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Echoing Federal Theater Project, 18 Towns Plan Simultaneous Events

The theme “No Place Like Home” will drive shows and festivals in both large cities and rural locales of this country on July 27, 2024.

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Lear deBessonet, Nataki Garrett and Clyde Valentin are the artistic directors of an initiative called “Arts for Everybody.” Justin Kaneps for The New York Times, Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times, Kim Leeson

By Michael Paulson

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One night in the fall of 1936, with Fascism rising in Europe, theaters in 18 cities and towns across the United States staged productions of the dystopian play, “It Can’t Happen Here,” under the auspices of the Federal Theater Project, which was created to provide Depression-era artists with work.

Now, inspired by [that moment](#), organizations in 18 American cities and towns are planning a contemporary version of that endeavor: On a single day next summer, they will each present a participatory arts project responding to a more hopeful prompt, “No Place Like Home,” from the “Wizard of Oz.”

Given the atomization of American culture, the communities will not present a single show — in fact, many of them are not staging shows at all — but they will each come up with ways to express something that connects notions of home with culture and with health on July 27, 2024. In Chicago, the city will establish artist apprenticeships at mental health clinics; in Tucson, Ariz., Borderlands Theater will create a “theatrical showcase” including a play about mental health and healing.

The initiative is the brainchild of Lear deBessonet, a New York-based director who created [Public Works](#), a program of the nonprofit Public Theater that develops musical adaptations of classic works and stages them with a combination of professional and amateur actors. The Public Works model has been adopted by theaters in other American cities, and in London.

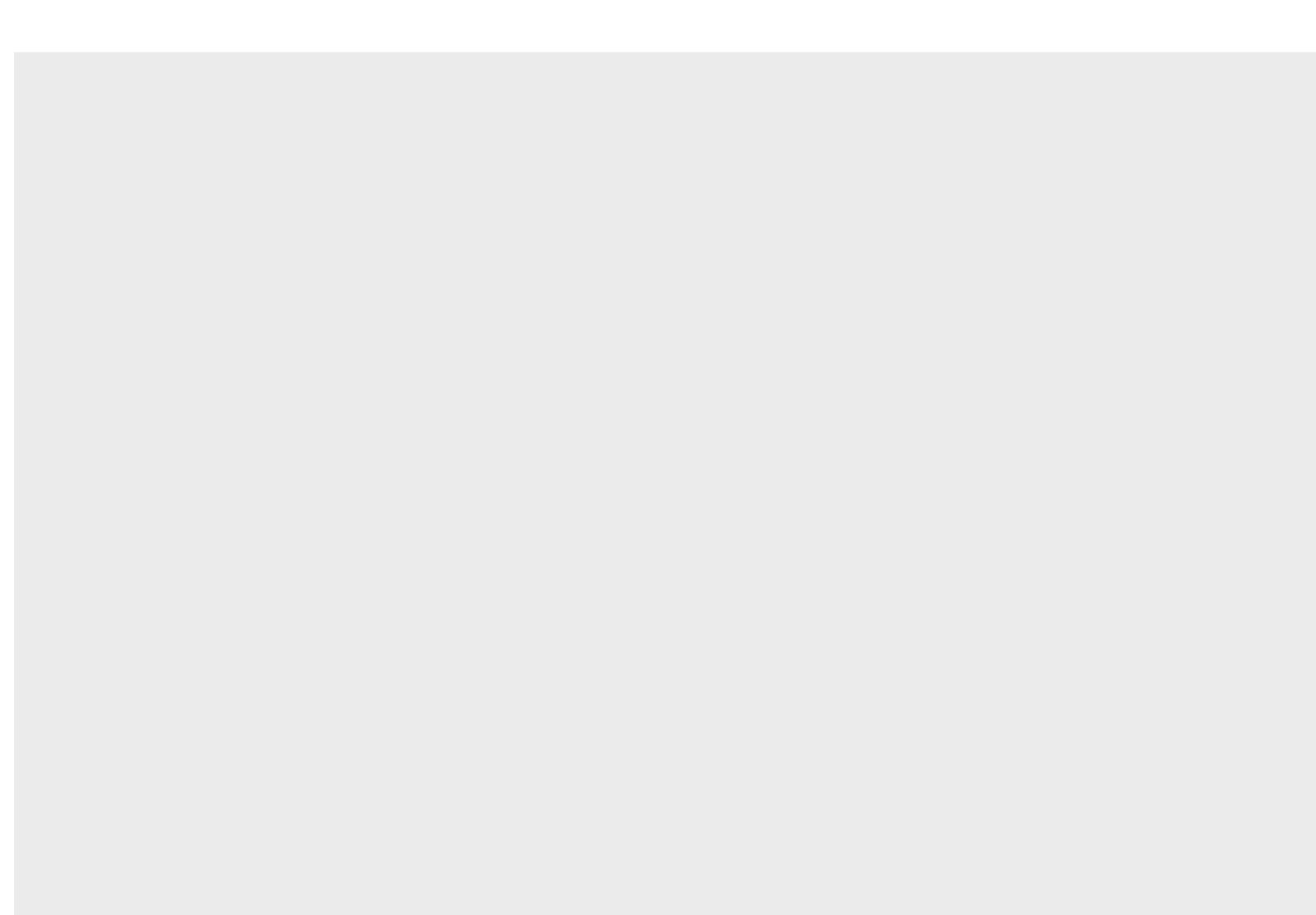
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“Art, by necessity, must look different in every place, to reflect its own community,” deBessonet said. “Our projects are not exclusively theater, or even predominantly theater, but really are reflecting the unique voice and character of the people in each of these places — they are making things that only they could make because they’re making them in direct relation with the people of their place.”

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DeBessonet, who is now the artistic director of the Encores! program at City Center, is working with Nataki Garrett, who just wrapped up a fraught run as artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and Clyde Valentin, who previously led Ignite/Arts Dallas at Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University. They are the artistic directors for a program called One Nation/One Project, and are calling the initiative “[Arts for Everybody](#).”

“How do we solve these problems that are happening within these large-scale organizational structures that are not moving in the direction that we need them to move in?” Garrett asked. “One way that you do that is, you go meet the people at their source — you go where they are and you engage with them in the way that they have been engaging outside of our museums and theaters and other spaces.”



The endeavor, which is inspired by a “Wizard of Oz”-based prompt, has been designed with a belief that participating in the arts can improve health outcomes. Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images

The program has set a goal of a \$14 million budget. Unlike the Federal Theater Project, which was government-sponsored, as part of the Works Progress Administration, the current initiative is being supported primarily by contributions from foundations and individuals and is sponsored by the [Tides Center](#), a nonprofit philanthropic organization that supports social change. Many of the projects are collaborations between art groups, local governments and community health centers.

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The endeavor, working with the [Center for Arts in Medicine](#) at the University of Florida, has been designed in the belief that participation in the arts can improve health outcomes, and the organizers have commissioned studies to research that connection.

The 18 communities chosen to take part are a mix of urban and rural, large and small, from Honolulu to the South Bronx; the National League of Cities helped with site selection and project design. Valentin said one priority was to “not have it be something that’s just in the coastal elite cities — geographically we think there’s profound diversity.”

Three cities — Chicago, New York and Seattle — that were in the 1936 project are taking part. Some of the communities are planning work that will call attention to local challenges: Phillips County, Ark., will highlight issues with the local water supply; Oakland, Calif., will focus on housing costs; and Utica, Miss. is seeking to generate conversation about food insecurity associated with the lack of a local grocery store.

“I think this is a much needed departure from the divisiveness we see,” said Carlton Turner, a co-founder of the [Mississippi Center for Cultural Production](#), which will be organizing a food and wellness festival, with lots of music, in the rural community of Utica. He added, “This opportunity to bring these 18 communities together is a way to heighten our commonalities, versus homing in on the things we disagree about.”

Michael Paulson is the theater reporter. He previously covered religion, and was part of the Boston Globe team whose coverage of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. [More about Michael Paulson](#)

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