

Art as Research: Toward a More Collaborative Funder-Sponsor-Artist Relationship

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“So what’s next?” It’s a question I’m asked frequently after a show, sometimes by wide-eyed audience members, sometimes by inscrutable artistic directors. It’s a good thing; it means the inquirer liked what he or she just saw — which is gratifying since it usually took several years of my life to create — and that I will live to see another year of making a living as an artist. It usually provokes a flutter of anxiety, a deep inhale, and a flood of words vaguely outlining a rambling, self-conscious mash of ideas, inspirations, and stories. And then I cringe inside and try to keep smiling.

The stakes are high in these informal postshow pitches for solo performers and independent playwrights like myself who don’t have institutional affiliations. For we usually have to apply for grants through larger theater companies, using their 501(c)(3) status and residency. This makes sense as it assures the funder that the artist will be given space to create, rehearse, and eventually produce the work. But it’s flawed in several ways, and some small tweaks could create a process that is more collaborative between artist and funder, and ultimately produces better art with less exasperation.

The artistic process inherently involves an evolution in the artist’s topic, thinking, and approach; as the process moves forward, certain ideas work better than others, and the heart of the play is often revealed to be something different than you originally thought. It’s impossible to know how this will evolve when you start, though. I’ve had different experiences in working with funders and supporting theater companies, and have found that it works best when there is direct communication between the artist and the funder, and the funder understands that the artist is often led by an idea or instinct that can change — and some would argue should change — during the process.

The best funders, it seems to me, understand that they are really funding an artist and his or her process rather than a specific idea that they think will work. It’s useful to have to articulate a proposal, to help clarify one’s artistic goals and ideas. My most recent solo show, *Each And Every Thing*, began with an interest in how the decline of newspapers in America was affecting our democracy and society. And so I proposed going to India, the world’s biggest democracy and one of the few places where newspapers are booming, to explore this idea in a rich environment with lots of possibilities for employing my practice of what William Finnegan calls “the journalism of hanging out” to gather material.

All my solo shows are based on field research I do on a topic or story. I travel or live in an environment

for an extended period, interviewing people, recording ambient sounds, learning about the sociopolitical dynamics, and generally soaking up the comedy, drama, and soul of a place. I then create characters based on people I met to tell the story of my experiences and shape them into a satisfying narrative. I get my best material not in formal one-off interviews but by getting to know my research subjects over time, uncovering their personal stories, discovering what is most interesting about a topic as I go. Past shows have included *Tings Dey Happen*, about a year I spent in the Niger Delta of Nigeria researching oil politics, and *The Real Americans*, in which I traveled through small-town and rural America for three months to understand the urban-rural socioeconomic divide in my country.

When I proposed going to India for *Each And Every Thing*, the artistic director of one arts organization and a funder who was interested in supporting my next piece expressed apprehension, and suggested I do something more manageable in the United States. I accepted their suggestion against my better judgment because I was eager to get funding for my next project, and here was someone offering to apply on my behalf. I also thought that it would be easy to change my plan if we got the grant. But the arts organization was very nervous about making changes to the original proposal, and requests for changes always had to go through them to the funder. It was a difficult communication process, and I could never just have a conversation or email exchange with the funder directly. The material I got from the research they proposed was, as I had worried, not that interesting dramatically, and so I ended up going to India with my own money, and that is proving to be some of the best material in the show. It's always difficult to try to sell a funder on a show idea, because sometimes the idea or impulse is only partly formed. And funders have seen only your finished products, and so sometimes don't understand how the initial idea will lead to a finished product, or what will make for good material. In my case, going to India sounded overwhelming, and so the funder and/or arts organization suggested doing something more circumscribed. But I know that casting a wide net initially is actually best for me, and that part of my process is getting lost in a new, rich, and perhaps slightly overwhelming environment, and finding what is most compelling through the process. When funders aren't sold on a new show idea, perhaps they could seek to learn more about the artist's process, as that might reveal how the grant will lead eventually to a piece of great art.

Meanwhile, I had applied for another grant from another funder in a different city who's funded my work in the past, through a small theater I've worked at before. We won the grant, they gave me the money. I had to do a full proposal and summary, but once I'd won the grant, the money was mine to use as I saw fit: to do further research (which I did, attending a digital detox retreat that provided great material), to pay myself as a writer, to employ a collaborator to help me shape the material, and so on. What I was interested in had changed since I wrote the proposal, but I didn't have to check back with the funder. They trusted me, they trusted my process. That trust had been won when they funded and accepted changes I made for my previous show *The Real Americans* as it evolved. *The Real Americans* has had 300 mostly sold-out performances in half a dozen cities across the country.

I understand that for funders and arts producers there is considerable investment in us as creators, and risk for them. But it's much more helpful when they act as trusting collaborators, interested in helping artists find and refine their ideas and inspirations, and then trusting that their skill and experience — when paired with resources from funding and the freedom of the artistic process — will create something of value and impact. Especially when we have a proven track record, there should be a process that checks in with artists the way artistic collaborators do rather than trying to keep us on a predetermined, fixed track the way a supervisor might an employee.

The outcome everyone wants is a great piece of art. And following the original proposal is no assurance of that, and often can be a hindrance to it. The incentive for us to succeed is huge. Not only is our artistic pride on the line, but often our livelihood as artists. When we are asked what's next, we get nervous not just because it's sometimes hard to articulate but also because we know how important what's next truly is.

Dan Hoyle is a New York-based actor and playwright whose award-winning plays have toured across the country and overseas.

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