

# THE SUNDANCE PROCESS

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The Sundance Institute Theatre Program provides a unique catalytic process of artistic engagement in the world of theatre development programs. Labs provide artists an isolated retreat setting of soul-nurturing natural beauty, removed from the demands of contemporary life. They balance the self-directed freedom of an artistic retreat with a series of carefully calibrated interactions with select artistic mentors within a supportive community. The Lab process is not tied to any particular methodology or “how-to” of “one size fits all” new work development. Rather, Sundance Labs are artist-focused and artist-led.

While many programs provide time and space for development, Sundance Labs are distinguished by:

- artist-driven engagement throughout the process
- a core emphasis on dramaturgical inquiry versus prescriptive feedback
- alternating rehearsal and writing days
- a rare protective environment, free of external pressure from producers or audiences.

Lab experiences aim to be transformative on both personal and project-specific levels. They enrich and strengthen artists to move projects toward production, and memorably impact artists throughout their careers. As *The Space Between*, Theatre Labs engage the complex spaces between idea and performance.

At Sundance, dramaturgy is the how and the why of new play development, a process of inquiry and exploration into dramatic works practiced not only by Sundance dramaturgs, but by all of the artists in the room. Sundance dramaturgs, who have wide experience in the support of new work, provide engaged, considered, and empowering guidance to each project’s artists, and offer fresh perspectives on the work. They recognize that each individual artist/project brings a unique set of intentions, aesthetics, content, language and process. Once a project is accepted to a Lab, there is opportunity to discuss the kind of dramaturgical support that best suits it. For the Middle East and North Africa Initiative, where work is often in Arabic, dramaturgs from both the US and MENA region work collaboratively.

Labs prioritize, whenever possible, a day-on/day-off rehearsal rhythm. Rehearsals with collaborating artists one day alternate with days for reflection and writing/re-writing. This offers artists refreshing opportunities for experimentation and discovery.

Sundance founder Robert Redford’s early awareness that beautiful natural surroundings enhance creativity means that Lab artists are housed in a calm bucolic setting, sharing meals and artistic journeys, thereby building community amongst the participants. Final showings of the works in progress are open rehearsals solely for the Lab community. Potential commercial producers, the external public, and paid audiences are purposefully not part of the final readings. Chosen experts in the field are brought to the Lab as Creative Advisors to attend final showings and offer fresh eyes. Though the intimacy and trust established through the Lab process, generative artists leave Sundance Labs with carefully curated feedback and new possibilities.

## OUR GUIDEPOSTS

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1 - *THE SETTING AND EXPECTATIONS*: In a beauty-filled landscape, where generous hospitality is provided by a gracious staff, artists discover an empty space - an open field for dream time and creativity discovery, relieved of external pressures and internal expectations.

2 - *ARTIST-DRIVEN PROCESS*: Lab Fellows guide their own experiences, first by introducing themselves to the community, describing their project and work plan goals, and often reading their work out loud. The artist-driven process is encouraged throughout the Lab process, as is respectful deep listening and interaction from dramaturgs, mentors and fellow participants.

3 - *DRAMATURGY AND REHEARSAL*: Carefully selected dramaturgs assigned to each artist/project begin with pre-Lab conversations. At the Lab itself, the Artistic Director and dramaturgs move between project rehearsals, entering into an ongoing dialogue with Fellows, encouraging artists to engage with the impulses that inspired their writing. Open rehearsals are encouraged to allow the Lab community to quietly observe the working process of fellow artists. Informal conversations may evolve outside of rehearsal, over a meal or a walk. Dramaturgical “check-ins” are scheduled for the dramaturgical team to learn and consult about all Fellows/projects.

4 - *WRITING*: With comfortable spaces provided for writing, Fellows determine their own rhythm of writing and/or re-writing. Feedback is managed between the Fellow, core collaborators, the dramaturg and other mentors, with the guidance of the Artistic Director.

5 - *FINAL OPEN REHEARSALS/PRESENTATIONS*: Fellows and their collaborators balance continuing development with the need to temporarily solidify choices for an informal presentation to the community. The Lab process culminates in a sharing that typically takes the form of readings or partially staged readings..

6 - *FEEDBACK*: A small gathering is convened for each Fellow, with his/her key collaborator(s), Creative Advisors and the Artistic Director. Fellows are encouraged to formulate questions to guide conversations that are moderated by the Artistic Director the day after a presentation, when possible.

7 - *AFTER THE LAB*: All participating artists are welcomed into the Theatre Program’s Alumni community. A limited amount of Post-Lab support funds are made available when requested and as approved by Theatre Program staff. While staff may involve themselves in advocacy or follow-through for specific projects, *Sundance does not function as a producer of plays.*