



GRANTMAKERS IN THE ARTS

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Caveat Author

Are we sacrificing plays to play development?

By David Speedie

It is a given that a dynamic national theatre depends on a constant infusion of new work by fresh, as well as established voices. It would seem to also go without saying that these playwrights are best served, and may hone their craft to the fullest, by coming under the wing of a theatre company that provides a nurturing environment for developing new work.

In fact, many playwrights have in recent years enjoyed such felicitous and productive associations—August Wilson, Wendy Wasserstein, Constance Congdon, Eric Overmyer, and Christopher Durang, to name a few—and the theatrical oeuvre has been enriched as a result.

Into this rosy scenario enter Jean Passanante, Associate Director of New Dramatists in New York, and seeming iconoclast. In "Reading Our Writers to Death," an article in the trade publication *Theatre Times*, Passanante probes at the heart of the relationships between playwright and theatre company, playwright and artistic director, and, in particular, playwright and dramaturg.

"Age Of Development"

The part of the theatrical canon under fire from Passanante is what she calls the "Age of Development." This epoch dates from the mid-Sixties, when the O'Neill Theatre Center hit upon the idea of inviting playwrights to the quiet of its rural Connecticut setting to work on plays, and to share ideas and receive advice from colleagues, far from the cauldron of critics, producers, and other "real world" pressures. The O'Neill initiative addressed the sense of dissatisfaction that

FIRST ISSUE

This newsletter is a new project sponsored by Grantmakers in the Arts, an affinity group of the Council on Foundations. Grantmakers in the Arts programs are organized by a national coordinating committee. Former committee member David Speedie graciously agreed to prepare this inaugural article. We welcome your submissions for lead articles in the future--eds.

new plays and playwrights were being given short shrift by the commercial theatre, and its lead was followed by theatres around the country. Playwrights were brought to bring their scripts for development, reshaping and, with luck, eventual production of the play, in a symbiotic association of author, artistic director, and dramaturg.

A Runaway Train

Twenty years on, Passanante's view is that this "play development" is now a kind of runaway train headed in the wrong direction. "Playwrights," she writes, "complain unendingly of their work being demolished by dramaturgs and directors, of being courted and abandoned by theatre companies, and of plays being read and re-read again and again with no production in sight. In fact, playwrights are crying out to have inflicted upon them the pressures and demands of the 'real world' because that would mean working the play out in production, the thing for which it is intended."

She sees overwhelming evidence that the staged reading is no longer a part of the nurturing, evolutionary process leading to production, but an end in itself, a kind of research and development for its own sake.

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Plays that read . . .

Passanante: "A theatre that produces only a handful of new plays each season and presents a weekly reading series clearly reads far more plays than it will ever produce, and initiates relationships with many writers it is very unlikely ever to produce."

The Script-tease

This is plausible and compelling reasoning that begs the obvious question of why and how this topsy-turvy situation has come about? Why do theatres indulge in this superficial, perhaps even cynical, flirtation with writers — a "script-tease," as Passanante describes it?

The answer offered by the writer sets off some warning signals for arts grantmakers, since our funding of new work in the theatre seems to be implicated as an unwitting co-conspirator. In the funding squeeze of the late Seventies, according to Constance Congdon, a playwright and literary manager of Hartford Stage Company, "it became easier to get money to *develop* rather than to *produce* plays" (my italics). "Staged readings became a way *not* to produce the play." The reason for this, of course, is the cost-effectiveness (seductive to both the theatre and funder) of the staged reading, an ersatz theatrical experience devoid of production excitement, risk, and therefore, cost. As Passanante puts it, "a few thousand dollars supports an entire reading series while it barely covers the prop budget for one full production."

Minority Manipulation?

Passanante raises one further, rather sinister aspect of the "script-tease" that she links to funding. She quotes playwright Eduardo Machado as saying "I get read in every theatre in New York because I'm Hispanic," with few of these artistic relationships resulting in productions. Passanante sees Machado as representative of minority writers who feel manipulated by theatres, invited to have their works read simply in order that the theatre may add minority names to their rosters. She sees a link between this and the fact that public funding sources regularly ask in grant applications how many minority playwrights a theatre has worked with.

All this would appear to lead to two unpalatable conclusions. First, play development activities, which came into being as a laudable initiative to help playwrights, now are, for the most part, empty exercises in frustration. Second, even though this is one of the most readily fundable of a theatre's activities, it is contrary to the obvious base mission of the theatre, to produce plays.

In Passanante's words: "The very act of writing a grant proposal for 'play development' as opposed to production is an acknowledgement that a ghetto exists, that plays get developed in a nether region, separate and apart from the theatre's 'real' work, its productions."

The Directors Respond

Passanante quotes the opinions of a number of prominent playwrights joined in a Cassandra-like chorus against play development as a "hostile force in the theatrical landscape." For the other point of view I presented the issue to representatives of four of our preeminent theatre companies: artistic directors Andre Bishop of Playwrights Horizons in New York, Bill Bushnell of Los Angeles Theatre Center, and Stan Wojewodski of Baltimore's Center Stage; and Bill Stewart, Managing Director of Arena Stage in Washington. There was a consensus of support for Passanante's view that the practice of play development had become abused and overused. One company interviewed has abandoned its "playlab" series this season, with an intention to focus on fewer scripts, and a commitment to produce those that are read.

All the directors agreed that play development is a valid and indeed vital exercise if it is seen as one link in a longer chain of a development process, not an end in itself. That is to say, once a theatre has committed to producing a playwright's work, a series of readings are helpful to playwright, director, and indeed actors and technicians. One artistic director went so far as to describe the stage reading as the "final checkpoint." "Anything that gets that far," he said, "ought to be produceable."

There were two instances in which readings as play development were felt not to be beneficial: first, where they are considered as an "audition" for the playwright; second, where they are offered as presentations of a "work in progress" as a perk, or benefit, for subscribers.

On the "audition" issue, several playwrights quoted by Passanante make the point that just as theatres have fallen into the trap of seeking funds for readings, not productions, so playwrights may be writing plays with the reading in mind, not the stage. Readings will, by definition, favor plays that read well; as playwright Mac Welman puts it, readings have created a corpus of plays that "work verbally but have no action, no visuals. It's a theatre hooked on the word." The absurd corollary is that a *King Lear*, a *Glass Menagerie*, a *Cherry Orchard*—"messy" plays—would be disastrous as readings.

"This Is Not a Nursery School."

There was a minority opinion expressed from the ranks of the artistic directors on the "reading as audition" issue. One director argued that any sense of "interference" with the playwright's script comes inevitably with the territory of the support system offered by the reading. He questioned the view that readings are a form of playwright abuse; better by far for there to be some activity, some exposure, than for the playwright to be sitting at home mailing out scripts cold.

... but don't play?

Moreover, he said, "it's too damned bad if it's seen as an audition. This is not a nursery school." And in a tough and competitive world, some playwrights will advance no further than the reading series just as some ball players will never get beyond the farm system. The point is that not everyone can bring plays to the point of production, but that the readings can help identify those who have the best shot.

Audience Participation

On the pitfalls of using readings as a "perk for subscribers," Passanante recites the horrors of audience involvement in play development, in the form of discussions in which the producer solicits the audience's comments or even ideas for rewrites. "It is difficult to imagine," she writes, "any other art form in which the opinions of non-professionals are given such credence."

We can readily draw on analogous acts of creation to support this. The composer works on his commissioned score in isolation, and the initial performance is the first exposure to the public. The painter works on his canvas, and at no time in the process leading up to the picture's public presentation is anyone likely to advise him that the blue background ought to be green.

The theatre directors were unanimous in the view that the lay public should be admitted only after the work is stage-ready. "We invite subscribers for a first look," said one, "but it's not to solicit their advice. We're interested in their reactions, not their opinion that Shakespeare ought to write Laertes out of *Hamlet*."

Again, a minority viewpoint was offered that audience involvement in theatre, at any stage of the process, will always be unique because the medium is unique. A play is never "complete" in the way that a piece of music is when it is scored, or a painting is when it is realized on canvas. Every time a play is performed, it is developed. In addition, the theatre is a singularly collaborative medium, with many people of many disciplines involved. Finally, because theatre is a verbal medium it *seems* to be as accessible as the other verbal media, television and the movies (although it palpably is not).

Thus, in the one director's view "everyone has an opinion, and is interested in expressing it, even if they don't know what they're talking about." This will happen in readings or, indeed, to an extent in performance, where a theatre audience is essentially participatory. The music audience politely awaits the end of the piece before responding. The theatre audience cheers and on occasion jeers along.

Laudable Goals in Danger

As a succinct summary of the bottom line position of both Jean Passanante in her article and the directors interviewed, we might offer the following: that the original goals of play development were laudable and worthwhile for both theatre and playwright; that these goals are in danger of being lost in a frenzy of readings for their own sake; that creating a play is a more collegial process than other forms of artistic creation, and dramaturgical advice is a necessary component of that process.

Alternatives

Andre Bishop of Playwrights Horizons described the best kind of dramaturgical advice as "based on an understanding of the spine of the play as perceived by the author, improving and refining on what the author has established."

That understanding, Bishop and others believe, is the responsibility of the theatre. The theatre must determine its artistic viewpoint, then involve writers in an organic way. Ideally, this involvement will transcend the agreement to produce just one play, and the theatre will select a handful of writers for a long-term relationship. When this works, the result is the cream of current theatre. Jean Passanante pays tribute to Stan Wojewodski and Center Stage by recalling reading Eric Overmyer's *On the Verge: or the Geography of Being* seven years ago, and describing the now-finished product of the collaboration between Overmyer and Center Stage as "very different from what I read."

Another instance is the admirable program developed by Playwrights Horizons (and funded by the W. Alton Jones Foundation) in which small-scale but complete productions of adventurous new work by the company's stable of writers is offered to audiences for \$5.00 a ticket, "less than a movie in New York!" proclaims Andre Bishop.

From the Front Lines

One director advises us, as funders, to follow this example. We should recognize that the cost-effectiveness of a grant for play development is often illusory and shallow, since it yields no fruit. Also: seek out and support those with a distinctive artistic mission who commit not just to a brief chat, but a full dialogue, with writers of talent. Reward theater's investment in a small number of fully-realized productions rather than a scattershot of staged readings. Never mind the width, feel the quality. And why not? It would not be the first time that we have something to learn from those in the front lines. ○

David Speedie is Program Director of the W. Alton Jones Foundation in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Items Of Interest

Hispanic Theater

Joanne Pottlitzer's **Report to the Ford Foundation on Hispanic Theater in the United States and Puerto Rico** is a readable, concise survey of this rich and long-lived Latino art form, beginning with its early history, and its development in this century, when family-based troupes barnstormed the Southwest in the 20's and 30's with shows of circus-like clowning, music, and political satire. A chapter recommends ways of stabilizing and fostering Hispanic theater; appendices list presenters, audience figures, etc. Contact: Ruth Mayleas, Program Officer, Education and Culture Program, Ford Foundation, 320 East 43rd Street, New York 10017; (212) 573-4706.

Knowledge Base

Karl Stauber of the Northwest Area Foundation in the Twin Cities recently asked a grantseeker to provide evidence that a membership renewal drive's first year success gave any indication of its multi-year impact on the retention of lapsed members. The applicant researched the question and found that apart from anecdotal information, no rigorously-executed research on the issue existed. The conclusion leads Stauber to seek interested parties to either identify an existing knowledge base in arts grantmaking (similar to that which has long existed in business) or to join him in "instigating a conversation" with appropriate agencies about the need for and development of such a base. Contact: Karl N. Stauber, Vice President--Programs, Northwest Area Foundation, W-975 First National Bank Building, St. Paul, MN 55101.

Artists as Consultants

The Zellerbach Family Fund of San Francisco has set up a program to provide seasoned performing artists to small and medium-sized community arts groups as consultants. For instance, Cynthia Wilson, a make-up artist with extensive theatrical experience, consults in her specialty, "including wigs, beards, and special facial effects (scars, blood, false noses, etc.)." Linda Howe at the ZFF has "gadzillions" of copies of the pamphlet describing the program, which has already been replicated by funding agencies beyond the Bay Area. Contact: Linda Howe, The Zellerbach Family Fund, 260 California Street, Suite 1010, San Francisco, CA 94111; (415) 421-2629.

Board Handbook

The Dade Community Foundation, responding to one of its primary requests, has produced the **Board of Trustees Handbook for Non-Profit Organizations**, a how-to approach with a personal perspective on setting up a workable and flexible board. Example: "Busy people make honest commitments, but it takes a lot of gentle, tactful prodding to help them keep those promises." Fee per copy for postage and handling: \$1. Contact: the Dade Community Foundation, Suite 3480, Miami, FL 33131-2343.

Autopsy of an Orchestra

Following the bankruptcy of the Oakland Symphony, the California Arts Council and other funders commissioned Melanie Beene to write a study of the factors leading to the orchestra's demise. Chapters in **Autopsy of an Orchestra** cover the symphony's history, artistic product, fundraising, labor relations, "final days", and other topics. Cost: \$7.00. Contact: JoAnn Anglim, Public Information Officer, CAC, 1901 Broadway, Suite A, Sacramento, CA 95818 or Melanie Beene, 2195 Green Street, #6, San Francisco, CA 94123.

Job Bank

The Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) publishes **The National Arts Job Bank**, a bi-weekly listing of arts employment opportunities, grants, fellowships, etc. Non-profits (including foundations) may list jobs free-of-charge. Subscription cost: \$36.00 per year. Contact: WESTAF, 207 Shelby Street, Suite 200, Sante Fe, NM 87501; (505) 988-1166.

Artists Fellowships Evaluated

Since 1976, The Bush Foundation's Fellowships for Artists Program has funded Minnesota visual artists and creative writers at levels that allowed them to work full-time on their art for 6 to 18 months. In 1984, the Foundation assessed the first six years of its program with a study, and it is now offering a 30-page executive summary of that evaluation to interested parties. The publication attempts to show what such a program can and cannot do for the individual artist, how it might indirectly benefit arts organizations within a given region, and how one might design and administer such a program. Contact: Sally Dixon, Program Director, Bush Artist Fellowships Program, The Bush Foundation, E-900 First National Bank Building, 332 Minnesota Street, St. Paul, MN 55101.

These items of interests were submitted by members of the Coordinating Committee of Grantmakers in the Arts. We've listed contacts, so that you may get copies of listed publications or further information.

Further Items . . .

Foundation Data

The Foundation Center's best source of data on foundation funding in the arts is **Grants for Arts and Cultural Programs**. Derived from the Center's Foundation Grants Index database, the publication indexes grants of \$5,000 or more reported for a 12-month period by approximately 475 U.S. foundations, including the 100 biggest. Both indices are available at The Foundation Center's libraries. The Center can also run customized grant searches for grantmakers doing specific analyses. Contact: Loren Renz, Director of Research, The Foundation Center, 79 Fifth Avenue/16th Street, New York, NY 10003; (212) 620-4230.

International Cultural Exchange

In preparation for its December, 1986 presentation to the Board of Trustees on proposed new program directions, the Arts and Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation commissioned Anthony Keller to prepare a report analyzing the current state of international cultural exchange. The comprehensive study, entitled **Aspects of International Cultural Exchange**, discusses many of the barriers that prevent the United States from being a more effective international partner, and offers recommendations, which, if implemented, could make the United States a more active participant in the international cultural system. The Arts International Program of the Institute of International Education and the American Council for the Arts, both in New York City, are now publishing the report as a book. It will be available in the late fall 1988/early spring 1989.

Americans and the Arts

Americans and the Arts V is a Lou Harris-affiliated survey of public participation (or the lack of it) in the arts. Among its findings: that Americans report a substantial decline in leisure time over the last 15 years, and that videocassettes have "explosive potential" as a way of getting arts to people. Cost: \$2.00. Contact: Publications Department, American Council for the Arts, 1285 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019; (212) 245-4510.

Arts Policy Report

Between November, 1984 and May 1985, Beth Murfee and Michael Washburn conducted 61 interviews with the members of the Independent Committee on Arts Policy and with other leaders in the arts nationwide for their **Report on Arts Policy** commissioned by the Arts and

Humanities Program of the Rockefeller Foundation. Among the questions they addressed: What groups are currently engaged in arts policy discussions? Is there a need for a more substantial forum on arts issues? How might such a forum be organized? Contact: Rockefeller Foundation, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10030.

Foundations and the Arts

Paul DiMaggio's report to the Ford Foundation entitled **The Role of Independent Foundations in Support of the Arts** surveys the history of that support and looks briefly at the arts programs of several foundations. It also addresses the scale and nature of individual donations, and other issues. Published in late 1985. Contact: Ford Foundation, 320 E. 43rd Street, New York, NY 10017.

Orcas Conference Notes

The Orcas Conference Notebook will be available from the New York Foundation for the Arts, 5 Beekman Street, #600, in early 1989. The Notebook, which will sell for \$75, includes commissioned papers by artists, reports, studies, examples of models and initiatives, selected readings, and conference proceedings from the Orcas Conference, being held in November 1988. The Orcas Conference, entitled "Creative Support for the Creative Artist," seeks to bring together artists, administrators, and arts funders for practical and philosophical dialogue.

Film and Video

The Jerome Foundation recently commissioned evaluations of its New York City Film/Video Program and its Midwest Film and Video Program. These 30-page studies mainly focus on the needs and priorities of film and video artists, though they do include evaluative comments on the programs' operation. Five-page summaries also available. Contact: Cynthia Gehrig, Jerome Foundation, West 1050 First National Bank Building, 332 Minnesota Street, St. Paul, MN 55101; (612) 224-9431.

This Newsletter

Grantmakers in the Arts Coordinating Committee members Wendy F. Bennett, Program Associate with The Bush Foundation in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Sarah Lutman, Executive Director of the Fleish-hacker Foundation in San Francisco, worked together to produce this newsletter. It was edited and written by Jim Paul, a Bay Area writer, and designed and typeset at the desk, using a Macintosh computer and Page-maker software.

News . . .

Reception in Toronto

Grantmakers in the Arts will be holding a reception during the Council on Foundations Annual Conference in Toronto this year. The reception will be from 6 PM to 7:30 PM on Tuesday, April 11th. This is a good opportunity to learn more about our activities and make suggestions for how we can better serve the field. Watch the conference schedule for further details.

Arts Grantmakers Annual Conference

As this newsletter goes to press, final registrations are being accepted for our fourth annual confer-

ence, held this year in Chicago on November 2-4. This year's theme is "Art Support: The Challenge of Funding Art, Artists and the Creative Process." The next Grantmakers in the Arts conference will be held in the fall of 1989. Look for more details in our next newsletter.

Research Task Force

Grantmakers in the Arts will soon put together a task force of arts grantmakers, artists, and arts managers to discuss ideas for a research agenda in arts funding. Any suggestions for individuals to serve on the task force or for research topics that should receive priority are most welcome. Contact Cynthia Gehrig, President, Grantmakers in the Arts, Jerome Foundation, West 1050 First National Bank Building, St. Paul, MN 55101.

Send Us Your Items

Future issues of the newsletter will continue our "Items" section—noting reports, books, and publications of interest to other grantmakers. We rely on arts grantmakers around the country to submit items for inclusion. To list your publication, please submit it with a 3 to 5 sentence summary of its contents and relevance to other grantmakers, the publisher's name and address, and its cost, if there is one. Deadline: March 1, 1989.

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**Grantmakers
in the Arts**

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