

The Faith-Based Theater Cycle Case Study: Cornerstone Theater Company

LYNN JEFFRIES, BILL RAUCH, MARK VALDEZ, AND CARON ATLAS

INTRODUCTION

CARON ATLAS

Cornerstone Theater Company is a multiethnic ensemble-based theater company. Since its founding in 1986, Cornerstone has pursued a mission of inclusion by creating a theater that builds bridges between and within diverse communities. In their words, “We believe society can flourish only when its members know and respect one another, and that we have a responsibility to make theater in this spirit.” Cornerstone productions have consistently engaged civic dialogue. Their biracial *Romeo and Juliet* in Mississippi helped spark and support dialogue about de facto racial segregation of the public and private schools. Since they moved to Los Angeles in 1992, Cornerstone has worked to build bridges in their home city. The Faith-Based Theater Cycle provided an opportunity for Cornerstone to engage multiple communities around a powerful and often challenging theme—and to work in depth, over time, and with cumulative impact.

Six years ago a long-term Cornerstone employee who was a devout Christian expressed the opinion that gay and lesbian company members were “going to hell.” The candid and painful conversations that followed forced the company to struggle with the inclusiveness of their mission. They asked, “What happens when core values are in direct contradiction with one another? What happens when tolerance leads to a betrayal of one’s own beliefs?”

Having witnessed the bombing of a local Jewish community center, and having seen how quickly Islamic fundamentalists were blamed for the Oklahoma City bombing, Cornerstone felt the acute need for a faith-based project on a civic as well as a personal level. “In fact,” they reflected with foresight in 2000, “faith-based civic issues get at the messy heart of the founding of the nation.” The Faith-Based Theater Cycle was just unfolding when the September 11 terror attacks took place, and the event provided a new context and urgency for an exploration of “how faith unites and divides American society.”

The Faith-Based Theater Cycle is ambitious in scope and diversity. The four-and-a-half-year project began with a Festival of Faith, a trial by fire involving 21 productions at five religious venues, and an audience-participatory ensemble production, *Zones*, that was later remounted to incorporate audience feedback. Three multiweek series of dialogues called Weekly Wednesdays, with the themes of ritual, believing, and social justice, preceded and followed the festival. Six community collaborations and productions included immigrant Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus; African American clergy with African American people infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS; and multifaith gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender participants. A bridge show in 2005 will be informed by each of these community collaborations and will bring together participants from

each of the faith-based residencies. Participants described the scale of the Faith-Based Cycle as both crazy and necessary to achieve the pluralism at its heart (See Project-at-a-Glance sidebar).

The Festival of Faith embraced a wide range of work, which raised questions for Cornerstone as curator about the balance between including works of different religious perspectives and maintaining a high standard of artistic quality. They concluded that the deepest work often was by artists who were willing to pose questions, rather than give answers. Their own ensemble production of *Zones*, which challenged some audience members' comfort zones, aspired to begin a process of creating a new form of theater that could seamlessly incorporate dialogue as an aesthetic as well as participatory element.

As an ensemble theater, Cornerstone has developed a core group of artists with shared values and processes for creating new work and engaging with community. During the Faith-Based Theater Cycle, Cornerstone stretched itself artistically by collaborating with several guest artists and learned that they needed to communicate more clearly the company's mission, methodology, and core values to these collaborators. The ensemble also pushed itself to diversify artistic leadership within the company. This increased midstream as a result of the loss of some guest artists and the eight-month sabbatical of Cornerstone artistic director, Bill Rauch.

Perhaps most challenging and rewarding was the stake that people had in issues of faith. The project's charged theme consistently challenged Cornerstone in its mission of inclusion, diversity, and tolerance. Whether faith divided or united people and whether faith could coexist with inquiry were not abstract questions, but rather played out regularly in the project itself.

The Faith-Based Cycle often succeeded at building community across difference. Cornerstone drew on its years of in-depth collaboration with community groups, based on values of reciprocity and respect. Community participants were powerfully committed to the project and to one another. The public's embrace of the theme of faith was evidenced by sold out productions and increased press coverage. The project provided a timely and powerful opportunity for reflection, dialogue, healing, and coming together after the isolation and fear following September 11. But the high stakes of faith also presented challenges that were revealed in painful "hot button" dialogues about faith and sexuality and tensions with guest artists whose strong points of view made it difficult for them to incorporate challenging community input. These often emotional experiences occurred throughout the project and took their toll on its participants and company members.

Cornerstone could not have done this project without their strong partnership with the Los Angeles office of the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ). The collaboration was built on their prior experience of working with one another. NCCJ had facilitated the difficult internal company dialogue about faith and homosexuality at Cornerstone that helped catalyze the Faith-Based project. Cornerstone members had participated in NCCJ workshops, and Peter Howard was a member of the NCCJ staff as well as the Cornerstone ensemble. He and Dani Bedau provided a crucial link between the organizations.

The Cornerstone/NCCJ partnership is exemplary in many ways. It is based on an ongoing commitment that allows them to challenge one another while seeking common ground. Both organizations are intent on learning from one another. They invest considerable time in dialogue and assessment, both individually and jointly, and are willing to question their assumptions, reverse expectations, and stretch themselves in response to collaboration. Each has a long-term perspective on the work and they make an effort to maximize the cumulative effects and cross-pollination of their collaboration with one another and with a wide range of communities.

The partnership also generated some “healthy tensions” and stimulating questions. Cornerstone members were skeptical about audience dialogue, having experienced mostly ineffective post-show discussions. They were also concerned that the intentionality, safety, and literal quality of dialogue could inhibit the risk taking and the evocative dimensions of art. For their part, NCCJ staff wondered whether the artists were fully respecting the faith venues and their congregations, were overly cavalier about the stake people have in the dialogue, and were unwilling to consider issues in greater depth.

What follows is the story of the Faith-Based Theater Cycle as told by Cornerstone Theater’s Lynn Jeffries, Bill Rauch, and Mark Valdez. This thought-provoking combination of description and analysis well captures the ongoing reflective process that is at the heart of Cornerstone Theater.

As of this writing the project is still underway, with one more community collaboration and the bridge show to go. Given the scope of the project, the narrative moves chronologically through the individual project components. Sidebars and appendices offer more information. These include: the Project at a Glance; insights into the collaboration between Cornerstone and NCCJ; a summary of the dialogue methodologies used; examples of curricula designed by NCCJ to support its collaboration with Cornerstone; and a list of articles about the project for further reading. Completing the case study are reflections I have had as Cornerstone Theater’s liaison to Animating Democracy.

PROJECT-AT-A-GLANCE

Cornerstone Theater's Faith-Based Theater Cycle

Weekly Wednesdays (February 2001-March 2002)

This three-part series of dialogues was designed by NCCJ's Lucky Altman and her colleagues in collaboration with Cornerstone Theater. Dialogues were held at various faith-based institutions on five to six consecutive Wednesdays. The three parts were thematically focused: Ritual (February/March '01) moved participants through a sequence of examining and sharing childhood to family to deeply personal sacred rituals; Believing in 2001 (August/September '01) explored concepts and perspectives on the topics of belief and believing in a diverse society, and how those perspectives both unite and divide people; Faith and Social Justice: The Hard Questions (February/March '02) was a dialogue about the ways that faith and belief can contribute to building a society of inclusion and justice.

Festival of Faith (October-November 2001)

Kicking off the Faith-Based Theater Cycle, the **Festival of Faith** was a citywide festival of 21 short plays and a multimedia film produced at five diverse places of worship, including a Buddhist Temple, Baha'i Center, Methodist Church, Jewish Temple, and Muslim School. As the centerpiece of the Festival, Cornerstone's ensemble created *Zones*, a short touring play about faith that incorporates multiple opportunities for audience participation. *Zones* was remounted in 2002.

Crossings: Journeys of Catholic Immigrants (June-July 2002)

Crossings: Journeys of Catholic Immigrants was presented at St. Vibiana's, Los Angeles' decommissioned cathedral. The production was a collaboration with five diverse Catholic immigrant communities including Latino, Arab American, Cambodian, French-speaking immigrants from Africa and Europe, and other African, European, Filipino, Korean, and Samoan Americans. The production reflected the intersection between Bible stories and current immigrant experiences. Act One consisted of five short plays, each created in collaboration with a specific parish, reflecting the experiences of its immigrants in coming to the United States. All the pieces were played site-specifically, in and around the campus of the decommissioned cathedral, including the gutted sanctuary itself. The final piece, called the Upper Room, written by Bernando Solano, was the culminating and second act.

Body of Faith (February-March 2003)

In the fall of 2002, Cornerstone collaborated with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people of faith in **Body of Faith**. MacArthur award-winning playwright Luis Alfaro conducted oral-history gathering, acting, and writing workshops with GLBT people of faith in multiple places of worship. Cornerstone founding ensemble artist Christopher Liam Moore directed the play for a four-week run at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center's Renberg Theatre at the Village.

PROJECT-AT-A-GLANCE

Black AIDS/Black Faith (June 2003)

In collaboration with the Watts Village Theater Company, the Black AIDS Institute, members of the African American clergy, and African Americans affected by and infected with HIV and AIDS, Cornerstone created and performed an original musical play, *Order My Steps*, written by acclaimed writer Tracy Scott Wilson. The project partners identified the themes of the church, youth, and AIDS; the church, women, and AIDS; and the church, stigma, and AIDS as launching points of the play. BA/BF built bridges between people affected by HIV/AIDS, including those infected, their partners, and children, and the clergy to whom members of the community often turn to for leadership. This production was codirected by multi-Emmy-award-winning director, Paris Barclay, and Cornerstone's associate artistic director, Mark Valdez.

You Can't Take It With You: An American Muslim Remix (October 2003)

In collaboration with Los Angeles Muslim communities and project partners, the Los Angeles Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Council on American and Islamic Relations, and the Islamic Center of Southern California, Cornerstone created an original adaptation by playwright Peter Howard and directed by Mark Valdez. Working through community meetings and story circles in mosques and the Islamic Center, the production delved into questions of acceptance, belonging, family, and faith. This project was a continuation of Cornerstone's long collaboration with the Muslim community, including the 2001 collaboration with the New Horizon Islamic School as a venue for the Festival of Faith.

Center of the Star (January–February 2004)

Center of the Star was Cornerstone's collaboration with the Los Angeles Jewish community, and included the participation of intrafaith communities such as orthodox, conservative, and reform, as well as Russian, Iranian, European, and American Jews. Written by Yehuda Hyman and directed by Tracy Young, this project was presented at the Greenway Arts Alliance. Community partners included the University of Judaism, the Skirball Cultural Center, and the Jewish Historical Society of Los Angeles.

Hindu Collaboration (working title) (October–November 2004)

This current project involves Los Angeles area Hindus in a modern exploration/adaptation of the central story of the epic Hindu poem, *The Ramayana*. The piece will explore the nature of morality tales and the audience they serve by focusing on the relationship between the fair abducted Queen Sita and her abductor, the “evil, dark” Ravana, rather than on the “red-blooded hero,” Rama, and his quest to win Sita back. If the spoils of war belong to the victor, and, along with the spoils, the authority to write the myths, then how can an accurate account be rendered?

Faith-Based Bridge Show (spring 2005)

Each of the previous community residencies in the cycle will inform the creation of the cycle's final production, the *Faith-Based Bridge Show*. Past participants will gather together to create an original play, written by playwright James Still that will give voice to regional and universal issues of tolerance, cultural and religious identity, compassion, loss, and the celebration of life.

THE FAITH-BASED THEATER CYCLE

LYNN JEFFRIES, BILL RAUCH, AND MARK VALDEZ

Weekly Wednesdays

Originally conceived as a monthly inter-faith dialogue session to create a safe space where participants could come together to discuss difficult topics around faith and culture, Monthly Mondays became Weekly Wednesdays in response to the need for a shorter time span between sessions. The first session of Weekly Wednesdays, on the theme of ritual, was held on six consecutive Wednesdays in February and March of 2001. NCCJ Program Director Lucky Altman designed the program curriculum with input from her NCCJ colleagues and Cornerstone members. Each group was led by two or three facilitators who underwent a full day of experiential training in the curriculum. Three groups of from 12 to 20 people met simultaneously in three separate locations: at Cornerstone's downtown headquarters, at Notre Dame High School in the Valley, and at the Millken School in Brentwood. Participants included Cornerstone ensemble artists and staff, NCCJ staff and affiliates, and members of the public who were interested in the topic. The groups reflected significant ethnic diversity and some religious diversity including atheists and believers of diverse faiths (mostly Christians and Jews).

The dialogue gently and effectively moved participants through a sequence of examining and sharing childhood and family rituals to deeply personal sacred rituals. We also discussed components of ritual and what makes it meaningful. At an especially provocative session, we enjoyed the perspectives of guest speakers from various religious traditions, whose beliefs sometimes conflicted strongly. The final session involved the creation and performance of a group ritual, which ranged from site to site from a simple sharing of food to an elaborate multi-part ritual that included invoking the name of each participant's mother. Interestingly, there had been an initial misconception that the purpose of the dialogue was to inform the artistic content of future theatrical productions, and we had to stress to both facilitators and participants that these dialogue sessions existed only for the edification of the participants.

The topic for the second session was Believing in 2001, exploring concepts and perspectives on the topics of belief in a diverse society, and how beliefs both unites and divides us. For five weeks, 45 participants gathered at three separate locations throughout Los Angeles. Host venues included St. Anne Catholic Church in Santa Monica, Cornerstone's offices in downtown LA, and New Horizon School in Pasadena, an Islamic school and a host for the Festival of Faith. Learning from the first session evaluations, we added a fourth location at the Baha'i Community Center in Encino. An additional session, which was a modified dialogue in structure, took place over 2 full-day Saturdays as an alternative for anyone for whom five weekly Wednesdays might pose a scheduling challenge.

One particular exercise remains memorable from this series. Using photos to explore essential beliefs, participants selected images that resonated with them from a stack of pictures. Using a mutual invitation process, individuals shared the photo with the group and told why or how the image spoke to his/her beliefs. In their evaluation of the exercise, one person wrote, "I gained a new appreciation, a sense of pride and renewed strength in my core beliefs."

The series concluded with the session titled *Faith and Social Justice: The Hard Questions*. The goal was to have an honest dialogue on the ways that faith and belief can contribute to building a society of inclusion and justice, and how faith unites and divides us—within religious communities, between different religious communities, and between religious communities and society. NCCJ's offices in downtown LA, Temple Isaiah in West Los Angeles and the Baha'i Community Center in Encino served as the locations for the dialogue sessions. There were 33

participants in this final round (See [Appendix](#) for sample curriculum for the Weekly Wednesday Faith and Social Justice dialogues).

The Festival of Faith

The Festival of Faith was conceived as a celebratory and inclusive kick-off to Cornerstone's entire four-and-a-half-year Faith-Based Cycle. We hoped to produce multiple short plays in multiple places of worship, involving dialogue in the work's creation and for the audience to process the work.

When we first conceived the Festival and scheduled it for October and November of 2001, there was no way that we could have imagined the tragic events of September 11. After the attacks, our work seemed even more vital. The biggest question facing the artists was how to address this tragedy in the work. After much discussion, we realized that the work itself addressed the issues that faced the nation:

"After much discussion, we realized that the work itself addressed the issues that faced the nation: religious tolerance, pluralism, and the power of faith to unite and divide."

religious tolerance, pluralism, and the power of faith to unite and divide. After September 11th, some of the artists changed their texts to acknowledge the event. Many artists, however, kept their text intact knowing that audience members would hear the lines differently.

Originally conceived to include three short plays in each of five places of worship, because of the quantity and quality of proposals submitted to us, the festival ultimately included 20 projects, four per venue rather than just three, plus a short original film. We set three ground rules for ourselves as curators: in each venue, at least one play would reflect the faith of that venue, at least one play would reflect a different faith, and at least one play would provide an opportunity for members of the host venue to participate. We identified five venues, each of which hosted the Festival for one week between October 18 and November 18: the Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple, the Bahá'í Center, Faith United Methodist Community Church, Temple Emanuel, and New Horizon Islamic School (our original intent was to perform in a mosque, but our community partners in the Islamic community suggested that we use the private elementary school instead, as a step in building trust with community members).

At each venue, we assigned an artistic coordinator hired by Cornerstone who worked with the lead artists to create a complete evening of theater. Artistic coordinators also served as liaisons between Cornerstone, the lead artists creating the plays, and the venue contacts. Facilitation coordinators, staffed by NCCJ personnel, were responsible for creating a dialogue component to the event in conjunction with the lead artists and artistic coordinators. Cornerstone associate artist Michael Rohd provided training sessions to give both facilitators and artists additional tools and resources for engaging with congregation members around the creation of faith-centered art. At each site we provided free, ten-week acting workshops to further engage our community partners and contribute to the development of faith-specific plays. For instance, at Hsi Lai Temple, congregation members and workshop leaders explored physical and text-generating exercises, which resulted in a movement-based play reflecting aspects of Buddhism.

Among the many highlights of the festival was a Jewish woman playing a Catholic nun performing at a Buddhist Temple. The play, *Motherhouse Dreams*, was based on a nun's experiences in the novitiate, and her decision to leave the sisterhood. Also at the Buddhist temple was a play developed by a Mormon theater troupe from Utah, examining a variety of sacred texts, from *The Book of Mormon* to Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. There was *The Life of a Muslim*, exploring the

tenants of Islam, performed by an inter-faith African-American cast at a Christian church in South Central Los Angeles. *Glimpse* combined live actors interacting with a film, exploring



Mass Transit, by Armando Molina and Evangeline Ordaz, was presented as part of Cornerstone Theater Company's "Festival of Faith." Twenty-one theatrical offerings were presented at five diverse faith-based venues. Photo by Lynn Jeffries 2001.

place of paper. During an intermission the leaves were collected, and selected responses were read by the actors as part of a ritual leading into the curtain call at the end of the evening. The artists and coordinators at Temple Emanuel wanted to find an alternate form to execute the dialogue component, asking audience members to make physical choices that reflected their beliefs. Using a series of paired portals, participants crossed the threshold that best described themselves and their perspectives. In one such pair, one portal was labeled "U.S. Citizen" and the other, "Citizen of the World." (See [Appendix](#) for details about the portal dialogue exercise.) Not wanting to be outdone, the Coordinators at Faith United Methodist Church created a "dialogue cabaret," which with its small tables, candles, mood music, and punch, engaged audiences during intermission to reflect on different issues of faith spurred by the art. Finally, at New Horizon School, spectators walked into a room to find plastic eggs on their chairs. Inside the eggs were questions for the audience to contemplate as they saw the performances. As they entered into the final half of the event, they deposited their responses and were given feathers with quotes from the previous audience's responses. The facilitation coordinator at New Horizon created a dialogue sheet for parents to use as a guide in talking to their children about the plays and their themes in relation to Islam.

Integrating dialogue with a complete evening of original plays proved difficult. Because the plays were all new scripts that were continually being worked on and revised, facilitation coordinators had a hard time creating the dialogue component for the venues because they often did not have up-to-date scripts in hand. The facilitation coordinators worked hard to create a safe space where the most timid audience member would feel comfortable engaging in a dialogue. The lead artists, on the other hand, were interested in taking risks; they wanted to push boundaries and go to deep places. A classic example of this tension happened when artists Shishir Kurup and Jeff Sugarman created a bold, dark comedy in which a middle-aged man is visited by his departed grandfather (played by Kurup on a

secular humanism and the surprising ways that lives come together. This film toured to three festival sites. At the Baha'i Center, we saw a Latino family pray in a car, while at Temple Emanuel audiences broke bread as a minyan of women reflected on the role of Judaism in their lives.

The dialogue components took many forms and perhaps should more accurately be called dialogue exercises, since they were designed to evoke responses and cause reflection rather than to frame extended group inquiry. At Hsi Lai Temple, audience members were given a paper lotus petal and a provoking question to answer in response to the art. The petals, bearing the written answers, were gathered at the end of the evening and assembled into a lotus flower that decorated the Temple and was available for subsequent audiences and guests to read. At the Baha'i Center, audiences engaged in a silent dialogue, then wrote their responses on leaves in

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pre-recorded video monitor). The play was performed on the bema (a raised platform or altar area) in a chapel at Temple Emanuel. At one point the grandfather's flatulence becomes a call to prayer, suggesting the blurring of the sacred and the profane. The facilitators were concerned that this might be offensive to our host and their congregants and encouraged the playwrights to remove the action from the play. While a humorous example, the situation grew deeply tense since it embodied the suspicions and fears that artists and facilitators each brought to the project. Ultimately, the action was kept in, and the piece was very successful; although we all learned a tremendous amount about dialogue from within the creative structure.

Because of September 11, the Festival seemed even more vital. At New Horizon, our Islamic site, the tensions experienced worldwide were made immediate. Fearing threats against them and their students, officials at the school considered canceling the performances at the venue. The school board was afraid to draw unnecessary attention to the school and the students. After careful consideration and thoughtful discussion, the Board decided to remain a part of the festival. Audience members at this site went through a security check prior to entering the premises, and we enlisted the help of the Pasadena Police Department in patrolling the grounds before, during, and after performances. Although most venues were sold out, it is perhaps not a coincidence that this was the most heavily attended site of the Festival.

Many lessons were gleaned from the festival. Most importantly, we learned about the needs of artists and dialogue facilitators, and that these needs are sometimes in conflict. We learned that in order to meaningfully incorporate dialogue into the art that artists and facilitators must work closely together throughout the process. However, many of the artists we were working with enjoyed and guarded their autonomy as they sought their way into their creations. It was no surprise that in the instances where the facilitators were kept out of the artmaking process that the dialogue seemed forced and inorganic.

Time was another awkward factor for the joining of art and dialogue. Theater, even in a meditative mood, sets a brisk pace. To keep the evening lively theatrically, the dialogue elements needed to be short and punchy, asking only for a word or a movement. Lucky Altman remarked, on looking back, that there was insufficient time for audiences to engage in "a true dialogue about the themes presented," and at any rate, they were not prepared to do so at a theatrical event.

Zones

A new theatrical experience at the intersection of art and civic dialogue—*Zones: or Where Does Your Soul Live and is There Sufficient Parking?*—ultimately explored the stresses of living in a religiously pluralistic society. A religious group, the Center for Exquisite Balance (whose tenets are loosely based on Manichaeism), has applied for permission to build a new place of worship in the neighborhood. During the course of a staged public hearing, the right of this group to have a home is at stake, and issues become increasingly complex and personal as a mother and daughter struggle to find common ground. This was the setting for *Zones*, which performed at every venue of the Festival of Faith, and also at other faith-based venues throughout Los Angeles. In all, we performed at Baha'i, Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Methodist places of worship.

In addition to scripted dialogue, there were six interactive sequences involving the audience (who "played" the community members in attendance) comprising a total of 50% of the performance. Each sequence was motivated and facilitated by one or more characters and usually came out of the character's attempt to get the audience to side with his or her point of

view. The sequences included a preshow written survey, a stand-up and sit-down agree/disagree exercise, a wagonwheel dialogue opportunity, small groups who collectively finished statements, a full group discussion, and finally an opportunity to ask an open question at the end of the meeting. NCCJ youth arts specialist Dani Bedau served as the project's creative and dialogue consultant. Along with Michael Rohd as a visiting advisor, Dani made significant contributions to the art and to the dialogue sequence structure.

Zones was already in rehearsal when the shocking events of September 11th sent the whole country into a period of anger, mourning, and questioning. The play had been written to examine fear and intolerance on a local level, but it served a new and urgently felt need for many people, not just as Angelenos, but as Americans and citizens of a suddenly more frightening world, to come together and talk about religious difference. Zones provided a safe place for people to reflect on their own beliefs and to learn about those of the people around them, and offered a welcome collective moment of healing and acceptance.

The play ends with an audience opportunity to ask an open question. One of our first previews occurred on the day that the United States started bombing Afghanistan. The power of the questions asked that day and the uncontrolled emotion of what was said underlined the

“One of our first previews occurred on the day that the United States started bombing Afghanistan. The power of the questions asked that day and the uncontrolled emotion of what was said underlined the importance and timeliness of this work.”

importance and timeliness of this work. Other memorable experiences during the run include Buddhist nuns who, unaccustomed to public conflict, left a performance due to the high emotional content (versus other faith venues where perhaps the congregants were used to, and even thrived on, the debate). At Faith United Methodist Community Church, Zones was performed for both hearing and hearing-impaired audiences. It was powerful

to see hearing and non-hearing audience members communicate and engage in dialogue together. Some used interpreters, some wrote on pieces of paper, and the rest found other, creative ways to communicate.

In its second incarnation, Zones continued to prove engaging as performance and successful in stimulating meaningful dialogue. The remount also allowed us a chance to broaden the reach of our programming to more communities, and to introduce ourselves to communities with whom we planned to work in the next couple of years.

Playwright Peter Howard embraced the chance to revise his work based on responses to the original production. The core conflict of Zones involves an invented minority sect that meets with resistance from members of a real and familiar dominant faith, Christianity. Some audience members perceived an anti-Christian bias that the playwright did not intend. One observer also voiced a concern about the positive portrayal of any version of Manichaeism, a heretical Christian movement that had, according to some theologians, an extremely negative effect on subsequent mainstream Christian doctrine. Peter's response was to give the character of the Christian minister more weight and complexity. The Pastor's rejection of the alternative faith is less knee-jerk and more informed. When Renée, the Exquisite Balance adherent, criticizes the repression of women in a traditional Christian household such as the one in which she was raised, the Pastor responds with our audience member's own argument:

*Do you know where you come from, you and your Manichaean roots?
The Manichaeans reviled the flesh—thought the human body was a prison.*

They considered women to be forces of darkness, sexuality a sin, and found no conceivable happiness in their lives here on earth. They were pure pessimism, and their only real achievement was to warp Christianity forever. And this is what you call sacred?

The revised Zones also included refinements of the audience-interactive sequences. Some introductory material was trimmed, and the actor facilitation of dialogue was scripted in more detail. One moment that consistently caused frustration for audience members was adjusted: in the original version, when the audience is divided into small groups and each group brainstorms on responses to audience-identified hot-button issues, one group's list-making is hijacked by the actor playing Renée, who says she would like to perform a ritual of her faith and asks that the group either participate or silently support her action. The request put these audience members in an uncomfortable position, and also shut them out of the dialogue process in which the rest of the audience was engaging. In the revised script, Renée interrupts the proceedings later, and explains that she is going to perform the ritual while the group's note-taker reads aloud the list they have made.

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The Zones remount toured to a total of nine venues. Five of the venues we approached represented communities of faith with whom we intended to work in the near future: St. Francis X. Cabrini Church (Catholic immigrants), Emerson Unitarian Universalist Church (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people of faith), Center for Inquiry West (Secular Humanists), Leo Baeck Temple (Jews), and First New Christian Missionary Baptist Church (African-American

clergy and people with AIDS). Two performances were commissioned for conferences, at Maryknoll (a Japanese Catholic church in downtown LA) for the ADI Learning Exchange and at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena for Lila Wallace. We also arranged performances at the Institute of Religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and at the University of Redlands.

Live theater is always unpredictable. Live theater with audience participation is doubly so, as proved by the feisty crowds who saw the production. Peter speculates that the groups we chose, like Unitarians and the Center for Inquiry West, and to some extent the Baptists, are more accustomed to public discourse and have a more active tradition of questioning than those who had seen the show before. At any rate, some audiences “really went to town” debating the pros and cons of the proposed (fictional) sacred architecture, and readily talked back to the performers. One Unitarian shouted down the Caretaker character when he ordered Renée to put out her candle. At

 Cornerstone Theater Company's Zones, or Where does your soul live and is there sufficient parking?" Written by Peter Howard. Part play, part community forum, this participatory theater work invites audiences to share their thoughts as the action unfolds around them. Photo by Lynn Jeffries 2002.

some venues, audience members flatly resisted the instructions of the cast members, refusing to participate in dialogue exercises, and especially refusing to move their chairs when asked. The Secular Humanists and the Redlands students were particularly resistant in this regard.

One woman who refused to follow directions given by the Pastor character was observed to be weeping at the end of the play. She confided to the performers after the show that she had

been vividly reminded of her own early experiences with Christian authority, and it was this that made her so uncooperative. What we had taken simply for more “intellectual orneriness” turned out to be a deeply emotional reaction based in personal history, and very much connected to the themes of the Faith Cycle.

The Animating Democracy Learning Exchange offered a welcome opportunity to perform the piece for fellow practitioners of art and civic dialogue, and to enjoy a substantive discussion afterwards. One participant asked about the choice to cast the family at the center of the conflict as African-Americans, and the young woman (Renée) as disabled. What was our intent in doing so, and why was neither race nor disability mentioned explicitly in the text? Peter responded that he wanted to keep the focus on religion, but that the choice also reflected his own observations about recent actual zoning controversies over new houses of worship for non-mainstream faiths. Questions about zoning often are coded and veiled expressions about other kinds of discomfort—resistance to a mosque, for example, might be racist, but never explicitly so.

In one aspect, the *Zones* tour was perhaps not as successful as we had hoped. The intent at some of the venues was to generate interest in upcoming community residencies. Yet, at some of these venues, the response to the show may have actually discouraged interest in collaboration. For instance, several audience members walked out at the Baptist church, where most of the audience was comprised of first-time theatergoers. Many of the congregation members in attendance felt uncomfortable participating in the play and dialogue, and the church itself later dropped out as a Faith Cycle partner. The Unitarian audience found a piece about tolerance and dialogue to be overly familiar territory for their congregation. The Center for Inquiry West executive director questioned the appropriateness of the religious themes for his organization, and the rabbi at Leo Baeck said he admired Cornerstone, but he didn’t think his congregation would support a collaboration. Audience members at the temple found the show “confusing.” *Zones* is an extraordinary work, but very different in its aims and in its structure from any community collaborative piece we have ever done. It was probably not a piece that people could readily imagine themselves performing in, and therefore a misleading calling card for potential community partners. Another factor was the climate in which we produced the remount. The first production provided a venue to discuss and reflect on the events of September 11th. The second time around, there seemed less urgency from our audiences to discuss the themes of play, as the civic dialogue around religious tolerance had shifted during the pre-war climate.

Although the remount did not prove to be a good recruitment tool, Cornerstone’s experience with both incarnations of *Zones* was very positive. The challenge to write a play with genuine

audience dialogue woven into its very fabric seemed not only daunting but potentially impossible. Yet, Peter Howard’s intelligent and carefully researched script gracefully incorporated seemingly incompatible elements of dramatic conflict and “safe space” dialogue process in a fluid and engaging interchange, and the director and the actors learned how to run with the constant shifts of focus and style that the piece demanded, from scripted dialogue to facilitation to improvisation. The experience of talking so much with so many audience members heightened our

“The experience of talking so much with so many audience members heightened our appreciation of the fact that audiences are not monolithic. The key to going beyond Q and A lies in structure . . . Opening up for questions is fine for discussion, but true dialogue requires careful design.”

appreciation of the fact that audiences are not monolithic. Everyone comes with different expectations, needs, and experiences. And, although we look forward to doing many kinds of theater in the coming years, when we do choose to converse with our audiences, we will

remember that the key to “going beyond Q and A” lies in structure. “Opening up” for questions is fine for discussion, but true dialogue requires careful design.

Zones taught us that it is possible to combine theater and dialogue in a way that is artful, dynamic, interesting, and engaging. Certainly the fact that Peter is both a seasoned playwright and dialogue facilitator contributed to the successful integration of these elements. However, despite the success of the production, there were still critics who felt that the play was neither theater nor dialogue and that by trying to bring the two together we were in fact diluting both.

“Despite the success of the production, there were still critics who felt that the play was neither theater nor dialogue and that by trying to bring the two together we were in fact diluting both.”

Crossings: Journeys of Catholic Immigrants

The Catholic Immigrant Family Project was transformed to *Crossings: Journeys of Catholic Immigrants*. That wasn’t the only thing that changed. Initially Jesuit priest Bill Cain was writing an adaptation of the medieval mystery plays. As we began moving forward on our collaboration with Cain, differences in aesthetics and even liturgy began to surface, much of this revolving around the plays presented in the Festival of Faith as well as Zones. Concerns about the skills of nonprofessional artists, the glorification of martyrdom, and perhaps a misperception involving Manacheism vs. Christianity led Cain to resign as playwright. Weeks were spent trying to find common ground, but ultimately we realized that because of the differences in our aesthetics that the separation was best for the project and all involved. In Bill Cain’s place, we hired eight playwrights, most of them ensemble members, each adapting different Bible stories to reflect specific immigrant communities. Another major change occurred when Bill Rauch, the original director, stepped down from the position to take another job. In his place, we hired guest director Steve Kent, a longtime practitioner of grassroots theater making. To help him with the massive project, we agreed that the writers assigned to each parish would work with Steve as codirectors at each site.

Working in collaboration with Altman from NCCJ, Grace Dyrness from the CRCC and Irma Isip from the Ethnic Groups Ministry of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, we identified five parishes with immigrant populations. Our collaborators were diverse in ethnicity and geography. They included the Latino congregants from St. Francis X. Cabrini in South Los Angeles, the Arab congregation from St. Joseph’s Church in Pomona, the Cambodian parish of Our Lady Mt. Carmel in Long Beach, the Francophone congregation from St. Jean de Viennay in West Los Angeles, which included French, Belgian, and French-speaking African members, and the diverse congregation of St. Philomena’s in Carson which included African American, European, Filipino, Korean, and Latino parishioners under one roof.

Each parish was assigned a writer and together they identified a story from the Hebrew scriptures that resonated within that community. This process involved a series of Story Circles which utilized dialogue techniques from Cornerstone’s own methodology as well as those used by NCCJ. The dialogue experience at each parish was thorough. The stories that were shared were deeply personal and moving. Participants told us about their experiences watching helplessly as their family members were murdered or of handing their children off to strangers as they journeyed across borders, fearing for their lives and those of their children. To these stories, the role of Catholicism was central. It was faith that got these families through their dark situations, and it provided them with the strength to make their journeys, both physical and spiritual.

As a result of the dialogue process, the stories that were identified carried deep meaning for the parishioners. For instance, at St. Francis X. Cabrini where most of the members were Mexican immigrants, they chose to explore the story of Esther, about a woman who was forced to hide her identity, making the connection to their own experiences as illegal immigrants in the United States. The diverse community of St. Philomena adapted the Tower of Babel, a story familiar to them, worshipping at a church with multilingual congregants. The Cambodian congregation explored the story of Noah, making the connection to their own experiences fleeing Cambodia and the massive death brought on by the Khmer Rouge, not knowing when or if they would ever arrive at a safe haven. Members of the Francophone congregation adapted the story of Ruth and explored the colonialism of Catholicism in African countries, while the Arab cast reinterpreted the Exodus story, connecting it to their own experiences in the Middle East and America, trying to find a home. The second act brought together participants from each of the five parishes, along with Cornerstone's ensemble actors, reflecting aspects of the Greek scriptures and a new covenant here in present-day Los Angeles. The concluding scene of the play drew from the ongoing civic dialogue around the construction of the new Cathedral, just a few blocks away, which had been featured largely in the news for some time.

"Our collaboration with Catholic immigrants allowed us to integrate a more thoughtful dialogue component in the text creation process. . . we learned about what was on the minds of collaborators, and our findings informed the way the writers approached the adaptation of their chosen Bible stories."

Our collaboration with Catholic immigrants allowed us to integrate a more thoughtful dialogue component in the text creation process. Using techniques incorporated during the Festival of Faith, such as stand up/sit down responses, variations of cultural mapping and open space, we learned about what was on the minds of collaborators, and our findings informed the way the writers approached the adaptation of their chosen Bible stories.

CORNERSTONE'S COLLABORATION WITH NCCJ

CARON ATLAS

"We were each pushed up beyond our comfort zones into a complex new territory where we had to face up to our preconceived notions of artmaking and dialogue."

Member, Cornerstone Theater Company

The Cornerstone and NCCJ partnership on the Faith-based Theater Cycle is exemplary not only for the common ground found by the two organizations, but also in their willingness to be challenged by and to learn from one another. Both Cornerstone and NCCJ invested considerable time in dialogue and assessment, individually and together; and both organizations were open to questioning their assumptions and stretching themselves. Grounded in a long-haul perspective on the work, they worked to maximize the cumulative effects and cross-pollination of their collaboration.

For Lucky Altman, program director of NCCJ, the collaboration with Cornerstone was “one of the most successful I’ve had in over 20 years of human relations work. I never would have expected this to have been with an arts group.” One of the reasons for this success was the acknowledgment from both NCCJ and Cornerstone that for any collaboration to work, the dialogue would need to begin with the partners involved. Said Altman, “we both wanted this partnership to work and we knew that it would begin by understanding one another, our processes, and our goals and objectives for the project.”

Cornerstone and NCCJ started out defining their terms—did they mean the same things by the terms *community, dialogue, and faith?* They also needed to understand one another’s concerns and misgivings about the work. Cornerstone members were skeptical about audience dialogue, having experienced mostly ineffective post-show discussions. They were also concerned that the intentionality, safety, and literal quality of dialogue could inhibit the risk-taking and evocative dimensions of art. They questioned what it meant to go deep—must it always happen through a serious and polite conversation, or could it happen through humor?

For their part, NCCJ staff wondered whether the artists were fully respecting the faith venues and their congregations. To the facilitators, the artists appeared overly cavalier about the stake people had in the dialogue, and were unwilling to go deep. The facilitators were also concerned about possible ethical issues related to using stories heard in dialogue for public productions. Each group questioned whether the other took their process seriously, and if there was a perceived hierarchy of art and dialogue. They raised issues about achieving balance and sharing control. Cornerstone asked, “How much control are we as artists willing to give up if our goal is to get the audience speaking?” For NCCJ, it meant that “facilitation coordinators needed to get out of the way.” Zones raised questions for both about “speaking truth with strangers.” How can theater authentically engage audiences in civic dialogue when there isn’t a mutual commitment from all that are present to participate? When might it make sense to preserve the separateness of approaches of a theater company and a human relations group? (See the case study sections on the Festival of Faith, Zones, and Conclusion for a further discussion of some of these questions.)

CORNERSTONE'S COLLABORATION WITH NCCJ

Three years into the project, Lucky Altman is a member of Cornerstone's board. Cornerstone has become more deliberate and structured in its approach to dialogue and is formalizing and teaching its methodologies. They have incorporated NCCJ values and used their facilitation processes in company meetings and to navigate difficult moments during rehearsals. Over the course of the project they have moved from ceding responsibility for dialogue to NCCJ as the expert, to working together to develop a collaborative arts-based approach.

NCCJ has become more open to nonverbal forms of dialogue and has tapped further into their creativity. Wrote NCCJ's program director Lucky Altman, as a result of the collaboration with Cornerstone,

NCCJ has expanded our repertoire of processes that we use in promoting interfaith acceptance and understanding. We have incorporated processes that allow people to express their feelings and ideas in a more artistic manner and in some cases, using movement to express what they want to communicate. We no longer assume that everyone who engages in dialogues about religion and faith are believers themselves. The models of dialogue that we developed together required considerable time and effort to make them work because we refused to settle for an "after performance" large group discussion in the theater where few people get a chance to talk. Our goal was thoughtful engagement around the issues raised.

In addition, as expressed by NCCJ's Burbie, an unexpected paradigm shift occurred—from assuming that substantive dialogue needs to be private and confidential to ensure safety, to appreciating that many participants choose to share their stories in a public arena and could still be safe in this process.

Collaboration is a living process. Grounded in shared values and mutual goals, the collaboration between Cornerstone and NCCJ worked because it was dynamic and because they took care of it over time. Altman describes characteristics of this successful collaboration. When there were difficulties and tensions, the partners stayed engaged. They checked in frequently about assumptions each had about the process and the people involved. They were flexible and allowed creative processes to emerge, and evaluated each stage of the project for possible changes. And they celebrated together along the way.

See [Appendix](#) for an overview of Cornerstone and NCCJ's "Approaches to Dialogue," sample arts-based dialogue curricula developed by Lucky Altman and NCCJ for the Weekly Wednesday series, and the Portal exercise used during the Festival of Faith.

Body of Faith

In the ensemble planning meeting where we consented to the idea of a multiyear cycle of plays with faith-based communities, one ensemble member already had a clear idea of a project he wanted to do. Chris Moore, a founding member of the company, has acted, written, and directed, but had never up to this point directed a community collaborative project. Chris had a passionate interest in directing a play with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people of faith. It was immediately clear why this group would be of interest. We were well aware from personal experience that most, if not all, major religions condemn homosexuality as sinful. We were aware, too, that many if not most GLBT people (probably because of this doctrinal stance) become estranged from organized religion, and often from faith itself. Where does this leave the GLBT person of faith—not altogether trusted, understood, or accepted? How does such a person negotiate the internal and external conflicts, and what can he or she teach others about gender, sexuality, and faith?

Playwright Luis Alfaro, a recent MacArthur “genius grant” recipient, accepted Chris’s invitation to write an original play for this project. Luis had never written about the GLBT community, and he brought to the table his own personal interest in exploring the community’s history and diversity. Later, Alfaro would comment that the process was not easy for him, that he had a lot of doubts along the way, but that he was, in the end, immensely grateful for the community-collaborative experience, and that he treasures his ongoing relationship with the extraordinary members of the cast.

Early work started in December 2001 with an “incubation,” a multiday intensive jam session involving other lead artists on the project and ensemble members. Luis led this small group in dialogue, asking each person to talk about early experiences with religion and sexuality. He shared material from his favorite books, and he wrote some early drafts of scenes that he might include in the play.

Story circles started in May of ’02. The host venues were Westwood United Methodist and Emerson Universalist Unitarian (both sites of earlier *Zones* performances), Metropolitan Community Church in West Hollywood, the Cornerstone office, and the Village, the complex run by the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. There were nine story circles in all. Chris and Luis placed an emphasis on seeking ethnic, racial, age, and gender diversity in participants, as well as religious diversity. They were quite successful in this, thanks in large part to help from community partners like Matt Walker at the Village, who worked hard to bring together a group of transgendered people, among others. Most of the sessions had mixed groups in attendance, though a few were more specialized. One memorable session involved “leather men,” who spoke eloquently about the integration of their spirituality and sexuality. This material found its way into the final play as a remarkable poem and dance piece accompanied by simultaneous live gregorian chant and scat singing. (One of the actors said that she was disturbed by the inclusion in this piece of young women engaging in S&M practices. To accommodate her dissent, it was agreed that the dance would stay as it was, but the actor would express her disapproval on stage by physically standing and turning her back on the dancers as they performed.)

The story circles provided much inspiration and actual material for the final piece. A bisexual convert to Judaism jokingly dubbed herself “Ambiguous Girl” in one session, and her story was included in the play, accompanied by a shadow puppet of a caped superhero. Sam Combs came directly from his Bible study group to a story circle, and shared an account of the time when, as a third grader, he discovered the wonderful word “homosexual” in a school dictionary, setting off a mystifyingly alarmed reaction in the adults and a lifelong intellectual journey for Sam. (Sam remained close to the production and attended almost every performance.) Other stories made

it to the stage, as well as many of the story circle participants themselves. Eighty percent of the cast of *Body of Faith* attended one or more story circles.

In the fall of '02, the Village hosted a Town Hall meeting. About 40 people attended, including story circle participants, members of the GLBT community, and others. We showed the Cornerstone promotional video and described the project.

Volunteers from the audience read selections from

Luis's script in progress, and a facilitator from NCCJ led an hourlong discussion in response. One of the main questions was, "What do you want this play to do for your community?" It should be *authentic*, people responded. It shouldn't be sugar-coated. A young Muslim man expressed a concern that the scenes Luis had written so far were about alternative responses to mainstream religious traditions. What about those who choose to follow the ancient paths and stay in the mainstream? Questions also arose about the inclusion of women's spiritual lives.

Subsequent drafts of the play did address some of these questions. There was a scene in which a young gay Muslim describes his journey away from and back to his traditional faith, ending in a prayer joined by the full cast. There was a very intense scene at the end of the play in which a woman tears up a book (the Bible? the Koran?) because she can't find "her story" in it.

Although the play continued to grow and change throughout the rehearsal process, incorporating a significant amount of new material drawn from the lives of the cast members themselves, not everyone was happy with the final mix. One actor, a mainstream Christian, regretfully dropped out because he didn't feel represented in the piece. Other artists who stayed with the project nevertheless felt that the play overall was too much about sexuality and not enough about religious faith.

The rehearsal process was unusual for Cornerstone in a couple of ways. For one, Chris Moore chose to work with a smaller cast (19) than usual for a community collaboration, and to work with them as an ensemble. It was a beautifully diverse group: younger, older, gay, lesbian,

straight, bi, transgendered, white, black, Latino, Asian, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Atheist, and other. The whole cast remained onstage for the entire performance, supporting each other's featured roles physically and vocally. This approach created a powerfully bonded group of actors. Their closeness and emotional support of one another was palpable throughout the theater—on stage, in the dressing rooms, and to the audience. Their substantial commitment of time in rehearsal paid off in confident and synchronous performances.

Another unusual element of the process was that the play was unfinished when rehearsals started. Although the uncertainty about where the script was going and when it was going to get there caused some stress for members of the production team, it allowed the distinct benefit of opening the script to input from the nineteen cast members. Many of them had already contributed to the text through story circles, but they were able to contribute further, and the newer participants

"...the Village hosted a Town Hall meeting. One of the main questions was, 'What do you want this play to do for your community?'"



Professional actors and community members appear together in a scene from Cornerstone Theater Company's production of *Body of Faith*. Photo by Craig Schwartz © 2003.

were able to contribute as well, such that the play at its very core reflected the lives of the people performing it.

Body of Faith opened on March 1, 2003, over a year after the initial incubation period. It drew large, enthusiastic audiences throughout its run. The final dialogue component of the process, conducted by NCCJ, was a facilitated “Open Space” discussion (in which participants choose topics of interest and form groups around those topics). Facilitator Peter Bectel reports that there were 20-30 participants (audience members and performers who chose to stay after the show) and 7-8 facilitators. The discussion began in the full group with initial reactions to the play, and an opportunity for audience members to ask the actors questions. Then people split into smaller groups, each with a facilitator. Finally everyone came back together in one circle, and each person shared one thing they would take away from the evening. The crowd was fairly diverse as far as age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The reactions to the piece were generally positive. It was clear that many people came away with new perspectives, particularly on the transgender experience, which many people said they had not much considered before. Some straight people confessed to surprise at the internal struggles of GLBT people around religion. Again, it was something they had never given much thought to.

The Village, which hosts several religious denominations for their GLBT services, was very pleased with their collaboration with Cornerstone and with the production. *Body of Faith* provided a forum to bring together what often seems like two segregated constituencies: religious and secular. The Village staff loved the ambition and artistic quality of the production, and they were pleased to provide the play as another service to their constituency.

Puppeteer Beth Peterson called up a few weeks after closing to ask for permission to use a scene from the play for a special purpose. Beth’s parents saw the show on a visit to Los Angeles from their home in a small town in Minnesota. Their church was about to hold a community meeting to discuss whether to declare themselves an “Open and Affirming” congregation. They had been particularly moved by the “Not my story!” scene in which the woman tears up the Bible, and they wanted to share it as part of the church discussion.

We were invited to perform excerpts of *Body of Faith* for participants in the Los Angeles County Internship Program, 150 college students and their supervisors, as part of an “Arts Day” event. Breakout sessions were held for the interns to discuss the excerpts and their feelings about what they saw.

We also performed excerpts at Loyola Marymount College, a private Catholic university that sponsors an annual inter-religious festival. The play was followed by a discussion on religion and sexuality.

Muslim Collaboration

It had been important to us to identify a Muslim playwright for this project, and, after an extensive national search, we found one whose work we liked. Unfortunately, he was from out of town, and we were only able to bring him in for three story circles. He chose to write an original play after we were refused the rights to adapt the Kaufman and Hart comedy classic, *You Can’t Take it with You*. When the playwright had a completed a first draft, we brought him back to L.A. for a reading at the Southern California Islamic Center with members of the Muslim community, Cornerstone ensemble members, past participants, and others interested in attending.

10 Acrobats is about a close, happy Muslim family that begins to come undone as all three children (in their late teens and early twenties) express doubts about who they are and what their faith and its traditions mean to them. The youngest son, it turns out, is gay. There is a scene in which he meets another man in the park, and they go off, presumably to have sex in the

bushes. In the facilitated dialogue that followed the reading, this was the plotline that received the most attention. Participants showed a remarkable willingness to talk about the issue of homosexuality and Islam, and, up to a point, remarkable honesty. Generally, people were against having a representation of homosexuality in the play. Their reasons varied. Some said it simply wasn't an issue for people in the community. Some said it was an issue, but not one that the community is ready to deal with yet. One person replied that the issue had already been dealt with: by the prophet Mohammed, who declared that gays should be thrown from the top of the highest building. Another said it wasn't the homosexuality that was the concern, but the fact that the men were having sex during the holy month of Ramadan. Although there was at least

"Cornerstone artists and other outsiders to the community can feel torn between the need to be a respectful listener to the community and a desire to express their own thoughts and opinions."

one gay Muslim (that we knew of) in the room, he chose not to share his sexual orientation in this group. Cornerstone artists present kept silent as well, even though some were pained by what they were hearing.

The lopsidedness of this particular dialogue as far as Cornerstone artists were concerned was not due to poor facilitation, but to the explicit purpose of the gathering, which was to gather feedback from members of the Muslim community about the script. In a situation like this, Cornerstone artists and other outsiders to the community can feel torn

between the need to be a respectful listener to the community and a desire to express their own thoughts and opinions. Different degrees of reticence and self-expression result from this struggle.

Shortly after the reading, we decided not to produce *10 Acrobats*. The main reason was because the playwright was resistant to any changes in his work, whether to accommodate concerns of the community or those of his colleagues about length, structure, or content. We found this position with regard to a first draft of a play to be unacceptable, given the collaborative nature of Cornerstone's work. We went back to the Kaufman and Hart estate, and this time we were given permission to adapt *You Can't Take it With You*. Cornerstone ensemble member Peter Howard was commissioned to write the adaptation.

When we conducted the first round of story circles, we heard repeatedly how Muslims felt increasingly isolated and misunderstood. Many shared stories of discrimination and the need to defend and explain their religion, while feeling the pressure to be "the perfect Muslim—devoutly religious and 'American.'" When asked what they wanted to see in the play and how they wanted to be represented, they replied unanimously, "Do a comedy," and "We want people to see that we are regular Americans, like everyone else."

Director Mark Valdez came up with the idea to adapt *You Can't Take it With You*. Not only does the play fit the community's desire for a comedy, but it is arguably the quintessential American comedy, as well. The play explores two different approaches to the American Dream: financial success and individual freedom. Our adaptation looks at two Muslim families, each from different cultures, and explores how faith and culture influence religion and beliefs.

Peter conducted extensive interviews with diverse Muslims, many of them drawn from the previous story circle process, as research for his work. Because he had spoken to several gay Muslims, Peter also wrote a gay couple into his first draft (they were a replacement for the stereotypical black maid Reba and her unemployed boyfriend, from the original play). Thus, at a community reading of Peter's play, the subject of homosexuality was addressed again.

"When asked what they wanted to see in the play and how they wanted to be represented, they replied unanimously, "Do a comedy," and 'We want people to see that we are regular Americans, like everyone else.'" "

Peter's representation of gay characters was vastly different from the one in *10 Acrobats* (which even Cornerstone members had objected to as promulgating a negative stereotype about gay men having anonymous sex in parks). There were casual indications that Donald and Ali were a couple, but their sexuality was not presented as an issue or a plot point. Nevertheless, community members had virtually the same reaction. They felt that any representation of homosexuality in the play, however incidental, would turn off the Muslim community and keep them from coming to the play. It would also prevent many Muslims from performing in the play, or from supporting it in any other capacity. The big difference in this discussion was that one of the Cornerstone artists decided to jump in. He said he appreciated the people's honesty, and felt it was only fair to meet it with equal honesty by telling them that he is himself gay. "You could feel the intake of breath," he said afterward, but the conversation continued.

Enough people threatened to withdraw their support and participation from the project that Mark and Peter decided to remove any implication that Donald and Ali were romantically involved. Peter expressed disappointment in having to do this, but he felt that there had been a human relations triumph in the process. We had engaged members of the Muslim community in a series of conversations about a difficult topic, and the people who had stayed involved in the project were doing so knowing that they were collaborating with at least one "out" gay man. The decision to remove the gay characters was disappointing to one of the gay Muslims Peter had interviewed, as well as to an ensemble member who felt that we should not just celebrate communities, but also challenge them.

While there were no gay characters on stage, there were gay actors in the cast. Once we had built trusting relationships, we were able to speak frankly about homosexuality and Islam, often during shared meals or in the greenroom, before a show. Conversation was passionate around this topic, and people respectfully listened to each other. Perhaps the first sign of change came on opening night. It is a Cornerstone custom to gather together in a circle and share with each other a meaningful moment, either from the play or from the production process. During this ritual, one of the gay cast members talked about his own self-exile from the Muslim community because of Islam's views on homosexuality. He talked about how much it pained him to distance himself from his faith community and went on to thank his fellow cast members for their warmth and respect. Listening to him speak so simply and eloquently made a profound impact on everyone there. More importantly, the discourse changed: it was no longer an abstract debate. It had become personal.

"Once we had built trusting relationships, we were able to speak frankly about homosexuality and Islam, often during shared meals or in the greenroom, before a show."

Regardless of the passionate debates and conversations, there is still a certain cynicism in the company and in society at large that is hard to overcome. Will people *really* change their opinions or actions based on the play or the process? We try to be optimistic, but it's hard to know for sure. This time, however, the question was answered directly. At a story circle comprised of cast members from *You Can't Take it with You*, one of the actors who had been opposed to the gay characters spoke out. She shared her feelings of embarrassment at her opposition and apologized if she had offended anyone. She also told us about an experience she had had with some of her friends. They were having dinner, and the topic of gay Muslims came up. As she listened to them talk, she found their comments offensive. She got angry and spoke out, saying she disagreed with them. She urged them to follow Islam's mandate to respect and love one another. She also told them that she had friends who were gay Muslims.

As we heard that story, suddenly, all of the problems we had faced seemed insignificant. This play and this process had, in fact, made a difference. Because of the dialogue and the experience

of the play, someone grew to accept another person as a valuable member of her community. Who knows what the ripple effect will be? What matters is that it's begun.

Order My Steps

As has been the case with every residency to date in the Faith-Based Cycle, *Order My Steps* (OMS) met with great success at the box office, with critics, and with audiences. However, like the projects that preceded it, OMS was also riddled with difficulty and change, reminding us of the need to better communicate our methodology and expectations to guest artists and prompting a deep dialogue on Cornerstone's mission and a reflection on the delicate balance between the artistic and social aspects of our work.

“Because of the dialogue and the experience of the play, someone grew to accept another person as a valuable member of her community. Who knows what the ripple effect will be? What matters is that it’s begun.”

Produced in partnership with the Watts Village Theater Company (WVTC) and the Black AIDS Institute, Cornerstone brought together African American clergy and African Americans affected by and infected with HIV and AIDS to create and perform an original musical play. The idea for the project came from Phil Wilson, executive director of the Institute and a fellow recipient of the Ford Foundation's inaugural Leadership for a Changing World Award, recognizing national leaders tackling tough social problems. We envisioned an original play built from the community that would shed light on the disproportionate occurrence of AIDS in the African American community and on the significance of the church in the community's life, suggesting the potential for black clergy to break their silence when it comes to HIV and AIDS.



Omú Vaidya and Sondos Kholoki-Kahf (left to right) in Cornerstone Theater Company's American Muslim Remix of *You Can't Take It With You*. Photo by Craig Schwartz © 2003.

The project got off to a strong start in January of 2002 when the producing partners devoted two full days to exploring the parameters and potential for what we called the Black AIDS: Black Faith Project (BA:BF). Two months later, we kicked off the first-ever Los Angeles event of the National Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS with a press conference and public forum involving local African American clergy on the topic of AIDS. This was followed by a week of story circles in multiple parishes, in which clergy and people affected by HIV shared stories.

Cornerstone commissioned theater, film, and television writer Dianne Houston to create the text for BA:BF. However, by the end of the first week of story circles, it became evident that Dianne's schedule would not allow her to complete the project: she had not attended any of the meetings. Not only was she completing several other writing assignments, but she was also offered a wonderful opportunity to direct a new independent film. We completed the first round of story circles without a playwright. Elizabeth Gonzalez, Cornerstone's director of community partnerships, led the process, facilitating the dialogue sessions and recording them as a future resource for the playwright.

After an exhaustive, nationwide search, we selected New Jersey-based playwright Tracey Scott Wilson to write the script for this collaboration. A shining early-career writer, Tracey brought the perspective of a woman and an out lesbian to what is still too often seen as a gay man's disease. The daughter of a minister, Tracey also understood intimately the dynamics and

politics of a religious community. When we interviewed her, she spoke eloquently of her passion to address this issue that is decimating her community. She cited homophobia, racism, and economic class as significant factors contributing to the high infection rate among African Americans, and she was eager to explore how religion and faith intersect with these other forces.

Because Tracey lived in New Jersey, we had to be strategic about her visits to Los Angeles. We arranged for three trips to the west coast: two five-day intensives for her to meet with community members, and an extended stay so that she could take part in the rehearsal process. With this in mind, we also decided that we would continue to have story circles without her presence, making available to her audio recordings of the meetings.

There were a total of 20 story circles contributing to the creation of OMS. Among the venues were Holman United Methodist Church, Faith UMC, Grace UMC, Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church, St. Brigid Catholic Church, First AME, First New Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, Jordan High School, and the Black AIDS Institute. Many of the individuals we heard from had a personal stake in the project, having lost a loved one to the disease or being active members of AIDS service organizations. Comments and concerns which we heard included: “preachers don’t preach about HIV from the pulpit;” “the issue is that people are afraid to talk about sex which means you can’t talk about HIV/AIDS;” “it doesn’t seem to affect people until ‘it happens’ to them (they are infected or someone they love is infected);” “there is a ‘two-faced’ attitude in the church, they ‘love everyone’ except you;” and “if you make the play about homosexuality people will be turned off and not get the message.”

Combining these concerns and feelings with her own insight, Tracey wrote *Order My Steps* which follows three characters as they come to terms with HIV and their faith: Selena, a playwright who wrestles with the news that she is HIV positive; her husband, Malik, a church deacon whose life on the “down low” has in this tragic way come to light; and their pastor, Reverend Howard, faced with the most painful challenge of his life as leader of a congregation led by his father before him.

In an effort to involve the clergy themselves in the performances, we wrote into the play a video segment where pastors shared their opinions on HIV and the church. For some of the cast members, this was the first time they had heard their ministers discuss the matter. Although not a live component, the inclusion of the clergy in the play added an additional weight and authenticity to the performances.

Two weeks prior to the start of rehearsals, director Paris Barclay called us to say that he had been offered a job directing and producing a new television series, beginning midway through rehearsals. A former board member and longtime supporter of Cornerstone, Paris had been a logical choice to direct this project. He is a celebrated AIDS activist, an accomplished composer, and a two-time Emmy Award-winning director. This news was devastating.

With rehearsals starting in less than two weeks, we had few options. The play was already cast, the designs were completed, and the venue was rented. Paris offered to codirect the play in order to maintain some consistency and to keep the project moving forward on schedule. The Cornerstone ensemble had mixed feelings. Many felt that codirecting was a bad idea, especially with two directors who did not know each other and had never worked together. Others,

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including the artistic and associate artistic directors, thought that while there were risks involved in having codirectors, ultimately it was a risk worth taking. We hired a director to work with Paris, but three weeks into the process we realized that he was not a good match for the company. We let the director go, and the associate artistic director, Mark Valdez, agreed to step in and take over the rehearsals.

Perhaps what characterized the play and the process most was our experience with George Gant, a community participant in the play. George is a member of Holman United Methodist Church, one of our community partners on the project, and the founder of the AIDS Ministry program at his church. He was the only nonprofessional community member in a leading role (he played the part of Reverend Howard). This was George's first play, and he had a difficult time during the rehearsal process. By the time we were in dress rehearsals, George still had not memorized his lines. Many people involved with the production were asking that he be replaced, including the playwright. As we neared performances, tensions mounted. The playwright felt that she was not being listened to, while some of the actors felt neglected because we had given so much attention to George. Because he was a first-time actor and a community participant who participated in story circles and had been a vital partner in the creation of the project, we felt a responsibility to keep him in the cast and work to improve his performance.

The situation sparked a dialogue on Cornerstone's mission. On the one hand, our mission is to create theater that includes the artistry of first-time performers. The counter argument was that George was not prepared to go onstage. He did not have his lines memorized and did not have the skills to improvise in those moments while he was searching for the line. We glued

notes in his prop Bible and even rigged an earpiece to feed him the lines, but there was still some uncertainty as to whether or not he would freeze on stage; and our mission is not to humiliate a participant. And what is our responsibility to the other actors and the play and the community? After much discussion and, quite honestly, some tears as well, we decided to keep George in the cast, believing that he would come through, and that we would continue to find ways to make sure there was a safety net for him during performances.

At the final dress rehearsal, we received tragic news. George's mother, who had been ill for some time, passed

away. The cast pulled together in prayer for George and his family. The last thing he said to the director before he left was that we could count on him and that he would be back the next day. When George had auditioned for the

George W. Gant (left) and Adina Porter in Cornerstone Theater Company's production of *Order My Steps*. Photo by Craig Schwartz © 2003.

play, he had decided to dedicate his performance to his mother. Her death reaffirmed his conviction to do the play. By the opening night, George was not only off book, he was also delivering an outstanding performance. He was able to tap into deep emotions, and he gave himself the permission to let loose and embrace his character. Every reviewer who critiqued the play gave George glowing notices.

Audiences were equally enthusiastic. We ended up turning away audience members because we could not fit them into the theater. Those who attended story circles and saw the play came up to us saying how wonderful it was and how they hoped the work would contribute to change.

Dialogue events around the production, beyond story circles, included three post-show discussions and an NCCJ facilitated “Dinner and Dialogue.” We averaged about 85–90 percent of audiences staying for post-show discussions. Dinner and Dialogue was also successful with 25 participants, including clergy. Lucky Altman designed and led the dialogue session, which included many participants who had previously seen the play. Among the questions that were asked: In your opinion what keeps people from acknowledging the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the community? Memorable was a participant’s comments that she is “left with hope that the play has changed lives. People who were on the margins saw this play and were moved and challenged. The play showed them what can happen when we ignore HIV and AIDS.”

As a follow-up to the production, Cornerstone and its partners hosted a session at Holman United Methodist Church called “The Next Step” with clergy, participants, and AIDS educators to discuss and examine the impact of the production on those who saw and participated in it. In addition, we have also been contacted by an AIDS service organization in North Carolina about remounting the production in their community.

Conclusion

Cornerstone’s collaboration with NCCJ in the past year has been about refining our methods based on what we have learned. The revisions of *Zones* were prompted by audience feedback about both the content and the process. Apart from the *Zones* remount, we have followed a more conventional separation of art and dialogue. We have, however, become much more aware of how each can feed the other. As a result, the dialogue events have had a greater focus, and a greater impact on the art than they had had before. The creation of *Body of Faith* is a testimony to the power of building relationships with a community through dialogue and the richness of material that can be explored this way. The script readings for the Muslim project demonstrate the company working hard to find a balance between respecting our community partners and challenging them. The reflections and conversations around *Order My Steps* challenged the company to stand up for its mission of inclusion as much as it challenged the community to stand up for their own Christian ideals of compassion and honesty with regard to the AIDS crisis. It was, in both cases, a test of faith.

The Animating Democracy Initiative has provided Cornerstone an opportunity to explore the use of structured, facilitated dialogue in a way that enriches our art and offers to our partner communities a forum for discussing their common concerns and their differences. In the past, we conducted our research into the community on a more casual, catch-as-catch-can basis. We relied more on individual interviews than on conversations with groups. Through the development of our Community Partnership Program and our close collaboration with NCCJ, we have reached a new level of sophistication and consistency in our interactions with community members, adding this process to the best practices of our methodology. We have observed gifted NCCJ facilitators in action, and we have learned some of their techniques for generating free and respectful dialogue which retains focus without being overly directed or dominated by one viewpoint. We are now hearing stories and thoughts we might not have heard with a less structured approach. We have new tools such as the story circle, the town hall meeting, and open space dialogue, which allow us to reach and learn from more people and to maintain the relationships we initiate. Our experience with NCCJ has also had a healthy impact on the way Cornerstone conducts its regular company and ensemble meetings, where greater awareness of communication styles has made for more effective communication.

For their part, the NCCJ staff has become more open to nonverbal forms of expression in dialogue settings. They have increased their use of exercises derived from theater games that

involve imagery and movement. They have also learned, as we have, not to make blanket assumptions about people. NCCJ Los Angeles has reported calls from other NCCJ offices around the country about collaborations with theater, sometimes inspired by our partnership.

When we began our collaboration two years ago, both the artists and the human relations facilitators expressed a desire to go deeper by working together. Although some of the skills and methods sometimes resisted combination, there's no doubt that the collaboration led to an exploration of new territory, from the various audacious experiments in dialogue with theater audiences, to the multifaceted exploration of community through story circles, to ground-breaking civic dialogues on AIDS in the African American faith community.

In the summer of 2004, Cornerstone will launch a four-week intensive institute where we will share our methodology with students and colleagues from around the country and the world through a hands-on, community collaboration in a rural setting. The lessons we have learned and the tools we have acquired through our participation in the Animating Democracy lab will become part of the curriculum of this new educational branch of Cornerstone.

ON BEING ABLE TO FINISH YOUR SENTENCE:

Reflections of a Project Liaison

CARON ATLAS

As I was beginning to write these reflections, I attended a film screening and discussion in New York City about the impact of September 11 on Arab New Yorkers. Referring to the post 9/11 chilling effect of civil rights restrictions, a professor spoke of no longer being able to finish his sentences. I more fully realized at that point what an amazing gift the Faith-Based Cycle has been for the people of Los Angeles. Not only has it encouraged people to finish their sentences, it has created an atmosphere of respect where dialogue wins over fear.

"For a company whose work is based on tolerance and inclusion, this project began with the challenging question: 'When does tolerance lead to a betrayal of one's beliefs?'"

All of Cornerstone's work, according to Bill Rauch, is a leap of faith. For a company whose work is based on tolerance and inclusion, this project began with the challenging question: "When does tolerance lead to a betrayal of one's beliefs?" Recognizing that faith could be divisive, passionate, and fearsome, Cornerstone created the project, in part, to face their fears. At the same time, Cornerstone is an optimistic company, and they knew that faith could also be a positive and unifying force. While many of their

company members are not religious, years of community collaborations had demonstrated the profound importance of faith in the lives of many of their partners.

Cornerstone and NCCJ engaged fear by building in-depth relationships, creating art, and participating in ongoing dialogue and inquiry with people who hold multiple perspectives. An underlying assumption of the project was participants' willingness to engage in this inquiry. Was this always possible in the realm of belief? Just as Cornerstone became aware of a tension between faith and tolerance, they also discovered one related to inquiry. A faith-based project, especially one taking place during a particularly sensitive "good vs. evil" moment in history, could not avoid firmly held points of view and beliefs. The project could be described as a journey, a metaphor used in *Crossings*. It was a journey that often ran into roadblocks (or enlightening detours?), where people's strong beliefs and agendas often challenged (or enriched?) the process.

Michael Rohd put the question this way: "Was faith open to dialogue?" Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn't, and often it was both at the same time. For example, as described in the

case study, guest artist and Jesuit priest Bill Cain was concerned that the pastor in the original version of *Zones* was represented as being unwilling to engage in dialogue, something that countered his own experience. At the same time, Cain was only willing to engage in dialogue about his own creative work to a point, beyond which he saw himself being censored by community collaboration. Complex moments such as this one continued to challenge Cornerstone in its core beliefs throughout the project.

I encountered the tension between faith and inquiry in my experience of the Festival of Faith. I hesitated to choose a portal to work through at Temple Emmanuel, reluctant to choose between being identified as either an “adventurous spirit” or a “contented soul.” But afterwards I found that being challenged to make a choice stimulated a fascinating dialogue with another person who also resisted the exercise. In contrast, a prompt that summarized the theme of a show and then asked us to respond, encouraged some audience members to become quickly judgmental. Back home in Brooklyn, in my dialogue group of Jews, Palestinians, and others concerned about the Middle East, the tension plays out differently. Some members struggle with the dialogue concept of beginning each statement with “I think.” For them, religion, culture, and politics embody truths that are not subject to opinion.

“Was faith open to dialogue?”

“Following the Festival of Faith, Cornerstone ensemble members spoke of the need to articulate their values and principles, and questioned when it might be important to take a stand.”

As an activist I’m sympathetic to the belief that if we are to get anywhere we need to take a stand. Like many of the other Animating Democracy projects, the Faith-Based Cycle raises questions about how dialogue can embrace strongly felt points of view without neutralizing them. Following the Festival of Faith, Cornerstone ensemble members spoke of the need to articulate their values and principles, and questioned when it might be important to take a stand. However, as Mark Valdez says, “the idea of taking a stand is always complicated. More often than not we are outsiders and we have to balance the needs for and time to take a stand without imposing our views on the community. Including

dialogue enabled us to do what we do well: ask questions and listen. It’s less of a goal to change minds than to open and broaden perspectives and build bridges.”

I had my mind opened during a performance of *Zones* held at the Muslim New Horizon School shortly after September 11, an experience that reminded me how important context is to the experience of art and dialogue. During an exercise where we moved through various short encounters with changing partners, one of my partners helped me face my assumptions about faith. The question posed was “What is one thing you need to know or understand about a faith or religious tradition in order to feel comfortable with it?” I, the secular Jew, asked my partner, “What is the source of your faith?” She, seemingly more religious, a Muslim wearing a head scarf, asked me “How do you live your life?” This exchange lasted only a few minutes, but I continue to reflect on it years later.

That exchange was a private moment, in a public context, about a complicated mix of personal and political beliefs. This interweaving of private and public and personal and civic was the strength of the Faith-Based Cycle. Civic issues were often raised and discussed in private settings and intimate groups such as story circles, Weekly Wednesdays, dialogues within the faith-based partners, or the dialogue between Cornerstone and NCCJ. It was often more challenging to create a deep and authentic dialogue about civic issues at a public space such as a theater, where participation in dialogue may not be the audience's primary intent. Alternately the public events

“This interweaving of private and public and personal and civic was the strength of the Faith-Based Cycle.”

that were most successful were those that could humanize civic issues with personal stories, like that of the mother and daughter in *Zones*, or personal experiences like the one I had at the New Horizon School.

The relationship between private and public was all the more complicated in a project focusing on faith that also touched on politics and sexuality. This was magnified by the extensive media coverage that was often an asset, but at times a distraction or threat. On the positive side, the extent of the media coverage played an important role in expanding audiences and ensured sold-out houses. It connected personal stories to civic concerns such as the closing of the Cathedral, the impact of 9/11 on Muslim communities, or the arrests of priests for sexual abuses. Critics and journalists who wrote about the process of the work also deepened understanding about the project. (See [Appendix](#), Further Reading, for selected press on the project.)

On the downside, Cornerstone got caught in the fascination and sensationalism around the topic of faith that accompanied the news—be it the ongoing crisis in the Catholic Church or the September 11 attacks. Even though their project was planned well before 9/11, the context shifted after that date, and sometimes the media focus overlooked the nuances of the project.

At this sensitive time, public media attention that otherwise would be highly desirable, almost destroyed part of the Festival of Faith, when the *LA Times* preview article featured the New Horizon School, who wanted to keep a low profile.

The historical moment and daring quality of Cornerstone's theatrical experiment also may have heightened unrealistic and inappropriate expectations for the work. A first step in pushing the creative envelope and attempting to organically connect art and civic dialogue within a play can't be expected to wholly change the form of both theater and dialogue. A theater, even in collaboration with NCCJ and faith-based community organizations, can't be expected to heal a troubled city.

What, then, is a realistic expectation for arts-based civic dialogue? Cornerstone, like many of the groups in Animating Democracy, aspired to work with integrity, and engage deeply in a sustained process. Rauch reflected that some of the richest moments artistically were the ones where questions were asked rather than answers given, and when a powerful space was reclaimed. He remembered the very moving circle of audience questions that concluded *Zones* during its first run shortly after September 11—including a question that echoed the origin of the project: “Is tolerance enough?” And at the end of *Crossings* in the decommissioned ruin of a Cathedral, “when the whole building was revitalized, it was spiritual, deep and moving in the air. It felt true.”

According to Diane Burbie of NCCJ, Cornerstone also learned that significant dialogue is not just the breakthrough moment; it is also “all the creative, intuitive, interesting, radical, but subtle moments.” Guest Luis Alfaro commented about the development process of *Body of Faith*: “I found the story circles wonderful and sweet, but as a playwright I first wondered where the tension was—the drama.” (*Frontiers*) He later found it through one-on-one interviews, in the poetry of the language of the participants.

“. . . significant dialogue is not just the breakthrough moment; it is also all the creative, intuitive, interesting, radical, but subtle moments.”

As a multiyear process, the Faith-Based Cycle had a cumulative impact, gaining depth over time and acting as a catalyst for ripples that are yet to be revealed. Valdez addressed this impact as he reflected on the Muslim project in the case study narrative. “This play and this process made a difference. Because of the dialogue and the experience someone grew to accept another person as a valuable member of her community. Who knows what the ripple effect will be? What matters, is that it's begun.”

The Faith-Based Cycle revealed the creative tensions of going deep in both art and dialogue. As a Cornerstone ensemble member said, “There’s this constant tug of war between the safety/trust needed for good dialogue and the risk-taking needed for good art . . . When you try to meet the needs of both art and dialogue at the same time you end up meeting neither.” This raises some questions that I heard echoed throughout the project: Can broad inclusion prevent as well as encourage depth by watering down the experience? How does abstract and evocative art sometimes evoke deeper insights than a literal message? Is depth only about inquiry and questioning—what is it for people who are firmly rooted in their beliefs? Does it have to mean being serious? What is the relationship between risk-taking and art in a project where participants have such a deep stake?

“The Faith-Based Cycle revealed the creative tensions of going deep in both art and dialogue.”

Another way that Cornerstone is seeking to deepen its impact is by becoming more intentional and structured in its work. Through this project the company furthered a process it had already begun of codifying its methodology and creating an institute. Cornerstone is acknowledging its long-term commitment to both the arts community and its local partners and accepting the responsibility to rigorously share its approach. In doing so they may face some questions that other mature community-based institutions are engaging as they institutionalize their work. Might this increased structure challenge intuition and encourage safety? When might structure intentionally inhibit creative foresight? Can Cornerstone ensure that this process does not inhibit the leaps of faith that are at the creative heart of their work by building risk-taking and experimentation into their methodologies?

As we complete this case study, the Faith-Based Cycle continues for another year. The project, the sentence, has yet to be finished. I am certain, however—given the powerful stake, the close relationships, the profound dialogue, the inspiring art, and the catalytic moment in history—that the sentence will end in a manner that challenges us to face our fears and speak our truths, with courage, compassion, and creativity.

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Bill Rauch, artistic director, cofounded Cornerstone Theater Company in 1986 and has directed over 40 of the company's productions, including the majority of the company's community collaborations nationwide. He has also directed at the Mark Taper Forum, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Guthrie, South Coast Rep, Yale Rep, Arena Stage, Great Lakes Theater Festival, and others. For his directional efforts, Bill has received L.A. Weekly, Drama-Logue, Garland, and Helen Hayes Awards, and has been twice nominated for the Ovation Award for Best Director. From 1992 to 1998, he served on the Board of Directors of Theatre Communications Group, the national service organization for nonprofit theatre (two years as a member of the Executive Committee). Currently an adjunct professor at UCLA, he graduated from Harvard College in 1984 where he received the Louis Sudler Prize for outstanding graduating artist. He has served as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts, California Arts Council, Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the Durfee Foundation and Playwrights Center, and Keynote Speaker for Theatre Puget Sound's inaugural conference, and has testified before Congress in support of the NEA. Bill is the only artist to have won the inaugural Leadership for a Changing World Award.

Mark Valdez first worked with Cornerstone as an Altwater fellow and is presently the company's associate artistic director. For Cornerstone he has directed "You Can't Take it with You: An American-Muslim Remix," "Mary Shelley's Santa Claus" and codirected "Order My Steps" with Paris Barclay, among others. Mark is a guest lecturer at the University of California, Riverside where he teaches a class on Latino Theater and Film. He has served as a grants panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Los Angeles Arts Commission, and has led workshops/discussions at the Lincoln Center, New School, Arizona Arts Commission, ATHE, and Cal Arts' REDCAT. Mark received his MFA in Directing from UC Irvine and is the recipient of a Princess Grace Fellowship.

Lynn Jeffries is a set, costume, and puppet designer and a founding member of Cornerstone Theater Company. In addition to designing one or more elements of over forty Cornerstone productions since 1986, she has also worked at various regional theaters, most recently designing costumes for *Nickel and Dimed* at the Guthrie, the set for *Lovers and Executioners* at South Coast Repertory, and puppets for *Lily Plants a Garden* for the Mark Taper Forum's P.L.A.Y. program. During the course of Cornerstone's Faith-Based Cycle, she participated in two of the three Weekly Wednesdays series, served as artistic coordinator for the Faith United Church venue of the Faith Festival, and performed as a bagpiper/puppeteer in *Motherhouse Dreams*, one of the Festival plays. She designed costumes for *Crossings*, costumes and puppets for *Body of Faith*, and the set for *You Can't Take it With You: An American Muslim Remix*. She was a proud audience member for *Zones* and *Order My Steps*.

Caron Atlas is a Brooklyn-based freelance consultant working to strengthen connections between community-based arts, policymaking, and social change. Caron is the founding director of the American Festival Project and worked for several years with Appalshop, the Appalachian media center. She is the Animating Democracy project liaison with Cornerstone Theater, Intermedia Arts, SPARC, and Urban Bush Women, and coordinates Animating Democracy's Critical Perspectives reflective writing program. Other recent consultancies include the Leeway Foundation, National Voice, 651 Arts, Urban Institute, and A Cultural Blueprint for New York City. Caron writes frequently about cultural policy and teaches at New York University's Tisch School. She has a master's degree from the University of Chicago and was a Warren Weaver fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation.