

Innovation in American Theatre: New Plays by New Playwrights

Liz Engelman, Literary Director at McCarter Theatre

Tamsen Wolff, Assistant Professor of Drama, Department of English

Steven Tepper, Deputy Director, CACPS

Gabriel Rossman, Sociology Department

With a grant from the Theatre Development Fund, the Princeton University Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies is researching the state of new play development and production in the U.S. The project seeks to address the question of how best to encourage the production of new plays and to promote and sustain the work of playwrights in this country. Most playwrights face enormous challenges getting a new production off the ground. While numerous grant programs, festivals, associations, and nonprofits exist that support new plays and emerging playwrights, there is a lack of empirical data and analysis about the production of new plays in the U.S. and about the conditions that lead to those productions. Moreover, without a firm understanding of structural factors – market pressures, organizational fields, networks, audiences – it is difficult to implement policies that will have long term effects on the development of new theatre in the U.S. In order to begin to survey the current landscape of new play production, researchers have completed interviews with 75 randomly selected nonprofit theatres to establish institutional information, the frequency and percentage of productions of new plays, as well as information about a theatre's season choices, new play submission policy, selection and development processes. This survey is the first step towards identifying the main obstacles that keep new work from being produced and having a life beyond the first production. At the same time, this survey will allow us to begin to identify what types of investments would most benefit playwrights and new play production.

In addition to the survey, researchers are visiting with particularly innovative theatres (and some who are not terribly innovative) to determine, through more detailed interviews and case studies, the obstacles, and incentives, to new play production. A select number of playwrights will also be interviewed to capture the experiences and perspectives of the artists.