



Walder Foundation Announces \$2.4 Million Support for Performing Artists in Music, Theater, Dance, and Interdisciplinary Performance With Launch of Platform Awards

Twelve Chicagoland performing artists to each receive an unrestricted grant and professional development opportunities

CHICAGO—June 20, 2024—Walder Foundation today announced it will award **\$2.4 million to performing artists** through its inaugural **Platform Awards**, which support accomplished Chicagoland mid-career music, theater, dance, and interdisciplinary performance artists who are enriching the city's creative and civic landscape through a commitment to honing their craft and meaningful community engagement. Twelve recipients will receive an unrestricted grant of \$200,000 each paired with ongoing professional development and networking opportunities, deepening the Foundation's commitment to building a more equitable and sustainable cultural sector in Chicago. Walder Foundation has granted \$17 million to performing artists and performing arts organizations since the Foundation was founded in 2018.

The 2024 Platform Award recipients are: theater artists **Lili-Anne Brown, Sandra Delgado**, and **Myra Su**; dance artists **Darrell Jones, Chief Manny** (Brandon Calhoun), **Vershawn Sanders-Ward**, and **Robyn Mineko Williams**; music artists **Lisa Kaplan, Sam Thousand**, and **Matthew Ulery**; and interdisciplinary artists **Brendan Fernandes** and **avery r. young**.

"The Platform Awards uplift the work of outstanding mid-career performing artists enabling them to continue to grow and advance their careers, so that Chicago remains a thriving destination for the arts for generations to come," said **Elizabeth Walder**, President and Executive Director of Walder Foundation. "As a former touring musician, I understand the unique challenges facing performing artists; through the Walder Foundation's Platform Awards, we can provide the opportunity for performers to explore their practices and take risks with fewer financial burdens. By supporting these artists who are enriching their local communities, we aim to help shape a vibrant arts sector that continues to contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of our city."

In addition to receiving financial support through 2026, the Platform Award recipients will participate in regular professional development sessions designed to encourage career growth and address their pressing needs. Through workshops, talks from guest speakers, and mentorship, artists will engage with issues such as finances, retirement planning, marketing and public relations, and health and wellness.

"By creating this cohort, we are forging a network for ongoing support and cross-disciplinary collaboration that will have positive impacts on Chicago's entire creative community," said **Meg Leary**, Senior Program Director, Performing Arts & Operations. "These Awards address a vital funding gap in our region to further the work of mid-career performing artists who are engaging the

greater Chicago community. We are excited to expand the Foundation’s impact and amplify the City’s significant contributions to the national and global performing arts landscape.”

Artists were nominated by a group of 80 Chicago-based academics, field experts, and cultural leaders. Nominations were solicited for applicants who, in addition to their artistic accomplishments, incorporate community engagement as part of their artistic practice. Selected grantees reflect the city of Chicago across neighborhood, race, ethnicity, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and artistic practice and tradition.

Applications were reviewed and semifinalists were chosen by a national panel of established practicing artists who specialize in one or more performing arts disciplines and are based outside of the Chicago region. National panelists included: theater artists Sharon Bridgforth, Mary Kathryn Nagle, and Rosalba Rolón; dance artists Faye Driscoll, Bebe Miller, and Aparna Ramaswamy; music artists Jonathan Bailey Holland, Rudresh Mahanthappa, and Shara Nova; and interdisciplinary focus artists Ann Carlson and Miya Masaoka.

A local panel then reviewed and selected a group of 20 finalists. Local panelists included: theater artist Dean Corrin; dance artists Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell and Reggio McLaughlin; music artists Mei-Ann Chen and Juan Díes; and interdisciplinary focus artists Dr. Mónica Félix and Lin Hixson.

Ultimately, the 12 Platform Award recipients were selected by Walder Foundation leadership and advisors, and the eight finalists each received a one-time grant of \$5,000. The Platform Awards is a triennial grant program, and finalists will be automatically re-nominated for the next application cycle in 2026, provided they continue to meet the eligibility criteria.

For more information on the Platform Awards and Walder Foundation’s performing arts funding, visit the Platform Awards website [here](#) and the Walder Foundation site [here](#).

The 2024 Platform Awards Recipients:

Theater

Lili-Anne Brown

Lili-Anne Brown works as a director, actor, and educator, and has performed in, directed, and produced award-winning local and regional shows. She is the former Artistic Director of Bailiwick Chicago, where she focused programming on Chicago-premiere musicals and new play development with resident playwrights.

Sandra Delgado

Sandra Delgado is a Colombian-Chicagoan writer and performer, best known for her play *La Havana Madrid*. She has received a United States Artists Fellowship, an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Literature, a 3Arts Award, and a Joyce Award.

Myra Su

Myra Su is a puppeteer and multimedia artist who directs, designs, and performs puppetry for stage and film. Her background is primarily in shadow puppetry, crankie, and other 2D forms, though she’s interested in working across different mediums to create new puppetry experiences. Her work

often experiments with integrating analog puppets with digital technology in live stage performance.

Dance

Darrell Jones

Darrell Jones is a performer, educator, researcher, and choreographer who has performed extensively across the United States and globally. He maintains long-term collaborative relationships with Bebe Miller Company and Ralph Lemon, and is currently a tenured professor of dance at Columbia College Chicago, where he specializes in improvisational processes.

Chief Manny (Brandon Calhoun)

Brandon Calhoun is an artist, filmmaker, and advocate for the Chicago Footwork dance style. As co-CEO of The Era Footwork Collective, he strives to share the culture of Chicago Footwork with youth in underserved communities through dancemaking, storytelling, and teaching.

Vershawn Sanders-Ward

Vershawn Sanders-Ward is an award-winning choreographer, arts leader, scholar, educator and ARTIVIST. In addition to her role as the Founding Artistic Director and CEO of Chicago-based Red Clay Dance Company, Sanders-Ward is also on faculty at Loyola University Chicago, serves on the Board of Trustees for Dance/USA, and is the Vice President of the Board of Directors for the Black Arts & Culture Alliance of Chicago.

Robyn Mineko Williams

Robyn Mineko Williams is the founder and director of Robyn Mineko Williams and Artists (RMW&A), which shares a body of interdisciplinary performance created in collaboration with an evolving roster of dynamic artists and designers. She is drawn to exploring embodiments of memory, time, lineage, and our relationships with the traces left in us of the people we encounter.

Music

Lisa Kaplan

Lisa Kaplan is a pianist, arranger, composer, and mentor as well as a four-time Grammy Award winner. She is the founding pianist of Eighth Blackbird with whom she has made a career performing and interpreting the music of living composers and a co-founder of Blackbird Creative Lab, a musical educational initiative for emergent musical artists.

Sam Thousand

Sam Thousand is a musician, curator, and the co-founder for artist-led media platform ChiBrations. He has held performance residencies and composed original music for films, podcasts, dance theater, and is a 3Arts recipient.

Matthew Ulery

Matthew Ulery is a bassist and composer who leads several of his own ensembles including Sifting Stars Orchestra, Loom Large, Loom, and has released albums including *Delicate Charms*, *Pollinator*, *By a Little Light*. He has collaborated with other ensembles, including Eighth Blackbird and performed at prestigious venues around Chicago.

Interdisciplinary

Brendan Fernandes

Brendan Fernandes works at the intersection of dance and visual arts and his projects address issues of migration, protest, and other forms of collective movement. He has shown solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, The Graham Foundation, and DePaul Art Museum and he is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University.

avery r. young

avery r. young is an interdisciplinary artist, educator, Chicago's inaugural Poet Laureate, and a co-director of The Floating Museum. His poetry and prose have been featured in *The BreakBeat Poets*, *Teaching Black*, *Poetry Magazine*, and *In The Company of Black*.

About the Walder Foundation

The Walder Foundation was established by Joseph and Elizabeth Walder to address critical issues impacting our world. The Foundation champions Chicago through five areas of focus: science innovation, environmental sustainability, the performing arts, migration and immigrant communities, and Jewish life.

About the Walder Foundation's Performing Arts Program

The Walder Foundation's Performing Arts program supports working artists and cultural laborers' ability to thrive within an equitable, sustainable, and vibrant performing arts sector that provides them ample opportunities for growth and advancement, both in their art and in their lives.

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Media contacts:

Aliyah Armstrong / Laurie Kamens / Josh Balber
Resnicow and Associates

aarmstrong@resnicow.com / lkamens@resnicow.com / jbalker@resnicow.com

212-671-5179 / 212-671-5178 / 212-671-5175