

GUEST ESSAY

American Theater Is Imploding Before Our Eyes

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By Isaac Butler

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The American theater is on the verge of collapse.

Here’s just a sampling of recent dire developments: The Public Theater announced this year that the Under the Radar festival, the most exciting of New York’s experimental performance incubators, would be postponed indefinitely and later announced it was laying off 19 percent of its staff. The Humana Festival of New American Plays, a vital launching pad for such great playwrights as Lynn Nottage and Will Eno over the past four decades, was canceled this year.

This season the Williamstown Theater Festival, one of our most important summer festivals, will consist of only one fully produced work, alongside an anemic offering of staged readings. The Signature Theater, whose resident playwrights have included Edward Albee, August Wilson, Tony Kushner and Annie Baker, is delaying the start of its season and, even then, will produce only three new plays rather than the customary six.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, one of the country’s oldest and most storied regional theaters, recently announced a second round of emergency fund-raising to remain operational. The Lookingglass, a major anchor of Chicago’s theater scene, is halting production for the year. The Brooklyn Academy of Music laid off 13 percent of its staff. BAM’s Next Wave Festival, which helped catapult generations of forward-thinking artists to prominence, presented 31 shows in 2017. This year, it will present seven.

Theater has always been a risky endeavor. Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Dangling Conversation” asked “Is the theater really dead?” back in 1966. The current situation, however, risks building to an unprecedented crisis: the shuttering of theaters across the

country and a permanent shrinking of the possibilities of the American stage. For those of us in New York, it might be easy to look at Broadway's return to pre-Covid audience numbers and think it signals something like normal. But Broadway in its current form depends on nonprofit theaters to develop material and support artists. Nonprofit theaters are where many recent hits — including “A Strange Loop” and “Hamilton,” both of which won Pulitzer Prizes — started out.

So how do we avoid this catastrophe? Just as in other areas of recent American life where entire industries were imperiled — banks, the auto industry — this crisis requires federal intervention.

That's right: The American nonprofit theater needs a bailout.

Regional and nonprofit theaters were in trouble well before 2020 and the force majeure of the pandemic. Most regional and nonprofit theaters were built on a subscription model, in which loyal patrons paid for a full season of tickets upfront. Foundation grants, donations and single ticket sales made up the balance of the budgets.

For much of the 20th century, this model worked. It locked in money and audiences, mitigated the risk of new or experimental shows and cultivated a dedicated base of enthusiasts. But this model has been withering for the entire 21st century. Subscriber numbers are falling, and nothing has arisen to take the place of that revenue or that audience. Not surprisingly, ticket prices have gotten higher, making new audiences more challenging to find.

This smoldering crisis was exacerbated by the pandemic, a ruinous event that has closed theaters, broken the theatergoing habit for audiences and led to a calamitous increase in costs at a moment when they can least be absorbed. A collapse in the nonprofit sector doesn't just mean fewer theaters and fewer shows across the country; it also means less ambitious work, fewer risks taken and smaller casts. The reverberations will be felt up and down the theatrical chain, and a new generation of talent will be neglected. As with a bank collapse, in which a few foundering institutions can bring down a whole system, the entire ecosystem of American theater is imperiled. And American theater is too important to fail.

This is why federal intervention is required. It might seem like a radical suggestion, but in fact, it's not even new. The Federal Theater Project, which ran from 1935 to 1939, was part of the New Deal effort to fund artistic endeavors. The project sparked an explosion in theatrical activity and inspired a generation of theater makers — including Arthur Miller, Elia Kazan and Orson Welles — and through its Negro Theater Project provided targeted support for Black theater artists across the country.

From the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s, theater artists founded pioneering nonprofit companies in Oregon (Oregon Shakespeare Festival); Dallas (Theater '47); Houston (Alley Theater); Washington, D.C. (Arena Stage); Los Angeles (Mark Taper Forum); Connecticut (Long Wharf); Kentucky (Actors Theater of Louisville); San Francisco

(American Conservatory Theater); and New York City (New York Shakespeare Festival, which became the Public).

Once theaters were up and running, charitable foundations stepped in to help. The Ford Foundation, for one, provided grants to theaters beginning in the 1950s. In 1966 the National Council on the Arts announced that “the development of a larger and more appreciative audience for the theater” should be one of the primary goals of the newly formed National Endowment for the Arts. The combination of public and private sector funding that followed had a miraculous effect. By 2005, there were over 1,200 nonprofit theaters in the United States, staging 13,000 productions a year and contributing over \$1.4 billion to the U.S. economy, according to the Theater Communications Group.

Now this system — which took decades to nurture, made our national theatrical culture possible and assured our place on a world stage — is falling apart. Only the federal government can provide the scope of support needed to stabilize it. One easy and immediate first step would be to pass the Creative Economy Revitalization Act and the Promoting Local Arts and Creative Economy Workforce Act, two bills that have been languishing in Congress since 2021 and 2022. These bills would immediately send millions of dollars to local artists and arts institutions across the country.

But an even more important — and formidable — step would be to greatly increase the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts. It has accomplished astounding things over its nearly 60-year history, helping to seed and sustain orchestras, theaters, museums and community arts organizations across the country. The N.E.A. has brought art outside traditional venues like playhouses and galleries and into schools and military bases. But it has never been adequately funded and since the 1980s has ludicrously become a popular piñata for conservative politicians looking to score easy points.

In the context of the federal budget, the funds required for a theatrical bailout are pocket change: For the fiscal year of 2024, the Biden administration requested \$211 million for the N.E.A., or about 63 cents for every person who lives in the United States. By contrast, Arts Council England plans to distribute roughly \$10 for every person in England. The N.E.A. must also once again be celebrated as an essential national organ that keeps the country’s cultural life alive.

After a series of attacks on the endowment led by the Republican senator Jesse Helms and Christian right figures like Jerry Falwell in the 1980s and ’90s, Congress changed the N.E.A.’s rules so that it can no longer give grants to individual artists, except in the field of literature, and cannot fund the general operating expenses of arts organizations. These rules — the outdated results of an earlier generation’s culture war — must be repealed.

In September 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, which created the N.E.A. The act contained a long declaration of findings and purpose outlining Congress’s view as to why the arts were necessary and deserving of support. “An advanced civilization must not limit its efforts to

science and technology alone,” Congress declared. “Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.”

These words ring even truer today. The arts nurture the human spirit, reflect the human condition for us and, at their best, allow us moments in which we can transcend the limitations of our own points of view and see the world anew. The government has long recognized that the market is not enough to sustain this project. Indeed, at times the relentless focus on shareholder value and corporate balance sheets puts the market and American art at odds.

If nonprofit theaters are to survive and fulfill their national purpose, it will take far more than cost cutting, layoffs and emergency fund-raising campaigns. Government aid is both necessary and essential, as is our nation’s renewed recognition that the arts are vital both to the survival of democracy and to the enlargement of the human spirit.

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