

LESSONS FROM THE

National Theater Project Pilot



NEW ENGLAND FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

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Prepared for
New England Foundation for the Arts

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Dear Friends,

The New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) invests in the arts to enrich communities. We have a special focus on building opportunities for artists to create and tour new work.

In 2006, growing out of NEFA's strong legacy of support for dance creation and touring through our National Dance Project, we worked in partnership with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to design a program especially focused on theater. We recognized existing resources in the field dedicated to producing theaters and presenters but we saw a unique opportunity to support artist-led theater ensembles that make new work, often using devised methodologies, and build that work to tour.

Why support ensembles? In part, we identified a great reservoir of talented theater-makers who needed support to share their visions with audiences across the country. We were drawn to their nimbleness and their nonhierarchical, community spirit. We also saw an opportunity to resource creative partnerships between artist ensembles, regional theaters, and performing arts presenters.

We launched the National Theater Project (NTP) as a two-year pilot initiative. We are pleased to share with our peers and stakeholders the outcomes of the pilot grantmaking of NTP in the form of this report from Chris Dwyer of RMC Research. NTP continues its grantmaking beyond the scope of our pilot years, but as the pilot has now come to its conclusion we find its learnings to be relevant and full of insight.

I make special note of the great contribution and leadership shown by NEFA staff, especially Quita Sullivan, NTP program manager; Meena Malik, NTP program coordinator; and Jane Preston, deputy director. I also thank our colleagues at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their leadership and the commitment they have made to this work.

Sincerely,



CATHY EDWARDS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The National Theater Project (NTP), a program of the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) developed in partnership with and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, was designed to create a national system of support for development and touring of professional artist-led devised and ensemble theater.

The impetus for NTP emerged from a study that identified the potential for ensemble theater to expand the boundaries of theater in the United States to both attract audiences new to theater and deepen the engagement of traditional theater audiences.

In seeking to bring visibility to the touring of original contemporary theater that is devised and ensemble work, the designers of NTP recognized the parallel need to develop a network of presenters, producing theaters, and other venues with the capacity to support the development of original work (production partners) and present the work (with subsidy support, in some cases). A goal of NTP is to engage all of the players—presenters, regional theaters, ensembles, and others—to support each other and strengthen the infrastructure/ecosystem. Over the past five years the conversations among program advisors and ensembles have changed from a focus on learning how to engage one type of venue, regional theaters, to many conversations about how to engage new audiences and sustain relationships with the many communities that have now been affected by highly compelling original work.

Background. NTP was launched in 2010 as a pilot program with 12 grantees and is now entering its fifth year of grantmaking, having supported 37 new theater works. Much was learned from the pilot about the best ways to support the developing field of artist-led, ensemble, and devised theater work and NTP has evolved considerably as the lessons have been applied.

The development and touring experiences of the pilot grantees were followed closely through a formal evaluation. Grantees were deliberately selected to represent a wide range of ensembles at different stages in the development process and with varied levels of experience in touring. All 12 ensembles completed touring the funded works in 2016, and their experiences offer lessons for other funders and theater artists funded through NTP and other sources.

PILOT GRANTEES

AARON LANDSMAN, MALLORY CATLETT, JIM FINDLAY

AMERICAN RECORDS

BUILDERS ASSOCIATION

BYRON AU YONG/AARON JAFFERIS

LATINO THEATER COMPANY

NATURE THEATER OF OKLAHOMA

PROGRESS THEATRE

RAINPAN 43

RUDE MECHS

SITI COMPANY

UNIVERSES

THE WOOSTER GROUP

City Council Meeting

ReEntry

House/Divided

Stuck Elevator

Solitude

Life and Times—Episode 2

The Burnin'

Elephant Room

Now Now Oh Now

Café Variations

Party People

Early Plays

touring works

The ensembles in the pilot represented a wide range of approaches to devising and collaborating to produce work. Sources of content included historical events, personal experiences, interviews, scientific information, transcripts of events and discussions, and literary texts. The topics of completed performances were also wide ranging: exploration of cultural identity (Chicano, African American and Puerto Rican), the effects of the mortgage crisis, public engagement in governance, immigration, personal effects of military service, ideals of social activists, evolution of species, and love and loss.

Program design. NTP design features (e.g., selection based on ensemble and work, funding for both development and touring, a network of Advisors) were based in part on the successful National Dance Project (NDP) that NEFA has led for 20 years. As the home to both NTP and NDP, NEFA facilitates opportunities for cross-disciplinary learning among theater and dance professionals and benefits both grant initiatives. NTP Advisors, a group of theater professionals, shape the selection process and provide feedback and support to grantees. Advisors are from both presenting organizations and producing theaters and include theater artists and consultants. Over the five-year period, approximately 26 individuals served as NTP Advisors.

PILOT ADVISORS

DAVID DOWER	<i>Arena Stage, DC</i>
CHARLES HELM	<i>Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, OH</i>
MICHAEL KONDZIOLKA	<i>The University Musical Society, University of Michigan, MI</i>
DIANE RODRIGUEZ	<i>Center Theatre Group, CA</i>
CLYDE VALENTIN	<i>Hip-Hop Theater Festival, NY</i>
CATHY EDWARDS	<i>International Festival of Arts and Ideas, CT</i>
MORGAN JENNESS	<i>Abrams Artists Agency, NY</i>
ROB ORCHARD	<i>Emerson College/Arts Emerson, MA</i>
MARK RUSSELL	<i>Under the Radar, The Public Theatre, NY</i>
SHAY WAFER	<i>651 Arts, NY</i>

The design of NTP has been adjusted in many ways over the past five years. As ensembles experienced challenges, NEFA and the Mellon Foundation stepped in to respond with program supports. For example, when small ensembles were challenged to manage tours while simultaneously carrying out development activities, NTP provided additional funds for tour administration. To encourage potential presenters to view work in progress, travel subsidies have been made available to presenters. When an initial networking gathering of pilot grantees and Advisors proved highly productive for building relationships and opening new doors for artists, the event became a regular part of the NTP induction process. To encourage artists and works representing diverse aesthetics, NEFA initiated a two-stage application process that assigns Advisors to work with promising applicants to prepare full proposals. These and other adaptations have continually improved NTP.

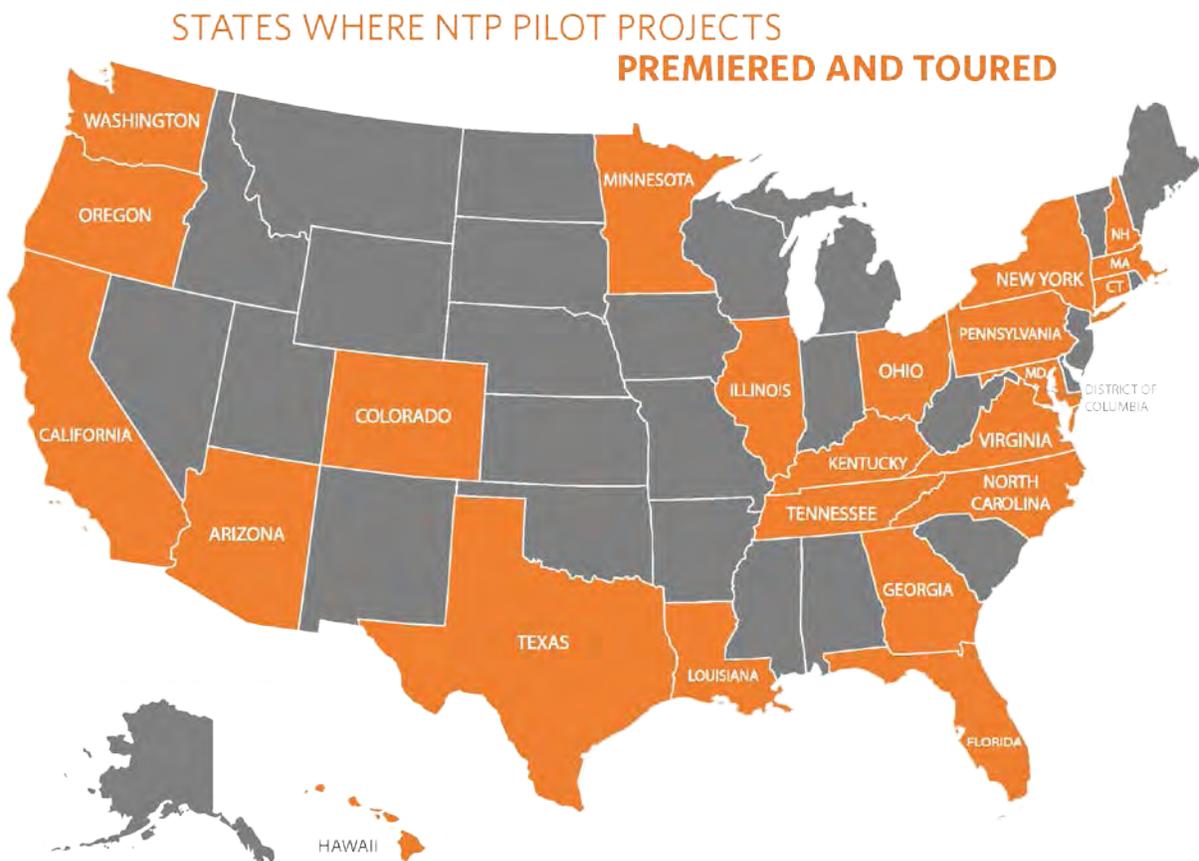
FEATURES OF THE NATIONAL THEATER PROJECT

- ARTIST-LED ENSEMBLES
- DEvised ORIGINAL WORK
- PRESENTER TRAVEL SUBSIDIES
- TOUR ADMINISTRATION FUNDS
- SELECTION BASED ON ENSEMBLE AND WORK
- SUPPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT AND TOURING
- EXPERIENCED THEATER PROFESSIONALS AS ADVISORS
- ENSEMBLES MANAGE POOL OF SUBSIDY DOLLARS FOR TOURING VENUES
- DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS PROVIDE SPACE, TECHNICAL SERVICES, ADVICE
- ADVISORS SHAPE SELECTION AND PROVIDE CONSULTATION TO GRANTEEES

Experience and Lessons From the Pilot

Theater ensembles in the pilot were awarded grants for development and touring, ranging from \$30,000 to \$60,000 for development and between \$40,000 and \$90,000 to support touring with the expectation that each would tour to at least three sites following a premiere performance. A few ensembles were ready to tour within the first year (e.g., American Records, Rainpan 43), others required about a year of development, and a few such as Progress Theatre and Rude Mechs required 24 to 36 months of research and development before successfully launching tours.

Development. Ensembles used development resources to work with different types of **partners**, including venues where they worked through technical issues, completed set design, conducted rehearsals, and conferred with consultants on dramaturgy, staging, and marketing. Some grantees used development resources to prepare community members for roles in performance (e.g., *City Council Meeting*). A few ensembles had extended or multiple residencies for conducting research and developing work. Ensembles learned that they could ask for all types of advice and support from development partners, who provided mentoring, networking, and advocacy assistance.



Advisors encouraged ensembles to begin **tour planning** early in the process and were often helpful in making connections for grantees. For those new to touring, the ramp-up involved securing tour administration staff and representation, reaching out to and developing relationships with presenters, and developing marketing materials. For some ensembles, taking on experienced consultants or staff in those roles proved critical to touring success. For entrepreneurial ensemble staff used to doing everything themselves, however, it was sometimes difficult to transfer connections and relationships to others.

After observing the experiences of the pilot cohort, the Advisors and NTP’s managers determined to prioritize funding projects that were further along in their development in order to reduce the time until work is available for tour. Without setting fixed criteria for level of completion, the consideration of development status has become more of a factor in selection decisions.

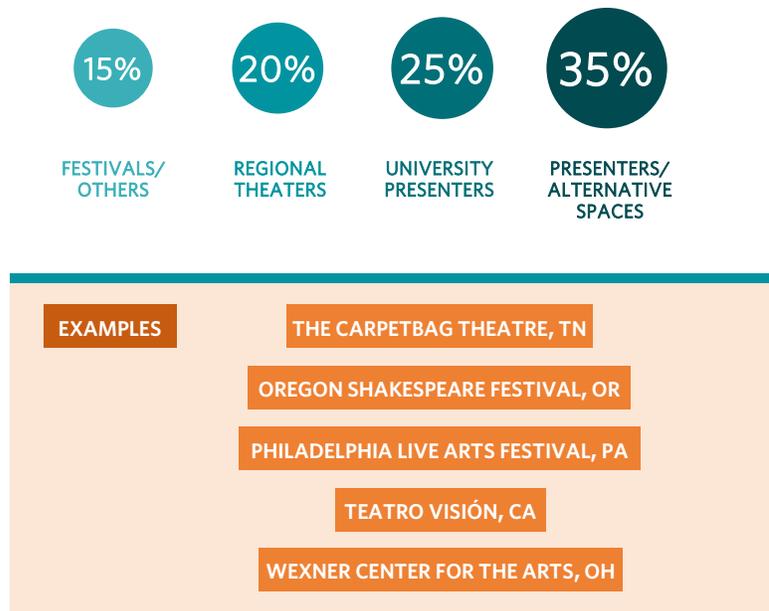
Scale. Most ensembles approached touring with flexibility of scale as a goal. At some point during either the development or touring phase, half of the ensembles designed productions at a smaller scale than the premiere version to enable touring to varied venues. American Records developed three versions of *ReEntry* to facilitate performances in sites such as military hospitals with few technical supports. Scaling down productions proved more challenging than expected for most ensembles, especially when multiple versions had not been anticipated at the outset. In some cases, ensembles needed several residencies to achieve satisfactory versions of the work scaled to different venues. Two-thirds of the 12 ensembles performed in both a regional theater setting and either a university presenting venue or another type of presenting space. In some cases, however, work that was originally designed at regional theater scale or for a long run at one venue proved difficult to adjust for touring.

Touring. The typical NTP grantee premiered at one site and toured to four additional venues (the number of tour sites varied from three to as many as nine). Collectively, the 12 ensembles reached well over **75,000 audience members** in about 60 venues in 24 states. Tour engagements ranged from single performances to longer runs of several weeks or, in one case, several months. NTP grantee cohorts that followed the pilot round had even greater national reach.

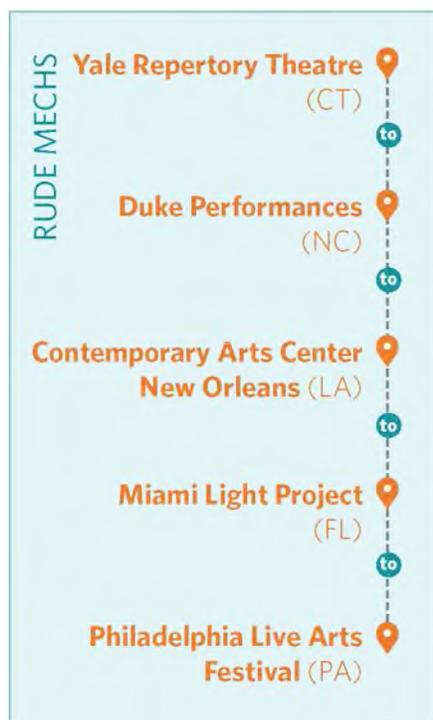
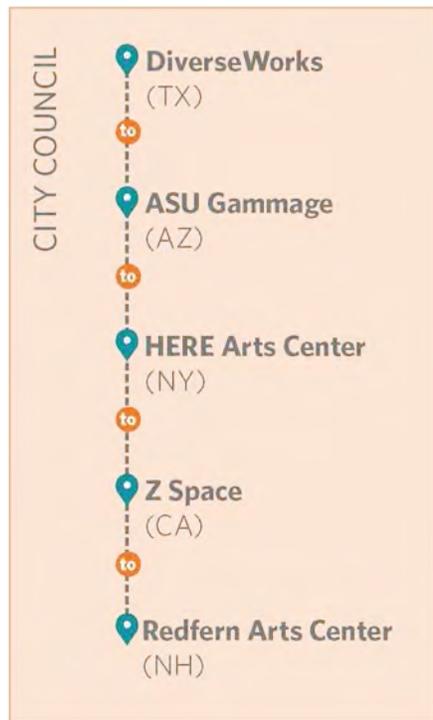
All types of venues successfully presented artist-led ensemble theaters: regional theaters; university presenters; contemporary art centers; and various types of alternative spaces, festivals, and groups of artists or producing ensembles. Over one-third of the venues were presenters, one-fourth were university presenters, and one-fifth were regional theaters. For the most part, any one venue presented one of the 12 ensembles, and nine venues presented two ensembles at different points during the four-year touring period.

The **motivation to present** an ensemble varied by venue, but most often the intention was to reach new audiences and actively engage them. American Records’ *ReEntry* engaged military and their families, *Stuck Elevator* served as a focal point for discussions about immigration in several communities, the game-like format of Rude Mechs’ *Now Now Oh Now* targeted a young and adventurous audience, and Latino Theater Company’s outreach to Spanish-speaking audiences helped to set the stage for building a network of Latino theaters.

TYPES OF VENUES



EXAMPLE TOURS



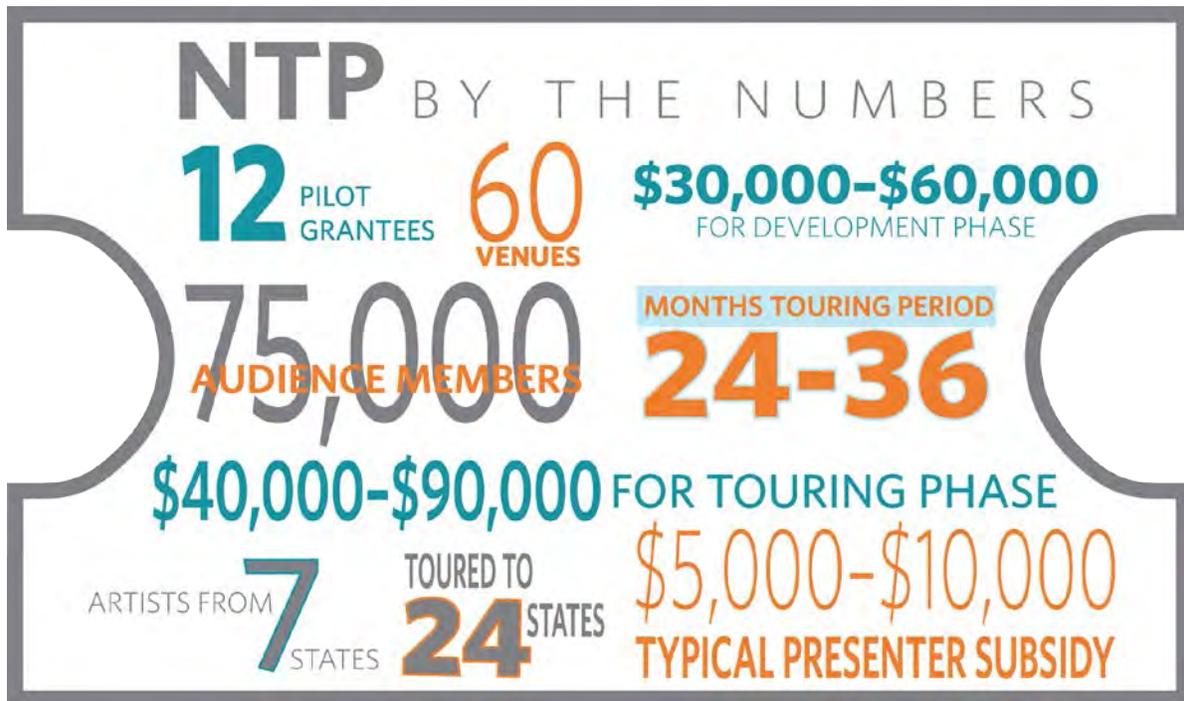
Touring subsidies proved important in securing sites. Ensembles were given flexibility in determining how much of the artist fee to subsidize for a given venue. Most subsidies were \$5,000 to \$10,000 although the percentage of artist fee represented by the subsidy amount varied greatly—typically 25% to 50%. In most cases ensembles chose to vary the amount of fee subsidy for each venue depending on the position of the venue in the touring plan. For example, whereas some ensembles were eager to present in major media markets early in their tours in order to generate positive publicity (e.g., Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s performances in New York City received national media attention), others were interested in investing in a relationship with a venue where they would likely be presented in the future and still others targeted venues with access to particular audiences. Although ensembles were often sought out by venues because of their ability to engage audiences in new and exciting ways (e.g., including community members as participants in performances), venues were sometimes unprepared for the advance work required to do so successfully.

Most ensembles expressed some disappointment with the effectiveness of **marketing** efforts to communicate about new work in powerful ways—and reported struggling with marketing departments to promote work in ways that would reach desired audiences. Time and resource constraints often prevented the implementation of creative marketing ideas generated by ensembles. Word-of-mouth did, however, attract audiences when there was enough time. Ensembles learned some strategies that helped: providing an advance excerpt or hosting a related activity to introduce artists and concepts during a site visit to the venue, arranging for local radio interviews with artists, and inviting leaders from target communities to advance previews.

Venues frequently gave **high marks** to their experiences with the ensembles. They recognized that ensembles were skilled in deepening engagements with audiences, and addressed complex issues in new ways. Many of the ensembles were able to reach audiences new to the venue. Ensembles created an opening for potential relationships to venues for new audiences, raising questions about how venues might follow such a performance to sustain these new relationships.

Individual ensembles entered the NTP experience with their own specific goals, many of which were achieved. Examples: The Wooster Group reinforced the beginning of a West Coast set of touring venues, SITI Company engaged new university presenters to augment a small group of regular tour sites, and Latino Theater Company was successful in its dream of establishing a touring network of Latino theaters. Others such

as UNIVERSES and Byron Au Yong/Aaron Jafferis used the opportunity to create work at the core of their missions but did experience challenges in securing touring sites for their ambitious productions.



Post-Pilot. Since the first 12 ensembles were funded 25 additional ensembles have been funded and many are currently in the process of touring. The original Advisors have been gradually replaced by others, continuing a cycle of exposing leading theater professionals to a range of artist-led ensembles that reflect the breadth of contemporary theater practice. Mellon Foundation funders and NEFA’s NTP staff have been encouraged by the response from all types of presenting venues to artist-led theater.

Through a concerted commitment on the part of funders, Advisors, and NEFA’s program managers, the ensembles and the work funded have become increasingly representative of diverse populations and aesthetics. The commitment to work that is representative of the nation has been realized through outreach to theater artists from all parts of the United States, extended conversations that deepen understanding about looking at work through different lenses, and ongoing interest in audience response to the work including through in-person observations on tour. Deliberate rotation in the composition of the Advisor pool has ensured that new perspectives are continually brought into the dialogue.

During deliberations about the selection of grantees, decision makers have challenged each other to be mindful of the range of aesthetics represented within each cohort and in the evolving collective body of NTP work. Themes of work continue to be wide ranging; sometimes the themes are broad and national in scope (e.g., military service, environmental changes, psychological effects of events) and sometimes more intimate and relevant to particular locales and populations (e.g., family sagas, personal stories). The work is often multidisciplinary and technically experimental.

NTP’s funders and managers have recognized that flexibility is a critical attribute necessary to support diverse methodologies and aesthetics and work at different levels of scale. At several points, members of the team, including Advisors, have adjusted expectations and added resources to help ensembles succeed. NTP remains a work in progress with adjustments made as lessons are learned. ■

http://www.nefa.org/grants_programs/programs/national-theater-project