

March 18, 2026

Dear Colleagues,

Earlier this month, Milwaukee Repertory Theater hosted more than 60 artistic and executive leaders from theaters and cultural organizations across North America for a three-day convening titled *From Crisis to Catalyst: Transforming the Regional Theatre Landscape*.

We gathered at a moment when the challenges facing our field are both widely recognized and deeply felt: declining attendance, rising costs, shifting philanthropic priorities, and growing competition for audiences' time and attention. The purpose of the convening was not simply to revisit these challenges, but to create space for honest conversation among peers about how the regional theater movement might adapt and evolve in response.

Over three days of panels, presentations, and informal discussions, participants shared examples of new approaches emerging across the field, ranging from entrepreneurial models for developing new work, to expanded educational and community partnerships, to collaborations between institutions that allow theaters to share resources and strengthen their impact. Just as importantly, the gathering offered an opportunity for leaders to step away from day-to-day responsibilities and learn from one another.

The attached report, *Only Connect: Growing Together in Regional Theater*, captures key ideas and themes that surfaced during those conversations. It is not intended as a blueprint or a single strategy for the field. Rather, it is a snapshot of how leaders across the regional theater landscape are thinking about this moment and the possibilities that may lie ahead.

We hope the report will be useful as you consider the opportunities and challenges facing your own organizations. More importantly, we hope it helps spark further dialogue and collaboration across our field. The issues we face are shared ones, and the future of regional theater will be shaped not by any one institution, but by the collective imagination and leadership of many.

Thank you for the work you do every day to sustain this art form and the communities it serves.

With appreciation,

Chad Bauman  
Ellen & Joe Checota Executive Director  
Milwaukee Repertory Theater

Mark Clements  
Artistic Director  
Milwaukee Repertory Theater

# Only Connect: Growing Together in Regional Theater

By Mike Fischer<sup>1</sup>

*Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.*

– E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910)

“Why are we doing this alone? Is there something that we can learn collectively that will help lead to better solutions?”

By the time **Kelvin Dinkins, Jr.** (Lecturer at the David Geffen School of Drama at Yale University and former Executive Director, American Repertory Theater) posed this query, it was as much a call to action as a question.<sup>2</sup>

Dinkins was speaking during the final moments of a March 4-6 conference at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater gathering more than artistic and executive directors representing more than 60 North American theaters.

The title of the Milwaukee conference says it all: *From Crisis to Catalyst: Transforming the Regional Theatre Landscape*. The crisis is real. But so are the coast-to-coast transformative innovations and initiatives through which the regional theater movement is confronting this challenge and building a new future.

What does the current landscape look like? How is it changing? And how do those transformations offer takeaways so that we can build back better, as the catalysts we all aspire to be? This report offers an overview of how conference participants addressed these questions.

## 1. The Crisis is Real

*However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light.*

– Stanley Kubrick, 1968 interview

Nobody at the Milwaukee gathering was trying to whistle away the dark.

In the first moments of his keynote address,<sup>3</sup> playwright **Ayad Akhtar** reviewed some of the numbers: From 2023 to 2024, attendance at nonprofit theaters fell 20% and income fell almost 40%; already in decline in many theaters even before the pandemic, theater attendance is still down one-third from that pre-pandemic threshold.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the invaluable assistance, input, and insight provided by Samanta Cubias in preparing this report.

<sup>2</sup> A list of conference participants, as well as the participants in the simultaneously convened meeting of journalists from the American Theatre Critics Association, is attached as Exhibit A.

<sup>3</sup> Akhtar’s keynote address is attached as Exhibit B.

In the first moments of his presentation at the final panel two days later, **Mike Schleifer** (Managing Director, Lincoln Theater Center) presented a slide<sup>4</sup> gathering just a fraction of the press reports proclaiming that “the sky is falling.”

“We talk about this a lot,” Schleifer said. “We’ve all seen the articles about how it’s the end and that nonprofits are in meltdown.” In the first six months of 2023 alone, Schleifer noted, 35 nonprofit theaters closed.

Schleifer pointed out that costs are rising within an industry creating a bespoke product that doesn’t allow for corresponding increases in productivity; actors today do their job much as they did a century ago. Raising ticket prices to offset costs, theaters shrink audiences, becoming more exclusive and “unseeding the future.” “Costs are going up,” Schleifer said, “so we can’t cut our way out of this problem.”

Even as he recognized established methods of raising capital at the margins – including dynamic pricing, commercial enhancement, rentals, and corporate training – Schleifer suggested that if theaters hoped to substantially increase revenue, “we’ll need innovative, collective business strategies to do it.” “If our industry insists on embracing the status quo,” Dinkins later said during the same panel, “we’re treading water without a life preserver.”

## 2. Follow the Money

*Other industries are building things differently than we are. If we could take these systems and could map their model onto cultural production, we could change the world.*

– Frances Pollock, March 6 Morning Panel

In an era when public support for the arts is declining and competition for philanthropic dollars is rising, how might nonprofit theaters find new revenue streams? A panel and subsequent presentation on March 6 directly addressed this question.

Introduced a morning panel entitled “The Art of Enterprise: Reimagining How New Work Comes to Life,” **Mara Isaacs** (Executive Artistic Director, Octopus Theatricals) invited the audience to rethink its approach to attracting capital, “not just at the level of individual projects or at individual theaters, but at the level of the systems that support them.”

How, Isaacs continued, “might capital, leadership and values interact . . . to build structures that actually sustain artists and ambitious creative work”? How, as panelist **Frances Pollock** (Director, Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale University) asked, might theaters build “sustainable funds that aren’t reliant on donors or subsidies?”

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<sup>4</sup> Schleifer’s presentation is attached as Exhibit C.

Panelist **James Rhee** (Owner of Red Helicopter® based on the operating system in the bestselling book and rock opera of the same name) echoed the other panelists in urging that nonprofits adapt for-profit strategies involving branding and capital formation.

An illustrative example he posed – which stimulated numerous sidebar conversations during the conference – involved thinking in terms of investment dollars as well as philanthropic dollars while looking to attract investments from family offices as well as donations from corporations and individual givers. Concurring, Isaacs opined that “it’s often easier to ask people to invest than it is to ask them to donate right now. It gives them a sense of being a true stakeholder,” thereby “getting close to something that they otherwise wouldn’t get close to.”

In “rethinking the way work is developed,” Isaacs said, theaters open themselves to “capital and organizational structures allowing for freer experimentation.”

Scary? Sure. Unfamiliar? Absolutely. Bound on occasion to crater? Indubitably (Pollock, for example, offered an anecdote involving her own perilous effort to launch an arts-oriented venture capital fund). Will the models proposed by this panel work for everyone? Surely not. But are they models that might work for some theaters, in an environment where one size will never fit all? Maybe.

Anticipating what Schleifer and Dinkins would say during their panel later that day, Rhee rhetorically asked the audience: “Isn’t the real risk to not take risk – to not do anything?” Sometimes, Rhee insisted, “not taking risk is an actual risk.” “We can never grow if we start from a place of fear,” **Shaunda McDill** (Managing Director, Pittsburgh Public Theater) insisted, during the final conference panel. “We must start with a sense of what is possible.”

While buffeted by pandemic crosswinds, Milwaukee Repertory Theater counterintuitively *raised* its already record-setting capital campaign goal of \$66 million to \$78 million, thereby enabling the dramatically remade arts complex within which the “Crisis to Catalyst” conference unfolded. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, in lines made famous by Robert F. Kennedy, some people see things as they are and ask “why?” True to their role in making dreams come alive on stage, our theaters need to be envisioning things that never were and asking, “why not?”

### **3. Dreaming Big**

*I dwell in Possibility –*

*A fairer House than Prose –*

– Emily Dickinson (1862)

During the ensuing presentation over the noon hour, Dinkins and **David Schmitz** (Interim Executive Director, American Conservatory Theater) discussed the initial exploratory phase of efforts to establish a Collaborative Fund for the Performing Arts (“CFPA”) – a fund that is anticipated to raise a minimum of \$5 billion for the Performing Arts and potentially grow to \$50

billion over the next 25 years – with a goal of eventually establishing “barrier-free access to live performing arts as a fundamental civic right for every child and adult in the United States.”<sup>5</sup>

Arising from Dinkins’ 2023 “Crisis Summit” convening of 13 executives across the field, which grew into a group of volunteer leaders and later a funded research project, the research phase launched in June 2025, followed by a convening of 23 arts and philanthropic leaders later that same month. The CFPA is envisioned as operating at a scale large enough to function as sustainable civic infrastructure rather than as a comparatively unstable series of charitable donations.

Schmitz candidly acknowledged that there are currently more questions than answers: Would there be a firewall between funders and operations? What criteria would govern fund distribution, and what efforts would be made to ensure inclusion at the table of historically excluded voices? Would the scope and size of such a fund give traditional public and private investors an excuse to step back? Might the fund garner attention and philanthropic dollars from non-arts funders? How might the requisite trust be established between the fund and the industry? Given its projected 25-year time horizon for fully achieving its goals and attaining maximum social impact in repairing the social fabric, how might the fund account for changes in the theater landscape and the world in the interim?

As with Isaacs’ morning panel, Dinkins and Schmitz’s noontime discussion of the CFPA is a reminder to dream big; when we do so, we tend to think more imaginatively about the here and now as well as the time to come. But even as we boldly envision a bigger and brighter future, we must live and work toward it within the present. Book-ending the conference’s middle two presentations, its first and final panels offered various roadmaps for moving forward from where we stand to where we want to be.

#### **4. Building Tomorrow Today: Education**

*In a world which prizes a pose of exhausted knowingness, children’s fiction allows itself the unsophisticated stance of awe . . . [It] can reteach you how to read with an open heart.*

– Katherine Rundell, *Why You Should Read Children’s Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise* (2019)

How might theater companies stay true to their artistic mission, prove relevant to their communities, and raise money, all at once? Schleifer made clear that scaling up theater education – simultaneously mission-driven and monetizable – offers one integral answer. Alliance Theatre artistic directors **Tinashe Kajese-Bolden** and **Chris Moses** – speaking as part of the conference’s first and final panels, respectively – offered one compelling example.

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<sup>5</sup> The CFPA presentation is attached as Exhibit D.

Embarking on a seven-year research project in Atlanta tracing what happens to young people when they attend theater, Alliance received results that offered concrete, substantive confirmation of what every theater maker intuitively knows.

“Children that came up through our early childhood theater programs,” Kajese-Bolden shared in a March 5 panel asking “What Does Engagement Mean,” not only entered the formal education system by reading at a higher level. They also sustained those advantages through subsequent grades. They paid better attention. They had fewer behavioral problems. They were staying in classes longer.

“The most exciting thing,” Kajese-Bolden continued, “was that they could better hold multiple opinions at the same time,” had “greater tolerance and empathy for other people,” and “left with a greater sense of hope – hope that they could find themselves in language because they found a sense of belonging inside of their body.”

In the same moment in 2021 when the Alliance was publishing these results, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a report chronicling the mental health crisis confronting young people. The report was eye-opening and ominous. That it was released at the same time as the Alliance report was, for the latter, also fortuitous.

As Kajese-Bolden and Moses both noted, the Alliance study offered a proof of concept that theater could be relevant to – and was deserving of funds from – non-arts funding sources concerned about the social fabric and civic well-being of the community. Four years after the Alliance shared the results of its study, such funding allowed the Alliance to open the Goizueta Stage for Youth and Families, a new performance space dedicated to TYA theater.

“We went to foundations that didn’t necessarily care about the arts” but did care about literacy, education, and mental health, Moses noted. “The reality is that philanthropic dollars have shifted,” Kajese-Bolden said. “They are looking for investments that will have a measurable impact on the community . . . Sustainability is being indispensable to our schools, to our youth, to our communities.”

Build that, and the dollars will come.

“Making theater about more than just theater is everything,” Schleifer said, in highlighting the Atlanta example. “Instead of thinking about how we can go into very small funding pools and get a significant portion of the funding, why wouldn’t we go to massive funding pools and get a very small percentage of the funding?”

## **5. Purple Haze: Making Art in a Divided America**

*Democracy and theater rose at exactly the same moment and in exactly the same part of the world. They have never been separate. Never.”*

– Joseph Haj, March 5 Afternoon Panel

As both Kajese-Bolden and Moses pointed out, the Alliance makes art and forges community within a red state; in seeing their context as an opportunity rather than a threat, its leaders are not alone.

“It is a privilege to produce theater in a politically ‘purple’ state,” **Chad Bauman** (Executive Director, Milwaukee Repertory Theater) said, in opening the conference on the evening of March 4.<sup>6</sup> “Our audiences span the full ideological spectrum,” Bauman continued. “What unites them is the desire to come together for a shared live experience that entertains while deepening empathy and understanding . . . Our theaters are among the rare community assets that can unite us.”

Chairing the March 5 “Civic Engagement” panel, **Blake Robison** (Producing Artistic Director, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park) made a similar point. Noting that the Playhouse board and audience are both politically divided, Robison’s stated goal is for “everybody to come in and hear something they believe and also an alternative point of view.”

Responding as part of the same panel, Kajese-Bolden agreed, while clarifying that for her and the Alliance, “not every show can speak to every point of view”; her goal, she explained, was to ensure that the Alliance’s body of work as a whole addressed multiple points of view and thereby hopefully fostered dialogue. **Snehal Desai** (Artistic Director, Center Theatre Group) also agreed; programming is a “long game,” he said, and a company’s body of work must therefore be judged in the aggregate.

Both Kajese-Bolden and Desai acknowledged the additional challenges programming posed for them as global majority artists who weren’t always judged by the content of their work rather than the color of their skin. “Just being in this space and in this position, I was a threat,” Desai said. “My body is a political canvas,” Kajese-Bolden added, agreeing with Desai that their intended messages – in what they say and how they program – must often fight that much harder to be heard.

Each offered variations on the theme subsequently sounded by fellow panelist and global majority member **Joseph Haj** (Artistic Director, Guthrie Theater): “I can include my identity and my politics in my art making, but I can’t squeeze the whole of my art making into my politics.”

Haj’s formulation offered a microcosm of what he subsequently drove home: “Theater has never been far from civic discourse”; one can’t read playwrights like Aeschylus or Aristophanes and conclude otherwise. The issue isn’t whether the theater we make should or shouldn’t be political; it’s always already intrinsically political. The issue, rather, is whether we’re promoting a politics that fosters dialogue and engagement rather than preaching predictable agitprop to the choir.

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<sup>6</sup> Bauman’s March 4 conference-opening remarks are attached as Exhibit E.

“At our best,” Bauman said in his opening remarks, “we create spaces where people encounter ideas that challenge them without being alienated, where disagreement can coexist with respect, and where curiosity is valued over certainty.”

Bauman continued: “We model the kind of civil discourse our democracy depends on by inviting audiences not to arrive with answers, but to leave with questions, greater compassion, and a deeper understanding of one another.”

## 6. Imagining Together: Collaboration

*Peace is the state of distinctness without domination, with the distinct participating in each other.*

– T.W. Adorno, *Subject-Object* (1969)

What Haj and Bauman envision is what the conference itself repeatedly embodied – through the panels it created and the conversations it engendered in the hallways and at the bar, over breakfast and dinner and through the three very different Milwaukee Repertory productions that those attending the conference saw: Akhtar’s *McNeal*, August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, and Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby Jr.’s homage to Fats Waller, *Ain’t Misbehavin’*.

Collectively, those productions as well as conference panels and informal discussions promoted genuine dialogism, in which distinct and sometimes conflicting voices engaged in the conversations through which relationships are built and common ground is forged. “Theater,” Akhtar noted in his opening address, “is a form of relationship. Living relationship. That relationship isn’t just institution-to-community. It’s person-to-person.”

The final conference panel also suggested various ways in which, much like the conference itself, such relationship building could be institution-to-institution.

**Jeffrey Herrmann** (Managing Director, Seattle Repertory Theatre) described the increasing collaboration between Seattle Rep and Seattle Children’s Theatre, which began with merging box office functions before subsequently combining IT departments as well as data and operations departments and culminating in a unified finance team under a joint CFO. Last Fall, that collaboration extended to a joint production (Larissa FastHorse’s *Fancy Dancer*).

Might there be more to come, involving merging HR, marketing, production, and education?

“My answer is that we’re dating,” Herrmann said. “We’ve had conversations,” but “there are real cultural differences between our organizations. That takes time to understand and leverage, and we don’t want to force it.”

Conversely, financial exigencies led to merger discussions between McDill’s Pittsburgh Public Theater, Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera and City Theatre Company before there’d been a full-blown opportunity for such relationship-building conversations to take place.

Invited to advise and assist with this proposed merger, Dinkins recalled being surprised that such conversations hadn't happened first; echoing Herrmann, he noted that such preliminary conversations and the trust they'd hopefully engender were "rudimentary." McDill agreed. "We don't as a field spend enough time talking about relationships and belonging," she said.

All of which takes time. A running thread, throughout the conference, involved investing the time to cultivate relationships. Among our peers. With our audiences. In our communities.

"It takes time and empathy to build trust and understand one another," Herrmann said of the growing relationship between Seattle Rep and Seattle Children's." "You need to build a relationship with an audience brick by brick," Akhtar said in answering a question, "and that takes time." "It can take 5-7 years to build an audience and community base with which to dialogue," Desai said. "Moving fast can feel decisive, but speed without stability often leaves behind broken systems," Bauman noted in his opening.

You get the idea.

The darkness creeping in from the edge of town – with its attendant pressures to fix this and balance that, right now – can make it hard to find the time and patience, the love and empathy, the sheer grit and determination necessary to build relationships that will sustain our efforts in the long term.

But the risk of being short term and transactional – with our audiences and with ourselves, with the leaders of tomorrow we must mentor and with the younger members of our companies who, the conference made clear, can feel disconnected – means we don't take the time to truly cultivate our prospective partners and allies.

"We must start with values rather than the balance sheet," McDill said, just as we should "in partnerships and friendships and marriages." We must make time, said **B.J. Jones** (Artistic Director, Northlight Theatre), Haj, and Robison, for conferences that can train new artistic directors and provide support for incoming leaders – and especially those global majority leaders moving into an industry that has historically marginalized or excluded them.

We must take time for conferences like this one.

Finally, as with partnerships, friendships, and marriages, we must recognize that while no two are alike, each of them must respect what's unique and distinct about their constituent parts. Even as we come together, Jones said, we must preserve "our individual artistic identity."

We can be greater than the sum of our parts. But those individual parts matter.

Cue the music for a collaborative dream shared by Dinkins as the final panel wound down. Noting that his home state of Connecticut featured five geographically proximate flagship theaters – and citing the examples of Village Theatre in Washington and the Arizona Theatre Company, each operating from two geographically distinct locations – Dinkins wondered if there

is a way for a single management entity to operate and preserve what's unique about each of these five Connecticut venues.

"Would it be a more sustainable solution for financial resources and talent?" Dinkins wondered. "Would it be better for the funders that support these individual communities?"

Would it foster best practices involving education and HR, marketing and budgeting? Might it introduce synergies that not only reduce costs but also the stress placed by a frequently wasteful industry on the environment, as sets are repurposed and reused rather than immediately trashed?

## **7. The Principle of Hope: Our Communities, Our Audiences, Ourselves**

*It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce. It is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness.*

– Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (1959)

"I want us to contemplate optimism," Schleifer said at top of that final panel, noting as well that "positivity boosts effectiveness, and happy people have higher productivity."

Framed within the context of the struggles confronting our industry, there was nothing pie-in-the-sky about Schleifer's vision; writing from prison in Mussolini's Italy a century ago, Antonio Gramsci similarly suggested that making real change involved combining pessimism of the intellect about the lay of the land with optimism of the will about how we might nevertheless reshape the terrain.

We all know it's tough out there. That doesn't mean we must accept a doom- and-gloom scenario as inevitable; to do so makes it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Excitedly discussing their upcoming seasons and trading takeaways during session breaks, it was as clear that conference participants emphatically reject such prophecies as it is that winter's discontent will always – *always* – yield to spring and returning light.

"Hope may be the hardest thing to offer right now," Bauman said in his opening remarks. "But it is also the most necessary. It requires facing darkness directly and choosing to move toward something better."

As Akhtar repeatedly made clear in his opening remarks, that "something better" must begin with and be grounded in the art we make.

"When we work from the center of the art form," Haj said, "we can do astounding things . . . when I am working from the center of the art form, all things are possible."

But Haj also made clear that when the art is at the center of what we do, there can be "so many spokes out of it that can be really beautiful and meaningful to a community."

Better still, as Akhtar suggested: What we do in making those connections from our art to the outside world allows us not to just reflect our community but also help shape it, as one of a community's stakeholders.

Our art form works best, Akhtar insisted, when we're willing to follow our gut and take risks, operating from passion and inclination in service to our vision of what great theater can be. Our "privilege" – to use Jones' word for the opportunities we've been given as theater makers – is to not just interpret the world. As catalysts, we can help change it, even as we are simultaneously changed by it. That's what a conversation is. That's what relationships are.

"What's next?," Milwaukee Rep Artistic Director Mark Clements asked in his closing remarks. "This" – similar conferences, our industry, our art – "can be what we want them to be."

"The environment in which this conference unfolded," Clements said, "has been fruitful for discussion and openness, conducted with kindness." "Gatherings like this," Clements continued, "remind us of the best we can be," in conversations with ourselves, our funders, and our audience.

"People are hungry," Akhtar said. "They'll show up for something that promises some form of aliveness and community, and that relationship starts long before the curtain goes up and continues long after it goes down."

Beset by our industry's crisis, will we think small and settle for crumbs, or will we be catalysts transforming what theater can be and do, within ourselves and out in the world?

To ask the question is to answer it.

## **Exhibit A: List of Conference Participants**

**Jonathan Abarbanel**, Theater Critic, WDCB-FM Public Radio; *Windy City Times*  
**Braden Abraham**, Artistic Director, Writers Theatre  
**Ayad Akhtar**, Keynote Speaker; Playwright and Novelist  
**Carly DiFulvio Allen**, Managing Director, Syracuse Stage  
**Suzanne Appel**, Managing Director, South Coast Repertory  
**Michael Barakiva**, Artistic Director, Cleveland Play House  
**Chad Bauman**, Ellen & Joe Checota Executive Director, Milwaukee Repertory Theater  
**Maggie Boland**, Managing Director, Signature Theatre  
**Randy Bryant**, President & CEO, Ten Chimneys Foundation  
**Debby Buchholz**, Managing Director, La Jolla Playhouse  
**Emilaya Cachapero**, Co-Executive Director, National and Global Programming, TCG  
**Ben Cameron**  
**Lindsay Christians**, Food and Culture Editor, *The Cap Times*  
**Mark Clements**, Artistic Director, Milwaukee Repertory Theater  
**Oline Cogdill**, Critic, Florida Theater on Stage  
**Chris Coleman**, Artistic Director, Denver Center Theatre Company  
**John Collins**, Executive Director, The Goodman  
**Kristen Coury**, CEO and Producing Artistic Director, Gulfshore Playhouse  
**Samantha Cubias**, Documentarian  
**Snehal Desai**, Artistic Director, Center Theatre Group  
**Jeremy Dewey**, Executive Director, Kansas City Repertory Theatre  
**Kelvin Dinkins Jr.**, Consultant  
**Kitty Drexel**, Editor-in-Chief / Queen Geek, New England Theatre Geek / ATCA  
**Ross Egan**, Managing Director, Asolo Repertory Theatre  
**Liz Eichler**, President & Stage Insights Chair, League of Cincinnati Theatres  
**Tim Evans**, Executive Director, Northlight Theatre  
**Jon Faris**, Managing Principal, AMS Planning & Research  
**Peter Filichia**, Correspondent and Weekly Commentator, Broadway Radio  
**Amanda Finn**, Chair, American Theatre Critics/Journalists Association  
**Mike Fischer**, Documentarian  
**Carlton Ford**, Managing Partner & CEO, Management Consultants for the Arts  
**David Daniel Friscic**, Critic and Writer, *Broadway World*  
**Angela Gieras**, Executive Director, Shakespeare Theatre Company  
**Jen Uphoff Gray**, Artistic Director, Forward Theater  
**Joe Haj**, Artistic Director, Guthrie Theater  
**Jay Handelman**, Editor, Artsbeat.org  
**Judy Hansen**, Immediate Past Board President, Milwaukee Repertory Theater  
**Lou Harry**, Vice Chair, American Theatre Critics/Journalists Association  
**Brad Hathaway**  
**Jamie Herlich**, Managing Director, Zach Theater  
**Jeffrey Herrmann**, Managing Director, Seattle Rep  
**Donna Lynn Hilton**, Artistic Director, Goodspeed Musicals  
**Bill Hirschman**, Founder-Critic, *Florida Theater On Stage*  
**Rebecca Hopkins**, Managing Director, Florida Studio Theatre

**Mara Isaacs**, Executive Artistic Director, Octopus Theatricals  
**David Ivers**, Artistic Director, South Coast Repertory  
**Tim Jennings**, Executive Director / CEO, Shaw Festival  
**BJ Jones**, Artistic Director, Northlight Theatre  
**Shannon A. Jones**, Executive Director, TheatreSquared  
**Brandon Kahn**, Managing Director, Alliance Theatre  
**Tinashe Kajese-Bolden**, Jennings Hertz Artistic Director, Alliance Theatre  
**Emily Knapp**, Consultant, Management Consultants for the Arts  
**Aaron Krause**, Critic & Writer, BerkshireFineArts.com  
**Kate Lipuma**, Executive Director, Writers Theatre  
**Vanessa Logan**, Managing Director, Goodspeed Musicals  
**Chris Mannelli**, Executive Director, The Huntington  
**Joel Markus**, COO & Managing Director, Gulfshore Playhouse  
**Shaunda McDill**, Managing Director, Pittsburgh Public Theater  
**James McNeel**, Managing Director, City Theatre Company  
**Martin Miller**, Executive Director, McCarter Theatre Center  
**Chris Moses**, Artistic Director, Alliance Theatre  
**Kim Motes**, Executive Director, Chicago Shakespeare Theater  
**Tom Parrish**, Managing Director, Berkeley Repertory Theatre  
**Frances Pollock**, Director, Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale  
**Gerard Raymond**, American Theatre Critics/Journalists Association  
**James Rhee**, Owner, Red Helicopter  
**Cynthia Rider**, Managing Director, Hartford Stage  
**Blake Robison**, Producing Artistic Director, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park  
**Peter Rothstein**, Producing Artistic Director, Asolo Repertory Theatre  
**Dorothy Ryan**, Executive Director, Theatre for a New Audience  
**Mike Schleifer**, Managing Director, Lincoln Center Theater  
**David Schmitz**, Interim Executive Director, American Conservatory Theater  
**Florie Seery**, Managing Director, Yale Repertory Theater  
**Martha Wade Steketee**, President, American Theatre Critics/Journalists Association Foundation  
**Mike Stotts**, Executive Director, Paper Mill Playhouse  
**Suzanne Sweeney**, Managing Director, Indiana Repertory Theatre  
**Karen Renee Topham**, Owner / Reviewer, ChicagoOnstage.com  
**Ed Tracy**, Publisher, CONVERSATIONS | PicksInSix®  
**Angel Ysaguirre**, Executive Director, Court Theatre

## Exhibit B: Ayad Akhtar Keynote Address (March 5, 2026)

I want to thank Mark [Clements] and Chad [Bauman] for the invitation to address you all this morning. I'm honored to be in my hometown before the gathering of our community of theater makers. In my remarks this morning, I'm going to endeavor to lay out a picture, and some history, of the situation before us and before our beloved art form.

But in hearing me speak, I'd like you to keep something in mind. I'll be addressing you from a perspective that's a little different than my resume. I'll be speaking not as an artist in the theater, per se, a playwright—which I am, of course—but I'd like permission to address you all as a peer, as a participant, an observer, a part of the ecosystem whose sum is greater than any of its parts. Everyone in this room plays a pivotal role in what we do. For the purposes of this speech, hear me as one who sees himself as involved in our collective endeavor, one who has been paying attention not just to what affects him, but what might be affecting us all.

It's a strange time for live entertainment. In the wake of COVID lockdown and the widely documented rise in isolation and loneliness, the experience economy, as it's sometimes called, is actually booming.

Live comedy just had its biggest year in history—the top 10 touring comedians grossed \$400 million in 2024, up 52% from the year before. Nate Bargatze, a comic from Nashville whose act is basically storytelling about his dad and about his confusion with everyday life, sold 1.2 million tickets in a single year and is now the highest-earning touring comedian in the world—his language spoken to an audience, his “monologues,” if you will, putting him in the company of rock bands like Coldplay and U2.

Netflix—the company that trained an entire generation to stay home and chill, that is, to not really pay attention to what it has on offer—is now spending hundreds of millions of dollars to build permanent physical spaces where people can be together. “Netflix House” in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, is 100,000 square feet in a mall, in a former Lord and Taylor, where fans gather for live interactive theatrical experiences—with working actors—based on shows from the platform. Interact with Wednesday from Addams Family. It's been packed since the day it opened. Dallas is live now, too. Las Vegas in 2027. The company wants one in every major city in the world.

Concerts are surging. Sports are surging. A Mastercard survey found 44% of high earners spent more on experiences last year than the year before, and most of them said they feel they get better value from experiences than from things. Contrary to what we sometimes worry is happening, people are leaving their homes. They're spending real money to be in rooms together.

Just not so much for the theater—which has been headed the other direction.

From 2023 to 2024, attendance at nonprofit theaters fell 20% and income fell almost 40%. Overall, theaters are still down a third in audience attendance from pre-pandemic highs. We are closing or cutting down the size of our seasons, with inflation, of course, being a major culprit. Costs rising without new audiences to pick up the tab means contraction.

For a time, one of our most important theaters, CTG, had to shutter the Mark Taper Forum. The Public has ended its direct production of *Under the Radar*. Shorter runs, smaller casts, simpler sets. Some theaters are looking to share set-building operations, others HR and marketing staff. Three out of four first-time single-ticket buyers don't come back. And, of course, so many of us are increasingly wondering if the subscription model that sustained regional theater for decades is viable.

And in fact, all this isn't just pandemic hangover and post-pandemic inflation—for in fact so many of our theaters have had declining audiences for years before 2020. In considering our situation, there can be an instinct to blame funding—we are chronically under-resourced, too dependent on the market. If we had the kind of public support the theater enjoys in some other countries, we could solve this.

But the German example suggests otherwise.

Germany has arguably the most generously supported theater system in the world—roughly 140 publicly funded theaters with permanent ensembles, their own buildings, repertory systems. Government subsidy covers more than 80% of operating costs. The German theater landscape—dating all the way back to Goethe and Schiller—has UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status.

And yet they're facing the same crisis. The most recent data show German theater audiences still 20% below pre-pandemic levels, with opera losing a quarter of its audience—and underneath that, a longer-term decline that stretches back decades.

The money is there. The infrastructure is there. The audiences are still leaving. Which suggests the problem isn't primarily about resources. It's about something in the relationship between theaters and the people they're supposed to serve. The audience isn't gone. It's just going somewhere else.

Let me suggest that one way of looking at live entertainment forms that are working is that they've figured out—or are benefitting from—what I might call relationship.

The comedian has been in conversation with the audience long before the live event—through specials, podcasts, clips, social media. By the time you're in the arena, or the presenting theater to see their act, you know this person. The live show is the culmination of a relationship, not a cold call, if you will.

The experience economy seems broadly to have understood that people want to belong to something, not just attend something. The theater used to really understand this.

The Group Theatre, the Royal Court under George Devine, the Public under Joe Papp—three great theatrical successes of the last century in our language that have shaped our art form globally. Robust, history-making institutions that understood their work as being connected to building community, where programming was about building an audience, building its capacity

to meet challenging, invigorating, ground-breaking work. And able to do so because these theaters were in genuine dialogue with their audiences. Earning the right to challenge by proving they were essential. Each did it in their own way.

The Group Theater trained actors into a shared inner life, and a shared revolution of naturalism on the live stage. They built a permanent company—Stella Adler, John Garfield, Elia Kazan, Sandy Meisner—and trained together, summers in the country working on Stanislavski and rehearsing productions, building a shared vocabulary of aesthetic and emotional truth, and a political vision.

When Harold Clurman directed Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, and *Awake and Sing!* in 1935, the power of that work came from the fact that this company had developed a common gestural and emotional language over years. Actors were listening to each other and speaking in a way audiences had never seen on an American stage. Odets himself was a product of the company—an actor who became a writer because the Group's “process” unlocked something inside him.

The Royal Court Theater under George Devine trained playwrights to be participants in the culture's history. Most famously, perhaps, Devine staged *Look Back in Anger* by a 26-year-old playwright named John Osborne in 1956—a play no commercial producer would touch. But the point wasn't one risk on one play. He built a system: Sunday night productions without decor where new work could be tested cheaply. A writers' group that brought emerging voices into the building. Out of that structure came Osborne, then Wesker, Arden, Bond, and later Caryl Churchill.

He wasn't looking to pick winners of grants or prizes, or good reviews—he was creating the conditions in which a generation of writers could discover they had something to say, and that the theater was the place to say it.

If the Group trained a company of mostly acting artists, and the Royal Court trained writers, Joe Papp was a trainer of “audiences” par excellence. He put Shakespeare in Central Park and made it free. When Robert Moses tried to force him to charge admission, Papp fought him publicly and won. The principle wasn't charity—it was a conviction that the audience for serious theater was vastly larger and more diverse than anyone assumed, and that the barrier was access, not taste. He insisted on multiracial casting long before it was standard. At the Public he programmed *Hair*, *A Chorus Line*, *for colored girls*—each pioneering in its own way, each unthinkable for the commercial theater of the time. Papp never asked if the audience was ready. He assumed they were and built an institution around that assumption.

What these three theaters share—beyond their differences in time and place and method—is that in each case the audience was encountering something new, something that, at first, they couldn't have known to choose. The Group's audiences didn't walk in expecting a revolution in American acting. The Royal Court's audiences didn't know they wanted to hear from an angry 26-year-old from the provinces. Papp's audiences—many of them—had never been in a theater at all. In every case, the institution was offering its community a vital vision of the present, and proceeded to build a relationship around this search for the pulse of its time.

That's what theater can do that no other live form can. It can bring the vital and new into the room with an immediacy that is transformative. It's the thing that makes what we do irreplaceable.

Comedy gives you a communal experience, but you've pre-selected the sensibility—or it's been selected for you. You've probably heard more than just a few of the jokes already. Netflix House gives you physical togetherness, but built entirely around what you already know and supposedly love, a love enabled in part by algorithms working at scale.

Theater, at its best, puts you where you haven't chosen what happens. Where what transpires one night can be quite different from the next. Where the living actor before the living audience creates something that can't be paused, can't be replicated, can't be served back to you because a machine decided you'd like it.

Our form is a stand-in for the present itself. Ever changing. Alive.

But here's what I think we have to be honest about. The logic of that world—which is the logic of serving people what they already want, reducing friction, minimizing surprise—is inside our thinking too. Because when audiences shrink, the understandable instinct is to program safer. Whether that's work that can be justified in a grant application, or seasons that won't alienate the remaining subscribers.

On the one extreme, programming assembled to match what Twitter thinks we should do. Or, on the other, what we assume the audience already wants. But the thing is, the audience can feel this logic at work. They may not name it, but they start to sense when work has been assembled out of obligation rather than conviction. Out of caution rather than passion.

And obligation doesn't burn. It doesn't draw people into a room.

Safe programming is exactly what fails to distinguish us from every other option, because Netflix and comedy do frictionless better than we ever will.

We can't out-algorithm the algorithm.

While the reasons for success at scale of forms like comedy and experiences like Netflix Houses can seem very clear to us indeed, the answer for the theater is necessarily murkier. There is no single answer to our predicament—which is partly what is most important about what we do. Theater is scaled to the human. To a room. To a community.

Finding the living pulse, being the living pulse, meant one thing to Papp and another to Devine, yet another to the seminal artists, the young artists, of the Group Theater and each of their audiences.

Our theaters can be sources of vitality and aliveness in today's world, but the vision of how to make that happen has to come from us—from our passion and ingenuity.

We must do what only we can do: lure and gather an audience together in a room, and astonish them with the surprise of the present. That's the work in front of us now.

The landscape is different than it was for Papp or Devine. The competition for attention is different. The economics are different. But the work is the same: building a relationship with the audience strong enough to sustain genuine searching. Finding out what that looks like today—taking something the audience thinks they already know, say, and making it new.

A beloved piece of IP like *Kavalier and Clay*, turned into an opera at the Met that has audiences lining up and devastated in equal measure. David Byrne, a rock icon, stripping the stage bare and making a theater piece that reminded people what live performance could feel like. Here in Milwaukee, taking a local tabloid story—Lawrencia Bembenek—and turning it into a hit musical written by a local legend, a piece of theater that could only have come from this city, for this city. In each case, the audience came in with one expectation and left with something they hadn't anticipated.

That's what searching looks like. It's not just one thing. And it requires a spirit and ethos that makes larger demands on everyone in our ecosystem—artistic directors, executive directors, boards, funders, critics.

Because this isn't anything one person in the ecology can do alone.

The searching I'm describing isn't abstract to me—I know it as a writer. It's what defines previews for me: three weeks on Broadway testing the work against a living audience every night. Risking jokes that don't land. Discovering where the complexity is too much, or not enough. Following an instinct even when you can't yet justify it.

Trial and error, in real time, with real people in the room. And when it works—the rhythms lock in and the audience's heartbeats start to synchronize? That's not a metaphor. It's been scientifically documented. And which is just one way of thinking about the essential moments of alive togetherness that have always defined, and will always define, our form.

And so the few suggestions I'd like to make come from a place of practice, from what I've learned that searching requires of me and the wonderful collaborators—designers, directors, actors—along whose sides I've worked.

**1) Follow your instincts.** We are a room of passionate people, passionate about our form. We gave up so much to do what we do. We love the theater. We have experiences in the theater that have defined us. The challenges of running a theater, of subsisting in the theater, can bury that passion. But ferreting out and following the instincts still rumbling around inside can connect us to that original passion. Find again (or feed) the fire that your audience will feel, because that's what they want to feel. That heat, that light, which, when it's glowing, is what draws them.

**2) Trial and error.** There is not an audience; there is your audience—with its history, its demographic, its challenges, its dreams, its self-identity seeking affirmation and challenge.

There is your staff and your set of relationships with artists. Inside these parameters, you can experiment—to search out the audience where it actually is, not where we want it to be. And here I want to say something that I think many of us feel but don't always say out loud. There can be a gap between our artistic passions on one hand and, on the other, the set of pressures that increasingly shape what we feel we're allowed to put on stage: the grant applications, the social media calculus, the pull toward what we think the audience already wants. These are all real forces, often pulling in different directions, and I'm not dismissing them. But it's worth being honest about the cost when the distance grows between what, in our guts, we believe is the right work and what we feel we have permission to pursue. The searching I'm describing requires a kind of internal freedom—the freedom to follow your artistic inclinations even when it's inconvenient, even when it doesn't fit neatly into a category, even when you can't quite justify it... in a press release. That freedom is hard to protect right now. But without it, we're not going to find our way to a living relationship with our audiences.

**3) Buy in.** We need to buy in. Everyone in the ecology has to buy in to the spirit of research, trial and error, passion—an ethic of searching, I might call it. Which, in many ways, is a constant educational process. And when I say everyone in the ecology, I mean our boards as well, which is an often under-discussed contingent in our industry. There's a difference between a theater that's failing because it's coasting and a theater that has had a challenging season because it's looking for something—and the people supporting the institution have to be able to tell which is which. I'm not saying anything particularly insightful by suggesting that board composition really matters. Who is on the board shapes what the institution can be. When boards see their only role—and are encouraged to see their only role—as fiduciary, guardians of financial stability alone, we cede leadership to a model where accountability isn't calibrated to the actual need. The need is artistic, communal, and civic. And yes, financial stewardship is essential, and financial health makes a lot possible. But it has to be understood by our boards as being in service of something, and our board has to understand what that something is: vision. Of course where it all begins.

Arriving at a real vision, communicating that vision in the work, requires a combination of qualities that the good leaders always seem to possess: know-how and curiosity. In my various board involvements with institutions over the years, the most effective and inspiring board members I've worked alongside have exactly this combination. Case in point: Greg Oberland, former board president of Milwaukee Rep, was President of Northwestern Mutual—as sharp and seasoned a business and managerial mind as you'll come across. But also endlessly curious about art and artists, about the process of theater, about the priorities of a not-for-profit. I remember many a call from Greg curious about how an artist like Mark or me would think about a situation, how we saw or didn't see the road ahead. I learned a lot from him, because he was in a permanent state of searching.

The critics, too, from whom I've learned the most share this quality with Greg—they come to the work with know-how but also with curiosity enough to see the play that's actually in front of them, not the one they expected or wanted. And when they do, often what they have to say helps me understand where I got it wrong or right, opening the path to my growth as a writer.

Criticism that searches is able to recognize, for example, when a theater is genuinely on the prowl for something valuable—even when the result is uneven—and to say so honestly in both directions.

Friends, colleagues, there is quarry in the field.

If we can figure out how to hunt it, the audience will come back.

To resume: theater is a form of relationship.

Living relationship.

That relationship isn't just institution-to-community. It's person-to-person.

The people in this room came to the theater for reasons that had nothing to do with white papers or funding prospectuses. You came with a need, a longing, a knowledge that what happens in a room with live actors and a living audience is different from anything else—somehow deeper, more transformative at its best than other forms.

We have to trust that.

Trust our curiosities and instincts. Trust our audiences.

I suspect the guidance we really need to flourish is less likely to come from market research than from the wellspring of wisdom and love and searching that brought you to this work in the first place.

The theater doesn't need to become more like Netflix or more like comedy. But it does need to reckon with what those forms have understood about this moment—that people are hungry, that they'll show up for something that promises some form of aliveness and community, and that that relationship starts long before the curtain goes up and continues long after it goes down.

The work is to become more fully what theater already is, but in real relationship with the audience that's actually out there now.

Thank you.

**Exhibit C: *Entrepreneurial Leadership in Nonprofit Theater* (March 6, 2026)**

Prepared by Camila Grisel H.H., Alesandra Reto Lopez, and Mike Schleifer

# Entrepreneurial Leadership in Nonprofit Theater

*Mergers and other new models for artistic and  
financial sustainability*



**I will share the deck.  
You should share it too!**

**Feel free to give credit to Camila Grisel H. H., Alesandra Reto Lopez,  
and Mike Schleifer, who created it, but no big deal if you don't.**



**The Sky Is Falling**

### A national theater crisis has lingered since Covid, while ...

Jun 3, 2024 — A national theater crisis has lingered since Covid, while Cambridge builds commitment to the stage. By Madeleine Aitken. Monday, June 3, 2024. [Read more](#)

### The box office is bleak. Here's how local theaters are ...

Mar 31, 2025 — With no major tentpoles and few hits, local theater owner **box office revenue is down 11%** compared to the ...

### Taking the temperature of theater in Chicago

Nov 26, 2025 — Three different times over the past year, **popular and longstanding Chicago stage theater spaces** have made headlines for their demise. [Read more](#)

### How Connecticut theaters have found themselves in 'cris

Jul 21, 2024 — Nationally, **theaters have been struggling** and in Connecticut venue reduced funding and ticket sales.

### Theatre in Crisis: What We're Losing, and What Come

Jul 24, 2023 — A look at this extraordinary moment of contraction for the U. complete list of closures since March 2020.

### With theater in jeopardy, how are L.A.'s top companies ...

Jan 14, 2026 — Layoffs reduced the staff by approximately 10%. Particularly damaging was the dismissal of several key associate artistic directors, veterans ... [Read more](#)

### Pittsburgh's three largest theater organizations consider a ...

Aug 22, 2025 — Facing steep financial headwinds, Pittsburgh's three largest theater organizations are in

### Broadway Meltdown: 2026 Set to be Theatre's Worst Year ...

Dec 29, 2025 — The fallout is swift and visible. Investors are pulling I abandoned. Development pipelines are drying up. In ... [Read more](#)

### 10 Questions About Theater in 2026

Jan 1, 2026 — Theater companies, as well as other cultural institutions, are struggling "Nearly 50 theaters, music clubs, museums, and galleries ... [Read more](#)

### How Can We Save Bay Area Theater From Collapse? 11 ...

Jul 15, 2025 — Amid dire circumstances for local theater companies, **11 directors, playwrights and**

### The Broadway Musical Is in Trouble

Sep 22, 2025 — Producers attribute the high **failure** rate to a number of factors. The costs of bringing song-and-dance spectacles to Broadway have skyrocketed ... [Read](#)

### Nonprofits struggling as financial setbacks hit New York's ...

Jul 27, 2023 — **New York's struggling performing arts community is facing financial setbacks.** From theatre to dance, we're seeing cuts and changes, with nonprofit ... [Read more](#)

### Theatre's Struggle: Will The Next Four Years Be the Final ...

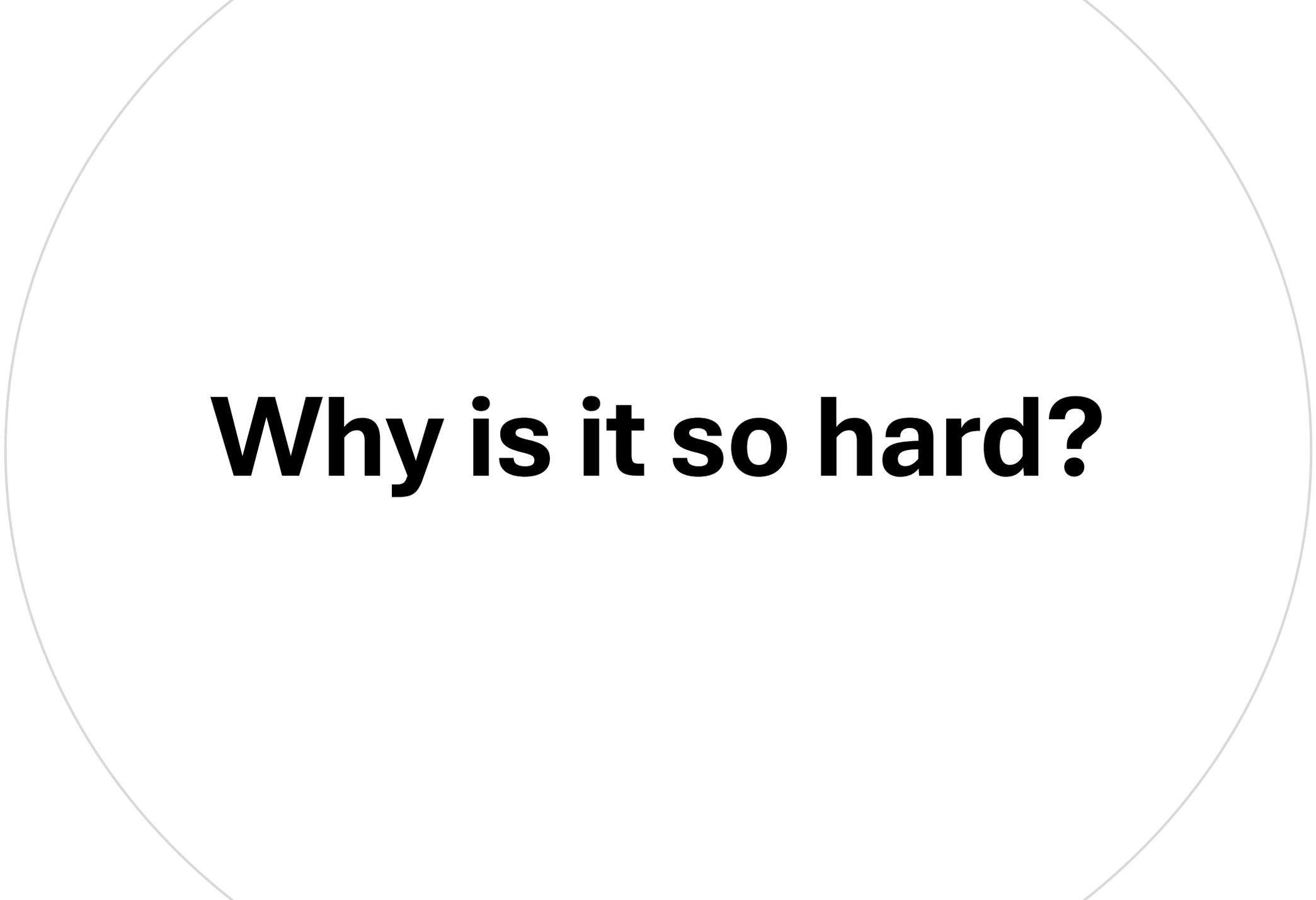
Jan 31, 2025 — The Ripple Effect of Theatre Closures. Theatre closings are like dom ever just one or two that close in our area. [Read more](#)

### 72 Regional Theaters, One Shared Crisis

Jul 28, 2023 — Michael Paulson spoke with producers and artist the country about the crisis their industry is facing. [Read more](#)

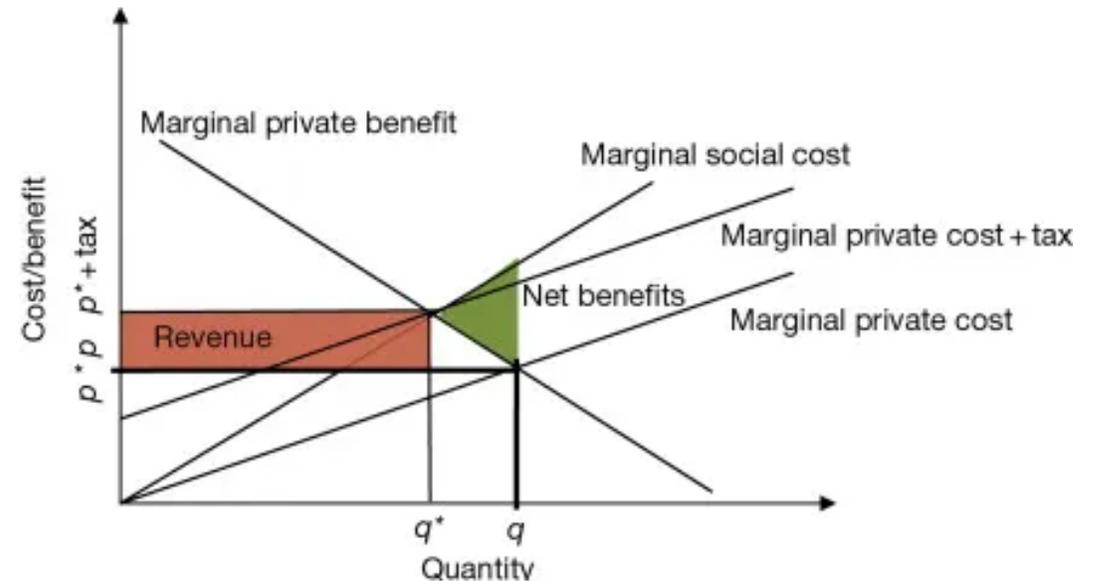
### A Crisis in America's Theaters Leaves Prestigious Stages ...

Jul 25, 2023 — As they struggle to recover after the pandemic, **regional theaters are staging fewer shows**, giving fewer performances, laying off staff and, in some cases, ... [Read more](#)



**Why is it so hard?**

- **Baumol and Bowen Effect**
  - **Cost Disease: Costs rise disproportionately against revenue in labor intensive sectors.**





- **Elimination of sweat equity & rise of worker rights**
  - Expansion of unions
  - Me Too
  - Racial Reckoning
  - WSYWAT
  - Intimacy Directors
  - Cultural and Sensitivity Specialists
  - Elimination of the 10 out of 12
  - 5-day work weeks

**Inflation since the start of the pandemic has increased 25%\***

\*Source: <https://www.bankrate.com/banking/federal-reserve/latest-inflation-statistics/>

# Related Challenges

- NEA funding restrictions & reductions
- Rising benefit and healthcare costs
- Tariffs and materials price volatility
- COVID-related operating disruptions and residual impacts
- Expiration of emergency public funding
- Increased self-curation of live events attendance (buyers are more selective)
- Staff and talent shortages across technical and administrative roles
- Expanded safety protocols and risk management requirements
- Workforce burnout and retention challenges
- Declining ancillary revenue (including reduced alcohol sales)
- Literal rioting in the streets



At least **35 theaters closed** between January and July 2023 alone.

The New York Times declared, “The American Theater is Imploding Before Our Eyes,” stating that “The American theatre is on the verge of collapse” (Butler, 2023).

**Insufficient revenue** was identified as a cause in nearly all closures.

The exploration of **innovative business models** has become increasingly relevant to the broader nonprofit theater and arts sectors, as existing models prove inadequate (Pension & Fristoe, 2025).



**What to do!?**

**Add \$300mm to your endowment**



# What will not work:

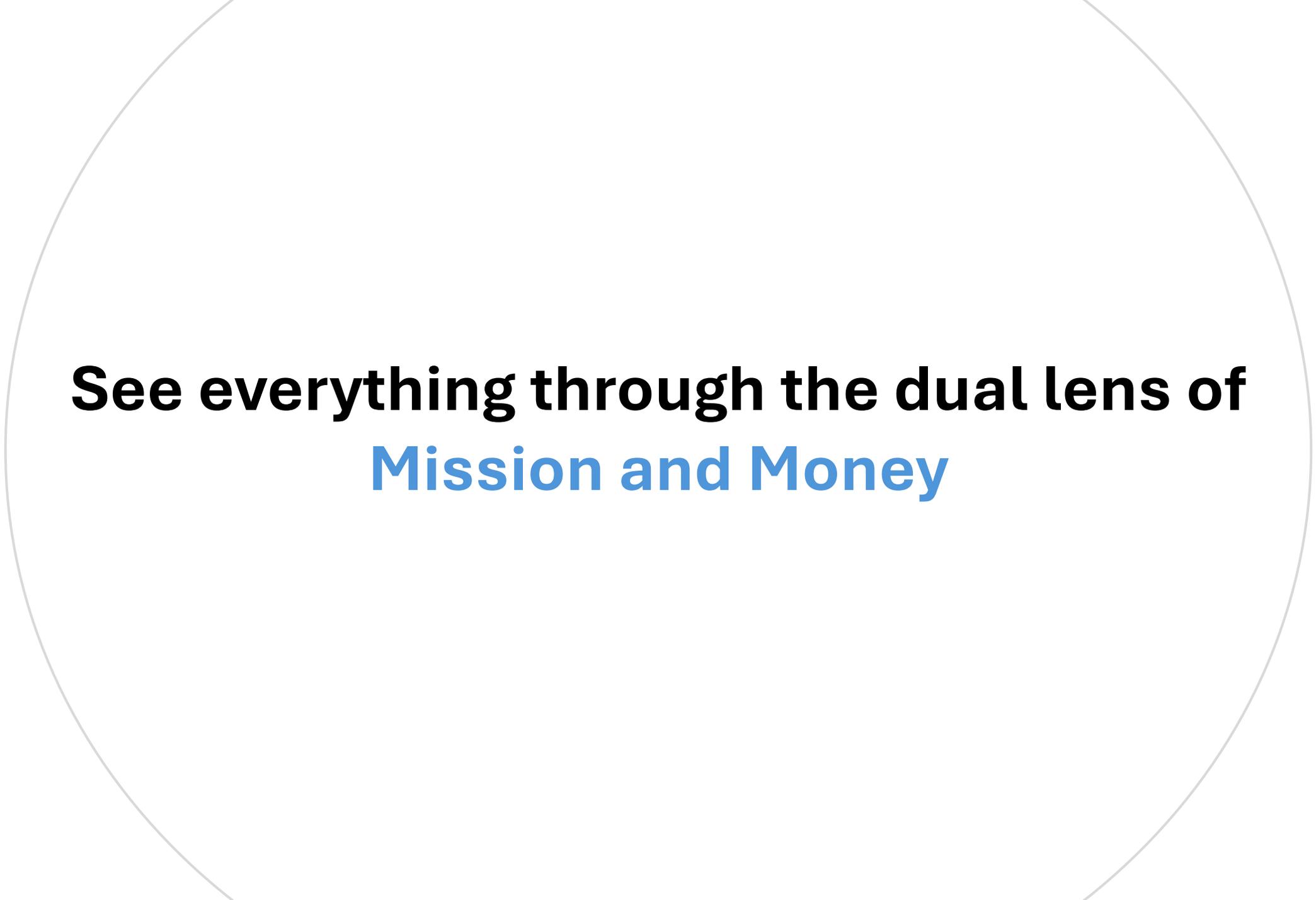
- **Doing only what we did before**
- **Diminishing and reducing to sustainability**



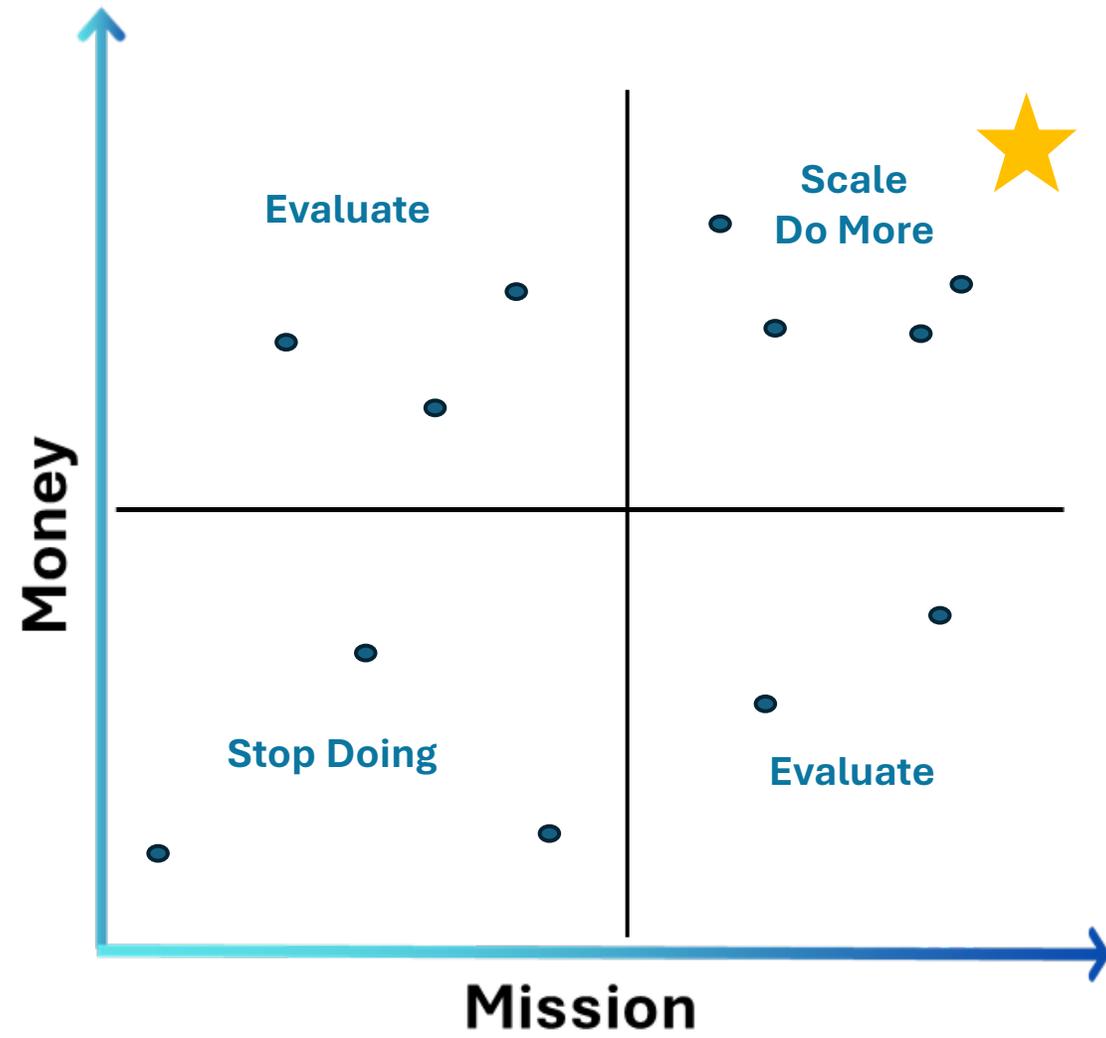
# Essential for Improvement

1. View everything through the dual lens of **Mission and Money**
2. See the glass **half full**
3. Practice non-profit **entrepreneurialism**





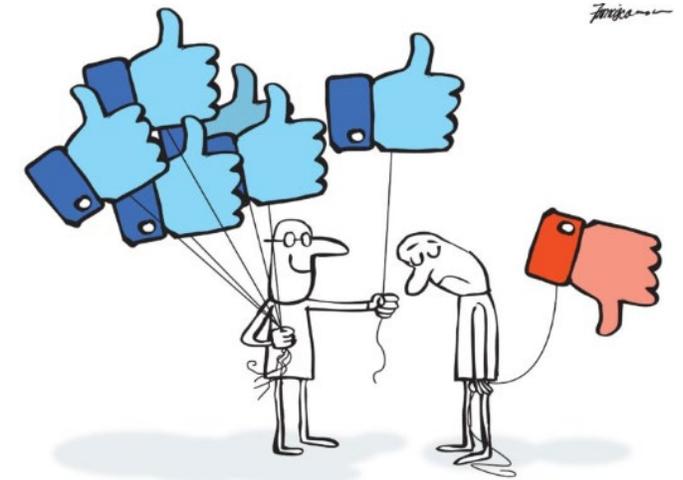
**See everything through the dual lens of**  
**Mission and Money**



# Positivity boosts effectiveness and productivity.

## *Happy people:*

- Have higher productivity and performance<sup>1</sup>
- Have increased creativity and innovation<sup>2</sup>
- Are better collaborators<sup>3</sup>
- Have a better immune system and can even grow taller<sup>4</sup>
- Have greater engagement and commitment<sup>5</sup>
- Are more resilient<sup>6</sup>
- Have lower turnover<sup>7</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Source: <https://hbr.org/2023/10/creating-a-happier-workplace-is-possible-and-worth-it>

<sup>2</sup>Source: <https://lpsonline.sas.upenn.edu/features/science-happiness-work-how-positive-psychology-can-increase-productivity>

<sup>3</sup>Study: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839212474272> / <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/what-secret-happy-collaboration>

<sup>4</sup>Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/05/learning/what-gives-you-hope-in-2026.html>

<sup>5</sup>Study: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12341457/>

<sup>6</sup>Study: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3132556/>

<sup>7</sup>Source: <https://www.shrm.org/about/press-room/employees-with-a-positive-employee-experience-are-68--less-likel>

# How do I become happy as a leader?

- Think happy thoughts (rewire your brain)<sup>1</sup>
- Meditate<sup>2</sup>
- Exercise<sup>3</sup>
- Therapy<sup>4</sup>
- Eat Klonopin and drink gin (but in moderation)
- Accept that some people can't spell happy, much less feel it



<sup>1</sup>Study: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01118>

<sup>2</sup>Source: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/mindfulness-meditation-practice-changes-the-brain>

<sup>3</sup>Source: <https://blog.nasm.org/happiness-boosting-benefits-working-out>

<sup>4</sup>Source: <https://www.springhealth.com/blog/how-therapy-and-coaching-can-enhance-leadership-skills>

# How do we make the staff happy

- Hire happy people
- Exit unhappy people
- Find time to see the staff
- Create a fun committee
- 10/1 – compliments to criticism



# **Reframe Stress**

**"Stress is the natural by-product of leading an interesting, impactful, and adventuresome life."**

**- Reade Fahs**

**Being happy does not mean avoiding conflict. Having conflicting ideas can be good and increase creativity.**



**" Creativity comes from a conflict of ideas."**

- Donatella Versace

**"I've always felt that a person's intelligence is directly reflected by the number of conflicting points of view they can entertain simultaneously on the same topic."**

- Abigail Adams

**" Creativity is that marvelous capacity to grasp mutually distinct realities and draw a spark from their juxtaposition."**

- Max Ernst

- You have worked to become a **positive** thinker
- You have audited your existing programs through the dual lens of **Mission and Money**



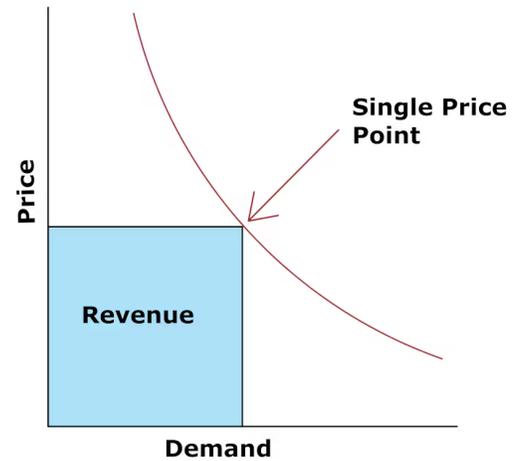


**Time for Non-profit  
entrepreneurialism**

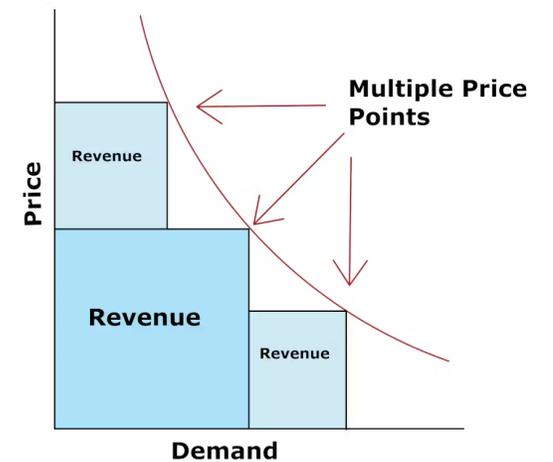
# Old school entrepreneurialism

- **Dynamic pricing**

Static Pricing



Dynamic Pricing



# Old school entrepreneurialism

- **Co-productions**



# Old school entrepreneurialism

- Reoccurring holiday show



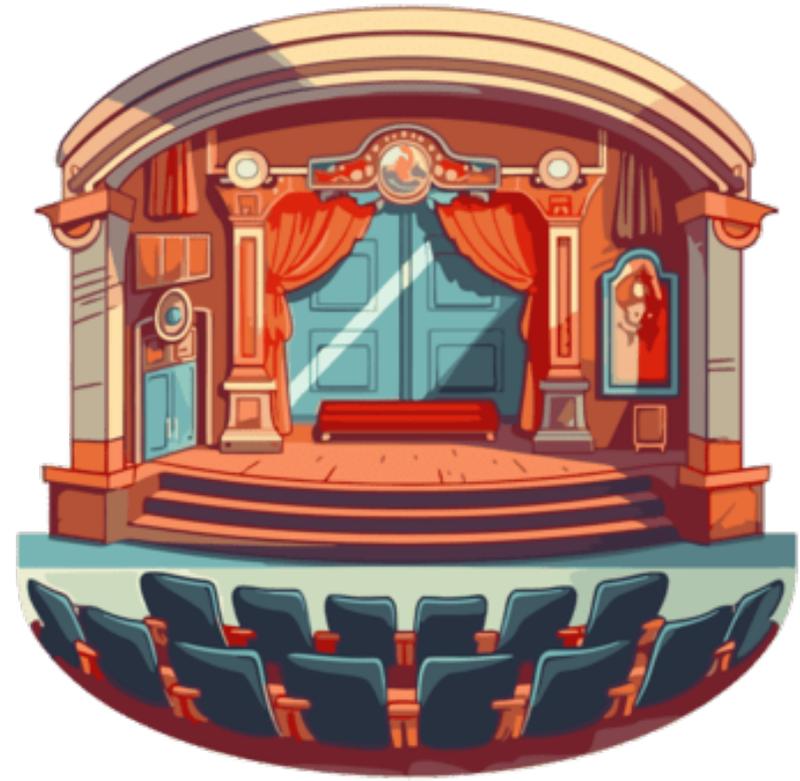
# Old school entrepreneurialism

- **Commercial enhancement**



# Old school entrepreneurialism

- Rentals



# Old school entrepreneurialism

- **Membership Models**



# Old school entrepreneurialism

- **Lifetime Value**



# Old school entrepreneurialism

- **Sustainability campaigns masquerading as capital campaigns**



# Old school entrepreneurialism

- **Academic Partnerships**



# Old school entrepreneurialism

- Monetizing Education

# Current entrepreneurialism

- Monetizing Education





# **Current Entrepreneurialism**

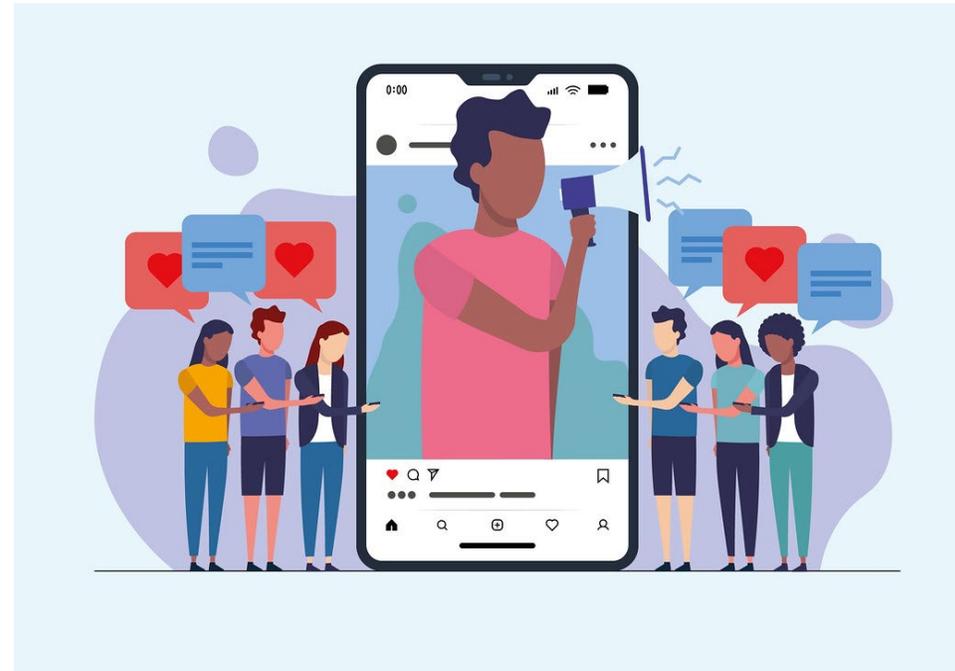
# Current entrepreneurialism

- Lines of Business



# Current entrepreneurialism

- Utilizing Influencers



# Current entrepreneurialism

- **Shared shops, building for others, having others build for you**



# Current entrepreneurialism

- **Corporate training professional development**



# Current entrepreneurialism

- **Multiple artistic directors**





## **Old school entrepreneurialism**

- **Monetizing Education**

## **Current entrepreneurialism**

- **Monetizing Education**



## **Future entrepreneurialism**

- **Monetizing Education**



# **Future Entrepreneurialism**

# Future entrepreneurialism

- Tax Credits and Tax Rebates



# Future entrepreneurialism

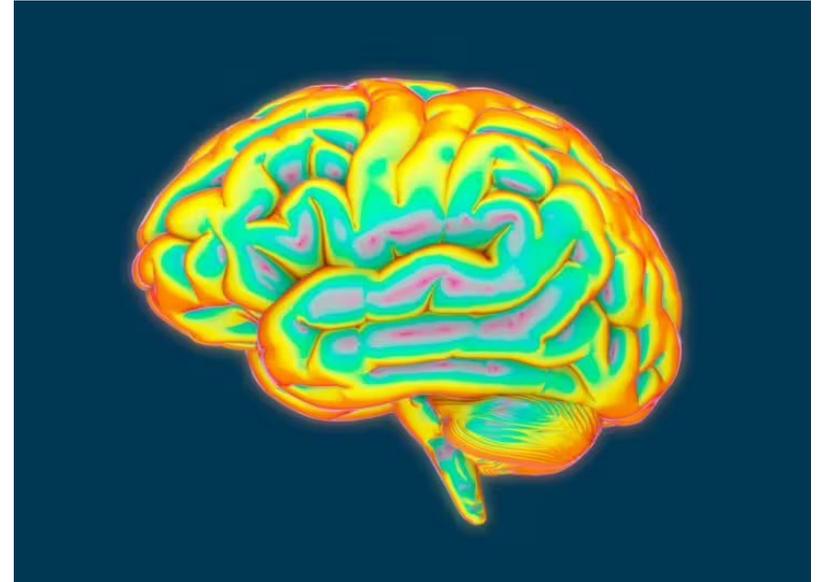
- Real estate moves



# Future entrepreneurialism

## Theater and Health

- Early literacy development (3rd grade reading proficiency)
- Drama therapy
- Autism therapy
- Alzheimer's and dementia engagement therapy
- Language acquisition and vocabulary growth
- Brain development through narrative processing
- General wellness
- Mental health treatment
- Heightened sense of empathy and increased social connection
- Improved school attendance
- Reduced school violence
- Reduced social isolation
- Reduced anxiety



# Future entrepreneurialism

## Arts and Health Research

- [NeuroArts Blueprint](#)
- [NeuroArts - The Woodruff Arts Center](#)
- [Your Brain on Art](#)
- [Music and Mind « Renée Fleming](#)
- [Arts in Health - Illumination Fund](#)
- [The impact of theatre on social competencies: a meta-analytic evaluation - PubMed](#)
- [The Play Was Always the Thing: Drama's Effect on Brain Function](#)
- [Impact of theatre interventions on mental health: a systematic literature review and meta-analysis - PubMed](#)
- [Effects of Drama Therapy on Depressive Symptoms, Attention, and Quality of Life in Patients With Dementia - PubMed](#)
- [Consuming arts and culture is good for health and wellbeing, research finds | Health | The Guardian](#)



# Future entrepreneurialism

- Monetizing Education



# Future entrepreneurialism

## Educational Research

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# Future entrepreneurialism

- **Public Advocacy**

- **TCG**
- **Professional Non-Profit Theater Coalition**
- **Collaborative Fund for the Performing Arts**
- **State and local advocacy**



# Future entrepreneurialism

- **Mergers and acquisitions**



# Future entrepreneurialism

~~• Mergers and acquisitions~~

• Collaborative Right Sizing



# **Collaborative Right Sizing Panel**

<https://www.inc.com/cindy-eby/why-nonprofit-mergers-are-no-longer-optional/91294447>

**Thank You!**



**Exhibit D: *Reimagining the Performing Arts* (March 6, 2026)**

Prepared by David Schmitz, Liz Alsina, and Samanta Cubias



# Reimagining the Performing Arts

Findings from Phase 1 of Research on the Collaborative Fund for the Performing Arts

Prepared by Amplify Leadership Advisors  
David Schmitz, Liz Alsina, Samanta Cubias  
February 2026



# Why This Work Began

## FROM CRISIS TO COLLECTIVE INQUIRY

- Initial idea was inspired by impact of SVOG on our field, increasing number of billionaires, and impact on audiences from disinvestment in arts education
- Brought to 2023 crisis convening of national theatre leaders
  - Shared concern about a post-pandemic fiscal cliff and uneven recovery
  - Recognition that short-term relief alone was insufficient
- Volunteers created a working group, recruited, raised funds, hired Amplify Leadership Advisors
- Field expanded from theatre to performing arts



# June 2025 Convening: The Hypothesis

## A NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE FUND COULD CHANGE THE SYSTEM

- June 2025 national convening of 23 arts and philanthropic leaders launched Phase 1 of the research
- Initial hypothesis:
  - A collaboratively funded endowment could provide stability and permanence
  - Advance equity and shared responsibility
  - Strengthen the performing arts as a public good
- The next step was launched to test this hypothesis with the field



# Draft Purpose Statement (as tested)

THE PURPOSE CREATED IN THE JUNE CONVENING AND TESTED IN CONVERSATIONS

To create generational change and advance society by establishing barrier-free access to live performing arts as a fundamental civic right for every child and adult in the U.S.

Further, to systematically and permanently deliver barrier-free access to the performing arts for every child and adult in the U.S., the fund will need at least \$5 billion in assets (providing \$250M a year for the field).



# What Phase 1 Asked

FIVE LEARNING QUESTIONS GUIDED THE RESEARCH

- 1 Rationale: What need and public value could the CFPA uniquely address?
- 2 Structure: What design features would build trust, equity, and effectiveness?
- 3 Messaging: What story will mobilize donors inside and outside the arts?
- 4 Feasibility: Under what conditions could the CFPA succeed?
- 5 Field Alignment: How do perspectives vary across constituent groups?



# How We Listened

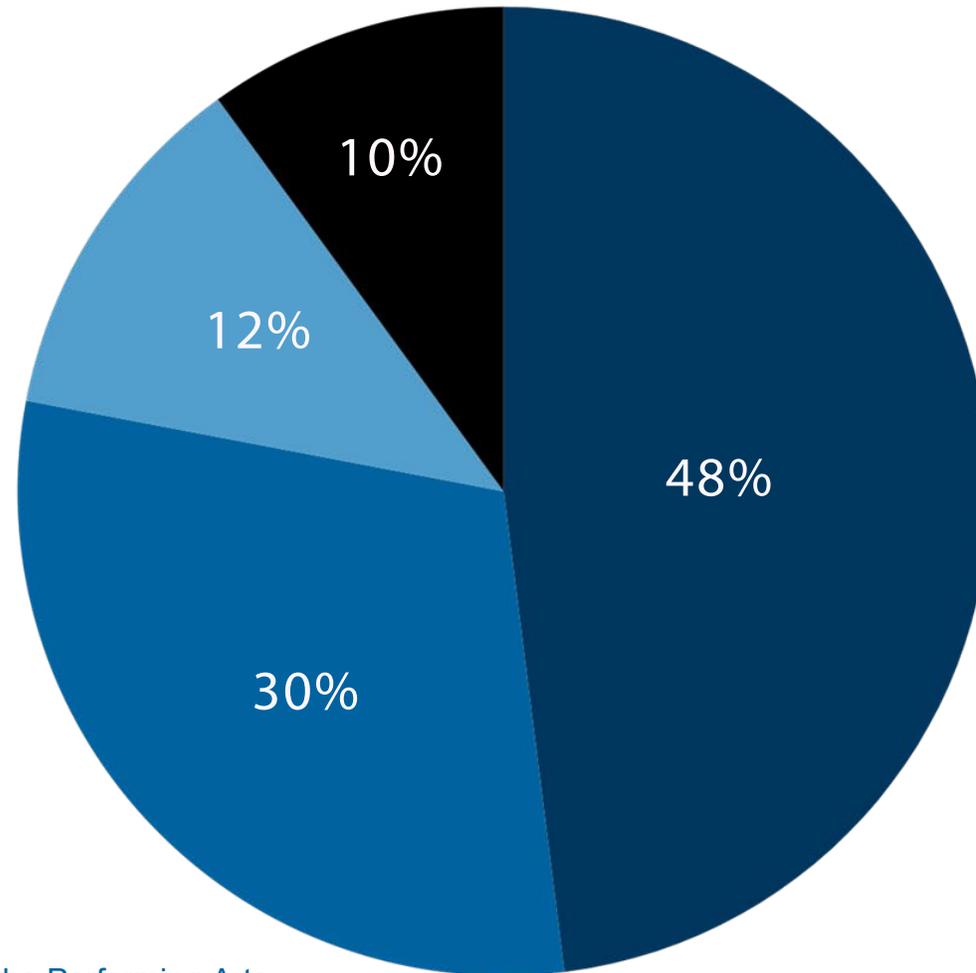
## SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

- 85 contributors engaged between June –October 2025
- Methods included:
  - National convening
  - Post-convening survey
  - One-on-one interviews
  - Eight focus groups
- Findings analyzed by coded source to balance individual and group input



# Who we talked to

## A CROSS-SECTION OF THE NATIONAL PERFORMING ARTS ECOSYSTEM



### RESEARCH CONTRIBUTORS:

- Practitioners and advisors
- Individual philanthropists and institutional funders
- Service and membership organizations
- Publicly funded entities and advocates



### KEY FINDING

The CFPA is widely seen as a vehicle to treat the performing arts as **civic infrastructure, not charity.**

- Referenced by more than 70% of contributors
- Participants framed the CFPA's greatest potential not simply in preserving institutions, but in strengthening the connective tissue of democracy itself
- More than half of contributors described the arts as a means of “civic healing” or “social reconnection” in an era of fragmentation
- One-third of contributors highlighted the need for systemic support for artists, educators, and small-to-mid-sized organizations

**“We’ve spent too long talking about saving theatres when what’s really at stake is saving community.”**



### KEY FINDING

The CFPA's credibility depends on **transparent, independent governance** with shared power.

- Trust was identified as the primary condition for legitimacy
- Participants repeatedly underscored that the success of the fund would hinge on how decisions are made, by whom, and with what degree of transparency
- Three-quarters of contributors favored a model governed by an independent board with decision making shared between practitioners and funders
- Preference for:
  - Independent governance
  - Shared decision-making between funders and practitioners
  - Clear, transparent criteria
  - Equity must be embedded in the fund's DNA with governance structures that distribute power equitably

**“Shared governance isn't just about representation – it's about legitimacy.”**

– Arts leader



### KEY FINDING

The most compelling story frames the CFPA as an investment in **civic healing and human connection.**

- Strong resonance with the spirit of the draft purpose statement, while the wording raised practical questions
- “Barrier-free access” needs definition
- “Fundamental civic right” inspires some and alienates others
- “Every child and adult” is mission -true but operationally vague
- The fund must be complementary and not comprehensive – the fund should augment rather than replace public, private, and local philanthropy

“Art uplifts the positives of our society and culture –offsetting the epidemic of loneliness.”



### KEY FINDING

More than 80% of contributors believe the CFPA is both **necessary and possible** – if **built for trust, early proof, and equity** .

- Early proof of concept will be critical
- Equity embedded in operations and outcomes
- Transparency and accountability
- Clear evidence that the fund is additive to existing funding systems
- It is important to ensure that launching a large -scale private fund doesn't inadvertently let the public sector "off the hook"

**"We've fought for decades to make arts funding a public responsibility. A private endowment can't become an excuse to withdraw."**



## Learning Question 5

# Field Alignment: How do perspectives vary across constituent groups?

### KEY FINDING

There is strong alignment on the purpose of the CFPA, with divergence on governance, scope, and decision-making authority.

- Stakeholders across all typologies agreed that the current patchwork of short-term, project-based philanthropy is insufficient for long-term sustainability
- Practitioners and service organizations emphasized participatory governance and peer-informed learning
- Individual and Institutional Funders emphasized accountability, stewardship, and risk management
- Public entities emphasized that the fund must be complementary to public investment
- Might the fund support non-profit and for-profit performing arts organizations alike?

**“We all want the same future. We just have different ideas about who should steer the ship.**



# What Phase 1 Established

## WHAT THIS RESEARCH CONFIRMS

- Clear appetite for a collaborative national fund to provide sustainable funding for the performing arts field
- Very few interviewed felt the task was impossible
- Shared agreement on foundational design values:
  - Trust
  - Equity
  - Independence
- Broad willingness across constituencies to remain engaged in Phase 2

**The how must be defined before a feasibility study can be useful.**



# From Learning to Design: Phase 2

## WHAT COMES NEXT

- Study existing collaborative funds
- Expand engagement to underrepresented and missing voices
- Refine purpose, scope, and theory of change
- Test governance and operating models
- Identify a potential long-term institutional home for the CFPA
- Resource the work



# Immediate next steps

- Q& A today
- The report is live, downloadable, and shareable (QR code)
- Spread the word to those who can help or folks we should know, especially folks outside of the theatre industry who you would recommend serving on the advisory committee
- Resource the work (raise funds for the next phase)



# Special Thanks

*Special thanks to those who funded the project:*

Kelvin Dinkins, Jr., the Barr Foundation, and Ralph Bryan.

*And special thanks to those who have volunteered their time for the last two years on this project:*

Debby Buchholz, Jennifer Bielstein, James Haskins, Jamie Herlich, Kimberly Motes, Martin Miller, Meredith Suttles, Meghan Pressman, and Sarah Williams.



# To download the report



**Exhibit E: *In the Arena: Leadership, Love, and the American Theater***  
(Chad Bauman opening remarks, March 4, 2026)

Good evening. I believe I know most of you, but if I have not had the pleasure yet of meeting you, I am Chad Bauman, the Ellen & Joe Checota Executive Director of Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

On behalf of Milwaukee Rep's Board of Trustees, Artistic Director Mark Clements, our incredible team of artists and staff, and the City of Milwaukee, welcome to Milwaukee Repertory Theater and the Associated Bank Theater Center.

Thank you for taking time away from your busy professional lives and families to join us here in the Midwestern tundra in March—when spring is technically on the calendar but not yet in the forecast. It truly means a lot to have you here with us.

When we first imagined our new home nearly a decade ago, we hoped it would become a hub for community, both local and national. A place where everyone feels welcome and inspired, and where artists are empowered to do their best work.

This week, we have three productions on our three stages, three more in pre-production and rehearsal, numerous educational programs throughout the community, and we are welcoming 81 guests for this convening. Seeing all of you here, alongside the vibrant work of artists throughout our building, affirms that this vision has become a thriving reality—and we are honored to share it with you.

As theater leaders, we are also grateful for this opportunity to step away from our daily responsibilities and gather together. The fact that we are here reflects a shared belief that American theater matters, and that how we lead matters just as much.

We are equally honored to be joined by members of the American Theater Critics/Journalism Association, whose voices help shape the national conversation about our work and its impact.

Together, this room represents a powerful cross-section of artistry, leadership, and media. It is our hope that this time fosters candid dialogue, deeper understanding, and renewed commitment to the role we play in the cultural life of our communities.

As I prepared for our time together, I found myself thinking about conversations I once had with Zelda Fichandler. When I asked her what it was like to lead a regional theater known for transferring work to Broadway, she pushed back. Regional theaters, she reminded me, were not founded to serve New York, but to serve their own communities.

For Zelda, success was measured by the depth of that relationship. Do people see themselves onstage, feel both challenged and affirmed, and leave changed in ways subtle but lasting? A theater that can do this consistently, she believed, is fulfilling its highest purpose.

Seen through that lens, success is not a destination but a practice. While our goals may be shared, the paths we take will be as distinct as the communities we serve. Those differences are opportunities to learn from one another and strengthen the field through connection. It is from that place of shared purpose and varied practice that we are here today.

### **Loving Our Audiences**

At the heart of theater leadership is a simple but demanding truth: to do this work well, we must fall deeply in love with the communities we serve.

We must love our audiences, and they must feel that love. When it is real, it creates trust. And trust transforms a theater from a place people attend into a place where they belong.

Belonging does not happen by accident. It is built through listening as much as speaking, through responding as much as leading. When people feel seen and respected, they do not simply buy tickets. They invest. They show up as partners in the life of the institution, and that relationship shapes every artistic and civic choice we make.

Some may believe that accessibility and broad welcome signal artistic compromise. I believe the opposite is true. To care for our audiences is not to retreat from responsibility, but to honor it. Loving our communities is not a failure of courage, but the foundation of it.

### **Programming from the Light**

Our love must be visible not only in how we welcome people, but in what we offer to sustain their spirits.

Our communities have endured unprecedented trauma in recent years: a global pandemic, racial violence, housing instability, economic upheaval, political polarization, and climate disasters. Our ability to process trauma is finite. The weight of these crises has contributed to a nationwide mental health emergency. People are frightened, exhausted, and searching for steadiness.

In moments like these, we are not passive witnesses, but rather have the power and responsibility to offer light.

Programming from the light does not mean ignoring pain or hard truths. It means refusing to let despair define the outcome. Hope, empathy, and connection are not luxuries, but essential to how people endure. Hope may be the hardest thing to offer right now, but it is also the most necessary. It requires facing darkness directly and choosing to move toward something better.

Offering light also means expanding whose voices are heard, including those long excluded. Our work and our communities are weakened when those voices are absent. We do this not out of obligation, but because the future we are trying to build cannot exist without them.

In the wake of September 11, *Come From Away* was created. Rather than centering violence or fear, it tells a story of ordinary people choosing care and generosity. Its power lies in its

insistence that even after profound tragedy, connection endures and becomes a source of resilience. The theater has the capacity to help communities heal. Hope, when offered honestly, is not naïve, but rather an act of leadership.

### **All Are Welcome**

If programming from the light is about what we offer, then welcoming from the heart is about who we invite into our homes.

Supreme Court Justices Scalia and Ginsburg were avid theatergoers, subscribing together for many years. It was well known that these ideological opposites were also close friends. Scalia said their bond endured because they challenged ideas while loving each other.

It is a privilege to produce theater in a politically “purple” state. Our audiences span the full ideological spectrum. What unites them is the desire to come together for a shared live experience that entertains while deepening empathy and understanding. Our theaters are among the rare community assets that can unite us.

In advocating for nonprofit status, Zelda said theaters were “like the university, church, and library, instruments of civilization.” Like the church, we should welcome all. What real impact do we have if our goal is to preach to the choir every Sunday?

At our best, we create spaces where people encounter ideas that challenge them without being alienated, where disagreement can coexist with respect, and where curiosity is valued over certainty. We model the kind of civil discourse our democracy depends on by inviting audiences not to arrive with answers, but to leave with questions, greater compassion, and a deeper understanding of one another.

### **What Endures and What Emerges**

The great playwrights from Sophocles to August Wilson are not produced because they are safely canonized, but because they still speak to something essential in us. Their work asks timeless questions, refusing to let us look away from who we are, how we treat one another, and what we owe the world we inhabit. When staged with conviction, these plays are not retreats into the past, but confrontations with the present.

At the same time, the soul is not a closed archive. Each generation arrives with its own language and urgencies, and new work gives shape to what has not yet been named. These voices do not replace the canon; they expand the conversation.

Audiences deserve both. It is an ongoing dialogue between what has endured and what is still becoming, between the stories that shaped us and the ones shaping us now. We must reject the false choice between artistic risk and financial stability. Audiences can be challenged and delighted, often at the same time. In fact, that tension is where some of the most powerful work lives.

Since reopening after the pandemic, Milwaukee Rep has produced world premieres by Dael Orlandersmith (twice), Catherine Trieschmann, Eleanor Burgess, Lloyd Suh, Eric Simonson, Gordon Gano, Idris Goodwin, Craig Lucas, Daniel Messe, Mark Clements, and Deanie Vallone. We have also recently announced a new \$2 million commitment to new work, which will see 6 new plays produced in the next 2 years as well as 3 new commissions. This work is bold, boundary-pushing, and deeply challenging, and it is being embraced by a growing audience. These productions are among our best attended and among the most produced plays in the country today.

We can produce known work and new work. We can entertain and provoke. We can do many things at once. That diversity is one of our greatest strengths.

### **Progress Without Abandonment**

Every era is shaped by a tension between tearing down and building up—and the American theater is no exception.

Change doesn't succeed just because it's urgent. It succeeds when it's paced well and carried forward by the people it affects. Moving fast can feel decisive, but speed without stability often leaves behind broken systems, drained budgets, and communities with fewer options than before.

Lasting change means knowing what can be rebuilt and what must be kept standing while it's improved. That requires careful planning and a willingness to bring people along rather than racing ahead of them. Going slowly can become an excuse for avoiding hard decisions, but moving too fast can create damage that takes years to undo.

Leaders must set the right pace: fast enough to address real harm, steady enough to protect institutions people rely on, and responsible enough to leave the community stronger than before.

### **With Hope and Gratitude**

Beneath discussions of programming, governance, audience development, and equity lie fundamentally different visions of our field and how it should relate to the people we are privileged to serve.

One belief is that theaters exist in deep relationship with their diverse communities; that trust is earned, not demanded; and that change endures when it is rooted in compassion, curiosity, and mutual respect. From this perspective, audiences are not obstacles to progress, but partners in it.

Another approach, articulated by respected voices in our field, frames the relationship between theater and audience differently. Here, disruption becomes the primary objective. The audience is something to be confronted, corrected, or even replaced, rather than brought along.

Time will settle this debate. A new generation of leaders will make their own choices, shaped by urgency, conviction, and lived experience—and that is as it should be. But history is clear about one thing: theaters endure because they create belonging. Change that lasts is not imposed; it is

invited, modeled, and sustained through relationships strong enough to hold disagreement without breaking.

We are all in the arena. The question before us is not whether American theater will change—it must and it will—but whether that change leaves behind a field that is stronger, more trusted and equitable, and deeply woven into civic life. We believe that when we choose love over antagonism, invitation over exclusion, and hope over despair, we give our field its best chance not merely to survive this moment, but to thrive beyond it.

Thank you for the work you do, and for the care, courage, and imagination you bring to it each day. We are showing up for our artists, our audiences, and our communities in good faith. We are grateful to gather with you, to learn from you, and to serve alongside you. The work ahead is difficult, but it matters, and it is work none of us has to do alone.

Thank you.