Report on Research Examining the Ford Foundation's Influence on the Producing Model of US Regional Theaters

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Abstract

This report provides draft excerpts from my PhD research on the evolving relationship between US regional theaters and the New York-based cluster of legitimate commercial theaters and producers, collectively known as "Broadway," between 1947 and 2017.

After World War II, Broadway had near total control over the professional production and regional distribution of new plays and musicals. In response to this stranglehold, there were calls to decentralize the American theater. The resident (or regional) theater movement that eventually arrived in response to these calls is generally credited to the massive investments, technical assistance, and public advocacy of the Ford Foundation. Between 1959 and 1980, the Foundation awarded approximately $31.5 million in support of strengthening resident professional theater.

Material from the Ford Foundation (FF) archives collected at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) contributes to a chapter in my dissertation examining how requirements, constraints, and forms of support provided by the FF shaped the first generation of modern resident theaters, including their relationship with Broadway. To that end, two questions are currently motivating my review and analysis of documents collected in the FF collection: (1) Did financial support, technical assistance, and the imprimatur proffered by the FF strengthen or weaken the agency of resident theaters vis-à-vis Broadway? (2) Did the FF's support encourage resident theaters to adopt structures, policies, practices, goals, and beliefs that ultimately confined them to fulfilling a *distributary* (franchise) or *tryout* (farm club) function vis-à-vis Broadway, rather than the *tributary* (independent feeder) role that regional theaters were once imagined to fulfill?[1]

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Scope of Research and Context

My research examines the evolving relationship between regional nonprofit-professional resident theaters in the United States and Broadway between 1947 and 2017. In the aftermath of World War II, regional theater in the US was comprised largely of community theater troupes organized by amateurs on a nonprofit basis. Commercial stock companies were also slowly making a comeback. These professional troupes had flourished throughout the 19th century, but by the start of World War II, they were all but extinguished by a number of forces, including the Great Depression. In this era, Broadway had hegemonic control over the professional premieres and regional distribution of new plays and musicals.[2] Generally speaking, in the 1940s and 1950s, both community theaters and stock companies were peddling Broadway fare that was available for regional licensing; additionally, some summer stock theaters on the Eastern seaboard would occasionally do a "tryout" of a new play being tested for a Broadway run. To the extent that new noncommercial plays were produced in the regions, they were largely done by academic theaters, which were growing in number with the rise of drama studies at universities. Aside from the sprinkling of stock companies scattered across the US, postwar professional theater fare in the regions was typically limited to Broadway touring companies, which tended to make stops only in larger markets and only rarely west of the Mississippi.

Modern resident (or regional) theaters formed as a noncommercial-but-professional *alternative* to the amateur-community and commercial-stock models for producing theater in the hinterlands of the US. Their nominal aim was the professional decentralization of the American theater.[3] Among other characteristics, they combined the nonprofit corporate form typical of community theaters with the use of professional (read: paid, union) actors and other personnel that were part and parcel with commercial theatrical production.

Any history of modern resident theaters must take into account the outsized influence of the Ford Foundation (FF), on the material practices, values, and beliefs that came to define this new hybrid form of producing theater. Wilson McNeil Lowry, the FF's first director of the Division of Humanities and the Arts starting in 1957 and a vice president from 1964 until his retirement a decade later, was instrumental in advancing the resident theater *concept* (as he called it).[4] To this day, Lowry and the FF are credited with spurring what came to be called variously the resident, repertory, professional, or regional theater *movement*.[5]

My research examines how the business models of resident theaters, including their relationship to Broadway, shifted across three eras.

- Section I covers the pre-Ford Foundation era (1947-1958). In it, I challenge the standard narrative on the origins of the resident theater movement through a case study examining the innovative producing practices of the Margo Jones Theatre. Founded in Dallas, Texas in 1947, the Margo Jones Theatre is widely recognized as the prototypical modern resident theater.

- Section II covers the Ford Foundation era (1958-1980), characterized by the rapid structuration of the resident professional theater field in response to the massive investments, technical assistance, and public advocacy of the FF and the service organization it founded, Theatre Communications Group (TCG). I seek to understand the short- and long-term consequences of business model choices made by the first generation of resident professional theaters, during this FF era, on their relationship to Broadway.

- Section III covers the post-Ford Foundation era (1980-2017), when the financial support and influence of the Foundation on resident theaters began to wane, general perspectives on the ideal relationship between government, markets, and nonprofits began to shift (in many industries, including theater) with the rise of neoliberalism, and once rare partnerships between resident theaters and commercial Broadway producers began to spread, escalate, and evolve.

I am still analyzing the thousands of documents I collected from the FF archive at RAC, including: transcripts from information-gathering sessions with artists, managers, critics, and others hosted by the FF; ongoing correspondence between Lowry and key advisors to the program; individual grant files for organizations awarded grants as part of efforts to strengthen resident professional theaters over a period of twenty years, as well as related docket items; grant files for TCG as well as data collected on resident theaters by the service organization; the administrative files and the 1972-1974 oral history of Lowry; documents related to the Cash Reserve Program that ran from 1971 to 1979; and applications to the New American Plays program that ran from 1976 to 1979.

What follows is work-in-progress.

Resident Professional Theaters and the Ford Foundation

The Ford Foundation's pioneering investments in regional theaters was one of the earliest and most ambitious large-scale experiments in organized philanthropy applied to an arts field.[6] Within a much larger initiative that included orchestras and ballet companies, resident theaters were the FF's "test case."[7] Between 1959 and 1980, Ford distributed more than $31 million in support of "strengthening resident professional theater."[8] The number and size of theaters rapidly increased during these years and the nonprofit-professional resident theater model emerged and spread.

This transformation is generally perceived to have been due to Lowry's efforts to propagate it through direct grants and through the formation of the Theatre Communications Group, a service organization that fostered communications among theaters, encouraged their collaborations, and provided guidelines and consultancies aimed at spurring particular producing practices (e.g. the adoption of the subscription model for marketing and selling shows).[9] During this period, Lowry garnered the nickname "Mr. Arts"—a testament to his czar-like influence on the US arts and culture sector.[10]

In the standard narrative of the resident theater movement, the FF tends to be credited with accelerating the development of the field but critiqued for ultimately fomenting large-scale, administratively top-heavy institutions, with "cookie-cutter" programming and interchangeable personnel.[11] Given this standard account, I expected to find documentation that Lowry was intent from the outset on stimulating the growth of institutions (in terms of professionalization, technical production capability, venue size, and administration). However, the FF archives provide clear evidence that, when Lowry launched his program aimed at strengthening resident professional theater, he was actually striving to foster a network of small, ensemble theaters dedicated to producing new works co-created by a company of actors working in tandem with a director, writer, and designers.

How, given these initial aims, did the FF funding program ended up stimulating something quite the opposite? The three excerpts that follow address different aspects of this core question.

- Excerpt 1 investigates the kind of theater Lowry had in mind when he began fleshing out and testing his resident theater concept with a dozen or so winter stock companies and community theaters. This investigation provides a baseline for analyzing where, when, and how the eventual realization of FF's activities deviated from the original vision.

- Excerpt 2 illuminates Lowry's unwavering belief and expectation that theaters would be able to sustain themselves on earned income (box office)—even as they significantly expanded and professionalized their operations in response to investments from the FF. While requiring theaters to have or obtain nonprofit status, the FF had no intention of being a sustaining donor.

- Excerpt 3 demonstrates that specific conditions of funding applied to grants awarded to resident theaters, stemming from Lowry's unwavering beliefs about the economics of theater producing, led the FF to support theaters in their efforts to build much larger, Broadway-sized venues, despite Lowry's intentions at the outset not to do so. Those larger venues not only made resident theaters more expensive and difficult to sustain, but they also limited the capacity of these alternative-to-commercial theaters to take risks on noncommercial fare, including e.g. new plays by unknown writers.

Excerpt 1: The Resident Theater Concept and the Problems to be Solved through Their Realization

In 1960, then president of the Ford Foundation, Henry T. Heald, gave a speech in Copenhagen, "Assisting Cultural Activities in the United States and Europe," in which he described the Foundation as "basically … problem-oriented." Heald explained that the FF decided to enter the arts field because it realized "that there were real and significant problems in the arts, and that it could possibly give fruitful assistance."[12] This problem-solving response was characteristic of what was at the time called "scientific philanthropy;" while practiced by other organized philanthropies, the FF was ahead of other foundations in seeking to apply the concept to the arts.[13] An FF internal document from 1960 clarifies how this scientific approach differs from charitable giving:

> In the following brief illustrations of a program of national scope in the arts, straight deficit financing of needy institutions is not considered and all institutional grants suggested are meant to be applied only on the basis of selectivity. … Each of the activities suggested below is addressed to particular problems in the first instance, and to institutions only second. Institutions that would be selected in each program would be those with distinctive promise for working at the problem in an effective way.[14]

In general, the arts program sought to: stimulate public demand for the arts; expand arts training aimed at professionalism; and foster the development of institutional outlets for artists.[15] Within the last category, there was a set of discipline-specific problems associated with theater that the Foundation aimed to solve through the support of what it called at the time "professional residential theater."[16] Reflecting on the origins of the resident theater program in a 1965 report, Lowry wrote:

> [T]he concept underlying what the Ford Foundation was doing (and what a few theatre people were very enthusiastically collaborating with) was that in the United States there should be some offset to the "hit-or-flop" economics where the serious play, the new script, the serious young actor, was being forced out by economic and budgetary exigencies of the producer. The Broadway repertoire was becoming either small-cast light plays or the big musical shooting for a hit that would bring a big gross. In this situation, the developing director, playwright and actor had fewer and fewer opportunities though the budgets were getting bigger and bigger and the producer's risks were getting bigger and bigger. So what we were trying to do was to see if certain institutions that could be more permanent, even though smaller on a budgetary scale, could be strengthened and could become the expression of the collaboration of various kinds of theatre artists that Lugné-Poë and Pitoeff had seen (*sic*).[17]

Lowry elsewhere expanded upon this reference to Lugné-Poë and Pitoeff, two French theater directors associated with a variety of small but influential theaters in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and how they inspired his efforts with resident theaters in the US.[18] In an interview for an oral history, captured near the end of his tenure at the FF (between 1972 and 1974), Lowry made mention of something he said he had "never told anybody."[19] After traveling around the US and identifying "thirteen winter stock companies" of promise, Lowry happened to be introduced to a French painter named André Girard (1901-1968) who had designed sets for a handful of directors in Paris who were part of "the modern and contemporary theater movement" there.[20] Lowry seemed compelled by certain characteristics of these French theaters: that they were housed within small venues (300 seats or less), that they put on "little small productions in little small houses that they could afford to rent," and that they "always took a new French script by a new playwright" and combined it with music by a French composer and a design by a "painter like Girard."[21] He remarked that something clicked when he realized the budget sizes of the theaters in France were on par with those of winter stock companies he had surveyed in the US:

> Well[,] it suddenly occurred to me—no, I'll take it back—it did not suddenly occur to me, it had been growing on me that if these [winter stock companies] could have real leadership with high artistic standards … they could be ensembles not only for the actor but for the director and conceivably the playwright and even the composer and the designer … that they could be thirty years later like the Lugné-Poë-Pitoeff-Baty-Bullin-Jouvet thing …[22]

In 1961, three years into his resident theater experiment and, ironically, at the opening of a new 827-seat theater for Arena Stage, Lowry described once again the dimensions of this ensemble-based ideal theater that he had in mind for Arena Stage and other nonprofit professional resident theaters:

> In its previous existence[,] the Arena Stage has proved that theater does not depend upon buildings and real estate, or on money. It does not depend upon names. Theater depends first of all upon a clear artistic direction, whatever that may be at any time or place, and then it depends upon serious actors working with a talented director in whom they can trust, in a repertory of literary quality, aided by serious designers and technicians. Finally, if the particular theater is to give new life to the national drama in its own generation, at the base of the whole ensemble must be the talented writer, himself ultimately an important source of the artistic direction.
>
> Since the Second World War[,] no American theater has encompassed all these ideal aspects of the art, but an ideal loses nothing of its force by remaining an objective. I think what is important for us to remember today is that the objective lies much closer to the grasp of the Arena Stage and the permanent residential company than to the potentialities of any other segment of the American theater today, and certainly of that segment known as Broadway.[23]

This moment appeared more striking in hindsight than it did to Lowry at the time. Only three years into his experiment, Arena Stage was already nearly three times Lowry's original, ideal size.

Excerpt 2: The Requirement to Be Sustainable on Box Office Revenues and to Be a Nonprofit 501c3

In June 21, 1960 Lowry began to lay out the case for an enlarged program in the arts in a 17-page document that describes "six branches of the theater in the United States—the academic theater, the community amateur (so-called "little") theater, the professional summer stock companies, the professional winter stock companies, the off-Broadway producers and the Broadway producers."[24] He noted that only the academic and amateur theaters were subsidized and further commented, "It is very, very difficult for the residential professional theater—of which there are 19 and only one in New York—to obtain contributions of funds."[25] Lowry asserted that "much of the hope by theater people" was on the "18 so-called professional winter stock theaters outside of New York."[26]

Lowry's fascination with winter stock companies—which he believed could become a serious cultural resource for artists and for their communities—took hold on his March 1957 to October 1958 listening tour. Lowry traveled to approximately 175 "places" in the US, with the goal of talking to "everybody ... in the arts."[27] Following the common process at the FF at the time, Lowry made a series of grants from 1957 to 1961 characterized as *experiments* or *demonstrations* or *experimental demonstrations*, in which he supported a small group of artists and organizations in order to test various hunches. After making a series of grants to individual artists, Lowry made a sizeable grant to the Cleveland Play House aimed at helping him test demand for theater in the hinterlands. Lowry's explanation of his choice of the Play House, which was at the time "operating as a community theater," is revealing. He recounted:

> [The Ford Foundation] centered the intermediary here for this project at Cleveland, not because we gave a rating of the best so-called winter stock company to the Cleveland Playhouse (*sic*), we did not and never have. ...
>
> But Cleveland was on feasibility and scope criteria able to absorb this project and since we could only give them demonstration funds, we knew that when that was ended it would not collapse the institution which is another principle of philanthropy: when you get ready to do an

> experimental demonstration you don't want to tease an intermediary to a point where you withdraw before it's over and they'd collapse. It could stand that and survive.[28]

In locating theaters on which to test and demonstrate the merits of his hunches, Lowry was looking for organizations that could survive receiving a grant from the Ford Foundation and, more importantly, eventually having the support withdrawn. As illustrated by a clear statement in the 1962 press release announcing a number of significant investments in theaters, the FF was not planning to become a long-term subsidizer of arts organizations:

> The Foundation has made efforts to identify professional groups first of steady artistic development and secondly of achieving a sustaining level of income from other sources within a reasonable period. The Foundation will not become a general patron of artistic institutions and will not provide routine financing of operating and capital costs.[29]

Even once the arts program was enlarged, enabling Lowry to recommend massive investments aimed at spurring the multi-level professional development of individual organizations, he nevertheless maintained his expectation that, beyond the grant period, resident theaters could and should sustain themselves through earnings at the box office. In the preface to his 1962 "Strengthening of Resident Theater in the United States" docket item, Lowry wrote:

> Developmental funds, such as are included in the proposed grants to the Alley Theatre and the Mummers Theatre, have been recommended only when it could be demonstrated that the theater could reach the break-even point between expenditures and box-office receipts within the period covered by the Foundation's grants.[30]

The Foundation's dockets quite often included statements that grants were conditioned on promises made by grantees that they would be able to break-even in the future, without Foundation support, once they were able to achieve, for instance, 70 percent or 80 percent capacity at the box office. Given rising demand for theater at the time (generally explained as a function of population, a prosperous postwar economy, and the higher percentage of Americans attending college), the expectation was that theaters would easily increase their audiences to sustain their operations. The 1962 docket item recommending a $2.1 million grant to the Alley Theater, included the comment:

> Mrs. Vance has projected an operation over the next ten years that would require an annual budget of roughly $330,000. This would make the Theatre self-supporting when attendance reaches 74.5 per cent of capacity in a new 600-seat theater, taking into account revenues from productions on a small experimental stage. The staff recommends that developmental funds averaging $110,000 a year, or a total of $1.1 million, be granted for a ten-year period, with the first claim against these funds being partial underwriting of the costs of operation while the theater attempts to reach 74.5 per cent of capacity.[31]

In reality, none of the theaters were able to achieve this break-even aim after expanding their operations. In a 1965 article, arts reporter Sandra Schmidt provided a range of statistics on a sample of 23 resident theaters, prefacing her report with the provocative comments:

> The fact that the overwhelming majority of the theatres carry deficits is meaningful and should be used by everyone to infer that the deficit is here to stay, and will continue to go up rather than down. The fact that most deficits are met by contributions is deceptive. Getting those contributions meant blood, sweat, and tears from the theatre staff, and all of that might have been better spent on plays. The list of theatres that have received major foundation grants is impressive—but look at the dates, the amounts, the strings attached, and the deficits.[32]

A paper by Lowry, written around the same time, conveys his reluctance to admit that theaters could not sustain themselves without subsidies. He wrote:

> The prospect that resident theatre will survive in the United States is good, but it is by no means assured. … Whether it can finally survive from its own resources or must be treated like opera and ballet and symphony (dependent upon a large annual maintenance drive and meeting an annual deficit) is being argued. I hope it can. Tyrone Guthrie's book says that it can't. And I admit there are not many adherents to my side of the question.[33]

While requiring theaters to break-even on box office, the FF simultaneously (and rather incongruously) required them to become 501c3 nonprofit organizations, so that its contributions to them would be tax deductible. In the case of one of its model theaters, Arena Stage, led by Zelda Fichandler, this required converting from a for-profit form. Established in 1950 as a "profit-making stock company," Arena Enterprises, Inc. "raised shares from a group of forty Washingtonians composed of ambassadors, carpenters, housewives, and a tennis pro." [34] It sustained itself on earned income and, at the close of its 1953-54 season, achieved the (self-proclaimed) distinction of being "the first year-round arena theater ever to pay its backers a dividend."[35] Despite being a profitable arts enterprise, near the end of its first decade, it nevertheless converted to nonprofit status to secure a significant grant from the FF, as well as the land and other contributions, necessary to build a new, significantly larger facility. The FF requirement was non-negotiable. In response to a letter from Lowry inviting Fichandler to apply for a grant, Fichandler asked, "Assuming Arena were to be part of this program, what would happen if we were not able to obtain our nonprofit status? ??????"[36] To which, Lowry replied, "The Arena Stage could not be a part of this program without a 501(c)(3) tax exemption or a pending application for one which only awaited a year's operations before receipt of the final certificate, and a decision."[37]

Arena Stage successfully secured its nonprofit status. For years after the conversion, however, Fichandler expressed concerns about the potential influence of the general public on the institution—a worry captured and explained in this poetic passage:

> I am not very strong on community giving, except perhaps when it represents only a small percentage of the total. I think we could well do without the hand that rocks the cradle, for the hand that rocks the cradle will also want to raise it in a vote and mix into the pie with it. For while a theatre is a public art and belongs to its public, it is an art before it is public and so it belongs first to itself and its first service must be self-service. A theatre is part of its society. But it is a part which must remain apart since it is also chastiser, rebel, lightning rod, redeemer, irritant, codifier, and horse-laughter.[38]

Fichandler was not alone among theater leaders in being concerned about outside influences on artistic programming and having fears that nonprofit status might lead to a loss of artistic control. Before too long, however, winter stock companies that once organized on a commercial basis began to form from the outset as nonprofits in order to be eligible for grants; and, if they wanted the opportunity to seek funding from the FF or membership in TCG, they simultaneously began to call themselves resident or repertory or regional professional theaters, instead of stock companies.

Excerpt 3: Build Larger Facilities to Sustain Professionalization Efforts Required by the Foundation

In addition to requiring theaters to be nonprofit (or on their way to becoming so), the FF required theaters selected for funding to commit to hiring professional actors. The first major demonstration project in the strengthening resident theaters initiative (following the perceived success of the Cleveland Play House experiment)[39] was an attempt by the FF to help four theaters form or strengthen their acting companies.[40] About this initiative Lowry reflected in his oral history:

> So we had what we called our first actors project, and we picked three theaters and said, "We'll pay $100 a week for whatever your season is to ten actors if you will get from the community $100 a week to match." So they got the sum of $200 a week. It was very damn hard, you see, for these little companies around to get an actor out of New York because his agent wouldn't let him go. He'd say, "What do you want to do; die in Houston?" "If you're not here when a part comes up you don't get any visibility; how can I sell you for $1,000 a week or $1,500 a week on Broadway?", you see. Well, what were they waiting around for on Broadway?[41]

The $200 per week theaters were required to pay as part of this experiment by the FF were significantly higher than the $67.50 to $100 weekly rate negotiated for theater companies working on a standard "stock" contract with Actors Equity Association (the union for actors and stage managers) around this time.[42] How would regional theaters sustain these higher salaries for ten actors beyond the period of the grant? It was a good question—and one that the board of directors of Arena Stage asked of Lowry when the theater was invited to be part of the "actors project."[43]

Lowry's response to that question came by telephone and so is not recorded; however, there is quite a bit of evidence that he believed that the path to economic sustainability for professional resident theaters was hinged to increasing the seating capacity of their venues. For example, the press release announcing the grants awarded in 1962 in support of "Strengthening of Resident Theaters in the United States" noted that "larger sums were granted to theaters that the Foundation believes are now in a position to reach significant new levels in their development, but require enlarged seating capacity to maintain them."[44] Several grants in the 1962 docket also reflect this same logic. For instance, the recommendation for the $2.1 million grant to the Alley Theatre included the following justification:

> For twelve years, until the Ford Foundation made a repertory actors grant, the entire budget for the Alley had to be drawn from a capacity of only 214 seats in a small building converted from an abandoned fan factory, and included in this budget were often salaries for New York actors running up to $750 a week. ... With the greater continuity of top acting personnel resulting from the Ford Foundation repertory actors program, [Nina Vance, founder of the Alley Theatre] has had more opportunity to concentrate on producing and administrative functions. The Alley's urgent need is for a better paid and more adequate staff, but if an adequate administrative and artistic staff is ultimately to be paid out of box office receipts, then a new theater with enlarged seating capacity is indispensable. ... Mrs. Vance has projected an operation over the next ten years that would require an annual budget of roughly $330,000. This would make the Theatre self-supporting when attendance reaches 74.5 per cent of capacity in a new 600-seat theater, taking into account revenue from productions on a small experimental stage.[45]

The disconnect between Lowry's espousal of small theaters and his numerous recommendations of investments in large, Broadway-sized houses is difficult to square until one considers that he came to see larger venues as the *only* viable economic solution for theaters, given that other sources of contributed support were not yet forthcoming for theaters. Indeed, Lowry's ambivalence on size is evident in his response to a question regarding "bigness" asked at a 1967 talk at Studio Arena Theatre in Buffalo, NY.

A member of the audience asked:

> I'd just like your personal opinion here and your reaction, according to your past experience in observing the workings of theaters around the country—we've seen the smallness disappear from the face of our earth and the face of our nation. Small businesses are in trouble, chains take over … Do you think bigness or size is going to be an important factor of a cultural institution? Do you think size itself—Do you think that a theater must grow big in order to survive in its community, or qualify for recognition from governmental and foundation sources? How do you feel about this?[46]

And Lowry responded:

> No, I feel very strongly the other way. I don't feel that that is what it depends on. … Whatever their role in a nation, I am taking for granted … that without other sustaining resources, whether the United Fund drive, or corporate gifts, or state and local sources or later on, government … then naturally the capacity of your house and the ability to sell that many subscriptions is important, but that's an obvious fact. Aside from that consideration, I don't hold to that.[47]

The cognitive dissonance in Lowry's response is striking. In principle, he was opposed to "bigness" while simultaneously believing that there was no real way for resident theaters to survive economically without embracing it. The fact, so obvious to Lowry—that the path to sustainability was to increase venue capacity—would become a key element of the logic that would underpin modern resident theaters during the FF era. Among other elements, it would eventually position them to become an attractive, lower-cost, publicly subsidized alternative to the commercial tryout houses that Broadway producers used for many years to test and polish new works before bringing them to the Great White Way.

Conclusion

While I have only just begun my chapter on the FF and its influence on regional theater, the FF archives hosted at RAC have already been vital to my research. They have offered insights into the influences shaping the thinking of key actors in the emergence of the resident theater field, particularly Lowry. The breadth, depth, and nuance of the FF materials enable a much clearer understanding of how American theater reached its present moment. Already, the FF materials have enabled me better to understand which of the many impacts of FF's theater funding activities during this pivotal era were intentional and which are better understood as unintended and/or unrecognized consequences.

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[1] "A Report for Mr. David Stevens from Robert C. Schnitzer," February 9, 1949, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Record Group 1.2, Series 200R, Box 330, Folder 3030, Rockefeller Archive Center, 1. In his examination of the "Relationship of Commercial and Non-Commercial Theatre," Schnitzer confirms the tributary role that regional theaters were once imagined to provide, writing: "The old *Theatre Arts Magazine* used the phrase 'Tributary Theatre' as an expression of the contributions in people, plays and techniques that the non-professionals might pour into the theatre's main stream."

[2] Norris Houghton, *Advance from Broadway: 19,000 Miles of American Theatre* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1941), 386 and 398. Commercial theater producer and designer Norris Houghton observed in his national study of theater in America in 1940 that the key problem plaguing the American theater was one of distribution. His study ends with a call for a renewed effort to decentralize the American theater and, in particular, for the formation of *resident professional theaters* across the US, modeled on European companies, producing diverse, affordable programming with a permanent director and acting company. Here's how he described his vision for a decentralized theater: "Broadway will not disappear; … it will be a Mecca; it will remain a standard of reference; its nod of approval will set the stamp … But as the nation grows up, as each state and region awakens to fuller self-consciousness, as the migrations cease and roots begin to grow deep into the soil, there will spring forth on the way to Mecca 1,000 oases. That is what I mean by decentralization of the theatre."

[3] While the term "resident" has lost its meaning over time, it originally denoted hiring actors on a season basis and producing several works over the course of several months in one geographic location (rather than touring).

[4] "Interview with W. McNeil Lowry for the Ford Foundation Oral History Project / Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey," January 26, 1972, Transcript, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 122. Lowry remarks that when FF President Henry T. Heald asked him what he would do if he had $8-$10 million to award in general operating support, Lowry suggested "two possibilities: a program to begin to strengthen and expand the concept of resident, professional nonprofit theatres, and a program to enlarge, improve and expand training and performance resources in ballet." Lowry states that Heald chose for the investments in the resident theater concept.

[5] Joseph Wesley Zeigler, *Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 64-65. Zeigler writes in his seminal history of the first two decades of the movement, "Ford led the way. Its entry into the regional theatre field in the late 1950s was the first major turning point of the [regional theatre] revolution because it provided the first hint of legitimacy and the primary building blocks of institutionalism. … Ford called together some two dozen leaders of professional, university, and community theatres to discuss common problems. … This meeting, with its sense of unity and common peril, helped to turn the early regional theatre strivings into a movement in America. The new fraternal spirit, combined with the assumption of a cultural explosion and the interest of the Ford Foundation … made regional theatre look like the wave of the future."

[6] Sheila McNerney Anderson, "The Founding of Theater Arts Philanthropy," in *Angels in the American Theater: Patrons, Patronage and Philanthropy*, ed. Robert A Schanke (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 173.

[7] Ibid, 180.

[8] "Activities in the Creative and Performing Arts Theater, 1957-1980," September 30, 1980, Ford Foundation Publications (Non-Grant Related), Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center. Section A of this report itemizes grants awarded between 1959 and 1980 in the general category "Strengthening Resident Professional Theater." Including a $25,000 recoverable grant that was repaid, grants total $31,485,906 in historic dollars.

[9] Zeigler, *Revolutionary Stage*, 180-187. Zeigler reflects over several pages on the influence of the FF and TCG on resident theaters, but this passage on page 184 does a good job of

encapsulating his general view: "In general, the Ford money was awarded intelligently and often imaginatively. Lowry, the first and for a time the only national supporter of an unprecedented theatre movement, was as daring in his way as those he supported. Without him, there would have been no regional theatre movement, and his support allowed the form to mature in the 1960s. … However, to acknowledge the vital importance of Ford and other foundation support is not to discount the problems that accompanied it. The persuasive power of Ford support tended to homogenize and codify theatres, although the villain in this was not really or directly Ford but rather those theatres which homogenized themselves in hopes of thereby gaining Ford support. In this homogenization, they had Ford's indirect help through its creation and underwriting of Theatre Communications Group, a service organization for regional theatres."

[10] "Interview with W. McNeil Lowry for the Ford Foundation Oral History Project / Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey," December 4, 1972, Transcript, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 149-50. Lowry commented regarding his work in the Division of Humanities and the Arts, "This was the biggest program—organized program in the arts in the United States and some people on the board thought that Mac Lowry had an undue influence in saying, 'No' or 'Yes' to appeals from the arts; and that since there was no duplicate for him in any other foundation or in any other federal program, he was a kind of Mr. Arts in the United States. And Henry Ford once – and this, I'm sure, came from [FF trustee] Don David 'cause David used it jokingly in front of me all the time – referred to me to Mr. Heald as a czar in the arts in the United States, and once called him on the phone when some disgruntled, but important, applicant had been rejected for a large grant and said, 'What are we going to do about Mac Lowry being a czar in the arts?' you know, and so forth."

[11] In addition to Zeigler, *Revolutionary Stage*, 180-187 (see note 8) see, for example, Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces 1870-1967* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 234-5 and Arnold Aronson, "American Theatre in Context, 1945-Present," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre Volume III, Post- World War II to the 1990s,* eds. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126. Poggi writes, "There is a danger in mammoth subsidy: it tends to turn theaters into Institutions. … The larger and more complex the operation, the more likely a theater is to shift its major emphasis from putting on plays to insuring its growth and survival as an institution. Some of the smaller companies refer to the Alley, the Arena, and the Guthrie as 'the Syndicate.' The word is apt in the sense that there is a good deal of cooperation and communication among the largest theaters. I am all in favor of people communicating, but it seems somewhat paradoxical that a movement that set out to decentralize the theater is now spending so much of its energy trying to recentralize it. In the schedules of the major companies, the same plays crop up over and over again. The directors, the managers, and the actors can move easily from one company to another—an indication that there really is not much difference in style among the theaters." This trajectory is echoed by Aronson, who writes, "After half a century, however, despite developing many new plays, actors, directors, and designers, it is not clear that the regional theatre movement has advanced the American theatre significantly. Virtually all of these theatres are not-for-profit and, having been founded with subsidies, they remain dependent on subsidies. When the theatres were run by visionary directors, the lack of dependence on the box office sometimes allowed for daring and innovative productions. But as support from foundations, federal and state agencies, and private donors diminished, and as production costs rose, and as the first generation of visionary artists died or retired, the resident theatres became increasingly

conservative, producing cookie-cutter theatre they hoped would appeal, or at least be inoffensive to a conservative subscription-based audience. With a few notable exceptions these 'regional' theatres had nothing to do with their location; they rarely produced plays of local interest; they employed few local artists; most still had one eye on New York City. And in a development since the eighties, the best theatres moved their successful productions to Broadway."

[12] "Assisting cultural activities in the United States and Europe," October 21, 1960, Henry T. Heald, Report #018987, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 17 and 20. Remarks made at the Congress of the European Cultural Foundation.

[13] James Allen Smith, "Foundations as Cultural Actors" in *American Foundations: Roles and Contributions*, eds. Helmut K. Anheier and David C. Hammack (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 262-3. Smith writes, "America's largest foundations arrived late on the cultural scene. … Why the neglect? What inhibited the major foundations in their support of arts and culture in the early decades of the twentieth century? The most obvious answer is that large general-purpose foundations represented an institutional and intellectual break with past charitable practices. The founders famously described their work as scientific philanthropy, seeing their role as a search for the root causes of social problems. … Arts patronage was clearly old hat. The realms of arts and culture thus remained marginal to the interests of the turn-of-the-century foundations."

[14] "A proposal for a program in the arts of national scope," January 1960, William McPeak, Report #010572, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 14-15.

[15] Ibid, 15-16

[16] Ibid, 17.

[17] "The Resident Professional Theatre," July 1965, Wilson McNeil Lowry, Report #001107, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 7.

[18] The Lugné-Poë and Pitoeff references merit further elaboration as they are our best indication of the vision that motivated Lowry's work in this area. These directors are associated with such late 19th and early 20th century institutions as Théâtre de L'Oeuvre (a symbolist playwrights theater and people's theater founded and led by Aurélian Lugné-Poë 1892-1929), Théâtre Libre (an independent, free theater founded and led by André Antoine 1887-1894), and Théâtre de Vieux Columbier (founded and led from 1913 to 1924 by Jacques Copeau, whose alternative programming pushed against the notion of the 'well-made play' and the star system).

[19] "Interview with W. McNeil Lowry for the Ford Foundation Oral History Project / Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey," May 21, 1974, Transcript, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 603.

[20] "Interview with W. McNeil Lowry for the Ford Foundation Oral History Project / Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey," May 17, 1973, Transcript, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 388-9.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid, 90.

[23] "Remarks at the Dedication of the New Arena Stage, Washington, D.C.," October 9, 1961, Wilson McNeil Lowry, Prepared Remarks, Office of Humanities and the Arts, Office of the Vice President, Office Files of Wilson McNeil Lowry, 1952-1974, Series V: Speeches and Writings, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 1-2.

[24] "Patronage of the arts—The United States," June 21, 1960, Wilson McNeil Lowry, Report #012812, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 4-5.

[25] Ibid, 4-5.

[26] Ibid, 10-11.

[27] "Interview with W. McNeil Lowry for the Ford Foundation Oral History Project / Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey," May 7, 1973, Transcript, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 365.

[28] "Interview with W. McNeil Lowry for the Ford Foundation Oral History Project / Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey," May 17, 1973, Transcript, 373.

[29] "News from the Ford Foundation," October 10, 1962.

[30] "Docket Excerpt: Bd. of Trustees Meeting," September 27-28, 1962.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Sandra Schmidt, "The Regional Theatre: Some Statistics," *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1965): 50. Stable URL http://www.jstor.com/stable/1124679L

[33] "The Resident Professional Theatre," July 1965, 8-10.

[34] Laurence Maslon, *The Arena Adventure: The First 40 Years*, (Washington, DC: Arena Stage, 1990), 9.

[35] Ibid, 15.

[36] Letter from Zelda Fichandler to W. McNeil Lowry, July 23, 1959, Grant #60-19, Arena Stage, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

[37] Letter from W. McNeil Lowry to Zelda Fichandler, July 27, 1959, Grant #60-19, Arena Stage, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

[38] Zelda Fichandler, "Theatres or Institutions?," in *The American Theatre*, vol. 3, 1969-1970, eds. Martha Wadsworth Coigney, Judith Ravel Leabo, and Larl Leabo (New York, NY: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1970), 110.

[39] "Legitimate: Cleve. Play House Going Equity After 42 Years: Ford Grant is the Key," *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000),* Aug 27, 1958, 57. When the FF selected the Cleveland Play House for its experimental demonstration the longstanding community theater converted to being a union house after 42 years of non-union status. For the second year of the multi-year grant from the FF, the Play House agreed to pay a minimum of $70 weekly, slightly more than the mandatory Equity minimum. During this period, many regional stock companies were operating on a Z contract with Actors Equity Association, which in 1959 had a minimum weekly pay for actors of $62.50.

[40] Lowry mentions “three theaters” in the oral history, rather than four; it appears he has forgotten or intentionally chosen not to mention the New York-based Phoenix Theatre, which was included in the program but withdrew after being awarded funds because the Ford-mandated fees for actors of $200 per week—while much higher than the standard rates paid in the regions by stock companies—were too low to be competitive in New York City.

[41] “Interview with W. McNeil Lowry for the Ford Foundation Oral History Project / Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey,” May 17, 1973, Transcript, 391.

[42] “Legitimate: Equity $65-$100 Stock Minimums this Year, Next; C.O.L. Raise in '62," *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000),* Jun 01, 1960, 67, 72. Beginning in 1962, “minimum performer salaries for members of Actor Equity working in stock” ranged from $67.50 to $100.00 per week.

[43] Letter from Zelda Fichandler to W. McNeil Lowry, October 31, 1959, Grant #60-19, Arena Stage, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center. Fichandler notes that the Arena Stage “Board” has asked “a very good question”: “IF the actors’ grant program goes through and IF Arena Stage actors for three years receive $200 a week salaries, what happens to the institution when the subsidy is withdrawn?” A handwritten note at the bottom of the letter indicates that Lowry answered by telephone on November 5.

[44] “News from the Ford Foundation,” October 10, 1962.

[45] “Docket Excerpt: Bd. of Trustees Meeting,” September 27-28, 1962.

[46] “Transcript of Tapes for the Ford Foundation,” Remarks by Wilson McNeil Lowry followed by Q&A, Studio Arena Theatre Conference, April 21, 1967, Office of Humanities and the Arts, Office of the Vice President, Office Files of Wilson McNeil Lowry, 1952-1974, Series V: Speeches and Writings, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, 44.

[47] Ibid.