was part of a broader partnership between the Doris Duke Charitable, Ford, W.K. Kellogg, and John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur foundations designed to unleash over \$1.7 billion in enhanced grantmaking.

In July, the New York Community Trust announced that its NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund raised more than \$110 million for emergency grants and zero-interest loans to theater organizations like the Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York, Cherry Lane Theatre and New York City Children’s Theater. Speaking with Inside Philanthropy, Suzanne Appel, managing director of Vineyard Theatre, said the trust’s emergency fund “gave us a lifeline.”

The theater sector’s third-largest institutional grantmaker, the Howard Gilman Foundation, approved an additional \$1 million in contributions to support emergency regrant and response programs like Indie Theater Fund’s Rapid Relief Emergency Grants and the Drama League of New York’s Directors Emergency Relief Fund. Foundations like Gilman “understand the importance of the longevity of the institution and the messaging of, ‘If you want us to be here in a year, we need your support right now,’” Appel said.

Other examples of emergency funds spearheaded by theater organizations include the American Theatre Wing’s National Rapid Relief Fund, Second Stage Theater’s Curtain Up Campaign, and the Educational Theatre Association’s Thespian Relief Fund.

Smaller foundations concerned about tight budgets and market volatility haven’t opened the vaults, but some are considering increasing their annual 5% endowment payout to unlock more funding.

Beyond maintaining a steady financial lifeline, funders are focusing on two particularly vulnerable and historically undercapitalized constituencies—organizations serving communities of color and individual artists. “When you get to the medium and smaller arts organizations—that don’t have endowments, that don’t have rich boards, that don’t have huge amounts of operating cash flow—those organizations are panicked,” Ford Foundation president Darren Walker told the Washington Post while describing the impetus for America’s Cultural Treasures initiative, which provides support for BIPOC cultural organizations.

While arts funders are now mobilizing to throw actors a lifeline, “generally speaking, the direct funding of artists is new territory for most foundations” said SMU DataArts’ Voss.

Collaboration Spotlight



MOSAIC NETWORK & FUND
IN THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY TRUST

Multiple interviewees cited the Mosaic Network and Fund as a particularly 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. Since its official launch in 2019, the fund has pooled over \$6 million from 20 funders and supports 27 ALAANA 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.”

In April, grantmakers launched the \$10 million Artist Relief Fund, which provides unrestricted \$5,000 grants to artists. The fund launched with \$10 million, consisting of \$5 million in seed funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, matched with \$5 million in initial contributions from various funders. By September, the fund had raised nearly \$20 million and announced it would extend its grantmaking through December.

Funders remain committed to keeping the emergency funding flowing. “The situation is dire for the artist, and we’re concerned with the artists themselves, so that is a primary issue right now,” said Doris Duke’s Knighton. During the quarter ending in September, when 8.5% was the overall unemployment rate, 52% of actors were out of work, according to the National Endowment for the Arts. By comparison, the jobless rate was 27% for waiters; 19% for cooks; and about 13% for retail salespeople over the same period.

An October Americans for the Arts survey found that 95% of respondents reported a loss of income and that BIPOC artists have higher rates of unemployment than white artists due to the pandemic (69% vs. 60%).

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, streamlining reporting requirements, as

well as a programmatic funding trend: support for optimizing virtual presentation of theater.

In the early days of the pandemic, grantmakers converted funding into general operating support to pay staff, upgrade virtual platforms and keep the organization's lights on. "General operating funding is the most flexible form of funding, and puts the organization in control of how it gets spent," said Cate Fox, senior program officer of the MacArthur Foundation's Chicago Commitment.

Inside Philanthropy research suggests that grantmakers will continue to provide this funding after the pandemic subsides. "General operating support is like gold—there should be more of it," said Karen Newell, director, external affairs of the Baltimore-based Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation.

Well before 2020, organizations 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 of five months," Theatre of the Oppressed NYC's Gomez said in August, "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."

In an era when other innovations in performance are on hold, more foundations are supporting the optimization of virtual programming. F. Javier Torres-Campos, program director of the Surdna Foundation's Thriving Cultures program, told Inside Philanthropy that "one of the critical transcendent issues that we are seeing—and will continue to grapple with—is the purchase, integration and distribution of virtual and/or immersive technology equipment and content during and beyond the COVID-19 health crisis."

Some funders are clear-eyed about virtual programming's long-term potential. "If you look at the data, there's been a huge consumption of arts and culture, but fewer examples of how it's been monetized online," said Judilee Reed, program director of Creative Communities at the William Penn Foundation, which has supported organizations in the Philadelphia region like the Theatre Exile Company, 11th Hour Theatre Company, and Pig Iron Theatre Company.

Inside Philanthropy's survey of performing arts fundraisers and foundation professionals corroborate Reed's perspective. About 3 in 10 respondents said that "smaller individual donors through events, including virtual events" were increasing in importance. About a third cited a decrease, and a third said revenues were "about the same."



"Before the pandemic, we knew we needed to increase our funding to support our education, engagement, theater access and audience development programs, but now, we face real challenges for the next two or three years as we try to get people back in the theaters."

—Victoria Bailey, executive director, Theatre Development Fund

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 IP’s survey of readers in August 2020, 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.

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 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

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.

A 2020 report from the Asian American Performers Action Coalition found that approximately 20% of shows on Broadway and off-Broadway stages in the 2017–18 season were created by people of color, the report found. Nearly two-thirds of roles were filled by white actors on Broadway, and about 94% of directors were white.

In July 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. Launched in 2018, the National Disability Theatre, a company producing large-scale professional work run entirely by people with disabilities, received a grant the following year from the Ford Foundation to support its mission, to commission partnerships, and create a strategic plan. In 2019, the Boston-based Ruderman Family Foundation partnered with the Yale School of Drama to support training for actors with disabilities.

In October 2020, the Ford Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation launched the Disability Futures Fellows, the only national award for disabled arts practitioners. The fellowship will directly support the work of 20 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



“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)

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.”

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 February 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 Atrium, the Eagle Project, and American Theatre’s [list of Indigenous theater-makers](#).



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

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



“[Funders] would rather give money to a white theater doing a black play than a black theater doing a multiracial play. [It is] the perverse notion we have in this country that people are being reverse-racist by creating their own cultural institutions.”

—Michael Dinwiddie, consultant, Black Theatre Network and associate professor, Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University.

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).”

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 does Ford’s “America’s Cultural Treasures.” In a similar vein, foundations have been bypassing predominantly white intermediaries and funding BIPOC theaters directly. Examples here include the Ford Foundation’s “American Cultural Treasures” and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s support for the Black Seed initiative, which awards one- to three-year grants ranging from \$30,000 to \$300,000 to 50 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 build a diverse organizational ecosystem from scratch. Strategies include funding regrantors, 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 two early-career playwrights of color. 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, 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 theatric community.

The Black Seed Fund announced its plans to award grants to around 100 Black-led theater institutions across the country through the Black Seed Fund. Supporters of the fund include the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Doris Duke Charitable Trust, Ford Foundation, Howard Gilman Foundation, and the New York Community Trust.

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 sector’s second-largest institutional funder, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 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 of 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 program officer 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 “American 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 in the form of fellowships, commissions and residencies. These funders include the Virginia Toulmin Foundation, the Tow Foundation, 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

As noted in the “Who’s Giving” section, of the 44% of expenses covered by “unrestricted contributed revenue” at theater organizations, only 3% came from corporations in 2017.

“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’ message on the festival’s publications, and more.

Research from International Events Group (IEG) found that sponsorship spending on performing arts organizations increased 3.7% from 2018—the largest year-over-year increase since 2006. Banks are eight times more likely to sponsor the arts than the average of all categories, IEG reported.

Program Spotlight Bank of America ACTivate Awards

In 2018, Bank of America provided a second round of funding for Theatre Forward’s Advancing Strong Theatre Grants, which were subsequently renamed Bank of America ACTivate Awards in recognition of the commitment. 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.

“The program was successful, and as we understand the importance of this work, we wanted to ensure the program would continue,” 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 2018, the Conference Board reported that 61% of 113 corporate survey respondents [support the theater field](#). That figure jumped to 88% for the 16 surveyed companies with annual revenues exceeding \$25 billion. “Financial contributions typically come from philanthropy/foundation budgets,” the report states, “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 2019, nearly 4,000 employees used their employers' matching dollars to donate more than \$5 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 2020 the Howard Gilman Foundation awarded around 160 grants to performing arts organizations in New York City. While a few of those awards were project specific, the remaining grants were awarded to support general operating costs. 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 to 8%. Community foundation giving to the arts frequently flows from donor-advised funds, which, as noted, is essentially individual giving.

Among all funders, the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation (GKCCF) was the entire theater sector's fourth-largest grantmaker and the community foundation giving the most from 2014–2018, according to Candid. In 2019, Giving from GKCCF's donor-advised funds accounted for 51% of the foundation's \$464 million in grants. Nine percent of DAFs focused on arts, culture and humanities charities.

The foundation's support for theater organizations and artists comes from an array of DAFs and organization-designated funds like the New Theatre Scholarship Guild 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 grantmaker fifth on Candid's list of top theater givers among all funders, is the largest community foundation in the U.S. The foundation awarded over \$1.2 billion in grants in 2019 to local, national and international organizations; it gave approximately 11.3% of this amount to “Arts and Culture.” According to the foundation's [grants database](#), it made 103 grants totaling approximately \$610 million to theater organizations in 2019.

The Columbus, Ohio-based Columbus Foundation allocated \$224 million in grants. Of this amount, it gave 25.3% percent to the arts, topping education (25.1%) and social services (21.8%) as the most popular recipient field. The Minneapolis Foundation’s 2017 annual report stated it disbursed nearly \$60 million in Minnesota and globally that year. At 10%, “Arts, Culture & Humanities,” was the sixth-highest funded focus area.

The New York Community Trust’s NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund received donations from more than 1,300 donors, which allowed it to provide \$29.4 million in grants to arts and culture nonprofits in the early days of the pandemic. “Though the city has had urgent needs for food and healthcare, New Yorkers also recognized that the arts are important to the quality of their own lives and to the economic health of the city,” Kerry McCarthy, the trust’s vice president for philanthropic initiatives, told IP. “Donors know that the arts are created by dedicated workers—whose efforts contribute a stunning 4.2% to the country’s gross domestic product—and their livelihoods have been threatened by the pandemic. Whether they experience art on the streets or a computer screen, our donors know that New York remains the heartbeat of our nation’s cultural sector, and direct grants from our donor-advised funds stayed strong in 2020.”

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, and have become more concerned with organizations’ pandemic-era plans for longevity.

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.

Major Donor Spotlight David and Stacey Goel

David and Stacey Goel donated \$100 million to Harvard’s arts campus, current home of the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.). The gift supports A.R.T.’s move from the Cambridge campus to its Allston arts campus. The \$100 million donation also backs other projects including a state-of-the-art research and performance center, arts programs, and academic offerings in the arts.

David Goel is a Harvard alumnus and co-founder of Matrix Capital Management Company.

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.

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. Prominent theater donors hailing from the entertainment industry include 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, the theater sector’s second-largest grantmaker from 2014–2018. According to Fidelity Charitable, it gave 7% of grants and 7% of grant dollars in 2018 to arts and culture organizations. In contrast, Giving USA found that arts and culture represented 5% of total charitable giving during that year.

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.

Major Donor Spotlight Julianne and George Argyros

In 2019, Julianne Argyros donated \$5 million to Orange County’s South Coast Repertory Theatre, which used the gift to create a new production of *A Christmas Carol*. Julianne and George Argyros are long-time supporters of the arts. Gifts include \$13.5 million to the Segerstrom Center for the Arts, and \$2.5 million to the Crowell Opera House.

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.”

The pandemic has made this commitment even more challenging for professionals who must make the case for theater to donors, who often predicate their support on the understanding that the recipient organization is financially secure. Donors “need resources to get a more sophisticated decision,” said American Theatre Wing’s Hitchens. “They want a safe bet.”

That said, Steppenwolf Theatre Company Executive Director Brooke Flanagan told Inside Philanthropy that donors may be more amenable to the “art for art’s sake” pitch after COVID-19 because they’ve seen firsthand the “non-measurable impact” of a world without live performances.

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, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Howard Gilman Foundation, Knight Foundation and many others. The Theatre Communications Group is the national organization for theater, with a membership 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."

[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.

With lead funding from the Wallace Foundation and Barr Foundation, additional support from Art



"One of the critical transcendent issues that we are seeing—and will continue to grapple with—is the purchase, integration and distribution of virtual and/or immersive technology equipment and content during and beyond the COVID-19 health crisis."

—F. Javier Torres-Campos, program director Thriving Cultures, Surdna Foundation

Bridges and the Terra Foundation for American Art, and participation from over 350 performing arts organizations, Culture Track’s “Culture + Community in a Time of Crisis” is a national research and strategy initiative designed to “deepen our understanding of how arts and culture organizations can help their communities” and “how communities can support their arts and cultural organizations.”

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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

Fundraising Now

Nonprofit theaters closed down in March 2020—at least their in-person performance spaces—and stayed closed for more than a year. With revenue-producing venues shuttered, thousands of workers—including actors, writers, lighting technicians and administrators—still find themselves waiting out the crisis, as the timeline for the return of reliable ticket sales remains uncertain. Also in the past year, calls for greater equity in the performing arts have nonprofits and funders alike rethinking how well they are serving audiences and creators and what that means for those who raise funds for theaters.

As nonprofit theaters faced these new imperatives, some of their donors turned their attention to the pressing needs of organizations dedicated to pandemic relief, healthcare and racial justice. These dynamics, combined with the loss of earned income, forced many theater executives in 2020 to slash budgets and furlough or lay off employees just to survive.

The federal government recognized nonprofit theaters' dire need with the late 2020 passage of the Save Our Stages Act as part of the \$900 billion COVID-19 relief bill. An estimated \$15 billion goes toward grant programs for live venues, independent movie theaters and other cultural institutions to cover payroll and costs, including rent, utilities and maintenance, with a maximum grant of \$10 million.

Some institutional funders also took action to stem theaters' financial hemorrhaging. The Leon Levy Foundation launched a \$250,000 COVID Relief Fund in January 2021 to support small New York City theaters. Created in conjunction with the A.R.T./New York Relief Fund, grants are available

to theaters that are based in, or primarily produce in, New York City, with annual budgets under \$250,000.

All of this helps, but pre-pandemic, theaters relied on a combination of revenue-producing shows and charitable contributions for income, often in the 50/50 range. One theater executive said she'd finished her next budget and didn't predict income from performances would resurface until the second half of 2022. That means performing arts fundraisers have had to adjust and expand what they do to fill gaps or just stay afloat.

Fundraising for Theatre Communications Group is "steady as she goes," according to Teresa Eyring, executive director. "Our foundation partnerships continue, and individual donations are right on track," she says, following an early 2020 budget reduction and 25% staff reduction. "Before the beginning of our fiscal year, we told our members that we would renew their membership regardless of their ability to pay and then surveyed them so we could project revenues, which were a quarter of what we would ordinarily bring in."

At Yale Repertory Theater, there has been no in-person or virtual theater since March 2020. "No question we are feeling the effects of the pandemic—our students, our faculty, our staff and our audience," said Deborah Berman, director of development. The theater relies on ticket sales, donor contributions and some support from Yale University. One strategy Yale Repertory has used is a new email newsletter to keep up engagement with the theater. "Since we can't highlight our productions, we've given our audiences a behind-the-scenes look at the experience of our students who work alongside our artists and staff," Berman noted. They are taking this opportunity to devote

even more time to justice issues. “We are focused as a community on addressing the ‘We See You, White American Theatre’ set of demands to implement anti-racism and anti-oppression in all aspects of our work, including fundraising,” she said.

The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota, shut down its stages on March 16, 2020. Pre-pandemic, the Guthrie had a 55/45 split between earned income and contributions, and its largest backer was the Minnesota State Art Board. “Last year, we did better than we thought,” said Mollie Alexander Hogan, director of development for the Guthrie. “Most sponsors let us keep their monies and redirect to overall operating expenses, plus we received emergency grants from local funders, one in the six-figure range, eager to support the Guthrie. There is such a feeling of pride around the Guthrie being Minnesota’s theater,” she said.

Hogan added that the inspiring thing about the past year and the theater’s switch to online performances has been the level of improved access, especially access to communities it ordinarily doesn’t reach. “It’s a new and exciting way to engage our audiences,” she said. The Guthrie staged a virtual gala in August 2020, which was free to attend. Of the 600 who signed on, 90% donated. “People care enough to make a gift, whether it’s \$25 or \$25,000, to make sure we are here on the other side of this,” she said.

The Guthrie staged a virtual performance of Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” last December that was available to households for streaming at \$10, free to teachers and students. The theater issued tickets to more than 15,000 households across Minnesota, all 50 states and 15 countries. “The response was incredible, not just in the region, but across the country and in Europe

and Asia,” said Hogan. She said their donor acquisition numbers are actually up. Last March, theater supporters were unsure where the pandemic would go and when it would end. With vaccines beginning to arrive in December, she said there was a shift in energy. “People are now saying there is a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“My mantra is, ‘You can never go back to before,’” said Victoria Bailey, executive director of Theater Development Fund, quoting a line from the musical “Ragtime.” TDF is a nonprofit that draws revenues mostly from discounted ticket sales (the TKTS program) and membership fees (115,000 members), with donor contributions making up 15% of revenue pre-pandemic.

Collaboration Spotlight

CULTURE + COMMUNITY IN A TIME OF CRISIS | A SPECIAL EDITION OF **CULTURE TRACK**

Culture + Community in a Time of Crisis is a national research strategy initiative aimed at supporting the cultural sector and strengthening local communities during and after the COVID-19 crisis. According to Culture Track, the initiative “quickly answer[s] a range of urgent, complex questions about the place of the arts and culture in the hearts, minds, families, and social and emotional lives of Americans during these painful times—and, crucially, help make strategic sense of those answers via forward-looking, inclusive dialogue that leads to adaptation, resilience, and relevance.” Lead funding for the project was provided by the Wallace and Barr foundations. Additional support was received from Art Bridges and The Terra Foundation for American Art, Slover Linett Audience Research and LaPlaca Cohen

“Dedicated to bringing the transformational power of the performing arts to all,” TDF is often the first place consumers are introduced to live theater in New York. TDF’s ratio, 85/15 of earned to donated revenue, may have been the envy of other theater nonprofits until March 12, 2020, when New York City theaters closed their doors to live performances due to the virus.

Bailey said now is an opportunity for nonprofit theaters to rethink their roles and explore their mission parameters. Digital programming is here to stay and removes many of the barriers to theater attendance, like time, location and cost. Bailey sees a mix of in-person and online performance in the future, which may open up TKTS and other theaters to a whole new menu of donors—streaming, international, young, tech-savvy or technology-based. “Before the pandemic, we knew we needed to increase our funding to support our education, engagement, theater access and audience development programs, but now, we face real challenges for the next two or three years as we try to get people back in the theaters,” she said.

The Alliance of Resident Theatres (A.R.T./NY), an advocacy and arts services organization for New York City’s nonprofit theater community, saw its revenues from rentals of office space and rehearsal theaters decline in 2020, but it still received more contributions than earned income. “In 2020, our earned income was down, but we had new and unexpected donations from institutions and individuals that remained strong,” says Risa Shoup, interim executive director. After a canceled 2020 fundraising gala, A.R.T./NY plans to hold a four-day online 2021 fundraising engagement, showcasing what it does. The event will include a kick-off party, a group discussion on the future of theater, and a new work production. There will also

be a panel on arts and advocacy, a panel on accessibility in theater, and a fireside chat with Shoup and some of their grantees. Pre-recorded, it will later be available online.

In Spring 2021, theaters across the country were getting ready for the next phase of the pandemic, during which they might be able to gradually open theaters with limited capacity, or quite possibly, ricochet between open and closed as the nation struggles with ongoing high rates of infections and new, more infectious strains of the virus.



“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.”

—Susie Medak, managing director, Berkeley Repertory Theatre

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

Devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the theater community is in crisis. The funders of 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.

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."

Performing arts grantmakers can also remain relevant in a post-COVID world 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 by the time we come out of this mess, 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/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,”

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 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.”

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

“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

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Thank You

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¹Based on available grantmaker data from Candid. Excludes federal funding, funding by higher education institutions and major donor advised funds (DAFs.)

²Based on available grant recipient data from Candid. Excludes government organizations and higher education institutions.

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. 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.