

# **The Potentials of Performance: the Role of the Rockefeller Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers Fund in the Development of Regional Professional Theater**

By Susannah Engstrom

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of History  
University of Chicago, Illinois

[sengstrom@uchicago.edu](mailto:sengstrom@uchicago.edu)

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My dissertation examines live theatrical performance in Minneapolis and St. Paul in the 1950s and 1960s, focusing on the development of a new era of cultural professionalism and its impact on the urban community of the region. In conducting research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) I was therefore most interested in the activities of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) in Minnesota, and their support of the regional theater movement there. While the material at the RAC did provide insight into activities in the Twin Cities area, especially in connection to the University of Minnesota, the collection also illuminated the role of the RF and the RBF more generally in developing arts organizations, the work of individual artists, and the infrastructure of nonprofit art across the United States.

The effort to professionalize and decentralize the performing arts in the years after World War II emerged from a growing national conviction that excellence in American art could combat Soviet competition as well as the ostensibly insidious influence of proliferating mass media.<sup>1</sup> While their support of theatrical initiatives began decades earlier, the Rockefeller name became inextricable from this movement with the publication of the RBF's Panel Report *Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, in 1965. Calling for increased financial support from foundations, corporations, and the government, emphasizing the importance of professional

training for artists, and proclaiming the importance of exposure to professional arts for *all* Americans (not just those lucky enough to live in New York), the Panel Report, with John D. Rockefeller 3rd (JDR 3rd) at the helm, essentially set the agenda for the rise of the regional nonprofit, institutionalized arts sector in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

*Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects* had been years in the making by the time of its publication, and it reflected serious investigation on the part of the RBF and the artists, administrators, critics, and cultural leaders the RBF enlisted for its research. In a philosophical spirit evident as early as the 1930s, when the RF staff members drew up deeply probing memos evaluating the role of the humanities in American society, the recommendations of the Panel Report were justified by copious reports, memos, and “background papers.”<sup>3</sup> Emerging in part from a set of “Major Questions for Performing Arts Panel,” thirty official papers touched on subjects integral to the final recommendations: the importance of decentralization – “if you want to make something living,” one contributor noted, “make it local,” – determination of quality in the arts, the relationship between universities and the arts, amateurs and professionals – “the supporter of artistic advancement must reserve his time, effort, and money for serious professional work,” – labor and the arts, and artist training, among many others.<sup>4</sup> These subjects reflected the major concerns of those who hoped American artistic achievements would enable the United States to win both the Cold War and the battle against supposedly numbing and homogenizing forces of television, advertising, and popular movies.

To ensure its practical influence, the RBF went to great lengths to publicize the published report and deliver it into the hands of those who would use or distribute it well. The RBF employed radio, television, and traditional press coverage, and received considerable attention from the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, as well as

magazines like *Newsweek*, *Saturday Review*, and the *New Republic*, all devoting prominent articles to the report.<sup>5</sup> The RBF also sent free copies of the Panel Report not only to arts organizations (which were, on the whole, very happy to receive it), but also to potential funders such as businessmen, universities, and politicians. Minneapolis Mayor Arthur Naftalin summed up much of the general reaction, “It is studies of this type that we so urgently need as we seek to enhance the quality of life in America.”<sup>6</sup> Funding for the arts was officially on the agenda.<sup>7</sup>

One of the purposes of the Panel Report, and an important goal for the RF and RBF more generally, was to encourage distribution of arts support among many funders. No one patron should support an arts organization or individual alone; development of a professional arts infrastructure ought to be a community effort, bolstered by different sectors of society: individuals, corporations, foundations, and government. Large foundations like the RF and Ford could play a significant role in determining who received support by conferring legitimacy on a project through initial funding, thereby instilling the local and the national arts community with confidence and inspiring wider support. This approach enabled foundations to have a proportionally larger impact than the actual amount of money they invested, and would also prevent them from bearing sole responsibility for the failure of an arts organization should its funding cease. “It would... be unwise for the Foundation merely to underwrite artistic deficits or to subsidize a level of activity which could not be maintained when at some future date it becomes necessary for the Foundation to withdraw support,” a Panel Report contributor noted.<sup>8</sup> Through the Panel Report and their general approach to funding, therefore, the RF and RBF not only directly financed numerous initiatives, but also inspired others to contribute, sowing the seeds for the development of a large-scale nonprofit performing arts sector.

Despite the well laid-out agenda of the Panel Report, the RF confronted many decisions in doling out its arts funding in the 1960s. One pivotal question was whether to provide seed money for new endeavors or ensure the continuation and/or expansion of existing entities, a concern which often overlapped (although not necessarily directly) with debate over whether to support experimental or classical work. Claiming that “a healthy development of the arts requires a sound balance between maintenance of the artistic tradition and new creative work,” the RF tried to divide its patronage, recognizing the importance of nurturing new artists and endeavors but remaining committed to sustaining and enhancing cultural institutions already in existence, as well as supporting mid-career or established artists who, more often than not, had not achieved financial security.<sup>9</sup> Yet while the RBF did seem to focus more on large institutions, the RF often leaned in the direction of new initiatives, touting its mission to support work “on the ‘frontiers’ of knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> For instance, in a 1964 report for the Performing Arts Panel, the RF cited the funding of orchestra commissioning programs, grants to theater critics to observe professional and university productions, and experimental playwriting projects.

Although the RF did provide financial support for established writers, it clearly saw the encouragement of new playwrights as key to the development of legitimate American theater. As early as the 1940s, the RF extended a series of grants to Margo Jones and the Dallas Civic Theatre for the development and production of new scripts, noting that support for new work in this particular theater was especially important considering “its service to playwrights in parts of the country so far neglected by other groups.”<sup>11</sup> And the RF continued to fund new play initiatives throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In 1967, an internal RF memo on the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre’s Theater for Tomorrow series noted, “I suppose my basic enthusiasm for the project stems... from my feeling that its success (that is, its continuation and development on a

regular basis) should inevitably lead to the adoption of similar programs of new works by other resident theaters. This is the most important step that could possibly be taken to make the resident theater movement get off its stodgy backside and come alive.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the RF’s longest lasting and most widely-influential commitments in this vein was to the Office for Advanced Drama Research (OADR) at the University of Minnesota. This entity, founded by Professor Arthur Ballet in 1963 as part of the University’s General Extension Division – a compromise reflecting disagreements between the University Theatre Department and the Guthrie Theater – collected submissions by American playwrights and connected promising plays to local theater companies to develop workshops or full productions. Funding for the OADR was meant to enable the exploration of riskier theatrical fare without requiring an enormous organizational or financial sacrifice on the part of theaters. While a substantially-funded, well-established theater like the Guthrie could take advantage of this program to experiment with new work while retaining its otherwise classic and conventional image, the OADR also enabled lesser-known, even subversive groups to take on new projects, promising both funding and critical attention.

Pairing the grassroots Anyplace Theatre Company with local playwrights Fred Gaines and Jon Gillman for instance, the OADR helped it present highly unconventional performances for low income Twin Citians. In a letter of appreciation to Ballet, submitted as part of a grant proposal to the RF, Anyplace Theatre founder Joseph Walsh wrote, “you are directly responsible for bringing fresh, new, and involving theatre to over five thousand Ghetto residents in St. Paul and Minneapolis. The affect is more than Theatre – it is life.”<sup>13</sup> Ballet’s work at the OADR bridged boundaries that otherwise would have separated those with different priorities for the

theater, for example, when politically-engaged playwright Megan Terry joined with Minneapolis businessmen Walter Trenerry of the First National Bank to praise Ballet's work.

The RF seemed determined to support experimental work without interfering, and thus refrained from critiquing OADR's selection of plays or the theaters chosen to work on them, leaving these decisions mostly to Ballet, who appreciated his freedom. In a letter to Richard Schechner, who had proclaimed in the *Tulane Drama Review* that the OADR must free itself from administrative shackles, Ballet wrote, "I honestly know of no administrative and bureaucratic restraints (other than the limits of the moneys we have available) from the University or the Foundation, so you are whipping a non-existent dog."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, even when OADR-sponsored collaborations between the Guthrie Theater and two emerging playwrights, Arthur Kopit and Terrence McNally, broke down in acrimonious misunderstandings over the promise of a full production, the RF stood aside and refrained from judgment. As Robert Crawford noted in a memo, "if there were concern at the University that as a result of this (controversy) the RF would lose confidence and withdraw interest from the concepts of an inter-relationship being developed there between the University and the Guthrie Theatre, this should not remain high in their thinking."<sup>15</sup>

Yet the officers of the RF were not without opinions. Gerald Freund worried in particular about Ballet's possibly overwhelming influence in choosing plays, presenting some doubts about a 1968 OADR proposal, "not because I necessarily mistrust Ballet (I do not), but because no man should have such power in any art form if the health of that art form is to be of central interest."<sup>16</sup> RF officers often came to their opinions after surveying those directly involved in artistic activities, soliciting the thoughts of people like Arthur Ballet, as well as the Guthrie's Peter Zeisler and Oliver Rea, and national figures like Harold Clurman, John Lahr, and Lloyd

Richards. “The Foundation would like the benefit of your advice and that of other recognized experts concerning the future development of our program in Theatre,” Freund explained in a general letter to these figures.<sup>17</sup> However, the Foundation had to be careful not to take personal grudges or alliances into account, recognizing the sometimes volatile relationships of theater artists. In determining whether to fund the work of critic Martin Gottfried for instance, the RF had to see through the “power of various cliques” in order to come to a legitimate decision as to his worth as a critic.<sup>18</sup> Thus while the RF’s activities in the arts were to some extent determined by artists and arts administrators, RF officers played an important role in sifting through opinions to come up with as close to an objective evaluation as possible.

In the early to mid-1960s, the recommendation the RF may have received most fervently from arts “experts” was to support training programs for artists. Echoed in the RBF’s Panel Report, which stated that artists must aspire to professional standards through “expensive and extensive” training in conservatories and universities, this priority was in part a response to admiration for the intense technical training of artists in Europe, which seemed to result in superior creative production.<sup>19</sup> If the United States hoped to achieve similar heights of artistic achievement, actors, designers, and directors, would have to undergo rigorous instruction equivalent to dancers and musicians. Considering the proximity of the University of Minnesota and the Guthrie Theater to one another, and the identity of the region as a growing cultural center, the Twin Cities seemed a promising place to establish a serious academy, and in 1965, the RF pledged \$551,600 toward the promise of an acting training school to be developed collaboratively by the two entities. The school would combine the resources of the University and the professional theater to produce artists of equal quality to any of those found abroad. As academic administrator Donald K. Smith promised Robert Crawford, “we have the materials and

purposes at hand in Minneapolis which could produce the most productive relationship between higher education and the professional theatre achieved anyplace in the world.”<sup>20</sup> As it turned out however, the proposed school was never established. Its failure was due in part to the Guthrie’s preoccupation with establishing a second theater in St. Paul, but mostly to dissension between the University, which believed any acting training should be in its hands and conform to Theatre Department policies, and the Guthrie, which wanted a pre-professional program concentrating more on the practical skills needed for a career in resident theater.<sup>21</sup>

These disagreements reflected long-standing debates over the relationship between educational and professional theater, arguments in which the RF often found itself immersed. Squabbles over the school came down to the question of whether actors needed a broad liberal arts education or more technical training, and whether universities had a duty to engage in impractical experimentation or should prepare future artists and audiences for more realistic endeavors. As articulated in the Guthrie (Minnesota Theater Company)/University of Minnesota proposal to the RF: “The University in America needs to relate its instructional purposes and artistic standards to the skill and aspiration of the finest professional artists in theatre. The professional theatre needs to relate itself to the general level of cultural aspiration held by institutions of higher education and needs to maintain dialogue with university teachers and scholars if it is to become an authentic and integral part of American culture.”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, professionals and educators could not often agree on these points, and as a result the kinds of collaborations the RF and others hoped to see between groups like the Guthrie and the University of Minnesota did not always come to fruition. Yet smaller-scale training programs that the RF funded, such as the Guthrie’s teacher training program for voice and movement, were more successful, and the funding that the RF provided to University-based programs like the OADR



ensured that educational and professional theater would remain closely, if not always happily, connected.

It is clear from the initiatives described above that the RF and RBF were integral to the development of professional performing arts in the 1960s, but that the influence of both entities may have been more nuanced and complex than I am able to convey here. In one sense their impact was indirect, often filtered through the expertise of those already working in the theater. Thus while Rockefeller staff members did form opinions and ultimately make distinctions as to where to direct funds, to a certain extent Rockefeller money flowed to areas determined by artists themselves. On the other hand, the RF and the RBF – by example, direct exhortation, and development of relationships with other funders – helped establish arts funding as a priority on a local and national level, and in conferring legitimacy on certain projects, significantly influenced the direction of that funding. Certainly, through support of OADR and attention to the activities of the Guthrie and other local entities, the RF played a crucial role in the development of Minneapolis and St. Paul as a noted regional center of culture.

While at the RAC, a number of the following related collections caught my eye: materials on the Business Committee on the Arts, the development of Lincoln Center, and particular initiatives at other theaters or Universities, for instance. While I did not have time to delve into these collections in depth, subsequent trips might clarify, or perhaps complicate, my understanding of the RF and RBF's role in post-World War II American arts funding.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> This consensus was evident in articles such as “The New Role for Culture,” *Life Magazine*, December 26, 1960; “New World Prepares to Show Its Cultural Achievements to Old World,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1958. Cultural competition with the Soviet Union was first directed internationally. See for instance Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: the CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. New York: New Press, 2000; Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004. For anxieties over mass media see most prominently Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, editors, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Seabury Press, 1972, pp. 94-136.

<sup>2</sup> The RBF was not entirely alone in setting this agenda, of course. The Ford Foundation for example, had great influence on the development of the nonprofit arts sector. It is my contention however, that the widely-read RBF Panel Report was central in focusing attention on and inspiring action in arts support at this time. Although it wasn’t published until 1965, conversations leading to the panel and eventual report began years before, and thus the initiative both influenced and reflected attitudes toward arts funding throughout the decade.

<sup>3</sup> Reports on the role of the Humanities in the 1930s and 1940s can be found in the Program and Policy files, Rockefeller Foundation (RF), RG 3, Series 911, Box 3. An incomplete list of “theatre background papers” can be found in Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) Unprocessed Material, RG 3, Box 573, Special Studies: Performing Arts Panel, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

<sup>4</sup> “Major Questions for Performing Arts Panel,” January 17, 1964. Quote on local art taken from “The Performing Arts: Our Challenge and Our Responsibility,” by George Allan Smith, and quote on Professionalism taken from “The Amateur and the Professional in the American Theatre,” by Dick Moore, PR Director, AEA; and Jack Goldner, Legislative Representative, AEA, all in RBF Unprocessed Material, RG 3, Box 573, Special Studies: Performing Arts Panel, RAC.

<sup>5</sup> See memo “Initial Press, TV, and Radio Coverage for the Performing Arts Report,” March 15, 1965. In RBF Unprocessed Material, RG 3, Box 573, Special Studies: Performing Arts Panel, RAC.

<sup>6</sup> Compilation of “Comments on The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects,” April 14, 1965. RBF Unprocessed Material, RG 3, Box 572, Special Studies: Performing Arts Study Distribution, RAC.

<sup>7</sup> The Rockefellers also hoped to spread their message to other countries, perhaps to impress those already or potentially on the American side of the Cold War with the American devotion to culture, or in the simple spirit of collaboration to share approaches to funding. John D. Rockefeller 3rd (JDR 3rd) himself sent the Report to cultural representatives in countries as diverse as Iran, Austria, Afghanistan, India, Greece, and Israel. List of countries and names for distribution, RBF Unprocessed Material, RG 3, Box 572, Special Studies: Performing Arts Study Distribution, RAC.

<sup>8</sup> Report, RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, Box 1, Folder 7, RAC.

<sup>9</sup> Report, RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, Box 1, Folder 7, RAC.

<sup>10</sup> “Foundation Support for the Performing Arts.” by Marilyn Shapiro. RBF Unprocessed Material, RG 3, Box 573, Special Studies: Performing Arts Panel, RAC. In the same document, the RBF is described as supporting such institutions as for instance, the Metropolitan Opera, New York Philharmonic, and the Brooklyn Academy of Arts and Sciences.

<sup>11</sup> Overview of funding for Dallas Civic Theatre, RF, RG 1.2, Series 200, Box 327, Folder 3011, RAC.

<sup>12</sup> RF, RG 1.2, Series 200, Box 379, Folder 3330.82, RAC.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Joseph T. Walsh to Arthur Ballet, July 20, 1968. RF Unprocessed Material, University of Minnesota Drama, RG 1, Series 200R, Box R1690, RAC.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Arthur Ballet to Richard Schechner, December 9, 1965. RF Unprocessed Material, UMN Drama, A81, Series 200R, Box R1689, RAC.

<sup>15</sup> Internal memo, January 8, 1964. RF Unprocessed Material, UMN Drama, A81, Series 200R, Box R1689, RAC.

<sup>16</sup> Gerald Freund memo on Arthur Ballet’s proposal to RF. RF Unprocessed Material, UMN Drama, Series 200R, A81, Box R1688, RAC.

<sup>17</sup> Form letter from Gerald Freund. RF Unprocessed Material, UMN Drama, Series 200R, A81, Box R1688, RAC.

<sup>18</sup> Norman Lloyd memo, April 28, 1966. RF, RG 1.2, Series 200, Box 337, Folder 3077, RAC.

<sup>19</sup> RBF Panel Report, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965, p. 5. The RF also supported research into European methods of actor training in order to develop American equivalents. Material on this 1965 endeavor can be found in RF, RG 1.2, Series 200, Box 379, Folder 3330.67, RAC.

<sup>20</sup> RF, RG 1.2, Series 200, Box 379, Folder 3330.56, RAC.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Robert Crawford memo of April 30, 1964, which states: “Progress towards a training program had been stymied by the unwillingness of the Theatre Arts Department to see the development of anything concerning drama at the University which would not be under its direct control.” RF, RG 1.2, Series 200, Box 379, Folder 3330.56, RAC.

<sup>22</sup> “A Proposal for Development of a Center for Professional Theatre Education, Production, and Scholarship,” submitted to the RF, RF, RG 1.2, Series 200, Box 379, Folder 3330.56, RAC.