



New England New Play Alliance 2012-14 New Play Attendance Report

Executive Summary

Playwrights are an engaged sector of the theater community. I have yet to hold a meeting, attend a workshop, or go to an event where there weren't playwrights in attendance, volunteering support and offering ideas. In the spring of 2014, StageSource created the New England New Play Alliance as a way to explore additional ways to support the playwrights of New England. Patrick Gabridge, former board member of StageSource and local playwright, became the community partner for this initiative. As with all the initiatives StageSource supports, including the Gender Parity Task Force, the Space Task Force, and the Theater Arts Marketing Alliance, engaged community members are critical to the success of these endeavors. This work comes not from the top down, but from the grass roots, which adds not just power, but credibility.

StageSource has been highlighting new work in our community for a number of years. On our printed StagePage, which comes out 3 times a year and is also available online at MyStagePage.com, has highlighted local playwrights and premieres for a number of years. The work of the New England New Play Alliance (NENPA) goes further than that. Built on the premise that one of the hidden strengths of New England theatre is the creation of new work, one of the goals of the group was to gather data to support this thesis. The result of that initiative is this report.

But the goal of NENPA goes beyond benchmarking. Here are the goals of the group:

- Grow audiences for new plays.
- Encourage more new play development and production.
- Spread the word outside of Boston about plays/playwrights from Greater Boston/New England.

Theater tells the story of the human condition, and different productions change the lens of how those stories are told. Within the theater community, there is a larger conversation about diversity and inclusion, the need to attract new audiences, and how to leverage the power of theater to create deep conversation. The answer to "how" is new work. How do we create room for different voices? By telling their stories with new work. How do we create change? By using contemporary voices to make the experience immediate, and not removed. How do we mitigate

the perceived risk of doing new work? By showing how much is being done already, celebrate it, and make the case.

Theater requires three elements: producers/organizations, artists, and audiences. These groups are not mutually exclusive. Many playwrights are taking on the role of producer for readings of their new work, and in some cases, for productions. Theater makers are audience members. More theater companies are producing new work. What can we all do to support new work in this mix? For some, for many, the term “new work” equates with taking on risk. In these difficult times for arts funding, risk is not taken on lightly. So how can NENPA help mitigate the “risk” of doing new work, or reframe risk? How can we change the conversation around new work, removing the risk associated with it as much as possible? What happens if we reframe our perception of risk, and turn it into adventure instead?

The NENPA already has created impact. In addition to quarterly meetings, work has included the creation of a weekly newsletter. Volunteers of the NENPA take turns managing the newsletter, and theater organizations use it to promote their work. As importantly, interested audience members can sign up for the newsletter. Since it is a sector wide resource, the list is not owned by any one organization. But by supporting the building of this list, the theater community benefits by having an additional marketing tool for new work.

New England is fertile ground for new work. Let’s plant that flag right now, and build from there. I am grateful for the work of the NENPA, and the support of the StageSource board for the work that is being done in all of these initiatives. It is an exciting time to be part of the New England theater community, and to be a member of StageSource.

I’ll see you at the theater,

Julie A. Hennrikus
Executive Director
[StageSource](#)



New England New Play Alliance
New Play Production and Attendance Survey 2012-2014

The New England New Play Alliance (NENPA) is a new StageSource initiative working to shine a spotlight on our region's new play development and production activities. Among its aims is to quantify these activities and their impact – how many new plays are in development, how many are being produced, and how large is the audience for culminating events? In 2014, NENPA undertook a comprehensive survey of Greater Boston theater groups, to capture a snapshot and baseline measurement of the new play sector. This is just one of NENPA and StageSource's initiatives to support and promote new work—other projects include a weekly new play newsletter, a new play attendance rewards app, group attendance events to new plays, a planned published anthology of plays by New England writers, and the creation of a New England New Play Fund.

Methodology

In the summer of 2014, NENPA created a Google form to collect information from theaters and other groups actively involved in producing and developing new plays. **For the purposes of NENPA, a “new play” is defined as a dramatic work intended for public performance on which the author is still involved in developing or revising the script.** NPA's goal was to create a comprehensive list of all new play readings and productions in Greater Boston¹, as well as readings and productions of plays by writers living New England, that occurred between September 1, 2012 and August 30, 2014. This would allow us to consider new plays/local plays developed over two consecutive theatrical seasons. Though NPA is ultimately interested in data for the entire New England region, because of time/resource limitations, this initial study focused on theaters within Greater Boston.

Surveys were circulated and reminders were issued via e-mail. NENPA volunteers utilized theater company websites to fill in missing data about performances, names of writers and directors, and demographic data. The committee then contacted companies again, to acquire missing attendance numbers from non-responders. Attendance figures came directly from the

¹ In this case, Greater Boston was considered as all towns within the I-495 corridor.

companies, with the exception of one company, for which we used estimates based on firsthand knowledge from actors and directors who worked with that company during the seasons under study.

For the purposes of this report, the NENPA counted total attendance, which includes complimentary tickets, as well as total seats filled, rather than unique patrons.

The Numbers

Overall Two Year Totals (productions and readings)		
New Play Events	Performances	Attendance
207	1,699	287,403

The results of our attendance survey show that more than 287,000 people attended 1,699 performances of 207 unique new play events during the 2012-13 and 2013-14 seasons.

Events range from mainstage productions at Huntington Theater Company in Boston to Sunday afternoon readings by Interim Writers at the Democracy Center in Cambridge. The survey compiles data from 55 different companies and groups who developed new work over the two-year-period in question.

Productions by Year – Performances and Attendance							
	Events	Performances	Attendance		Max Capacity	% filled	Equity
2012-13	57	553	75,698		117,817	64%	16
2013-14	81	1,072	207,230		260,116	80%	24
2-yr-totals	138	1,625	282,928		377,933	75%	40

- Of the 138 full productions in this period, 40 employed actors who are members of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers.
- Typically, these productions have significantly higher budgets and more performances than non-Equity productions.
- Maximum capacity of a venue is estimated—the capacity at some venues varies, depending on configuration of the particular set and house.

Readings by Year – Performances and Attendance			
	Events	Performances	Attendance
2012-13	38	39	1,684
2013-14	31	35	2,629
2-yr-totals	69	74	4,313

Readings that allow a playwright to hear his/her developing work aloud are an important part of the process of developing a new play. Our data does not capture in-house (private or closed) readings or workshops. In addition, since not all readings are broadly publicized, it's likely that the numbers of readings of new plays in Greater Boston is higher than reported.

Analysis: It is notable that the number of full productions is so much higher than the number of readings. A common conception about new play development is that new plays are “over developed,” or stuck in “development hell,” and rarely are produced. This would not seem to be the case in Boston.

In some cities, new play development is highly influenced by new play development groups that put on many readings (like the Playwrights Center of Minneapolis or Chicago Dramatists). Boston has a number of small new play development groups, many of which focus on in-house development, and lacks a dominant new play development organization. As such, many readings are done in-house in Boston and there are fewer public reading than might be expected given the size of our new play sector.

In Greater Boston, the two largest theater companies demonstrate a strong commitment to new plays. Given their large capacities, NENPA wondered if attendance at the American Repertory Theater (ART) and the Huntington Theater Company was transforming or obscuring the story about the rest of the community's activities. NENPA found this not to be the case:

Productions - Excluding ART and Huntington Numbers						
	Events	Performances	Attendance		Max Capacity	% filled
2012-13	50	364	21747		32,646	67%
2013-14	73	716	56,429		86,684	65%
2-yr-totals	123	1,080	78,176		119,330	66%

While ART and Huntington are indeed responsible for a disproportionate segment of the attendance figure (accounting for more than 200,000 new play attendees in the time period of the survey) other companies in Greater Boston filled more than 78,000 seats at new play productions. In addition, the large jump in new play attendance between 2012-13 and 2013-14 cannot be solely attributed to highly successful new play productions at the large companies (*Smart People*, *Jungle Book*, *All The Way*, *Finding Neverland*). Attendance figures also jumped

in the realm of the smaller companies. This is in a large part due to smaller Equity theater companies producing more new work in 2013-14—together, Company One², New Repertory Theatre, Nora Theatre Company, SpeakEasy Stage Company, Stoneham Theatre, and Underground Railway Theater had eight more new plays on the boards in 2013-14 than in 2012-13 (increasing from 3 to 11).

Other facts about new plays in Greater Boston in 2012-14

- 147** different writers had work developed (plus there were lots more in festivals). Most were writers based in New England.
- 102** directors directed readings and productions of new plays (plus there were many festivals with additional directors)
- 55** different companies and groups developed new work in Greater Boston (see appendix)
- 176** different full-length works received readings or productions
- 14** new musicals were developed
- 77%** of all new play productions were receiving their first production (world premiere)
- 18** distinct short play festivals showcased the work of hundreds of local writers and directors

The busiest venues for new work were Boston Playwrights' Theater and the Boston Center for the Arts Campus (which includes the Calderwood Pavilion Theaters and the BCA Plaza and Black Box spaces). The Factory Theater hosted 17 productions of new plays in the two-year span (9 in 2012-13 and 8 in 2013-14). The loss of the Factory Theater (closed in November 2014) is a serious challenge to the new play sector in Boston in the coming years. Several groups, including the StageSource Space Task Force, are actively working to promote and encourage the creation of new performance spaces.

There is a great amount of breadth to the new play scene in Greater Boston. Among the writers and directors staging new plays, no individual writer or director dominated, in terms of numbers of productions. Outside of Ryan Landry writing for his company Gold Dust Orphans and Daniel Morris writing for Bad Habit, and James P. Byrne, directing for Gold Dust Orphans, no writer had more than 2 productions of full-length plays in a single season and no director directed more than 2 productions of new full-length plays in a given year.

Conclusions

In some ways, the most important result of this study is to provide baseline numbers, against which further seasons can be compared. This will help us assess the impacts of various programs intended to stimulate new play production and attendance. Though there was a large jump in new play productions and attendance between 2012-13 and 2013-14, the data is insufficient to claim

² Company One sometimes uses Guest Artist contracts, so we are including them with other companies who operate on a NEAT or other Equity contract.

any sort of trend. Boston places great emphasis on high tech and medical innovation and education, and the new play sector is also large and energetic. This synergy is not an accident. It's unclear whether Boston is currently recognized, either internally or externally, as a hub of new play creation, but it should be.

If we estimate an average ticket price of \$20, then the two-year ticket sales to new plays are in the neighborhood of \$5 million. This is a significant economic impact, despite little financial or logistical support from governmental agencies, foundations, or other sources. If part of Boston's cultural identity is that of a new play hub, can a strong argument be made for additional and more intentional support?

In addressing the question of how to grow audiences for new plays, traditional thought suggests that there are two primary options. Either stage more productions, or get more people to attend productions that are already staged. In Boston, the answer is actually both. Productions of new plays at the largest theaters are already playing at close to capacity—they can only bring more people to new work by devoting more of their seasons to new plays (note: the ART's current season is entirely comprised of new work). Smaller companies currently fill about 66% of seats at their productions of new plays. This would indicate that audience gains can be made from additional marketing and cultivation of audiences. Productions of new plays at smaller Equity companies have a large impact on the overall number of new play performances—in order for them to continue to commit to productions of new work, the NENPA will work with those companies to support their audience's interest and knowledge of new plays.

Thanks to a large fringe theater scene, Greater Boston's new play sector is developing the work of many different local writers, using a broad pool of directors. In order for this to continue, our community will need to ensure that there are sufficient spaces and funding sources for smaller companies to continue to thrive and develop new work.

Next Steps

Demographic data gathered during this survey will be released later in 2015, as part of a larger Gender Parity discussion being led by StageSource. NENPA will continue to collect attendance data on new work in future seasons, though we plan to change to a system of continuous reporting, rather than data gathering in chunks. In addition, if we can recruit sufficient volunteers, we will expand our data collection to include theaters from across all of New England. There are significant large theaters (Yale Rep, Long Wharf, Trinity Rep, Hartford Stage) who are producing new work in New England for which we have not yet collected data. Our region is sufficiently compact that artists (especially writers and directors) can effectively create and develop plays with companies throughout.

It is our hope that other cities and/or regions of the country will conduct similar studies, gathering comparable data. Doing so would enable productive comparisons between different theatrical ecosystems and enable arts administrators in these areas to learn from each other and explore factors that impact the new play sector. The future of our art form and industry depends

on the ability to create new plays that entertain and engage audiences and that reflect the diversity of voices and points of view within our society. These plays can only exist if we provide an artistic ecosystem where creative artists have chances to develop and see their work on stage. Despite a persistent drone about the “death of the theater,” it’s clear that in a city like Boston, many tens of thousands of audience members are engaged by new plays. The new work we create now is what defines our cultural moment, and Boston is a city where that culture is being actively created, night after night.

For more information, contact Patrick Gabridge, New England New Play Alliance coordinator, 617-959-1437, pat@gabridge.com.

<http://www.stagesource.org/?page=NewPlayAlliance>

Appendix: List of Companies/Groups included in the survey:

Acme Theater	Hovey Players
Actors Studio of Newburyport	Huntington Theatre Company
All Stories	imaginary beasts
American Repertory Theater	ImprovBoston
Argos Productions	In Good Company
Bad Habit Productions	Interim Writers
Blue Spruce Theatre	Israeli Stage
Boston Actors Theater	Liars & Believers
Boston Playwrights' Theatre	Mill 6 Collaborative
Bridge Rep of Boston	New Exhibition Room
Can't Wait Productions	New Repertory Theatre
Central Square Theater	New Urban Theatre Laboratory
Company One Theatre	Nora Theatre Company
Firehouse Center for the Arts	One-Minute Play Festival
Flat Earth Theatre	OperaHub
Fort Point Theatre Channel	Playwrights Platform
Fresh Ink Theatre	Project: Project
FUDGE	Puppet Showplace Theater
Gold Dust Orphans	Rhombus
Hibernian Hall ³	Roxbury Repertory Theater
Hibernian Hall/Anna Myer and Dancers	Science Fiction Theatre Company
Hibernian Hall/Common House Productions	Sleeping Weazel
Hibernian Hall/New African Company	SpeakEasy Stage Company
Hibernian Hall/Our Place Theatre Project	Stoneham Theatre
Hibernian Hall/TYG Productions	TC Squared Playwrights' Lab
	The Survivalists
	Underground Railway Theater
	Unreliable Narrator
	Vagabond Theatre Group
	Vaquero Playground

³ Hibernian Hall sometimes acts as a producing organization, and sometimes as a presenter or co-producer.

