



# *The Fellows Gazette*

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## *What’s in a name?*

The Spring 2026 issue, “What’s in a name,” follows our Fall 2025 conversation, “What’s next for US theatre?” which explored how artists and companies might engage with the ever-increasing onslaught that’s impacting arts funding as well as the physical and psychological safety of the communities we serve.

Company, playhouse, and institutional names *mean* something to their prospective audiences: Native Voices, Imagination Stage, the American Negro Theatre, El Teatro Campesino, American Shakespeare Center, The Theatre Offensive, The Federal Theatre Project, WP Theatre, East West Players, DreamStreet Theatre

Company... Through their names, arts organizations declare their values and create spaces for audiences to feel welcome.

In this issue of *The Fellows Gazette*, we invited colleagues to reflect on what it means to create spaces for community engagement and growth. How do artists and administrations (whether at the state or federal level) imagine the arts as a catalyst for developing specific visions of American identities? In naming spaces, creators can conjure visions of what might become and who might belong in the audience. *What's in a name* in defining trajectories for American theatre?

It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the elephant in the room when it comes to names and public spaces: the propensity of the current administration to rename institutions arbitrarily and illegally, including the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. In a December 22, 2025, letter to the College of Fellows, which was also shared with our strategic partner organizations, Dean David Grapes and the Board of the College of Fellows, decried the renaming of the Kennedy Center:

**A Statement by the Board of Directors of the College of Fellows of the  
American Theatre Regarding the Renaming of the  
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts**

*The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts was created by Congress in the wake of President Kennedy's assassination as a living memorial to his belief in the vital role of the arts in a democratic society. It was intended to stand above partisan politics, honoring a legacy rooted in cultural excellence, civic responsibility, and national unity. The recent action by members of*

*the Kennedy Center Board—installed after the removal of a bipartisan board and acting under the influence of President Trump, who appointed himself Chair earlier this year—to rename this historic institution represents a profound violation of that purpose. Beyond the fact that the Center’s name is established by federal law and cannot be altered without congressional action, this decision betrays the spirit in which the institution was founded.*

*When government allows cultural institutions to be reshaped by overt political self-interest, it diminishes the values of empathy, imagination, and shared humanity that the theatre exists to cultivate. As President Kennedy observed, the arts reflect the moral and cultural health of a nation. This morally reprehensible action by the Kennedy Center Board undermines that ideal, disrespects the artists and workers who give the institution life, and erodes the civic trust the Center was meant to embody. The Board of Directors of the College of Fellows of the American Theatre condemns this act as both unethical and deeply damaging to the integrity of our nation’s cultural legacy. Therefore, we call upon the Senate and House of Representatives to override this unilateral action by the Kennedy Center Board of Directors.*

## **Our five questions for the Roundtable Participants included:**

1. When you think about the name of a company or a performing arts complex, how do those names create invitations or opportunities? Can you describe examples from companies or complexes you've collaborated with (or founded!) in the past?
2. Reflecting on the last 50 years of US theatre, how have you seen naming practices *change* and how has that reshaped our cultural landscape?
3. Do you have a key historical example that you would point to as a watershed moment?
4. What names/identities are still missing from the conversation or are now under threat of erasure?
5. How do we use names to hold open a place in memory? Particularly in combatting efforts to eradicate some names and histories?

*--Heather Nathans (Tufts University and CoF, 2023)*



# *The Fellows Roundtable*

**1. When you think about the name of a company or a performing arts complex, how do those names create invitations or opportunities? Can you describe examples from companies or complexes you've collaborated with (or founded!) in the past?**



**Joan Lipkin**, social activist, playwright, director, and Producing Artistic Director of That Uppity Theatre Company, shared thoughts via email while *en route* to an overseas project, writing, “I deliberately chose a very literal name for my company years ago, That Uppity Theatre Company, because I wanted people to know what kind of theater it was and to align myself historically with other groups and populations that had been called “uppity” in the past, women, African-Americans, Jews. Essentially, anyone who steps out of line and does not embrace the status quo” (<https://www.facebook.com/ThatUppityTheatreCompany>).

Thirty some years later, the name feels a little heavy handed but in the historical moment we were in, the AIDS epidemic, the ongoing struggle for racial and gender justice and the midst of the cultural wars ( which are alarmingly upon us again), it seemed appropriate and memorable. I’ve considered changing it (oh the paperwork!), but now it’s well known.

But naming is important. When I’m writing a new play or song, my ability to easily name it tells me I understand the essence of the piece.

I’ve really enjoyed naming some of our projects to help both participants and audiences know what they were about. Sometimes, audiences are adventurous and we encourage and cherish those moments. But I also think many audiences crave a measure of

safety. They will go on the proverbial journey, but they want to know the context. An appropriate name can assist with that.

Some project names we have created have included the Alternate Currents/Direct Currents Series (also known as the AC\DC Series) the DisAbility Project, As American as Apple Pie ( a project for queer and allied youth), the Real Deal for breast cancer survivors,



We Immigrants and more.

What's in a name? Plenty.”



**Jim Volz**, international arts consultant, author, President of Consultants for the Arts, producer and professor emeritus at California State University, Fullerton

([https://stateofshakespeare.com/?page\\_id=1848](https://stateofshakespeare.com/?page_id=1848))

shared thoughts both in writing and as part of our hour-long interview. Our discussion ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous in theatre naming practices. As Jim noted,

“Commercial and many non-profit theatres have spent countless hours and thousands of dollars debating company and performing arts complex names.”

Sometimes the names create invitations to communities and sometimes they shine a spotlight on donors. Jim recalled, “The company that I built my reputation on as a much younger man is the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. When we changed cities and built an entirely new theatre complex and year-round operation, various Board Members clamored for outside national consultants. Those consultants advised getting rid of *each name* in our long-established company name for both valid and ridiculous reasons. Not understanding our mission, history, funding, and state theatre mandate, they advised that the ‘Alabama Shakespeare Festival’ eliminate the name ‘Alabama’ because, well, who would want to go to a theatre in Alabama? Next, they wanted to eliminate the word ‘Shakespeare,’ ...because, well...who in their right mind would want to attend just Shakespeare? Finally, they despised

the word ‘Festival.’ He laughed as he recalled the consultants’ argument: “You are a *theatre*,’ they said, ‘So call yourself one like all the other great theatres in America (such as The Guthrie, The Arena, etc.)’ They did not understand or *care* to understand what we were all about.” (*image from this year’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary season of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival*: <https://asf.net/season-54>)

Volz argues that over time the festival had come to incorporate much more than a few hours in a playhouse. The consultants overlooked, “The wide-ranging activities that had made us a highly popular *festival*: Picnics, lakes, swans, hiking trails, music, dance, theatre, pre-shows, Actor Talks, and late-night Cabarets...and all the things that a ‘Festival’ implies.”



He says, “We ignored their advice and much to the surprise of all of us, we grew from 30,000 attendees to 300,000 attendees in 3 years, drawing audiences from around the world. Our name and our commitment to spectacular productions of Shakespeare and modern ‘classics’ was our winning ticket and the fact that it was happening in Alabama drew the attention of *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and arts enthusiasts around the nation.”

For Volz, the consultants’ impulse to rename the Alabama Shakespeare Festival revealed some of the most disturbing trends in personal and corporate “naming rights” which, as he contends, “Have now created ego-laden, marketing-driven, names for many of America’s artistic and cultural venues.” As he notes, “We all know the worst of the worst in Washington DC, but the trend to ‘monetize’ cultural names has been trending.” For example, he cited the Ford Amphitheatre in Tampa, Florida, which was briefly renamed the 1-800-Ask-Gary Amphitheatre, before being restyled as the MidFlorida Credit Union Amphitheatre. The Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center (named for the inventor, philanthropist, and board member) became the David Geffen Hall, following a \$100 million dollar donation (<https://www.lincolncenter.org/series/visit/info/venues-1>). In Phoenix, Arizona, the city tried out the “Ashley Furniture HomeStore Pavillion,” before turning to the name the Ak-Chin Pavillion (a name that honors the Ak-Chin Indian community in the area, <https://ak-chin.nsn.us/>).

Volz points out that the renaming of performance spaces can highlight some of the ethical issues that so many companies face. Naming questions also risk obscuring, “the true missions of many performing arts complexes and theatres.” He cited a 2021 article, entitled, “How Naming Rights Became the Art World’s Most Controversial Issue,” in which, *Town and Country Magazine* stated that what had once been the “gold standard of high-level giving,” had grown increasingly challenging in an era in which scandals – such as those which enveloped the Sackler family and resulted in its name being removed from numerous institutions – have raised questions about the fallout from public name branding. “Maybe these days donors are wondering if anonymity is better than infamy”

[\(https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a36501107/museum-naming-rights-scandals-controversy/\)](https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a36501107/museum-naming-rights-scandals-controversy/).

Volz comments, “Ironically, commercially-minded Broadway theatre producers are the ones who have historically ‘gotten it right,’” citing theatres honoring August Wilson, Eugene O’Neill, James Earl Jones, Helen Hayes, David Belasco, Lena Horne, and Ethel Barrymore. These named venues and others, “showcase the creative history, vision, and mission of our art form.” In his long career of founding theatres and consulting with arts organizations, he emphasized the focus on mission and vision in the naming process: “For example, the Australian Shakespeare Festival (Tasmania) stands for gravitas, funding, stability, recognizability.” It offers an “implied welcomeness to all Australians and a variety of music, dance, theatre and Shakespeare events.” In another example, he cited “Bard on the Beach (Vancouver, CA),” which offers a “playful, fun, adventurous,” spirit, “All matching the Shakespeare Festival’s Vision/Mission/Vibe as a Shakespeare in Circus Tents with the Pacific Ocean, Cruise Ship, Whistler Mountain Range & Cruise ships as a backdrop!” For Volz, “The name and approach created community, inclusiveness, and world-class family-oriented productions.” He also mentioned, Virginia’s Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, which became the American Shakespeare Center, “with a name change that matched the company’s growth from a regional company to one with international aspirations!”



**Bonnie Nelson Schwartz**

(<https://theatrewashington.org/bonnie-nelson-schwartz>)

knows firsthand “what’s in a name” from her experience founding the prestigious Washington, DC, Helen Hayes Awards in 1984, in addition to her leadership as the Co-Director of the national festival, 2020 “One



Woman One Vote” celebrating the Centennial of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment and Producer of the “Tribute to Ava

DuVernay” with Jason Moran at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. She has also served as the Executive Producer of the Emmy-nominated *Traveling While Black* film and exhibition and is the creator and director of the “Global Climate Uprising Festival” featured at the COP26 UN Climate Summit in Glasgow.

(image: <https://theatrewashington.org/helenhayesawards/history>.)

In discussing the current trend of renaming artistic spaces in Washington DC, she says, “I think what’s happening here is an outlier. This is purely political. It has nothing to do with naming buildings or renaming buildings.” She points to a long tradition of naming spaces for “people who are doing good work,” like philanthropist Alice Tully or Fred Rose. By contrast, with the recent effort to rebrand the Kennedy Center, she emphasizes, “This is a unique situation that’s all about politics and power.”

For Nelson Schwartz, some of the current crisis around the Kennedy Center emerged in part out of efforts to create additional rehearsal, administrative, and community spaces. According to its website, the 2019 addition of The Reach venue was intended to offer audiences, “A space where everyone truly belongs,” promising visitors “your favorite hangout spot where you, your friends, and your family can relax and be a part of something entertaining, enlightening, and perhaps even unexpected every day of the year.”

(<https://www.kennedy-center.org/reach/>).

A fundraising and revenue gap ultimately made the space vulnerable to claims by the current administration that the spaces were “dilapidated” and “broken,” resulting in the

recent announcement of a two-year closure of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (<https://time.com/7364391/trump-kennedy-center-closure-july-renovations-controversy/>). As Nelson Schwartz observes, this extended closure, as well as the multiple recent cancellations of numerous performances at the Kennedy Center after the illegal renaming and leadership changes, impacted not only the artists and prospective audiences, but all of the Kennedy Center’s employees, as well as union shops across the Greater DC area.

*“You can't protest on the streets of Washington, D.C. right now without ending up in jail... [so] you boycott.”*

Yet Nelson Schwartz attributes the closing of the Kennedy Center in large part to the local community’s refusal to acquiesce to the change of name and corresponding change of mission and vision over the past year. As programming became less diverse, as long-time staff and leaders were fired or resigned, many members of the public signaled their disgust by turning away from the Kennedy Center towards other arts venues across DC. As Nelson Schwartz says pointedly, “You can't protest on the streets of Washington, D.C. right now without ending up in jail. The right to protest, publicly has been taken from us. So, there was no outward protest. In that case, the only thing you can do is the same thing that happened in the Civil Rights Movement in the South. You know, boycott. You boycott.”

For Nelson Schwartz this proved a wrenching choice: “The first question that comes up is, are you boycotting *Trump’s* Kennedy Center, or are you boycotting the artists at the same time?” She adds, “I’ve been working there since the ‘80s. I produced film. I produced festivals. I produced theater. I produced concerts in every hall for all of these years.” Initially, her response was “I was mortified. I said, we will support the artists... And then it just became too difficult. To walk in the door and go in a magnetometer. To walk into a space which was once a performing arts center where everyone was welcome. You now go through high security. You're searched. You come in, and it's not about the artists anymore. That's the sad thing.”



In her response to the question, “what’s in a name” **Dean of the College of Fellows Emerita, Sandra Shannon** (<https://jbhe.com/2022/09/sandra-shannon-honored-by-the-association-of-theatre-in-higher-education/>), talked about how naming created opportunities and invitations for new communities. Shannon began by saying, “I want to start from one historian to another. I want to start at the beginning of a relationship with the August Wilson African American Cultural Center (AWAACC) in Pittsburgh.

In the fall of 2017, I reached out to the newly hired president and CEO of the August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Janis Burley Wilson (<https://awaacc.org/about/people/janis-burley-wilson-president-and-ceo/>). At the time, I was president of the August Wilson Society” <https://www.augustwilsonsociety.org/about>).



Shannon and Burley Wilson discussed options for collaboration, including biannual colloquia or other programming. She notes, “Much of my work on August Wilson has to do with the planets aligning just so.” At the time Shannon contacted her, Burley Wilson was working to embed the Center’s work in the community, to link it to August Wilson’s own deep commitment to Pittsburgh, and to maximize a space “strategically situated within the Black community,” rather than just

“plastering his name on the building” (image: <https://awaacc.org/event/awc-community-day-black-in-bloom/>). The connection with Shannon and the August Wilson Society meant access to important conversations about the trajectory of Black theatre in America.



So, Burley Wilson turned to Shannon as a resource and, in turn, the AWAACC agreed to host the August Wilson Society's meeting at the Center every other year – free of charge. For Burley Wilson, “The

August Wilson Society and the scholarly conversations it fostered, would bring that kind of relevance and connection to August Wilson that she wanted.” Shannon also came on board not only as the leader of the AWS, but as a Scholar-in-Residence at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center. This appointment allowed Shannon to take a hands-on role in the AWAACC’s installation of “August Wilson: The Writer’s Landscape,” the first-ever permanent exhibition dedicated to the life and works of the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright. <https://awaacc.org/exhibition/august-wilson-the-writers-landscape/>. Her responsibilities included suggesting content for the 3,600 square foot display that explores the people and places of Pittsburgh that influenced Wilson’s American Century Cycle plays. As Shannon says, the AWAACC became an important component of the August Wilson Society’s work and mission: “We consider going to the August Wilson Center *going home*.”



While much of our conversation focused on Wilson, Shannon also discussed another important “name” Shannon has been associated throughout her career:

The Black Theatre Network (<https://www.blacktheatrenetwork.org/>),

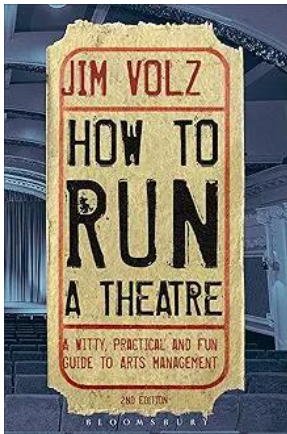
celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year! As Shannon recalls, “My initial encounter with the Black Theatre Network came when I was just an inquisitive conference attendee. I had no agenda. I wasn’t on a panel or anything. Black Theatre Network was meeting in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, concurrent with the International Black Theater Festival. Actually, I went to the festival. and I didn’t know the Black Theatre Network was there. I happened to open a door... The room was buzzing. And I went to the door, and I peeped in, and the Black Theatre Network was having a luncheon. Some of the people there saw me and they beckoned me very, very animatedly to come join them. And it was a big family. That’s where I met Lundeana Thomas, Kathy Ervin, Greg Horton, Andre Harrington, and Michael Dinwiddie. Some of them have now joined the ancestors. But they welcomed me, so it was sort of a sense of coming home. Coming to a home that you can’t recall ever being to, if that makes sense. I came in among them, I sat down, they offered me food, I listened to the

program that was going on during the reception, and I fell in love with these people.” Following that providential encounter, Shannon continued to attend BTN meetings and collaborate with BTN colleagues, ultimately becoming President of the BTN from 2006-2008!

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## **2. Reflecting on the last 50 years of US theatre, how have you seen naming practices change and how has that reshaped our cultural landscape?**

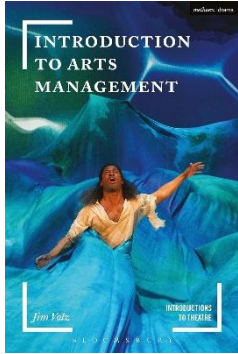
**Volz** observes, “Sadly, corporate branding and naming sponsorships, whether in sports venues, cultural centers, or individual theatres, are generally *all about money*, and fail to reflect any interest or commitment to the actual artistic mission or entertainment product being ‘endorsed’.” Volz adds, “I first noticed the horrid branding influences on desperate



regional theatres when I visited the prestigious Oregon Shakespeare Festival back in the 1980s. Even the toilet stalls had ‘Local Paper Product Sponsors’ with placards gracefully mounted next to the commodes.” He also cited examples of companies including Coca-Cola and Pepsi installing neon logos in theatre lobbies and concessions (which in turn sell their products). He adds an anecdote from his own experience, “A Coca-Cola executive once told me they would be glad to sponsor a production of *King Lear* if we would allow them to purchase a permanent bright red show curtain with their white logo running through the curtain!” He stated emphatically that his organization declined this opportunity.

Volz pointed out some challenges with corporate and commercial sponsorship. For example, he notes that brands may demand exclusive rights for concessions, or that airlines may avoid sponsorships if a competing airline is also a donor to a company. Similarly, banks

“prefer not to share the spotlight,” and if one bank becomes a named sponsor, others may decline to add their support. He notes too that “large corporate sponsorships and naming opportunities can disappear if a key donor dies or the corporation has a change of heart.”



Volz also pointed to a phone company that shifted its arts branding from “cutting edge” to “family-oriented” as “part of one corporate turnover,” and that this, “threatened to throw a non-profit’s budget into disarray.”

Families may challenge bequests to arts organizations – either to recover the funds or to demand naming rights. And, as recent events have shown, political schisms impact arts organizations if Republican donors decide not to contribute to what they consider Democratic-supported

institutions and *visa versa*. For Volz, in the worst-case scenarios, “The reliance on sponsorships and the whims of egotistical donors have destroyed donations/budgets and threatened the very existence of professional theatres.”

*“A naming can be a history lesson for future generations.”*

While Volz pointed to the harmful effects of naming that erases mission and vision, **Shannon** described the importance of naming practices in Black American culture

as a means to achieve “a kind of permanence” in a way that “changes our mental landscape.” She turned again to the Black Theatre Network, which “may have emerged out of a crucible of crisis, but is now here to stay.” For Shannon, “A naming can be a history lesson for future generations.”

She also sees the destructive impulses operating around naming in contemporary US culture: “What I just described as a way to honor somebody, to give them longevity, immortality, and respect, *rightful* respect for the major contributions that they've made during their lifetime has become a gesture of vanity.” She went further to describe it as “Bullying, indecency, lack of decorum, and downright disrespect for the contributions of others. And it's a sad, a sad thing. Who would have thought it? Who would have thought that somebody would put their name on top of somebody else's name?”

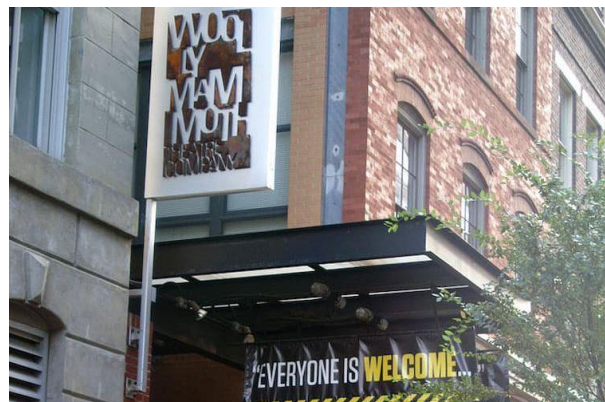
Shannon also shared an anecdote about a time when she was invited to weigh in on renaming an institution to incorporate August Wilson’s name because the former name had

included Woodrow Wilson’s name (which has been removed from many institutions over the past decade due to Wilson’s openly racist beliefs). However, for Shannon, using August Wilson’s name in that context felt like the wrong solution. It seemed too pat and convenient, without a significant exploration of how August Wilson’s legacy might be connected to the mission and vision of this institution. Eventually she determined that she could not support the renaming plan and the institution chose another honoree with specific ties to its history.

Shannon also turned to the question of the ways in which naming creates a sense of *ownership*, when donors pay for seats, rehearsal rooms, offices, or other spaces. While their named gifts offer proof of investment and dedication, they also signal status and perhaps implicitly a sense of “this belongs to *me*,” which can militate against other audience members feeling welcome in the space or feeling that the space is an equitable one. It becomes “borrowed” space for the audience, rather than something that’s *theirs* (as Volz described with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival).

By contrast, **Nelson Schwartz** approached the question from her long perspective as a producer who has seen companies struggle to sustain themselves in competitive landscapes and challenging financial times. For her, naming can offer a lifeline to companies or organizations that might otherwise have to fold, “We know that we can't support theater by selling tickets. We need the support of the community, we need these gifts, and we also need the naming of buildings.”

But for Nelson Schwartz it’s also important that in that naming/gifting process, the mission and vision of the organization remain front and center and that the organization continues to spotlight the community it serves. She listed a range of DC-area performance venues that have emerged over the last forty years, including the National Theatre, Woolly Mammoth Theatre, Studio Theatre, GALA Hispanic, Solos Nua, and more. These theatres create invitations for their audiences (note the Woolly Mammoth sign, “Everyone is Welcome.” (see image above).





She also discussed what it means to style something as a “national” theatre vs. a Hispanic theatre or Irish theatre, and how those names created a range of opportunities for audience engagement. While those companies may have significant corporate or individual sponsorship, their names remain distinct from those kinds of labels. (image: [https://www.historictheatrephotos.com/Theatre/National-](https://www.historictheatrephotos.com/Theatre/National-Washington-DC.aspx)

[Washington-DC.aspx](https://www.historictheatrephotos.com/Theatre/National-Washington-DC.aspx)).

For Nelson Schwartz, as for Volz and Shannon, branding/naming backfires when it props up the vanity of the individual or business being named, rather than the organization the donor purports to uplift. She acknowledges the difficult balancing act arts organizations must negotiate in sustaining their spaces and their work while also remaining true to their mission. For example, she points to the shifts in programming for the daily *free* Millennium Stage events at the Kennedy Center, which had formerly offered a site for experimental work and a way for community members to encounter artists that they might not otherwise see. In its earlier incarnations, the Kennedy Center’s Millennium Stage provided a showcase and a “big umbrella” to bring a range of voices into conversation. As Nelson Schwartz notes, more recent Millennium Stage events and other programming at the Kennedy Center have taken a “patriotic turn,” that potentially limits opportunities for audiences to encounter less familiar work. For example, current and upcoming shows at the Kennedy Center include *Chicago*, *Shear Madness*, *Back to the Future*, *the Musical*, and *Mrs. Doubtfire, the Musical*, (<https://www.kennedy-center.org/>). Beyond that programming shift, she adds that frequent road closures, policing, and surveillance around the Center have discouraged many community members from venturing into the space.

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### **3. Do you have a key historical example that you would point to as a watershed moment?**



For **Shannon** the naming of the August Wilson Theatre on Broadway was a “FINALLY!” moment. The theatre opened under its new name on October 16, 2026, roughly a year after Wilson’s passing. With its renaming, it became the first theatre on Broadway to bear the name of an African American artist. Now, twenty years later, the NYC theatre landscape also hosts the

James Earl Jones Theatre and the Lena Horne Theatre, but for Shannon, the power of Wilson’s name helped to work this transformation in the city’s landscape. And, as Shannon comments, Wilson was aware of the power of his name during his lifetime as his fame grew. He chose to use it sparingly and with deliberation. In the wake of his passing, his widow, Constanza Romero Wilson, CEO of August Wilson Legacy, LLC, has stepped into the role of what Shannon describes as a “gatekeeper” for how Wilson’s name gets attached to projects or organizations. “I respect that,” Shannon observes.

Shannon also described the process of naming the College of Fellows August Wilson Fellowship for Students of Color in Technical Theatre, Production, and Design. As she noted, “One of the first steps in founding AWF was to seek approval from the Chief Executor and Director of Wilson's Estate, Fellow Constanza Romero Wilson, to name the Fellowship in honor of her late husband. She graciously agreed and indicated a willingness to support this effort. The AWF Advisory Committee was well aware of the leverage that Wilson's name carries in elevating its stature and ability to recruit quality applicants and gain generous sponsors. We took seriously our charge to accord the name August Wilson with the reverence it demanded in the application, press releases, and other types of promotional material.”



From the sublime to the potentially ridiculous... Just as Shannon emphasized the urgency of naming to memorialize and celebrate milestones or key figures in US culture, Volz pointed to the downside that happens when corporate sponsorship obscures other identities. He cited the Idaho Potato Bowl (1997), formerly known as the Humanitarian Bowl, as well as the Orlando Pop-Tart Bowl, founded in 1990, and formerly known as the Sunshine Football Classic, the Blockbuster Bowl, the CarQuest Bowl, and the MicronPC Bowl.

Volz sees a parallel in some of the name changes to US theatres over the past 40 years, pointing to the transformation of the old Lyric and Apollo Theatres on Broadway



into the Ford Center for the Performing Arts in 1997. After Livent went bankrupt in 1998, the theatre underwent shifts in sponsorship and naming, including Hilton (after the Hilton Hotel empire) and Foxwood (after the casino organization). It became the Lyric Theatre again in 2014. For Volz, constant shifts in naming raise questions about how those changes signal shifts in identity and mission for the company, and they also prompt concerns about what the sponsors think they're "buying" with their investment. Are they purchasing cultural cachet? Goodwill? Name recognition in a new sector? Or do they see their corporate resources as an opportunity to support the community? And as organizations see rotating rounds of sponsorships, how does that impact their identity among the communities they serve?

**Nelson Schwartz** also talked about the ways that naming can create expectations for institutions and organizations, citing her own experience in founding the Helen Hayes Award. She noted that initially American Express joined as a sponsor in offering an award for excellence in the field ("The American Express Tribute" first given in 1987 to James Earl Jones), but that the relationship concluded because, "there was not enough publicity" generated by the DC-based awards. The Helen Hayes Awards has also offered the Helen Hayes Humanitarian Award, the *Washington Post* Award for Distinguished Community

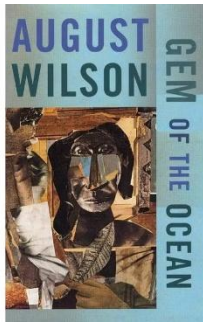
Service, the Thomas J. Lipton Award for Distinguished Volunteer Service to Washington Professional Theatre, and the KPMG Peat Marwick Award for Distinguished Service to the Washington Theatre Community (for a history of the awards and their recipients, see: <https://theatrewashington.org/helenhayesawards/nominees-recipients?page=0>).

Nelson Schwartz emphasized that while some of the awards offered under the banner of the Helen Hayes Awards have shifted over the last five decades, the core name and mission of the awards has remained the same because, “The name has always been privately owned by a small group or family, whereas the bigger theaters that were once the Royale and the Ritz and so on, were owned by the Schuberts of the Nederlanders, so...they could change names if they wanted to, and they did.”

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#### **4. What names/identities are still missing from the conversation or are now under threat of erasure?**

Drawing on her long experience in DC as an example, **Nelson Schwartz** talked about the ways that she has seen theatre companies adapting to new audiences and trying to create more inclusive spaces. For example, in discussing a theatre that twenty years ago featured a dress code guidance for its patrons and expensive pre-show dinner recommendations, she pointed to a transformation in mission and vision to foreground community, empathy, innovation, and inclusion (<https://shakespearetheatre.org/about/mission/>). Nelson Schwartz lauds DC’s Shakespeare Theatre Company for its commitment to community engagement *and* for its willingness to learn from its past as those lessons inform its future goals (<https://shakespearetheatre.org/about/equity-diversity-inclusion/>).



**Shannon** underscored the importance of “calling something by its name, *versus* having a name imposed.” She added, “I know you understand where I'm going with this. Back to slavery. When names were erased and imposed. And there is a correlation with that to August Wilson. I want to share a piece of dialogue that August Wilson wrote between two of his characters in *Gem of the Ocean*. Solly Two Kings says to Citizen, ‘My name is Two Kings. Used to be called Uncle Alfred. The government looking for me for being a runaway, so I changed it.’ And Citizen responds, ‘My mama named me Citizen after Freedom came, she wouldn't like it if I changed my name.’ And Solly answers, ‘Your mama's trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It's hard to be a citizen. You're gonna have to fight to get it. And time you get it, you'd be surprised how heavy it is. I used to be called Uncle Alfred back in slavery. I ran into one fella called me, Uncle Alfred. I told him, say, Uncle Alfred is dead. He say, I'm looking at you. And I told him, you looking at Two Kings. That's David and Solomon. He must have... he must have had something in his ear, because all he heard was Solomon. He say, I'm gonna call you Solly. The people been calling me Solly ever since. But my name is Two Kings. Some people call me Solomon, and some people call me David. I answer to either one. I don't know which one God gonna call me. If he called me Uncle Alfred, then we got a big fight’.”

For Shannon, this exchange emblemizes the importance of *claiming* names – particularly if they are self-chosen. She turned from *Gem of the Ocean* to August Wilson’s own biography. Wilson changed his name in the 1960s, to distance himself from his father, “who had very little to do with his family,” and he “clung to his mother’s maiden name, Daisy Wilson.” His father’s name was Frederick Auguste Kittel. “He took the August and his mother's name. So, he manufactured himself as ‘August Wilson,’ and it was in a moment when many other Black activists and artists chose to change their names as a way to disavow White oppression and domination.”

Like Shannon, **Volz** focused on the potential for harm when oppressive forces assert authority to rename or “un-name.” He said, “Where to start? Cancel culture is happening

and has happened institutionally throughout America. Cultural histories and the American experience are being rewritten in the National Park Services, through NEA rescinded funding and threats to deny future funding; American Pioneers and their stories are being eliminated from government institutions and websites including the Smithsonian and National Park Service and through Presidential Executive orders to terminate DEI offices (and their associated personnel and legacies, current and historic).” He added, “The systemic attempt to dismantle, rewrite or destroy any mention of artists of color and other significant historical figures of color in our nation’s websites, public institutions, parks, museums and divert government funding to the wealthiest and whitest of America’s cultural institutions is disturbing at best and criminal at its worst.”

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## **5. How do we use names to hold open a place in memory?**

### **Particularly in combatting efforts to eradicate some names and histories?**

**Nelson Schwartz** described the ways in which some names can create opportunities and challenges simultaneously. For example, she cited the Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s and the National Theatre (DC), both of which created “expectations” about what a national theatre might look like, who it should represent, and what ideologies (if any) it should espouse. Thinking locally, she pointed to companies such as the DC Black Repertory Theatre Company (1971-1976, <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/dc-black-repertory-company/>). While the DC incarnation of the company did not survive in that form (there *is* a Black Rep in St. Louis: <https://www.theblackrep.org/>), its five-year existence helped to launch a network of Black artists working in the DC area and supporting young artists at Howard University. Ironically, Nelson Schwartz noted that some white DC audiences didn’t perceive the DC Black Rep as “inclusive” enough. She questioned their assumption that predominantly white spaces and institutions are somehow assumed to be inclusive by default.

**Volz** declared, “Public opinion can be a powerful influence when it comes to individual, government or corporate behavior. Individuals, businesses, corporations, state

governments, city governments, and all who believe in equality and life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness must battle to ‘hold places open’ and celebrate the diversity of America and the contributions of all Americans while speaking out and influencing those who would attempt to eradicate our *true* history.

**Shannon** closed our conversation by musing on the recent funeral of the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and the memorial service held at the House of Hope Church in Chicago. In announcing the arrangements for the services, his family proclaimed, “All are welcome,” and indeed, the space was filled to capacity with those who came to honor Jackson’s extraordinary life and his impact on so many Americans.

(<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2026/02/18/jesse-jackson-funeral-observances/88736592007/>).

For Shannon, the message in that celebration of life was “to keep hope alive.” Justice is the product of generations and the fight continues. As Shannon said, “The right spirit was in the air,” in that church, and those in attendance knew their role was to honor Jackson’s legacy. She contrasted that spirit with the current administration’s refusal to acknowledge Jackson’s contributions to civil rights in the US, while lionizing other white figures of the far-right movement: “It just draws stark, stark attention to the racism.”

Shannon added, “I think it's interesting how we've gone from talking about naming buildings to the whole naming process, to whose names get remembered. I was invited to think about the profundity of naming and legacies in preparing for this conversation. I'm an activist at heart... Just think of what our forefathers have said, what our ancestors have *done*. I think of what my parents experienced. I don't know where this country is headed in *my* lifetime. I have a daughter in her 30s. I'm wondering whether we're going to straighten this ship out again in *her* lifetime. But we have to stay positive because our ancestors did. And we carry their names.”

## ***Conclusion***

In my Roundtable conversations with members of the College of Fellows I am always so grateful for the deeply thoughtful and inspirational responses they offer. We need reminders to look to our histories. We need to call on and honor the names of those who have inhabited the spaces in which we create and thrive. We also need to remind ourselves that names and naming are tinged with precarity. As our Roundtable participants pointed out, those who want to erase “uncomfortable” histories or glorify themselves may *try* to eradicate names. But as August Wilson says in *Two Trains Running*, “Freedom is heavy. You got to put your shoulder to freedom. Put your shoulder to it and hope your back holds up.” How lucky we are as the College of Fellows to have so many strong backs to aid in the struggle.

## ***Honors and Awards***

*Because our wonderful colleague Kristy Simpson is temporarily out of commission, I'm sharing some recent news that will be posted on our College of Fellows Facebook soon! Congratulations to everyone on all their amazing new and upcoming work!*

**Mark Charney** writes, "I've written a new screwball comedy with my collaborator Cory Norman called "*in honor of...*" that was selected to be developed at Rose Theatre in DC (<https://www.rosetheatre.net/>)."

**Daniel Banks** will premiere the new work, *The Secret Sharer* at Boston's ArtsEmerson in April-May 2026: <https://www.dnaworks.org/secretsharer>.

**Robert Benedetti** is in rehearsal for *Eureka Day*, his first of two shows this season with the company he founded in Santa Fe twelve years ago, the New Mexico Actors Lab. Hugh Jackman, who credits Benedetti's book, *The Actor at Work*, as the foundation of his career, graciously recorded a promotional video for the show which is being shown before every feature presentation all this month at Santa Fe's premier Sky Cinemas. Benedetti's second show will be College of Fellows colleague Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* in September.

At the age of ninety-one, **Tom Markus** published two books this year: *Dear Lindsay, A Whimsical History of our Family, Part 2: 1934-1945*, from Swordfish Press, and an updated, 4th edition of the Intro to Theatre textbook *Another Opening, Another Show*, from Waveland Press.

**David Grapes** was inducted as a member of the National Theatre Conference at their annual meeting in January 2026 in NYC.

**Benny Sato Ambush** is directing three upcoming productions: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's play *Appropriate* at the Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival-St. Louis, September 2026; Joe Landry's *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* for the Nevada Conservatory Theatre, Las Vegas, November-December 2026; and Rajiv Joseph's *King James* for the Lyric Stage Company of Boston , March-April 2027

**Laurence Senelick** published a new article, "The Marriage of Nancy and Sikes: Portraying the Fallen Woman on the Victorian Stage" available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/PVTHUKIKWFDEK562PXUI/full>.



**Sandra Shannon** was part of a Global Read-a-Thon, celebrating the creation of the August Wilson Society with journalist Suzanne Malveaux, former CNN Anchor and White House correspondent. The event was hosted at the University of Georgia.

For the latest in Fellow Fellows' news, visit our Facebook page, which you can reach from the landing page of the College of Fellows website <https://www.thecollegeoffellows.org/> or at <https://www.facebook.com/people/The-College-of-Fellows-of-the-American-Theatre/61569773971070/>.

To share news of your honors and awards for inclusion in *The Fellows Gazette*, you can email [fellowsgazette@gmail.com](mailto:fellowsgazette@gmail.com).

News of upcoming projects, publications, and other events can be sent to this address and will be shared on the Facebook page.



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## **Opportunities to Serve**

The College has no permanent infrastructure and is, therefore, dependent on the work of individual Fellows who volunteer their time and effort to serve in various capacities. Anyone who wishes to volunteer for service to the College should reach out directly to **Dean David Grapes**.

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