Theater Mu is to receive $161,000 in the first year of its participation in the Wallace Foundation’s new, five-year arts initiative, which involves 18 arts organizations of color from across the United States. The funding is for organizations to develop and pursue a project to address a strategic challenge—which, for Theater Mu, means embarking on the first steps of researching what opening its own theater would look like. (While Theater Mu has an office and studio, it rents or partners with other stages for its productions.) Researchers will document each organization’s work with the aim of developing useful insights about the relationship between community orientation, resilience, and relevance.

Created as part of the Wallace Foundation’s efforts to foster equitable improvements in the arts, the initiative began with an open call in 2021 that drew over 250 applicants. Theater Mu was selected as one of 18 organizations representing a diverse range of artistic disciplines, geographic locations, and communities served. Minnesota’s Pillsbury House + Theatre and Ragamala Dance Company are also part of the cohort.

“Theater Mu is honored to be a part of the Wallace Foundation initiative with so many respected organizations,” says Theater Mu Managing Director Anh Thu T. Pham. “As we’re entering our 30th anniversary season, Theater Mu will be working with Wallace to examine how we can be of better service to our communities.”

Originally announced in July 2021 as a $53 million endeavor involving about a dozen organizations with budget sizes between $500,000 and $5 million, the initiative has expanded to include additional grantees in this category. Planned funding has also increased to be up to $100 million across five years.

While Wallace’s support will not eliminate the need for the other funding that sustains Theater Mu and the other grantee organizations, it does help provide the time and resources to explore new approaches to urgent challenges, such
as succession planning, developing values-aligned business models, increasing visibility, and creating cultural spaces that nurture the creativity and well-being of artists and communities served.

For the first year of the initiative, Theater Mu will embark alongside the other grantees on planning their individual projects in partnership with Wallace, researchers, consultants, and financial management advisers. Grantees will work with Wallace to define their goals and identify any technical support they might need before beginning four years of project implementation, and they will connect with the whole grantees cohort for shared learning and support.

The Community Orientation Action Research Team (COART), made up of researchers from Arizona State University and the University of Virginia, has been funded to co-develop the initiative’s research design with the grantees. The research is expected to explore the initiative’s guiding question through the lens of the projects that grantees will implement over four years. Additionally, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) is overseeing a fellowship program for 18 early-career qualitative researchers, one of whom will be paired with Theater Mu to develop an ethnography that documents the organization’s history, practices, and culture.

The Wallace Foundation’s arts initiative builds on research going back to the 1970s suggesting that community orientation, along with high quality artistic programming, may be foundational to organizational health. Community orientation has been described, across the literature, as preserving or presenting the artforms of a particular racial, ethnic, or tribal group, supporting artists from the focus community, developing the cultural workforce of that community, and advocating for the community within broader socio-political contexts, among other activities. In addition to building an understanding of what community orientation looks like in different organizations, Wallace hopes to learn with the organizations how they define relevance and resilience.

THEATER MU is the second largest Asian American theater company in the nation. Founded in 1992, Mu’s continuing goal to celebrate and empower the Asian American community through theater is achieved through mainstage productions, emerging artist support, and educational outreach programs. Theater Mu is a member of the Consortium of Asian American Theaters & Artists as well as a member of the Twin Cities Theatres of Color Coalition, proudly standing alongside New Native Theatre, Pangea World Theater, Penumbra Theatre, and Teatro Del Pueblo. This summer, people can see its co-production with Jungle Theater, the regional premiere of Lauren Yee’s Cambodian Rock Band. | theatermu.org

THE WALLACE FOUNDATION has a mission to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for young people, and in the arts for everyone. Wallace works nationally, with a focus on the arts, K-12 education leadership and youth development. In all of its work, Wallace seeks to benefit both its direct grantees as
well as the fields in which it works by developing and broadly sharing relevant, useful knowledge that can improve practice and policy. | wallacefoundation.org

COMPLETE LIST OF PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS:

- 1Hood Media (Pittsburgh, Pa.)
- Arab American National Museum (Dearborn, Mich.)
- BlackStar (Philadelphia, Pa.)
- Chicago Sinfonietta (Chicago, Ill.)
- EastSide Arts Alliance, Black Cultural Zone, and Artist As First Responder (Oakland, Calif.)
- Esperanza Peace and Justice Center (San Antonio, Texas)
- Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture (Charlotte, N.C.)
- Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (San Juan, Puerto Rico)
- PHILADANCO! The Philadelphia Dance Company (Philadelphia, Pa.)
- Pillsbury House + Theatre (Minneapolis, Minn.)
- Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater (Manhattan and Bronx, N.Y.)
- Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (San Francisco, Calif.)
- Ragamala Dance Company (Minneapolis, Minn.)
- Rebuild Foundation (Chicago, Ill.)
- Self Help Graphics & Art (Los Angeles, Calif.)
- Theater Mu (Saint Paul, Minn.)
- The Laundromat Project (Brooklyn, N.Y.)
- The Union for Contemporary Art (Omaha, Neb.)

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