

# Envisioning the Future of Theater for Young Audiences



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*Babies in Space*, performed by the the Alliance Theatre. Photo by Daniel Parvis



# Envisioning the Future of Theater for Young Audiences



Written and Compiled By Jonathan Shmidt Chapman and Emma Halpern

A report from the National Endowment for the Arts in collaboration with Theatre for Young Audiences/USA

This report follows a convening held June 8, 2019 at the National YoungArts Foundation in Miami, Florida

Presented by

National Endowment for the Arts  
Theatre for Young Audiences/USA, and  
Theatre Communications Group

With additional support from Children's Theatre Foundation of America

*A note on the term Theater for Young Audiences (TYA): For the purposes of this report, the term Theater for Young Audiences specifically refers to professional performance for young audiences (usually with professional adult performers), though the term can also encompass performance featuring non-professional or semi-professional child and teen performers.*

Front cover: Elementary students from the SPARK Program watching *Mother Africa*. Photo by Alexis Buatti-Ramos, courtesy of the New Victory Theater.

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# Preface



Dear Colleagues,

In June 2019, the National Endowment for the Arts convened with Theatre Communications Group and Theatre for Young Audiences/USA for “Envisioning the Future of Theater for Young Audiences.” This was the first time the three organizations have collaborated to confront the challenges and opportunities faced by theaters producing work for young audiences.

The National Endowment for the Arts understands the importance of arts engagement at a young age. Therefore, we are providing the findings from this historic convening in order to summarize the state of theater for young audiences, share the latest research in the field, and discuss proposed next steps.

Theaters for young audiences are preparing the next generation of Americans to inherit an increasingly complex world and are doing so by making some of the most exciting theater in the country today. I encourage you to share this report with the producers, critics, funders, and elected officials in your community, and to explore what you or your organization can do to help support this important work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "MA Carter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mary Anne" and the last name "Carter" clearly visible.

Mary Anne Carter  
Chairman  
National Endowment for the Arts



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*Three Little Birds*, performed by the Children's Theatre of Charlotte. Photo by John Merrick



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Panel discussion entitled The Current State of the TYA Business Model at the Envisioning the Future of Theater for Young Audiences convening. Photo by Nina Meehan





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*The Snowy Day and Other Stories* at Childsplay Theatre. Photo by Tim Trumble Photography, courtesy of Childsplay Theatre



# Theater for Young Audiences in the United States Today

Across the United States, millions of young people are introduced to live theater each year through the work of professional theaters dedicated to inspiring a new generation of audiences from infants to teenagers. The professional field of Theater for Young Audiences (TYA) has come a long way over the last century, now including hundreds of full-time TYA theaters ranging from innovative, itinerant ensembles to multimillion dollar institutions. While adaptations of popular literature dominate the TYA stage, programming also includes topically relevant plays; contemporary original work; and a wide range of experimentation in aesthetics, content, and form.

## The Challenges and the Opportunities

While TYA has steadily grown as an art form and as a cultural industry, several significant structural and societal challenges impede its ability to sustain, grow, and amplify impact. Those challenges include:

- 1. Funding:** While the arts funding community in the United States offers support for artistic development, leadership training, and accessibility of theater, it rarely devotes a proportional allocation of resources to the TYA sector. In fact, many exclude work for young people from their funding portfolios entirely. Funders often exclude TYA from their grants on the basis that TYA is classified as education work rather than art, while education funders often exclude TYA from their grants by interpreting the work as art and not primarily education. TYA companies want to talk about the high artistic quality of their theater work as well as the work's educational benefits, yet they often struggle in getting funders to understand that the work exists and excels at this intersection.
- 2. Limitations of the Business Model:** A recent study surveying the Theatre for Young Audiences/USA membership<sup>1</sup> demonstrates a fundamental challenge in the organizational structure of the industry. While the percentage of earned vs. contributed income for TYA theaters and theaters for general audiences is fairly consistent, average (mean) ticket prices were much lower at participating TYA theaters than at theaters for general audiences. For comparative purposes, a report commissioned by Theatre Communications Group<sup>2</sup> found that the average price for a single ticket to a production for general audiences was \$39.43<sup>3</sup> (Voss, Voss, & Warren 2017, 11).<sup>4</sup> By comparison, the average price charged by TYA theaters for tickets to students for school performances was \$7.32—just 18.6 percent of the cost of a single ticket to a production for general audiences reported in the TCG report (Omasta 2009, 9). While single tickets for young people at TYA theaters were higher than those for school performances (averaging \$16.00), this significant discrepancy in earned income potential likely contributes to lower average salary for artists and arts leaders in the TYA sector.
- 3. Leadership Development:** Given the realities outlined above, most TYA theaters can't afford to have associate artistic directors or associate managing directors. As a field, TYA does not have training models to bring in a

1 Omasta, Matt. 2019. *Theatre for Young Audiences State of the Field Study: Technical Report*. New York: Theatre for Young Audiences USA. 9.

2 Voss, Zannie Giraud, Glenn B. Voss, Lesley Warren, Ilana B. Rose, and Laurie Baskin. 2017. *Theatre Facts 2017: Theatre Communications Group's Report on the Fiscal State of the U.S. Professional Not-For-Profit Theatre Field*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

3 While this figure represents the average from member theaters reporting from the TCG membership, it is worth noting that the top single ticket price for general audiences in the 2019-20 season as reported to the National Endowment for the Arts was \$397.

4 For comparative purposes, ticket prices have been adjusted for inflation and are reported in 2018 U.S. dollars.

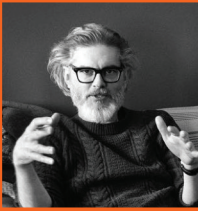
new generation of leadership. Most university programs focusing on TYA are practice-based, and not focused on organizational management. Arts management programs generally have a broad scope, and since salaries are typically larger at theaters for general audiences than at TYA theaters, TYA loses emerging talent to those theaters. Funding models are such that it's difficult for TYA to create leadership pathways to introduce and widen who's at the table in the industry.

4. **Research:** Even though there is a growing body of research that points toward the impact that theater performance can have on young people, to date the field has not aggregated this research or thought hard about its implications for the design of individual performances, the contents of whole seasons, or possible partnerships with other youth-serving organizations.

## Envisioning the Future of Theater for Young Audiences

The convening participants envision a future in which every child in this country has access to high quality theater as a core part of their development. This outcome is achievable by the following efforts:

- Deeper collaborations can be developed between TYA theaters and general audience theaters serving the same geographic region, between TYA venues across regions in the co-commissioning of work, and between artists who can work across sectors and expect the same level of compensation.
- Arts journalists at local and national outlets can be encouraged to include TYA performances in their coverage of the arts through outreach and education efforts by theaters and service organizations.
- Arts funders in the United States can recognize the value of TYA, supporting the development of new work, leadership development opportunities, community impact, and organizational sustainability.



### Testimonial: Mo Willems

A play is called a 'play' for a reason. Not just because it is fun, but because playing is centered on a question, a powerful 'What if...?' that propels characters and audiences and ideas across an emotional landscape that is both startlingly new and reassuringly universal. To bring a child to the theater is to allow them to not just witness a special moment but to be part of it, to experience the dialog between playwright and performer, designer and architecture, actor and audience. Theater is the conduit of a spark of creativity that does its best work after the play is done, when the audience member is back home remembering, imagining, and re-playing.

Recent scientific investigations have led us to discover that adults share over 99 percent of our DNA with children. So, if theater is good for them, if it feeds their creative empathy, then probably it's good for us, too.

*Mo Willems writes and draws books, animates films and TV, and creates musical theater. His work has garnered multiple Caldecott Honors, Geisel Awards, Emmy Awards, and giggles. He is most proud of the giggles.*



# Making the Case for the Impact of Theater for Young Audiences

What is the impact of Theater for Young Audiences on a child? Historically, little research has been conducted that assesses the value of theater in the lives of young audiences. In the last few years, several studies have provided tangible and compelling evidence of the impact that watching live theater can have on children and young people. The research provides concrete data to support what has been demonstrated anecdotally through the experiences of audiences at theaters for young audiences for decades.

Seeing live theater offers a range of academic, social, and emotional benefits to children. This includes a greater ability to accept people with different opinions from their own and understand the diversity of ways others experience the world; an increased hope for their own future, with the ability to imagine attending college and envisioning success; a greater recognition that the arts can have a place in their lives in the present and future; improved engagement and behavior in school environments, which can impact success; increased success on standardized tests; higher writing scores; and a stronger command of narrative devices.

The New Victory, a flagship theater for family audiences in New York City that presents international performances across disciplines, completed a landmark study with the arts and cultural research firm WolfBrown on the intrinsic impact of live performance on young audiences<sup>5</sup>. In the only longitudinal study of its kind, New Victory partnered with under-resourced school communities with no arts programming to track children in both treatment and control groups over three consecutive years<sup>6</sup>. The study found that:

- Children exposed to live theater are much more able to imagine the lives of others.
- Children exposed to live theater before the age of eight report that “Theater is for someone like me.” (The study found that trend to decline in children who are not exposed to live theater before the age of eight).
- Children demonstrate a range of intrinsic impacts after seeing live theater performance, including personal relevance, social bridging, aesthetic growth, and motivation to action. Their survey responses and comments suggest that different types of performances elicit different levels of these impacts.

An unexpected outcome of the New Victory Research indicates that children who engaged with the performing arts in a three-year program exhibited a more optimistic outlook toward their future than peers who did not. These children can imagine different futures—ones that include attending college. Speaking metaphorically, **young people discover and develop hope through the performing arts.**

New Victory's results add to a growing body of research on the impact of arts field trips. Studies by Dr. Jay P. Greene (Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas) and his team shows that seeing live theater offers significant educational benefits to school-age children<sup>7</sup>, including a stronger command of the plot and vocabulary of those plays. (Students randomly assigned to watch a movie of the same or related content did not experience these benefits). He is leading a large-scale study with the Woodruff Arts Center on the impact of arts field trips across multiple art forms. An unexpected outcome of that study found that students who received multiple arts field trips experienced significantly

5 Maliekal, L.B., Boddie, C.J., Palmer Wolf, Dannie, and Holochwost, Steven J. (2019) Theaters for Learning: The NEW VICTORY THEATER SPARK Program in M. Finneran, M. Anderson (Eds.) Ed Finneran, Michael, Anderson, Michael (Eds.) *Education and Theatres: Beyond the Four Walls*. 195-207.

6 Palmer Wolf, Dannie, and Holochwost, Steven J. WolfBrown, (2019) New Victory Intrinsic Impact of Live Performance on Young Audience. (Forthcoming Publication in Review).

7 Greene, J. P., Erickson, H. H., Watson, A. R., & Beck, M. I. (2018). The Play's the Thing: Experimentally Examining the Social and Cognitive Effects of School Field Trips to Live Theater Performances. *Educational Researcher*, 47(4), 246-254.

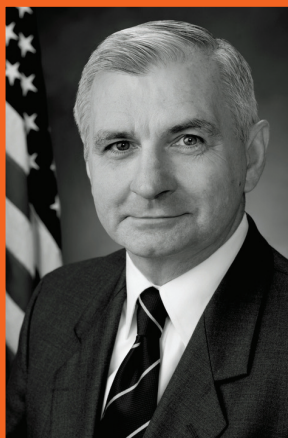
greater gains on their standardized test scores (Math and ELA) after the first year than the control students.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a recent NEA-funded study<sup>9</sup> by Dr. Daniel H. Bowen at Texas A&M University and Dr. Brian Kisida at the University of Missouri examined Houston's Arts Access Initiative, finding that a substantial increase in arts educational experiences, including theater field trips and in-school performances from professional artists, has remarkable impacts on students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Relative to students assigned to the control group, treatment school students experienced reductions in disciplinary infractions, higher standardized writing scores, and an increase in their compassion for others.

**This body of research suggests that seeing live theater offers children a range of demonstrated benefits that enrich their social and emotional growth, support their school engagement, and develop their ability to imagine the future.** In developing a child's ability to understand the lives of others, and fostering a deeper sense of compassion and tolerance, theater also provides essential developmental tools for the adult they will become. Exposure to live theater impacts the success of young people today, while shaping their future as a more self-aware, compassionate, and empathetic generation of leaders and citizens.

## Conclusion

**Seeing live theater offers children a range of demonstrated benefits that enrich their social and emotional growth, support their school engagement, and develop their ability to imagine the future.** In developing a child's ability to understand the lives of others, and fostering a deeper sense of compassion and tolerance, theater also provides essential developmental tools for the adult they will become. Exposure to live theater impacts the success of young people today, while shaping their future as a more self-aware, compassionate, and empathetic generation of leaders and citizens.

**Children across the country should be introduced to the live performing arts as early as possible, ideally prior to the age of eight.** They should be exposed to a range of performing arts, both within their school day and with their families. Children should be provided opportunities to engage with and further explore the theater they see on stage, ideally before and after the show. Engagement led by teaching artists will amplify the impact of the experience of theater-going. Artists and theater organizations should be supported in every community to ensure that as many children as possible have access to the performing arts.



### Testimonial: Senator Jack Reed

"As a high school student in 1966, I was one of the kids who benefitted from NEA-funded Project Discovery. It gave me the chance to experience live theater, to see a performance of *Richard III* on stage, and that opened my eyes to a world of possibility. Thanks to Senator Pell's vision, Project Discovery and other NEA initiatives continue to inspire generations of young people."

*Senator Jack Reed, the senior U.S. Senator from Rhode Island.*

8 Greene, J. P. (2018). [An Unexpectedly Positive Result from Arts-Focus Field Trips](#). Brookings Brown Center Chalkboard.

9 Kisida, B., Bowen, D. H. (2019). [New Evidence of the Benefits of Arts Education](#). Brookings Brown Center Chalkboard.



# Summary of June 8, 2019 Convening

On June 8, 2019, 85 producers, presenters, artists, funders, and journalists met in the Jewel Box at the National YoungArts Foundation for a convening on the field of Theater for Young Audiences (TYA).

Taking place a day after the close of the Theatre Communications Group 2019 National Conference and billed as a post-conference to that event, the TYA convening was a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts; Theatre Communications Group, the national service organization for the American nonprofit theater; and Theatre for Young Audiences/USA, the national service organization for the professional field of TYA. The Children's Theatre Foundation of America provided additional support. The online platform HowlRound Theatre Commons livestreamed the day's events.

Goals for the day included 1) To examine the current state of the TYA field, 2) To explore the relationship between TYA and the wider theater community, and 3) To envision ways to strengthen the impact of the TYA field in the future. Plenary presentations and breakout discussions served to address various aspects of these objectives.

## Welcome and Introduction

Greg Reiner, Director of Theater and Musical Theater, National Endowment for the Arts

Suzan Zeder, President, Children's Theatre Foundation of America

Teresa Eyring, Executive Director/CEO, Theatre Communications Group

Greg Reiner delivered an introductory welcome that stressed both the importance of TYA and its tendency to be overlooked by the larger theater field. "You are inspiring and empowering our next generation of theater artists, audiences, and citizens," he said. Reiner then mentioned how his colleagues in both the theater world and in the funding community are often surprised when he talks about excellence in TYA, saying "[It's] a continual reminder of why it's so important to us at the National Endowment for the Arts to do what we can . . . to lift up this very important field."

Suzan Zeder's welcoming remarks emphasized the importance of representation in TYA. "[Today's young audiences] are probably the most racially and economically diverse, age- and gender-fluid audience you're ever going to find," she said, "In order to serve them effectively with live performance, we must speak to their experience and we must be willing to interrogate our own assumptions, as artists and as educators, about power, about privilege, and we must pursue artistic excellence in all aspects."

Teresa Eyring noted in her remarks that young people had been a theme earlier in the Theatre Communications Group National Conference, with pre-conferences for education directors and theater professionals working in higher education. "I do think, in this big beautiful arts ecology that we're all a part of, Theater for Young Audiences, and young people in general, are one of the most marginalized groups," she said, naming funding, coverage by critics and arts journalists, and arts in schools as areas where TYA is under-resourced. Eyring explained that one of the ways Theatre Communications Group is helping to promote TYA is through their Audience (R)Evolution Program. Funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Audience (R)Evolution supports new ways of building community, and this past funding cycle, focused on programs designed to engage multigenerational audiences. "I think we have to activate," she said, "especially now, because I think this next generation coming up in particular is really eager to engage with live art forms, to have their voices heard, to express their creativity."



## Testimonial: Jason Reynolds

I write stories that other people read in their own time. Their discovery and engagement with the story usually doesn't involve me. I'm rarely in a space to see characters come to life in the minds of readers, and therefore never even imagined that my characters would come to life on

stage. It's been an incredible thing to see my novels adapted into theater pieces for young audiences. Not only does it give my work a new lens and a new life, it more importantly provides young people with an immersive experience. A human experience. A dialogue between young person and story that can only come from theater. The journey has been eye opening, and has shown me the power that live theater has, both on the child and the adult who is lucky enough to attend with them.

There's something electric that happens when a child connects to a story through theater, in a room with other humans all witnessing the same story at the same time. The energy is palpable. Live theater transports the audience directly into the world of the story, witnessing the characters and emotions in real time. It allows them to see the world of the character through their eyes, in an encompassing way that only being in a room with other people can do. It's one of the most human experience one can have, and every child deserves to know it. To feel it.

*Jason Reynolds is the New York Times best-selling author of All American Boys, the Track series, Long Way Down, For Everyone, Miles Morales-Spiderman, and Ghost, a 2019 National Book Award Finalist for Young People's Literature. Reynolds is the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature.*

## State of the TYA Field

Theatre for Young Audiences/USA Executive Director Jonathan Shmidt Chapman gave an overview of the current American TYA field, outlining the various TYA organizational models, the differences between TYA and general audience theater operations, and current trends in the field.

According to Chapman, there are three major differences between TYA and other theater models:

- TYA productions tend to target very specific age groups, which affects programming decisions, school partnerships, and TYA's relationship to ticket buyers.
- TYA faces unique funding challenges, including high audience turnover as kids age out, financial strains on parents that keep them from becoming major donors, and confusion among funders as to whether TYA is an artistic or educational endeavor.
- TYA faces difficulties in developing leadership pathways, due to a lack of training models at TYA theaters, lack of university programs focused on TYA management, and a lack of diversity in leadership.

Chapman also noted several future-facing trends in American TYA, including theater specifically targeted to children ages 0-5 (referred to as Theater for the Very Young); unique commissioning partnerships involving multiple TYA entities, or collaborations between TYA and general audience theater organizations; “mainstream” theater artists and companies working in TYA; work specifically designed for young audience members with autism and special populations; and work that explores current events and issues on stage.

## Research Presentation: National TYA Data Survey

Dr. Matt Omasta, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and Assistant Dean of the Caine College of the Arts at Utah State University

Matt Omasta presented some of his findings from the national TYA data survey that he conducted, one of the most comprehensive studies of its kind.

Omasta drew attention to the disparity in operating budgets and ticket prices between TYA companies and theaters serving general audiences, pointing out that TYA companies can make as little as 18.78 percent of the ticketing revenue that a comparable theater serving general audiences would make on a show with similar production values and audience turnout. This data suggests that the economic reality of producing TYA directly impacts the industry’s ability to pay artists and produce high-quality work.

Omasta also shared data about how TYA companies plan their seasons, develop work, run their education departments, and cast their shows.

“TYA does amazing work with few resources,” he concluded.

## Research Presentation: The New Victory Theater Intrinsic Impact Study

Lindsey Buller Maliekel, Director of Education/Public Engagement, New Victory Theater

New Victory recently completed a five-year study with the research firm WolfBrown on the intrinsic impact of live performance on young audiences. Located in New York City’s Times Square, New Victory annually serves 60,000 family audience members and 40,000 students through school programs across the city. The theater presents work from all over the world and offers a range of theatrical forms, including theater, musicals, opera, circus, dance, and puppetry. New Victory also runs a variety of community engagement programs, as well as a new works development lab. About 70 percent of school audiences receive free pre- or post-show classroom workshops, and 60 percent of family audiences engage in lobby activities or family workshops when seeing a New Victory show.



## “Why Are the Arts Important?” Stories Previous Research Has Left Out

Maliekel recounted how most research into the arts’ impact on kids has focused on raising test scores and attendance. She found this to be a frustrating framework. She asks, “Why do you work in the arts? Is it because of test scores? Obviously not.” Observations in the classroom resonated with Maliekel much more, which included kids’ ability to better identify their own feelings, identify the feelings of others, grow their imaginations, and learn more about the world. When a funder asked New Victory what new initiative they would launch with a five-year gift, they pitched a new education program that would simultaneously help them develop the research tools to learn more about the real impact the arts have on kids.

## Launching New Victory SPARK and Developing Research Tools

New Victory launched SPARK, or Schools with Performing Arts Reach Kids, to partner with nine under-resourced schools with no arts teachers or arts programming, all with at least 90 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Because of the students’ lack of arts exposure, it is safe to assume that the impact data is a result from New Victory programming, as opposed to other arts experiences.

New Victory’s SPARK program treatment students saw three shows and participated in 15 workshops per year with New Victory teaching artists (nine performances and 45 workshops by the time they exited the program). For the control group, New Victory also tracked students a year older from the same teachers and school environment.

One of the research tools used by New Victory was a post-show survey, given to study students along with other attendees immediately after a show. More than 5,000 kids at 15 different productions took these surveys over the course of five years. Survey prompts included items such as, “The show made me think about my life or the people I know” and “I have never seen anything like this show before.”

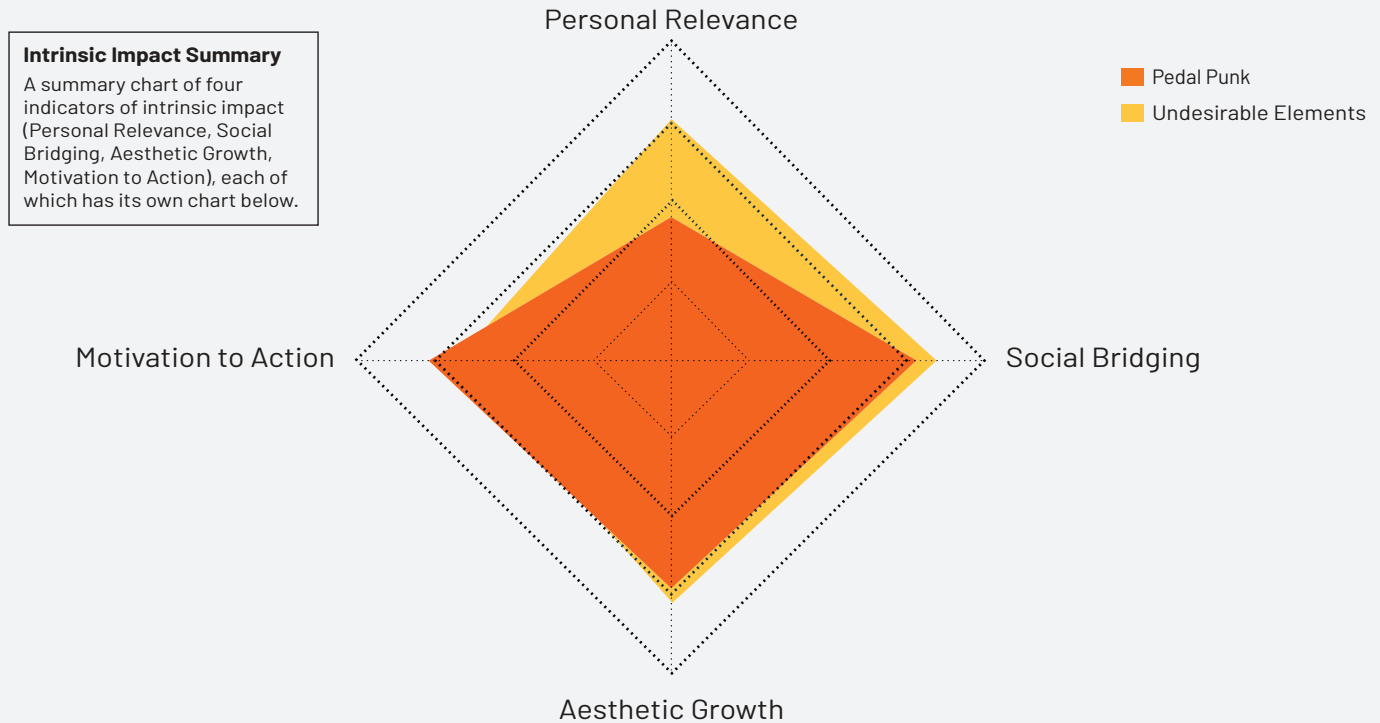
## Impact Footprints – *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ* vs. *Pedal Punk*

Two shows that students filled out surveys for were Ping Chong & Company’s *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ* and Cirque Mechanics’ *Pedal Punk*. *Undesirable Elements* featured young adults telling their stories about growing up in New York City, and *Pedal Punk* was a steampunk circus performance. When assessing student survey responses, New Victory and WolfBrown looked at four different types of intrinsic impact:

- 1) Personal Relevance – When a show makes audiences think about their own lives or people that they know; seeing themselves and their stories reflected on stage.
- 2) Social Bridging – When a show exposes audiences to people whose lives are different from their own; nurturing curiosity about different cultures and people who live in different parts of the world.
- 3) Aesthetic Growth – When a show introduces audiences to a new art form, style, or genre; seeing something for the first time.
- 4) Motivation to Action – When a show motivates audiences to make or do something new on their own; seeing a show with puppetry and then making your own puppet at home.

# In-Theater Surveys:

## Different production genres have different impacts

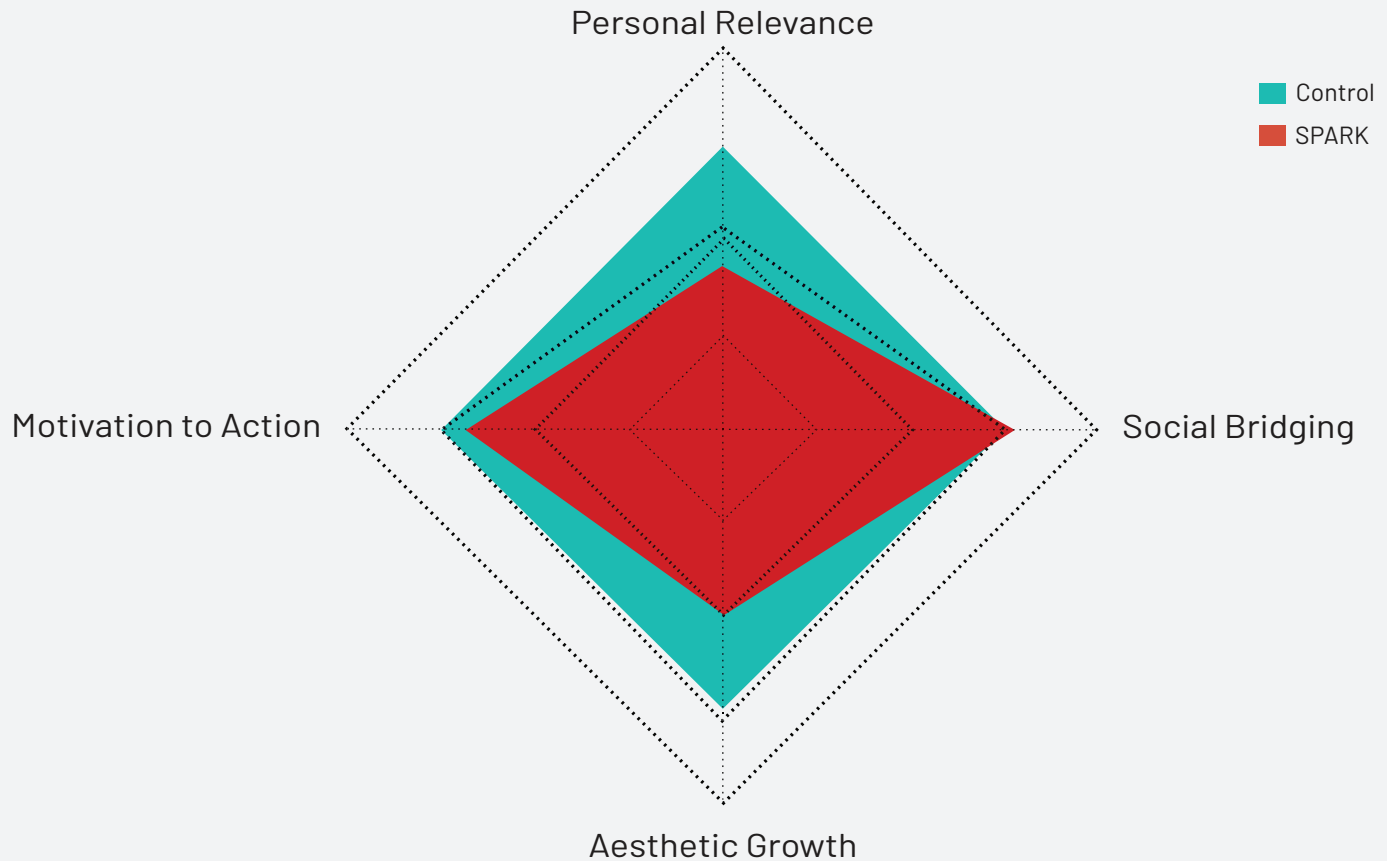


In their survey responses, young people reported that *Undesirable Elements* had high impact in the areas of personal relevance and social bridging—kids thought about their own lives, and people whose lives were different from their own. *Pedal Punk* had high impact in motivation to action—kids wanted to learn the kind of acrobatics they saw on stage.

The surveys also indicated that pre-show workshops increased a show's impact on audience members. Kids who participated in pre-show workshops for *Pedal Punk* demonstrated higher impact in personal relevance, motivation to action, and aesthetic growth than kids from the same school who saw the show without a workshop.

# In-Theater Surveys:

## Pre-show workshops increase impact



### By Age 10, Kids Have Decided Whether or Not Theater Is for Them

The data also demonstrates that New Victory SPARK had a huge impact on theater interest. In this area, the program exceeded the New York City Department of Education's standard for impact by twice their minimum requirement in the first year of the program, and by three times the following year. As Maliekel expected, when kids go to the theater and work with teaching artists, they like theater more and think of it as something that's "for them."

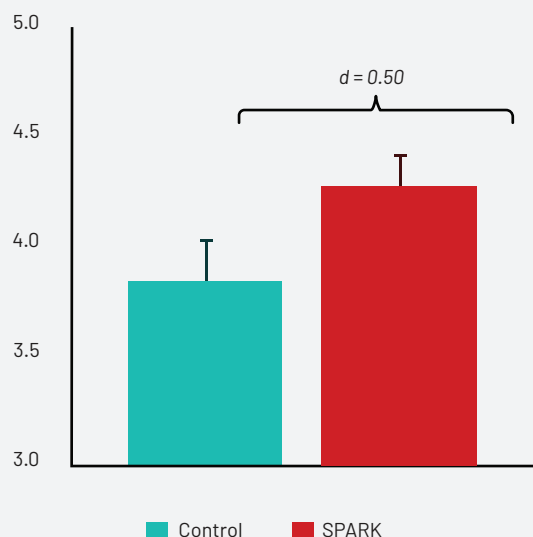
However, she was not prepared for what would happen to students in the control group. At the beginning of the study, students in the control group reported only slightly less interest in theater than New Victory SPARK students, but just two years later that interest starkly declined. "If we really care about when we invite kids into the theatrical space, if we want these kids to think that theater is for them, we cannot wait until they're older."



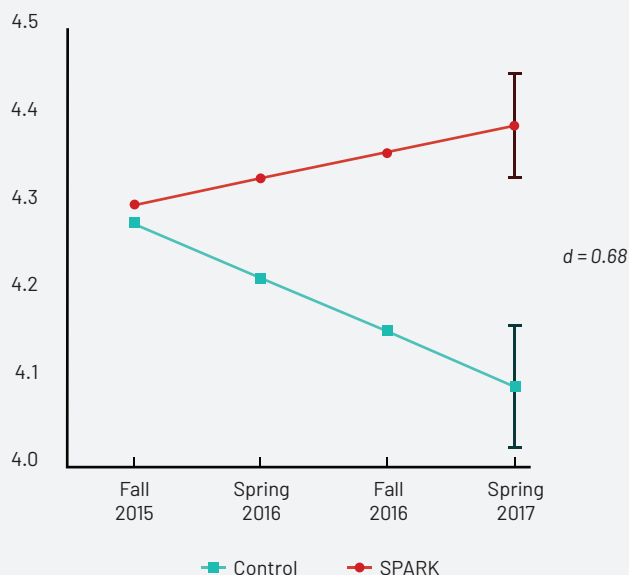
# Theater Interest

Example Question: “Theater is for someone like me”

Differences after 1 Year (2015–2016)



Differences after 2 Years (2015–2017)



## “Theater Gives Kids Hope!”

Another type of research tool used in the study was a series of survey questions about the future. Some questions pertain to students’ theater-going habits, such as “Would you like to go to the theater with your family?” while other questions address students’ quality of life, like, “Do you think you’ll graduate from high school?” and “Do you think you’ll be happy?”

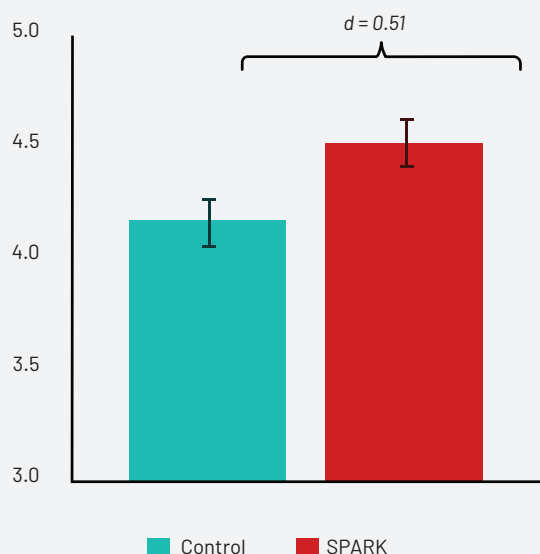
These responses suggest that going to the theater and working with teaching artists can impact how young people see their futures, even for children who face housing instability, food insecurity, and other hardships.

“Kids who get to see live performing arts and work with artists are more optimistic about what their future will be like than kids who are not,” said Maliekel. While New Victory SPARK wasn’t designed with this outcome in mind, we think there is an explanation: “As you raise kids’ ability to think about lives other than their own, and simultaneously raise their ability to practice imaginative skills, you raise their ability to wonder ‘what if?’ and adjust their own hopefulness for their future.”

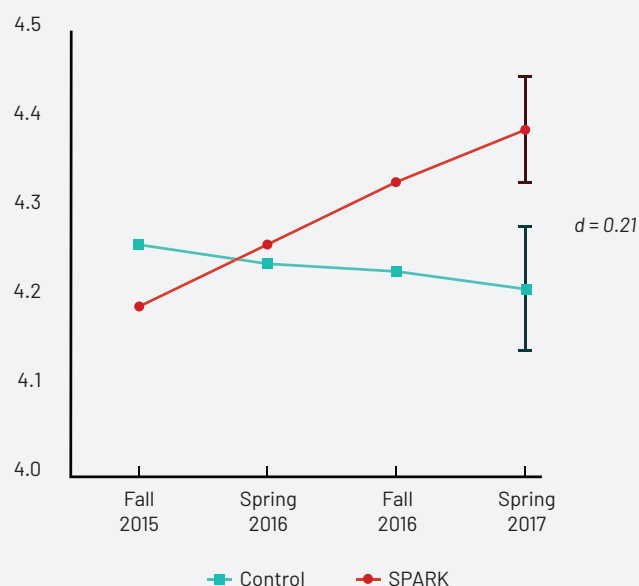
# Future Orientation

Example Question: “I will graduate from high school”

Differences after 1 Year (2015–2016)



Differences after 2 Years (2015–2017)



## ERm Research Data Supports WolfBrown Research

Maliekel also shared data from New Victory’s quantitative research with the market research firm ERm Research. These statistics dovetail with New Victory’s findings regarding a link between age and future theater interest:

- 67 percent of all surveyed theatergoers attended the theater as a kid.
- 51 percent of adults who do not attend the theater today did not attend as a child.
- Adults who attend theater frequently now are almost 2x as likely to have attended frequently as children.
- Adults who attend theater heavily now are more than 2x as likely to have seen a show by the time that they were in pre-K than non-attendees.
- 78 percent of adults who attend theater heavily saw their first show by the time that they had finished elementary school.

(Note: Theatergoers participating in the ERm Research currently live in the New York metro area, though they did not necessarily grow up there.)

Maliekel reiterated that seeing theater before the age of eight is crucial if a student is going to become an adult theatergoer. “I didn’t quite realize how much of an impact it would make on whether [kids] would ever attend the theater, and whether they felt that theater as an art form was meant for them at all,” she said.

# The Current State of the TYA Business Model

A panel discussion with TYA management leaders offered an in-depth look at the opportunities and challenges facing the TYA industry nationally from an organizational management perspective.

Panelists:

Kevin Malgesini, Managing Director, Seattle Children's Theatre, Seattle, Washington

Meghann Babo-Shroyer, Associate Managing Director, Imagination Stage, Bethesda, Maryland

Steve Martin, Managing Director, Childsplay, Tempe, Arizona

Meredith Suttles, Director of Development, TheaterWorksUSA, New York, New York

Moderator: Michael Bobbitt, Artistic Director of New Repertory Theatre, Boston, Massachusetts.

"Any conversation that funders, foundations, government agencies, individuals are having about audience building that doesn't include TYA is missing a huge piece. . . . Supporting TYA, investing in TYA, is investing in the future of theater in the United States."

– Meghann Babo-Shroyer



## Testimonial: **BENJ PASEK and JUSTIN PAUL**

In adapting Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* for the stage, we witnessed firsthand the power inherent in bringing a beloved book to life for kids and families. We cherished those moments of synchronicity as the show came to life in front of young audiences—the uproarious, genuine laughter at the hijinks of a fellow kid, the gasps as our young hero steps inside a giant peach to set off on an adventure, and the spontaneous applause

when he defeats his evil aunts. The impact of theater on children and young adults is most palpable when you witness that magical connection between the audience and the stage just as the curtain goes up. You somehow know that something profound is about to happen, both in this moment and to the futures of the young people in the audience. To that end, we also recognize the importance of expanding the canon of stories for young people on stage. *Dear Evan Hansen* provides teen audiences and their families an opportunity to see their own experiences represented and validated on stage. Though we always strive for our work to function on a universal level, we have been especially grateful for the ways in which these shows have created space for audiences of all ages to connect and share where they otherwise may not have. Providing this space has undoubtedly been one of the most rewarding and humbling parts of our careers, and as lovers of theater in our own childhoods, it is a privilege and an honor to be able to contribute to this ongoing and invaluable tradition.

*Oscar, Grammy, Tony, and Golden Globe Award-winning songwriters Benj Pasek and Justin Paul are best known for their work on Dear Evan Hansen, La La Land and The Greatest Showman, as well as the musical adaptation of James and the Giant Peach.*



Panelists representing organizational leadership from across the industry participated in a lively discussion focused on the unique opportunities and challenges of the TYA business. One of the overarching themes was the tension between the fact that TYA can be a driver of future audiences within the wider theater sector, yet the TYA sector is generally less supported financially than their general audiences counterparts. “The difference that I see [between fundraising for general theater and fundraising for TYA] is that we’re given the children’s menu. I know that there are other things that we can eat from, we want to see the full menu of opportunities.... I think funders could have better conversations with us about the full scope of the work that we’re doing, and that we are indeed beyond creating a pipeline. The work that we’re doing is comparable and just as important and fund-able as theater for the ‘big kids,’” shared Meredith Suttles of TheaterWorksUSA. The panelists also discussed how the fact the lack of funding in the TYA sector leads to challenges in staff retention and infrastructure. “Our budgets are small.... most of the people who work in our organization, many of them, are earlier career, so not only do they not have the skills that are really important for that [donor] acquisition that has to happen all the time, when they learn them, they leave and go someplace else, and then we have to train someone else,” shared Imagination Stage’s Meghann Babo-Shroyer.

The panelists discussed ways in which the TYA field leads the overall industry, citing audience diversity, audience engagement, and producing model experimentation as examples in which the overall theater community can learn from the TYA sector. Finally, the panelists discussed the ways in which theater funders and the wider theater community can help support and amplify the TYA field. Kevin Malgesini of Seattle Children’s Theatre offered, “TYA theater is marginalized, it has been for a long time, and like any marginalized community, we need strong allies with power to stand next to us and say that TYA theater is important and legitimate.... We need funders to stand with us whether that means committing an entire year to focus on TYA theater, whether it means a funder really investing in TYA theaters, [TYA] is a community constantly fighting this notion that it is auxiliary, when really it is so fundamentally centered and important.”

## Visions for the Future

Six leaders in the TYA field each gave a presentation on their own individual vision for the future of the industry.

Speakers:

- Idris Goodwin, Playwright and Producing Artistic Director, StageOne Family Theatre, Louisville, Kentucky
- Min Kahng, Playwright and Composer
- Mary Rose Lloyd, Artistic Director, New 42, New York, New York
- Johamy Morales, Director of Education, Seattle Children’s Theatre, Seattle, Washington
- Ernie Nolan, Executive Artistic Director, Nashville Children’s Theatre, Nashville, Tennessee
- Jacqueline Russell, Founder and Artistic Director, Chicago Children’s Theatre, Chicago, Illinois



### Idris Goodwin

“I want to replace the word risk with opportunity.”

Goodwin’s vision for TYA’s future was grounded in an asset-based approach, and he encouraged the field to look to its own community to find creative ways to overcome a lack of resources and move our country forward. What are the things that TYA has in common with “mainstream” theater? What are the common values that they have and the common challenges? What can we do together to keep theater in the conversation as a whole? “I’m not

terribly interested in conversations about the dichotomy,” Goodwin said. “What happens when we obliterate the chasm, and become a better connected, more inclusive United Theater of America devoted to creating balanced seasons and conversation for everyone, one to 100, driven by the same core principles, and mid-, short-, and long-term objectives? How do we collectively rise as folks committed to the development of young people? There’s great potential in intentional unity.”

What happens when we de-emphasize the traditional theater venue? What other modes of presentation can we use to engage more directly with our audiences? Goodwin pointed out that churches, schools, and community centers all have theaters in their buildings. “There’s just always an expectation that of course we do this, of course we engage in this ritual,” he said. “So if theaters are everywhere, why aren’t we in all of them? What happens when we consider ourselves the intended residents of all of those spaces that exist in our own communities?”

How can TYA ensure that every child’s story has a place in the American theater canon? How can TYA lead the charge in engaging the country in difficult conversations? “A true American theater invests its full powers in expanding its definition of what an American story is..... Stories of difference are American stories,” Goodwin said. “The future of TYA has to be fully committed to returning to the past, to the community around the fire being regaled with word and mask, shadow, and song, one that is inviting, and open and relevant to all people.”



### Min Kahng

“I imagine a future for TYA, as we all do, where every kid who comes to the theater gets to see themselves reflected back to them on stage. I’m also interested in how this affects us as artists and as theater makers.”

Kahng focused his presentation on the impact that representation of historically marginalized groups can have on TYA audiences and artists. He identified funding as a major hurdle for recruiting diverse artists into TYA or getting them to think of TYA as a career “destination.”

“TYA for a lot of artists right now is a starting place, a stepping stool to get further. It is not seen as a valid marker of success,” he said. “This happens, honestly, because of where the funding is going, and that funding reinforces this hierarchy, and that hierarchy reinforces where the funding is going.... from an artist’s perspective, money is a big solution to this.” He then went on to explain that, while financially he can afford to take TYA commissions (many of which pay much lower than non-TYA commissions), many other artists cannot. “My queer colleagues and colleagues of color out there can’t afford to take those contracts, so what happens is they’re absent from the TYA world,” he said. “Not because they don’t want to be there, but because they can’t sustain themselves in it.”

Kahng closed by imagining how a competitive wage could impact representation in TYA, suggesting that TYA companies in homogenous areas could then house out-of-town artists of color, and more theaters could make programs for kids with autism or other specific groups sustainable. “If the funding is there, a more robust, diverse group of artists will be drawn to TYA as a final destination point for their careers,” he said, “which will then create the work that children can see themselves reflected in, as well as provide the teaching artists who can help young people feel empowered by the ways that they are unique.”



### Mary Rose Lloyd

“I don’t think it’s that provocative to equate the world of TYA with a better, more peaceful world.”

Lloyd referred to the work of examining inclusivity at one’s organization as a “duty and privilege” and explained that it should include questions about who’s making the work, who’s performing the work, what the source material is, and who the audiences are. “It’s something we’re all in a position to do and not just talk about,” she said. “Making an invitation to allow

everyone to be around the table takes effort...but in general, I think if we don't do that, we're doing such a great disservice to the young people that we're meant to be serving."

She also discussed making advocacy a priority. "By advocacy, I'm talking about more responsibility from U.S. leaders," Lloyd said, remarking how other countries have legislation that asserts a child's right to quality theater experiences. "In order to make some of these changes in our society and our community, we're going to have to be the ones who advocate for this change." She then brought up advocacy in terms of getting funders to treat both TYA and children in general with more respect, saying, "It goes back to the way we look at children as individuals, intelligent individuals who have the right to quality arts experiences." Advocacy for Lloyd also means giving adults the tools to make an articulate, compelling case for TYA, and elevating the conversation around the work "so that the teachers who are working hard every day can have the language to go to their principals and help them understand what they're bringing their kids to see."

Including young people in the TYA development process and incorporating their voice into new work is crucial, Lloyd says. "When we're creating new work for kids, we're very purposefully asking kids to come to rehearsals and to give our artists feedback, to weigh in on what's relevant to them..... If they're going to shows that do not represent them on stage and are not interesting or important to them, why would they want to come back?" She also called on "mainstream" theaters to incorporate TYA into their seasons and to give it the same weight and production values that they give their work for adult audiences.



### Johamy Morales

"I see a TYA world where we are not only holding each other accountable, or holding our students accountable, but where our students are also holding us accountable for our actions or lack thereof."

Morales's presentation explored the relationship between the self, the workplace, and the community, and how these three interconnected "ecosystems" impact the way TYA professionals make their art, run their organizations, and interact with young people. She began by telling the audience that she drew inspiration from nature when preparing her remarks and interspersed her presentation with photographs and images of the natural world. She then reflected on the global challenges that young people are facing today and how important it is that TYA audiences have a voice in the decisions being made at organizations. "If we believe that theater is about building self-confidence and critical analysis and educating and empowering our youth, why not have them at the table with us making those decisions?" she asked, "Our work is for them, and only for them. That is the mission of all of our organizations and the heart of why we do the work we do." Morales went on to consider how taking better care of one's self, one's colleagues, and one's community members will help the TYA field to better serve young people. "I think about how the individual, the work space, and our communities are all part of this larger ecosystem, that we're all connected," she said.

"I envision a TYA world where we start to attend to all of those ecosystems by building curiosity and challenging one another, with an open heart and empathy... empowering our youth through knowledge. It is our obligation to create those nurturing environments, and it is our obligation to challenge our children with difficult conversations on themes that they are having to deal with on an everyday basis," she said. "I invite you all to be a part of this vision, to create it with me, and to help propel us into the new, extraordinary possibilities of our new TYA ecosystem, that includes our youth's voices, loud and proud."





## Ernie Nolan

**“If we think about it, children’s theater [in the early 20th century] was really a part of this movement that was both social justice and social work.”**

Nolan gave an interactive presentation, describing the future of TYA in terms of the field’s role in the global community, and used his own organization, Nashville Children’s Theatre, as a case study. He began by asking the audience two questions: “What do you think of when you hear the phrase ‘cultural heritage?’” and “What do you believe that children have a right to?”

In light of Nashville’s increasingly diverse population, Nolan and his board revised the Nashville Children’s Theatre mission statement to have a more global outlook: “Believing the culturally curious child is the future, Nashville Children’s Theatre nurtures the next generation of global citizens by providing transformational theatrical experiences which reflect our evolving community, instill profound empathy, and foster personal discovery.” Nolan noted that the mission says that the theater nurtures “global citizens” rather than “children.” “[Our audiences] are the next people who are voting, our leaders who are deciding cultural policy, political policy,” he said. “We thought it was really important to recognize that and recognize that we’re part of a global community.”

“What rights can we ensure for our future global citizens?” Nolan asked, “What can we do to make sure that theater and the arts are in the lives of all future global citizens?”



## Jacqueline Russell

**“We the grown-ups have to power through these hard times and make the work that will ultimately empower and activate all of these young people to become their best, most resilient selves.”**

Russell highlighted the double bind that TYA companies currently find themselves in—now more than ever, children need TYA to help them process and make sense of the world, but making that work is becoming increasingly difficult—and encouraged TYA professionals to find ways to make the kind of theater that will help children deal with complicated issues and emotions. Though Russell affirmed that “[TYA] is about the opportunity and the responsibility to teach and nurture the people who will eventually be tasked to take care of our world,” she acknowledged the many factors that make it difficult for TYA companies to live up to this standard. These include declines in funding and ticket sales, the increase in “mainstream” theaters with family-friendly shows in their seasons, and the fear that parents don’t want their kids to see work that might be a little sad, scary, or confusing. With all of these hurdles, many TYA companies must balance their budgets by programming shows that are well-known titles and don’t necessarily speak to the tough issues in children’s lives.

“In this landscape, what is TYA facing?” Russell asked. “On the one hand, the undeniable mission to present work that will shape [their] lives and the future for the better. And on the other hand, more competition, tightening budgets, and declining ticket sales that force us to lean into more commercial and sometimes less thought-provoking work to keep our lights on..... We cannot be cowed by any of these threats and abandon our core purpose.” She quoted child prodigy Adora Svitak, who in her TED Talk “What Adults Can Learn From Kids” calls on adults to “listen and learn from kids, and trust us and expect more from us...because we are the leaders of tomorrow.” In order to prepare kids to take on the future, Russell suggested that co-commissioning and co-producing partnerships with other TYA companies and “mainstream” theaters will be crucial. “How great would it be for the larger regional theaters who’ve traditionally looked at us as competitors or as lesser than, to instead embrace and engage with us?” she asked. Russell concluded by calling the TYA leaders in the audience to action. “Let’s commit today that we will represent all of our children. Let’s work even harder to inspire their curiosity and to care more for the world that depends on them,” she said. “Let’s be bold and encourage honest engagement and difficult dialogues and present our audiences with a world that is complex.”

## Conclusion: Next Steps

Theatre for Young Audiences/USA Board President and Bay Area Children's Theatre Executive Artistic Director Nina Meehan gave the closing presentation, reflecting on the conversations that the convening had spurred and articulating the next steps and action items that came out of those conversations.

She summarized the day's discoveries by saying, "We are a group of dedicated artists who want to build a better future for our world. We see our work as a tool to empower young people. Through our work, children are seen and see themselves." She then outlined the challenges and strategies for moving the field forward that had been named throughout the day, incorporating direct quotations from earlier speakers into her presentation. "We can only move forward if we not only see the solutions but also make the commitment to take action," Meehan said.

Meehan acknowledged funding, representation, and recognition as the major challenges facing the field of TYA today. Though TYA has the same business model as other regional theaters, it lacks many of the contributed income opportunities that general audience theaters enjoy. Regarding representation, TYA professionals believe in the power of children seeing themselves on stage and in TYA leadership, but TYA as a field lacks diversity in its leadership ranks. And though TYA is building the next generation of theater artists and theatergoers, TYA artists and companies are often seen and treated as second-class citizens by funders, arts journalists, and award-giving organizations.

Despite these difficulties, there is a compelling case to be made for TYA's value and impact. There is clearer evidence than ever before that theatergoing has a huge impact on the social development and emotional growth of young people, and that access to theater before the age of ten is significantly more impactful than access that begins later on in adolescence. Throughout the day, presenters gave numerous examples of how Theater for Young Audiences plays a vital role in community life, cultivates global citizenship, and engages young people in conversations about the complexities of our world. "How many times have you been able to sit through data presentations and get teary eyed and get goose bumps?" Meehan asked, referring to the New Victory research on TYA's impact that had been shown earlier in the day, "That's opportunity, because our numbers are telling us our work is important, our work is critical."

The field identified several strategies to help face these challenges, naming access, organizational partnerships, and community engagement as important tools for moving the field forward. Making TYA as accessible as possible to as many kids as possible, and doing it while they're still under ten, will ensure that today's kids grow up feeling a deep connection to TYA and theater in general. More co-productions and co-commissions with other theater companies, both TYA and other organizations, help to expand TYA's reach and enable companies to take risks and produce on a scale that their budgets might not otherwise allow. Partnerships with agencies and community groups that share TYA's values and will advocate for TYA are equally important. In order to navigate these partnerships successfully and remain relevant to their communities, TYA companies must understand their communities' specific needs and concerns and take these needs into account during season planning and other decision-making processes.

Finally, the field resolved to capitalize on its potential with a list of action items, including paying artists more competitively, lobbying elected officials about the importance of the arts, forging deeper collaborations with college theater departments and arts management programs, speaking with various industry unions about raising their awareness of TYA, and engaging more with funders and arts journalists to make sure they're as informed as possible about TYA and why it's important.

"We actually do have the potential to do what we say we do every day—change the world through theater—but we can't do it by ourselves," Meehan said in closing. "So, let's bring our collective voice together, and let's really make sure that the future of TYA is bright and incredible."



## Testimonial: Karen Zacarías

I was born in Mexico. Immigrating here in fifth grade and feeling like an outsider prompted me to start writing plays by myself at age ten. Writing became a tool to help me navigate a new world; it gave me a voice. It helped me find my place in this new universe of the United States.

Playwriting: the art of building character, navigating conflict, making choices are skills everyone can use. I started Young Playwright's Theater when I was 24. My first week, I walked through the metal detectors at schools offering to teach playwriting. I was sent to rooms that looked like broom closets with kids who had no hope, little discipline, who could barely write. By the end of the year, every one of my 50 students had written a play.

At that time, few plays out in the world seemed relevant to my students. But a cohort of amazing children's theaters like Imagination Stage, Childsplay, Alliance Theater, Nashville Children's Theater, New Visions/New Voices began an assertive commissioning program to revolutionize

children's theater into something vital and relevant. I am so thankful to them.

I started writing plays that addressed the imaginative, magical, and isolating aspects of childhood. And to my surprise, the theaters started to *produce* the plays. Nothing improved my writing more; kids are the most honest audience a writer could want. It completely changed the way I wrote and saw plays. It drove me to not create work as a literary exercise, but as a communal commitment to change and connection.

Theater for Young Audiences is not just about plays for children; it is a movement that actively advocates for children and the power of their creativity. It is a dynamic medium that actively addresses the value and potential of all children, of all races, creeds, and abilities.

Writing a play for a children's theater is not just writing a script; it is about giving kids dynamic tools to help them make sense of our complicated world. I have written ten TYA plays. Nothing imbues my work with more purpose than writing a TYA play. It is the present and the future.

*Karen Zacarías is the award-winning playwright of Native Gardens and Ella Enchanted. She is the founder of Young Playwrights' Theater and co-founder of Latinx Theater Commons.*



# APPENDIX I:

## Theater for Young Audiences History: A Timeline

Compiled by Katherine Krzys

With additional contributions from Roger Bedard and Suzan Zeder

Edited by Emma Halpern

Special thanks to the Child Drama Collection at Arizona State University

**1901**

Mary Harriman founds the Junior League, a social welfare organization that trains women to work with immigrants and settlement house populations. Many leagues choose children's theater as one of their community service projects, eventually helping to found some regional TYA theaters that are still in existence today.

**1908**

After serving on the board of the Children's Educational Theatre, Mark Twain wrote, "It is my conviction that the children's theatre is one of the very, very great inventions of the twentieth century; and that its vast educational value—now but dimly perceived and but vaguely understood—will presently come to be recognized."

**1915**

Russell and Rowena Jelliffe found Karamu House, a settlement house in Cleveland, Ohio, and one of the longest-running black theater companies in the country. Theater for young audiences is an early component of Karamu House's programming, and a number of black theater artists, including Langston Hughes, are trained there.

**1910**

Drama League of America is founded, with many cities establishing children's theater divisions within their chapters.

**1903**

The Children's Educational Theatre, considered the first significant theater for young audiences in the U.S., is established in New York City by Alice Minnie Herts, remaining active until 1909. Shows feature children who perform for families and friends in their neighborhoods. The theater receives funding from commercial producers and works with professional directors with Broadway credits.

**1905**

*Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie premieres on Broadway after a highly successful West End run in London. It becomes popular with child and family audiences.

Professional theater for young audiences, which developed widely in this country more than 50 years ago, has its roots in multiple significant cultural movements of the late 19th and early 20th century. At that time, this country's first child labor laws, the advent of compulsory schooling, the creation of organizations like the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and major child-centered philosophical ideas (such as John Dewey's Progressive Education movement) helped define the "modern" concept of a child.

Gradually, the "child" was viewed as more than just property of her/his parents and the idea of the arts as a potent tool in child welfare and education came to the fore. While the commercial theater was only beginning to see the economic benefits of child and family audiences, social workers and educators took the initial lead in exploring theater with and for young people.

**1923**

Clare Tree Major Theatre is formed. The first American professional touring company for young audiences, the company would tour throughout America through 1954.

**1932**

Charlotte Chorpenning becomes the director of Children's Theatre at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. She would go on to write more than 55 plays for children during her career, and influence a generation of theater for young audience practitioners.

**1935**

The Federal Theatre Project is formed as a part of the Works Progress Administration, with the goal of putting theater professionals back to work during the Depression. In the agency's four years of operation, theater for young audiences would be treated with the same level of professionalism as theater for adult audiences. TYA productions in the Federal Theatre Project would include *Revolt of the Beavers* (1937), which conservative members of Congress accused of being pro-Communist, and *Pinocchio* (1939), which would later transfer to Broadway.

*The end of World War II precipitated one of the most profound cultural shifts in the history of this country. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers returned home, married, and moved to the newly created suburbs to raise families, resulting in the Baby Boom generation. Children soon occupied a much larger percentage of the population than ever before. Issues of child development and education came to the fore, and the commodification of childhood introduced a boon in all things children, including toys, clothes, books, and movies. As television entered most American homes in the 1950s and 1960s, children were raised and educated on increasingly sophisticated TV-mediated theatrical fare from Captain Kangaroo (1955) to Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood (1962) and Sesame Street (1969).*

## 1947-1955

The Children's World Theatre, recognized as the first professional theater for young audiences in residence in New York City, is founded. Articles and reviews appear in the *New York Times*.

## 1956

A committee of TYA professionals defines the term "children's theater" as "plays, written by playwrights, [presented] by living actors for child audiences."

## 1947

UNESCO creates the International Theatre Institute, prompting a resolution to support children's theater programs around the world.

## 1952

Mary Chase, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Harvey*, is invited by TYA professionals to write a play for young audiences. She writes *Mrs. McThing*, which is produced on Broadway starring Helen Hays.

## 1955-1956

Mary Martin stars in a musical adaptation of *Peter Pan* on Broadway. This production is recorded for television, introducing the show and TYA to a wide audience of children and adults throughout America.

## 1958

TYA professionals struggle to get funding from traditional arts funding sources. In response, a group of TYA professionals and artists found the Children's Theatre Foundation of America, a nonprofit with a mission "to collect and expend funds for the advancement of the children's theatre movement." The foundation remains active today.



## 1960s-1970s

TYA plays begin to explore serious subject matter during this time, including *The Ice Wolf* (1963) by Joanna Halpert Kraus, which deals with discrimination, and *Step on a Crack* (1976) by Suzan Zeder, about a girl dealing with the death of her mother and a new stepmother.

## 1970s-1980s

Many professional TYA theaters across the country begin to form regionally and grow during this time.

**1961**

Theatre Communications Group, a membership organization for nonprofit regional theaters, is founded. In 1973, it releases its first volume of Theatre Profiles, a compilation of information on member companies. Only one TYA company is listed. When Volume 5 is released in 1982, 11 TYA companies are listed.

**1965**

The International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ) is formed. Founding member countries are the U.S., United Kingdom, U.S.S.R., France, Belgium, Canada, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, West Germany, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. The organization's focus on professional productions for young audiences, as opposed to work created by or featuring young performers, helps to jumpstart the regional TYA movement in America.

**1969**

The first Actor's Equity contract for TYA is approved.

**1976**

Aurand Harris becomes the first TYA playwright to receive a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, awarded to help him develop his play *A Toby Show*.

**1979**

The Child Drama Collection is created at Arizona State University to preserve the professional, academic, and artistic history of the TYA field. By 2010, it becomes the largest repository in the world, documenting the international history of theater for youth back to the 16th century.

*The creation of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965 reflected the then-growing national interest and support for the arts. At this time, national foundations such as the Ford Foundation also began to aggressively promote the arts, both through funding and through bringing the arts to communities across the country. Amid this climate, the nonprofit theater movement matured to create a network of influential regional theaters.*

*The late 1960s and 1970s also saw dramatic growth and change in U.S. higher education as the population bubble first reached college age. Motivated by their own immersion in popular culture, and supported by a generally prosperous society that fostered experimentation, unprecedented numbers of students chose to study theater in one of the newly minted Master of Fine Arts programs that were springing up in universities across the country. This educational movement profoundly affected theater in this country as university-trained theater artists became the backbone of the regional theater movement and the impetus for the experimentation and development of professional TYA.*

## 1980s

The Louisville Children's Theatre (now known as StageOne Family Theatre) and Nashville Children's Theatre, both founded by the Junior League in the 1930s and '40s, reinvision their operations to become professional TYA companies. They join the network of professional TYA companies developing during this time in most major cities across the country.

## 1980

The Kennedy Center produces its first work for young audiences, *Maggie Magalita* by Wendy Kesselman, at its Imagination Celebration.

## 1986

ASSITEJ/USA is awarded its first National Endowment for the Arts Services to the Field grant.

## 1986

*Time* magazine names Young ACT of Seattle's production of *The Odyssey* by Gregory Falls and Kurt Beattie one of the top ten plays in the nation for 1985.

## 1988

Joint conference of ASSITEJ/USA and Theatre Communications Group.

## 1989

The New Generation Play Project, an initiative developed by a consortium of four regional TYA companies, receives funding from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts to commission eight "mainstream" playwrights to write TYA plays.

## 1984

ASSITEJ/USA, the American Center of ASSITEJ (later known as Theatre for Young Audiences/USA), produces a World Theatre Festival at the Louisiana World Exposition in New Orleans. Jim Henson attends.

## 1983

"The Role of Theatre for Young Audiences in the American Regional Theatre, and in International Cultural Exchange," an ASSITEJ/USA Wingspread Conference, is hosted by the Johnson Foundation in Racine, Wisconsin. Attending were professional TYA leaders and representatives from Actor's Equity, Puppetry Arts, International Theatre Institute, various publishing houses, the National Endowment for the Arts, ASSITEJ/Mexico, and Theatre Communications Group. Some of the goals listed in the resulting five-year strategic plan created were to improve artistic quality, achieve parity with regional theaters in management and compensation, and improve communication to levels found in adult regional theater.

## 1993

Childsplay in Tempe, Arizona, premieres *The Yellow Boat* by Founding Artistic Director David Saar, a play about Saar's eight-year-old son who died of AIDS. It becomes one of the most produced plays for young audiences in the U.S.

## 1993

Disney Theatrical Productions brings *Beauty and the Beast* to Broadway, establishing Disney as a major player in the Broadway/commercial theater world and marking the beginnings of the revitalization/"Disneyfication" of Times Square.

## 1991

New Visions/ New Voices, a TYA play development workshop and festival, begins at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

## 1990

In conjunction with the 20th anniversary of the publication of Maurice Sendak's book *In the Night Kitchen*, Sendak, along with fellow picture book author Arthur Yorinks, announces the formation of the Night Kitchen, a theater company "devoted entirely to the development of quality performing arts productions for children and adults."

## 1997

*The Lion King* opens on Broadway.

## 1997

The first Theatre Communications Group National Theatre Artist Residency Program Grants, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, are awarded for TYA projects.

**1995**

The New Victory Theater, a presenting organization that caters to young audiences and families, opens on 42nd Street in New York City as part of the Times Square revitalization initiative.

**1995**

The Theatre Communications Group Board receives its first member from a TYA theater, Seattle Children's Theatre Artistic Director Linda Hartzell.

**2019**

Theatre Communications Group's Audience (R) Evolution Exploration Grants focus on theater for youth and multigenerational audiences.

**2004**

*Time* magazine spotlights TYA with the article "Setting a New Stage for Kids" by Richard Zoglin.

**2015**

Steppenwolf Theatre produces *This is Modern Art* by Idris Goodwin and Kevin Coval in their Steppenwolf for Young Adults series. Based on actual events, the play recounts the story of a young group of graffiti artists who tag the modern wing of the Chicago Art Institute to protest the exclusionary nature of the art world. Theater critics at Chicago's two major newspapers criticize the piece for condoning illegal behavior, sparking a field-wide debate about criticism and who gets to decide what is "appropriate" for young audiences.

**2007**

ASSITEJ/USA changes its name to Theatre for Young Audiences/USA (TYA/USA).

**2003**

Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis's production of *A Year with Frog and Toad* transfers to Broadway for a two-month run, and the theater company becomes the first TYA company to receive the Regional Theatre Tony Award.

**2018**

*Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences*, the first anthology of TYA plays by Latinx playwrights, is published, accompanied by essays by Latinx scholars, on ways to combat marginalization.

*The last decades have seen the artistic evolution and professionalization of TYA. The field is now made up of a variety of types of organizations, from large institutions to small itinerant companies. The form encompasses traditional theater models, devised work, as well as work that speaks to the specific experiences of kids concerning family, race, gender, sexuality, and culture. Just as TYA in the U.S. was born in the settlement houses and immigrant communities, where live performance served a social, educational, and political purpose, TYA today continues to engage with and reflect the issues of our time.*



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How to Catch a Star, The Kennedy Center. Photo by Yassine El Mansouri/Elman Studio LLC





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*Ghost*, performed by the StageOne Family Theatre. Photo by Jonathan Cherry



*Winnie the Pooh*, performed by the Omaha Theater Company (the Rose Theater). Photo by Alex Myhre

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