



**TRIPLE PLAY**  
**Audience Perceptions of New Plays**

**Executive Summary**

Report to  
**Theatre Development Fund  
& Theatre Bay Area**

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## Foreword

Triple Play was born on a cold snowy day in Washington, D.C. at the *Scarcity to Abundance* convening hosted by Arena Stage. We were both there; the opening session was an interview of Rocco Landesman, conducted by Diane Ragsdale. This was the interview in which Rocco famously said that one of the problems with the not-for-profit theatre sector was that there were just too many theatres. We looked at each other and said: “No, the problem is there aren’t enough audience members. As Executive Directors of performing arts service organizations committed to building audiences, we are not doing our job.” Later in the weekend, two comments stood out for us. The first was an artist in the midst of a conversation about audiences who exclaimed, “We are always talking *about* audiences but we never talk *with* them!” The second was a presenter who in a conversation about programming and audiences said, “I always think of my audience. I am building a bridge to them from the art; I have to meet them where they are and bring them across.”

We got talking about what might happen if we put artists and audiences and theatre workers (both marketing and artistic folks) in direct conversation. Given the foci of our organizations, we were thinking about plays, not musicals, and new plays, not revivals. And so Triple Play was born. With support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, in fall 2013 we embarked on *Triple Play Phase I*. It modeled three-way conversations among playwrights, theatres, and audiences at theatres across the country to discover ways to help audiences have a more direct connection to new plays, give playwrights insights into the people for whom they write, and help theatres more deeply engage both sides of the equation.

After hosting conversations in six theatre communities across the country in which artistic and marketing directors shared their institution’s relationship with audiences we then partnered with nine theatre companies in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. and facilitated conversations with 70 infrequent new play single ticket buyers. Playwrights conducted one-on-one interviews with audience members while theatre staff observed. Marketing staff conducted focus groups with similar patrons, which were watched by playwrights. The interview protocol and focus group format were developed by WolfBrown, a bi-coastal consulting firm that specializes in nonprofit arts management. Information from the theatre community conversations and audience interviews became the foundation for a convening of *Phase I* participants, hosted by HowlRound, at Boston’s ArtsEmerson in January 2015. More than seventy playwrights, artists, and artistic and administrative leaders examined *Phase I* findings, discussed implications, and proposed next steps.

The clear message at the convening was “this is all very interesting and the findings are provocative but you have only talked to 70 audience members. The findings may not hold up if tested further.” So with the help of partners across the country we



ramped up the research. In Phase 2, playwrights, theatre staffers and audience members engaged in almost 300 individual conversations. Following the live interviews, online surveys were sent to single ticket buyers from NNPN theaters and our partner theatres from the live conversations. We got 7,200 surveys back! The results are here in this report.

We are heartened by what we have learned and excited to share the findings with you. As you will see, audiences are passionate about going to the theatre. They enjoy having their assumptions challenged and seeing plays that provide a window into the larger world in which we all live. There are some consistent messages about ways in which we can increase the impact the work has on audiences and in so doing increase the likelihood that folks will come back time and again.

We look forward to hearing from you with your responses!

Tory Bailey and Brad Erickson



## Introduction

Triple Play is a national research project led jointly by Theatre Development Fund and Theatre Bay Area to explore the relationships between playwrights, audiences, and theatres. The initiative focuses on setting playwrights and theatre staff in conversation with audience members to increase our understanding of how audiences engage with new plays. In doing so, we explore what types of interaction with playwrights would deepen audiences' experiences with new work, strengthen their relationships with the playwrights, and connect them more deeply with the theatres that present new plays. The purpose of this research is to develop recommendations for new practices that would engage more people in the work of contemporary dramatists and open new plays up to larger audiences.

Following a successful pilot study in 2014, a second phase of Triple Play launched in 2016, expanding the “action research” methodology, in which playwrights are paired with theatre administrators to conduct interviews with audience members, to seven cities across the US: Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Washington DC. Simultaneously, an online survey was sent to recent Single Ticket Buyers (STBs) of thirty-three theatres nation-wide to gather quantitative data that can supplement the qualitative interviews.

The many partners who collaborated in this study and the decentralized approach to conducting interviews and recruiting survey participants generated a body of data that, to our knowledge, is unmatched in other audience research in terms of its breadth and depth. The data derived through interviews and surveys complement each other, allowing us to cross-reference results, test the wider applicability of individual statements, and contextualize responses within lived experiences.

The national scope of this study and the depth of engagement with audience members could not have been accomplished without the support of several national and regional service organizations, including the National New Play Network, HowlRound, Playwrights Foundation, and the League of Chicago Theatres, as well as a number of individual theatres committed to the advancement of the field.

This executive summary highlights key findings from the analysis and poses questions for further discussion.



## Summary of Findings

### Marketing

1. While relaxing, having fun, and spending time with friends and family are the most frequently cited motivations for going to the theatre, that doesn't mean STBs just want to tune out and escape from reality.

60% of all respondents also want to challenge their assumptions about the world and discover new plays and playwrights when they go to the theatre.

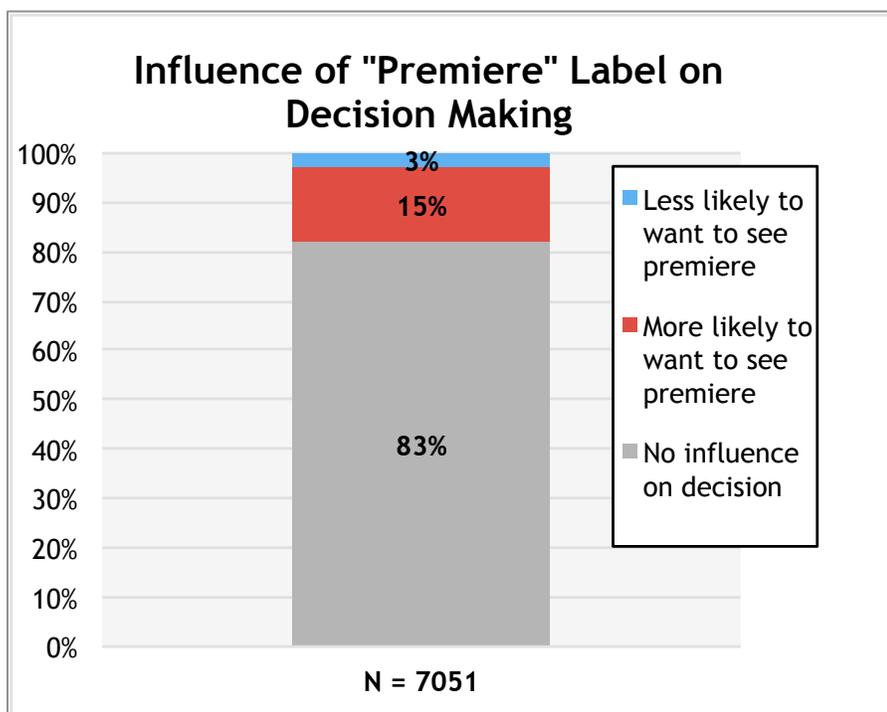
2. Most STBs want to know about the plot, style, and themes before seeing a new play. This helps them prepare and set expectations, and generally isn't perceived as a "spoiler."

The three-sentence synopsis or "blurb" was cited by many as the single most important source of information they turn to when making decisions about whether to see a new play.

"I want to know what the story is. That's the only thing I care about. [It's] pretty much the only determining factor, when I see a play."  
Los Angeles

3. When selecting a play to see, about one third of all STBs say they look up their favorite theatre companies to find out what's playing.

This highlights the importance of brand and reputation.



4. The vast majority of audience members don't care whether a play is a premiere or not.

Moreover, most STBs don't distinguish between local and world premieres, and those that do are about evenly split between those who prefer local and those who prefer world premieres.

For most STBs what matters is that a play is "new to them."



5. **STBs who like challenging their assumptions, engaging with important issues in their communities, and taking aesthetic risks tend to be more interested in new plays.**
6. **In interviews, many audience members expressed an interest in recommendations based on previous experiences, as in “if you liked this play, you’ll love our next play.”**

Since there are wide discrepancies between the types of shows that audience members consider “risky,” this may be the most promising approach to helping STBs identify new works that they are likely to enjoy.

### Engagement

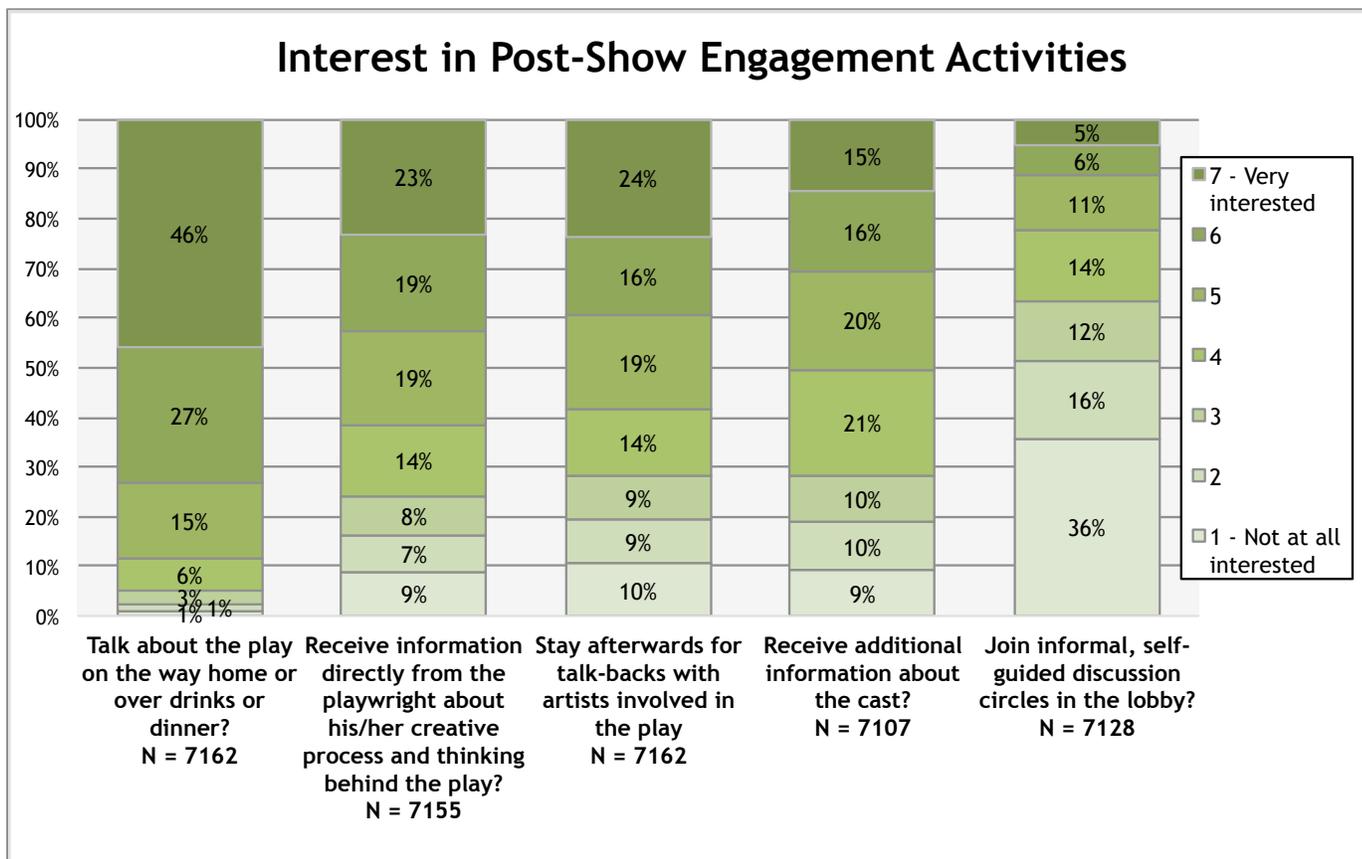
1. **People who are eager to discuss performances immediately after seeing them are more interested in all types of engagement activities, whereas those who prefer to reflect in private show little interest in engaging.**

This raises an important question: How can theatres support those who prefer to reflect privately?

2. **People who are not generally fond of new plays want to be well-informed about what they’re going to see before arriving at the theatre, but are generally less interested in engagement activities or additional information afterwards.**
3. **STBs with high affinity for new plays need less information going into a new play but are more interested in vigorously discussing the work immediately after the performance.**



4. In terms of structured post-show engagement activities, STBs are most interested in receiving information directly from the playwright and/or talks-backs with the artists.



5. Most STBs show little interest in engaging in the development of new plays. Some avoid plays that are still in development because they want a polished product, while others fear they might unduly influence the playwright’s work.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is the lack of knowledge about the new play development process among audience members, and uncertainty about how they can engage meaningfully without being experts.

“People don’t want to impact the writer’s vision. They [said,] “That’s not my job. That’s not why I go to the theater. And it’s not even my place, it wouldn’t be right.”

Chicago



Connection to Playwrights

1. **Most STBs don't pay much attention to the authors of the plays they see.**

The playwright and the process of writing a play are mysteries, and for that reason they don't feel much of a connection.

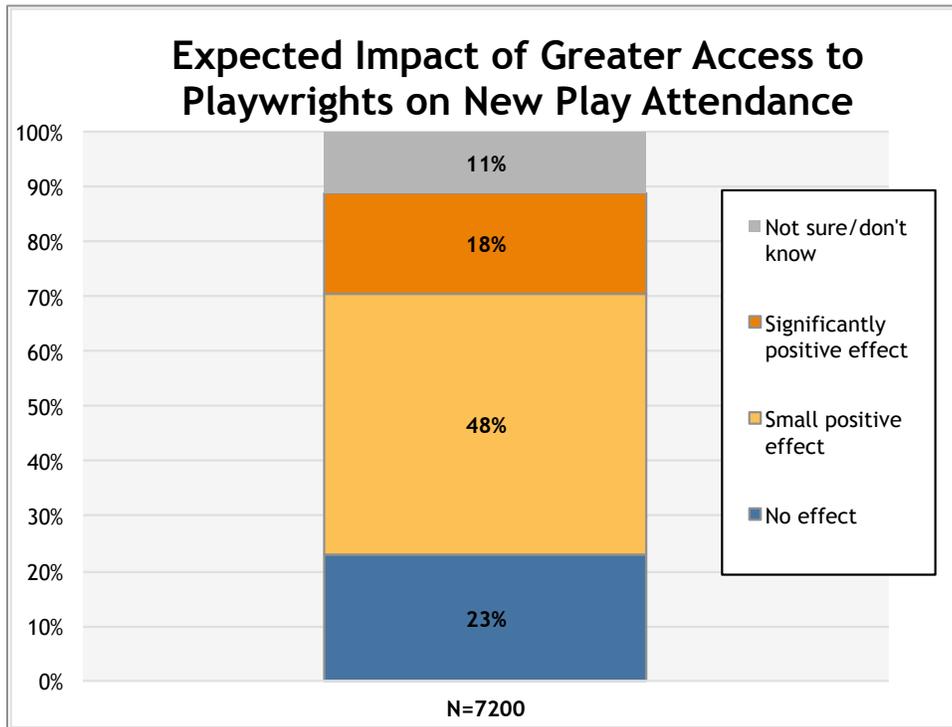
“When they encounter the play, the playwright isn't there. It's just a name on the program. So they just didn't know [who they are].

Atlanta

2. **Audience members who have a strong affinity for new plays are much more likely than occasional new-play goers to follow particular artists.**

By fostering closer and more personal connections to the generative artists, less frequent attenders might also be inspired to see new shows by their favorite artists. This argues for more “touchpoints” with playwrights.

3. **The survey results suggest that greater access to playwrights would increase interest in seeing new plays.**



**4. Theatres could foster audience connections with playwrights by promoting name recognition and connecting them with playwrights on social media.**

For instance, theatres might:

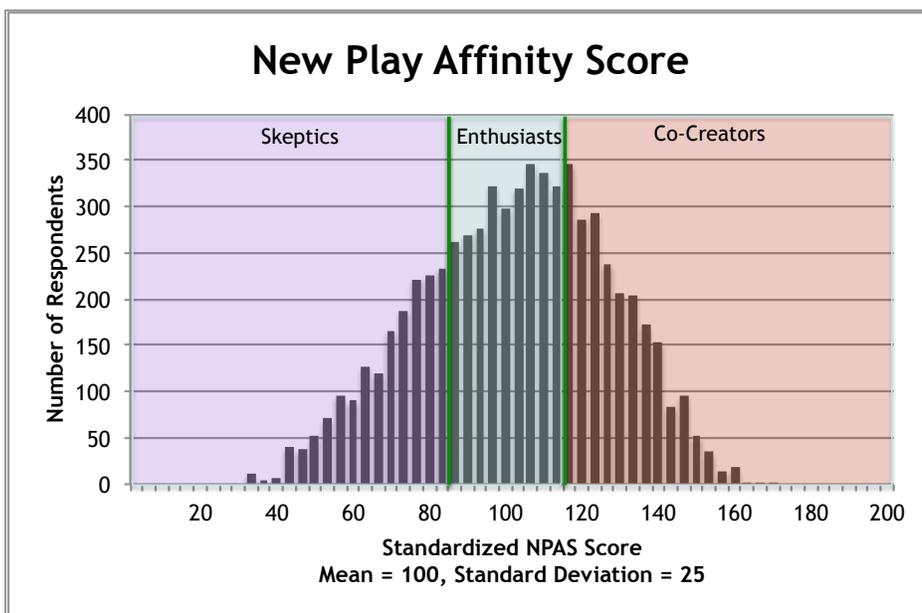
- Inform audience members that a play they saw is being produced somewhere else, that the playwright won a prize, or that another work by the same playwright is being produced in the area (even if it's at a different theatre).
- Promote a playwright's social media outlets (e.g., "Follow her online for commentary and creative responses to current affairs").
- Share fragments of new dialogue or short videos of scenes still in development on social media.

## Modeling Audiences for New Plays

To better understand the motivations, interests, and behaviors of STBs who have varying levels of exposure and affinity to new plays, we calculated a "New Play Affinity Score" (NPAS) for each respondent based on responses to eight different survey questions (details are in the full report).

Statistical analysis shows that four character traits are strongly correlated with respondents' interest in new plays:

- The desire to challenge one's assumptions and ideas about the world;
- The desire to engage with important issues in one's community;
- Enjoying being taken beyond one's comfort zone with a piece of theatre; and,
- Enjoying plays without a clear narrative (i.e., abstract or non-linear form).



Together, these four characteristics explain almost 30% of the variance in respondents' NPAS.

Using the NPAS, we divided the respondents into three groups – New Play Skeptics, Enthusiasts, and Co-Creators – to further explore their preferences and interests.



### New Play Skeptics

In selecting plays to see, New Play Skeptics tend to rely more heavily on professional reviews and recommendations from friends than more frequent new-play attenders. They prefer to be well-informed about what they're going to see before arriving at the theatre. Primarily, they're looking for basic information about the style, theme, and characters of the play. The desire for information in advance of seeing a play is the one form of engagement in which Skeptics show a slightly greater interest than Enthusiasts and Co-Creators. Receiving information in advance may reduce the sense of uncertainty or risk that Skeptics associate with seeing a new (i.e., an untested) play.

After seeing a new play, Skeptics are most inclined to talk about the play with the people they attended with on the way home or over drinks. Other than that, they are not terribly interested in engagement activities.

### New Play Enthusiasts

New Play Enthusiasts behave more like Co-Creators when selecting plays, in that their choice is primarily driven by loyalty to particular theatre companies, but they are less likely than Co-Creators to follow particular artists (in that respect they're more like Skeptics).

New Play Enthusiasts fall between Skeptics and Co-Creators in terms of their desire for advance information about plays they're going to see and their desire to discuss plays afterwards.

After the performance, they are most interested in talking about the play on the way home or over drinks—even more so than Skeptics. However, unlike Skeptics, they are also somewhat interested hearing from the playwright about his or her process, participating in talk-backs, and receiving additional information about the cast.

### New Play Co-Creators

In selecting plays to see, Co-Creators are primarily driven by loyalty to certain theatre companies; however, they are also more likely than either Skeptics or Enthusiasts to follow particular artists.

On average, Co-Creators feel less of a need to be well-informed before going to see a new play than either Skeptics or Enthusiasts, but there is still a slight preference for some advance information.

Whereas Co-Creators don't need a lot of information going into a play, they're more interested in receiving additional information afterwards than the comparison groups. This suggests providing basic information upfront for general audiences, while making materials that allow more committed new-play goers to dig in deeper accessible both before and after the performance.



Co-Creators are also more interested in *all* types of engagement activity than either Skeptics or Enthusiasts, and they are more interested in vigorously discussing the play immediately afterwards.

## Notes on Methodology

### Interviews

Interviewees were recruited by email from among the recent STBs of the participating theatres. Interested audience members were asked to complete an online screener survey, and interviewees were selected to represent a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. Theatre professionals, subscribers, and theatre-goers who already have a strong affinity for new work were generally not invited to participate, as we are particularly interested in “general” theatre audiences as opposed to theatre insiders or “new play buffs”, and we assume that subscribers often attend new plays simply because they are part of the subscription package (rather than out of any particular interest in the play). Interviewees received a \$50 Visa gift card in return for their participation.

Overall, 289 interviews were completed across seven US cities. The interviews provide a nuanced view of the range of experiences and relationships audience members have with new plays; however, one cannot assume that the sample is representative of individual theatre markets or the larger theatre-going public nationwide. The demographics of the interviewees reveal considerable differences between the samples in the various cities, and these distributions do not correspond to the demographics of the large-scale online survey that we conducted.

### Online Survey

The online survey was distributed to recent STBs of thirty-three theatres across the US. Theatre professionals, employees and board members of theatre companies, and students in graduate-level theatre training programs were disqualified from the survey through initial screening questions.

Financial incentives for participating in the survey were not available at all participating theatres. Those that offered a financial incentive provided a chance to win a \$100 Visa gift card. Even when financial incentives are offered, online surveys of this sort suffer from self-selection bias. The results have not been weighted to correct for biases, since the size and demographics of the surveyed theatre markets are unknown.

All in all, a total of 7,213 valid responses between December 2016 and April 2017. Due to the large number of survey participants, all results presented in the report are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$  for all correlations, comparison of means, and regressions).



## Acknowledgements

### INTERVIEWERS

#### **Atlanta**

Lisa Adler  
Justin Anderson  
Margaret Baldwin\*  
Carolyn Cook  
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Lila Rose Kaplan\*  
Walt McGough  
Charlotte Meehan\*  
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Bridget O'Leary  
Nicholas Peterson  
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Evan Turissini  
Ryan Walsh

#### **Chicago**

Brooke Allen\*  
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Philip Dawkins\*  
Reginald Edmund\*  
Angela Horn  
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Chelsea Keenan  
Nambi Kelley\*  
Jenni Lamb\*  
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Mia McCullough\*  
Aileen McGrody  
Jack O'Donnell  
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Doug Post\*  
Ben Thiem

#### **Los Angeles**

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Evelina Fernandez\*  
Prince Gomolvilas\*  
Sam Linden  
Joy Meads  
Brian Polak  
Amelia Roper\*  
Herbert Siguenza\*  
Benina Stern  
Victoria Stewart\*  
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#### **New York**

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Chisa Hutchinson\*  
Rania Jumaily  
Charlie Madison  
Rogelio Martinez\*  
Ciara Murphy  
Nandita Shenoy\*  
Kyle Sircus  
Andrea Thome\*  
Emily Travis  
Ken Urban\*  
Sean Williams  
Lauren Yee\*  
Casey York

#### **San Francisco**

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Patricia Cotter\*  
Brad Erickson  
Lydia Garcia  
Katja Gottlieb-Stier  
Megan Gray  
Garret Groenveld\*  
Grace Hoffman  
Jeffrey Lo\*  
Karen Macklin\*  
Sam Mattos  
Patricia Milton\*  
Peter Nachtrieb\*  
Abigail Pañares  
Lisa Ramirez\*  
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Tanya Shaffer\*  
Sara Waugh

#### **Washington, DC**

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Kathleen Akerley\*  
Dani Barlow  
Bob Bartlett\*  
Kirsten Bowen  
Bryan Braunlich  
Allyson Currin\*  
Zakiyia Gray  
Victoria Gruenberg  
Rachel Hynes\*  
Susan McCully\*  
Helen Pafumi\*  
Neal Racioppo  
Teddy Rodgers  
Gwydion Suilebhan\*  
Seamus Sullivan\*  
Amy Young

\* Playwright



THEATRES PARTICIPATING IN INTERVIEWS

American Theater Company	Marin Theatre Company
Alliance Theatre	Merrimack Repertory Theatre
Apollinaire Theatre Company	New Repertory Theatre
Arena Stage	New York Theatre Workshop
Arts Emerson	Playwrights Horizons
Aurora Theatre	The Public Theater
Boston Court Performing Arts Center	The Tank
Center Theatre Group	Theatre Works Silicon Valley
Central Square Theater	Shakespeare Theatre Company
The Flea Theater	Silk Road Rising
Horizon Theatre Company	SpeakEasy Stage
The House Theatre	Studio Theatre
Huntington Theatre Company	Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company
Magic Theatre	Z Space

THEATRES PARTICIPATING IN ONLINE SURVEYS

Actor's Express	New Repertory Theatre
Arena Stage	New York Theatre Workshop
B Street Theatre	Northlight Theatre
Capital Stage Company	Rogue Machine Theatre
Central Square Theater	Salt Lake Acting Company
Central Works	San Diego REPeritory Company
City Theatre	Skylight Theatre Company
Company One	South Coast Rep
Contemporary American Theater Festival	Southern Rep Theatre
Curious Theatre Company	Steppenwolf Theatre Company
Diversionsary Theatre	Synchronicity Theatre
Florida Repertory Theatre	The House Theatre
Geva Theatre Center	The Hypocrites
Gloucester Stage Co.	The Public Theater
Marin Theatre Company	Theater J
Moxie Theatre	Unicorn Theatre
Native Voices at the Autry	

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