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Ford Foundation fund to award an unprecedented \$160 million to minority arts groups

By
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Eduardo Vilaro, the artistic director and chief executive of New York’s Ballet Hispánico, has tried to ignore the slights. Well-heeled patrons who wouldn’t join his board because they favored older, Whiter organizations. Theater managers telling him they couldn’t present the company because they had already programmed a “minority-themed” group.

And like so many self-described institutions of color, Ballet Hispánico has a tiny endowment, about \$1 million. New York City Ballet, just a cab ride away in Manhattan, has \$220 million in the bank, according to its most recent audit. With so little saved up, Ballet Hispánico’s ambitions are perpetually limited.

But next year will be different. The Ford Foundation this week is announcing an unprecedented \$160 million-and-growing initiative called America’s Cultural Treasures, with substantial grants going to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) organizations across the country. The grants are, in most cases, the largest ever for the 20 recipients in the first round. Ballet Hispánico will receive \$4 million, more than half of its \$7 million annual budget.

“It takes an ice pick to this huge glacier of structural white supremacy,” Vilaro says. “This is reorganizing and saying, ‘We have other national treasures that we need to refocus on.’”

This is the Ford Foundation’s latest and most dramatic salvo in President Darren Walker’s bid to reinvent how Americans — and most important, American philanthropists — value theater companies, museums and the arts overall. The gap between rich, largely White institutions and younger, BIPOC organizations is wide, but Walker says he sees an opportunity for change now. The [killing of George Floyd](#) brought attention to the systemic racism in American society. The [pandemic shutdowns](#) drew attention to the financial gulf in the arts world.

“Just as inequality is playing out in our society, in the arts it is playing out,” Walker says. “The Getty and the National Gallery of Art are in their own bubbles. Yes, they’re

concerned about finances, but as one of them said to me, ‘This is terrible, but we can raise the money.’

“When you get to the medium and smaller arts organizations — that don’t have endowments, that don’t have rich boards, that don’t have huge amounts of operating cash flow — those organizations are panicked. If we don’t help them, they will be gone.”

Even such [blue-chip institutions](#) as the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in New York and the Boston Symphony Orchestra have made painful cuts in recent months, but Walker and other philanthropy leaders have feared that many organizations run by and serving people of color might have to shutter for good.

In June, the 84-year-old Ford Foundation, which has increasingly focused on fighting economic and racial disparity since Walker took over in 2013, announced that it would borrow \$1 billion by issuing bonds to help nonprofit groups in every area it funds. And behind the scenes, Walker was working on something focused entirely on culture: A plan to distribute \$85 million of that total to organizations run by and in communities of color for what would become America’s Cultural Treasures.

He would not do it alone. Walker began to recruit other foundations to join the mission. Kate Levin, who oversees the arts program at Bloomberg Philanthropies, particularly appreciated the reshuffling invoked by the initiative’s name. Bloomberg is giving \$10 million.

“Calling them ‘America’s Cultural Treasures’ recognizes that they are excellent but have suffered the impact of systemic racism by being undercapitalized,” Levin says. “This is a situation that’s been in place a long time now, but it’s time to take action.”

The Ford plan is meant as more than a one-time coronavirus bailout. The network of foundations and donors is providing money that will go to the recipients over four years, presumably long after theaters and museums reopen. And the excitement over a establishing this new set of “treasures” has been contagious.

As of this week, Ford’s initial \$85 million commitment spawned \$80 million more in giving, which includes Bloomberg, the MacArthur Foundation (\$5 million), the Abrams Foundation (\$5 million) and the Alice L. Walton Foundation (\$5 million).

The first 20 grant recipients, picked by Ford in consultation with the national donors, are geographically and racially diverse. They include the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Mich.; the *Charles H. Wright Museum* of African American History in Detroit; the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage; the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Apollo Theater in New York; the Museum of Art of Puerto Rico in San Juan; and the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle. The \$1 million to \$6 million grants are unrestricted, so the recipients can use them on whatever they choose.

The gifts are also a departure from traditional grant allocations in that they are not limited by budget size. Some of the smaller organizations, in fact, are receiving grants larger than their annual budgets. The Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minn., which is devoted to work by African American playwrights, will receive \$2.5 million — \$500,000 more than it typically spends each year. The gift comes as the company renames itself the Penumbra Center for Racial Healing and expands its community presence. The system “usually doesn’t address the chronic disinvestment problems over a period of time. This does, and it is transformative,” says Penumbra Artistic Director Sarah Bellamy. “Other arts organizations can point to this and say, ‘This is possible.’ If the Ford Foundation can do this, other foundations can as well.”

That’s already proving true. For America’s Cultural Treasures, Ford structured the program not only to spur interest, but also to motivate philanthropists across the country. It did that by splitting its money and focus in two.

The national program, designed for the 20 organizations being rolled out this week, called for \$50 million from Ford and \$35 million from other contributors. A second wave is meant to be regional, with Ford offering \$35 million to partners in seven regions: Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. (There is also a foundation, which Walker wasn’t ready to announce, that will focus on rural organizations.) Those partners had to find a way to match Ford’s \$5 million in each region. So far, that hasn’t been a challenge.

For example, in Chicago, the Joyce Foundation (\$2.5 million) recruited the MacArthur Foundation (\$5 million) and a handful of other contributors.

“The reason we’re committed to it is how important this network of organizations is to the cultural life of the city and how vulnerable they are,” says Joyce President Ellen S. Alberding. “Of course, we have the symphony and Lyric Opera, but this network of smaller organizations is important to our city.”

In Boston, Barbara and Amos Hostetter gave \$10 million in personal funds. Barbara Hostetter, who says she has been moved by the protests sparked by Floyd’s death, then approved \$5 million more from the family’s Barr Foundation.

“We have a growing awareness that we haven’t had,” she says. “And I include myself in that. I think we’re learning a lot about racial injustice. It’s top of mind, and now’s the moment.”

Hostetter also appreciates Ford’s desire to reshape the cultural pecking order and to help raise up valuable organizations that have traditionally been underfunded. “It’s hard work, and it is like turning the supertanker around,” she says. “It won’t happen overnight. But I do think it will.”

Ballet Hispánico's Vilaro is encouraged. The cushion provided by the Ford grant will allow it to weather the shutdown. And once performance spaces reopen, he imagines expanding the company's programming and donor base.

"This," he says, "is a social justice megaphone. We've already had plenty of dialogues about social equity. The Ford Foundation is saying, 'Why aren't you putting them at the table?' This puts us at the table."