

COMMUNITY-BASED ARTISTIC PRACTICE: PERSPECTIVES FROM A GATHERING OF EXEMPLAR ARTIST COMPANIES

**WITH PERSPECTIVES FROM ARTISTIC STAFF
FROM SOJOURN THEATRE, CORNERSTONE THEATER COMPANY,
LIZ LERMAN DANCE EXCHANGE, AND URBAN BUSH WOMEN**

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For one weekend in November 2007, four pioneering arts organizations— Cornerstone Theater Company, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Sojourn Theatre, and Urban Bush Women—came together to share ideas about community-engaged art practices and connection with and responsibility to audiences and young artists. Their meeting was arranged and funded by the Exemplar Program, a program implemented jointly by Animating Democracy of Americans for the Arts and the LarsonAllen Public Service Group.¹ Spearheaded by Michael Rohd, artistic director of Sojourn Theatre, and hosted by the Theatre Department of Northwestern University, the artistic director of each organization brought a company member or collaborator to share in the process and learn from the language generated. Though some of the artists were meeting for the first time, there were a web of connections and parallels between the companies. Dance Exchange and Cornerstone were both dealing with artistic leadership transitions. Sojourn and Cornerstone enjoyed a long affiliation. A former member of Urban Bush Women was about to choreograph a Sojourn piece. Whatever the connections, there was a clear sense of admiration and inspiration amongst the group.

The artistic directors entered the weekend with a number of goals, as articulated by Michael Rohd:

We will push each other to express our own core values and working methods in ways that distinguish us as citizen-artists and innovative creators, as a means to establish vocabulary we can claim within our own and larger field conversations.

We hope to explore the possibilities of linking our Summer Institutes in ways that allow us to better serve the growing field of artists/activists who seek advanced, visionary training in the area of community-engaged performance-making.

We aim to examine the ways theater and dance function differently and similarly in our work, and deepen our collective understanding of the languages within which we work.

We will learn from each other's practices and share tools for engagement strategies, partnership-building, and ensemble-based work.

We will open up a conversation about the role of the leader/director/facilitator in projects and organizations doing work that involves collaboration within groups of artists and within community contexts.

¹ The Exemplar Program awarded \$2.1 million to 12 small to midsized arts and cultural organizations nationwide for their outstanding cultural work in their communities and in the field, based on their participation in the Animating Democracy program of Americans for the Arts and the Working Capital Fund. Supported by The Ford Foundation, the two-year Exemplar Program enabled these organizations to sustain and advance the extraordinary work for which they were recognized. The Exemplar Program was implemented in collaboration with LarsonAllen Public Service Group of Minneapolis, MN, which also managed the Working Capital Fund.

The conversations that ensued revealed the histories and hopes of each company. Through a discussion of how each company enters and exits a community, the artists were able to compare and contrast how their working methodologies adjust to each community. Each company runs an annual training institute that shares these techniques with other artists entering the field. Presentations about and brainstorming around these institutes allowed the groups to expand their ideas of what training and leadership can be for artist-citizens. Although teaching through institutes is a way to ensure a future for the companies, financial sustainability is more complicated. The companies also dove into a discussion of partnering with corporations as a source of revenue. Each company had varying experiences with corporate partnerships and allowed these experiences to inform a rethinking of what a corporate community can be. All of these discussions led back to meditations on home. As community-based organizations with national reputations, how could each group best maintain their home base?

In addition to these discussions, three community engagements were planned: a workshop with Northwestern students, a panel discussion open to the Chicago community and moderated by Henry Godinez, associate professor at Northwestern and the resident artistic associate at the Goodman Theatre, and a participatory roundtable/conversation with community artists, students, and organizations engaged in similar art-making practices. The intention of this schedule was to lift the conversation from “telling” to “doing,” an informative combination of informal and formal dialogues, art-making, teaching, and celebration. The four organizations found a working process that was driven by mutual respect and boldness and led to a stimulating and rich learning exchange.

AGENDA

NOVEMBER 8-11, 2007

Day 1

Company Presentations: Each artistic director made a brief presentation for fellow directors and company members and led a conversation around aesthetics, methodologies, and ideas they wanted to explore.

Workshop: *Movement in Theatre, Story in Dance: Community Engagement and Making Performance.* Held for Northwestern University theater, dance, and performance studies students.

Day 2

Conversation Topics:

Vocabulary: How do we talk about our work? What vocabulary do we possess? What vocabulary do we want to develop?

Movement: How is the body—and bodies in space—core to our respective works and explorations? What is similar and what is different for us?

Roles: What is the role of the leader/director/facilitator in projects and organizations doing work that involves collaboration within groups of artists and within community contexts?

Community Event: *A Conversation with Four Artistic Directors: A National Perspective on Work that Engages the Local Community*

Day 3

Conversation Topics: What are the reasons to establish training institutes? What do each of us hope to gain from it, both for ourselves and for the community? What are the benefits and detractions?

Community Event: A conversation with local artists and activists around training methodologies.

ENTERING AND EXITING: NAVIGATING A NEW COMMUNITY

During the three days spent together, one of the recurring conversations concerning the ethics of community-engaged art revolved around the challenges of entering and exiting a community. Everyone expressed deep concern regarding the potential damage of not getting these aspects of the work right. How can artists enter an unfamiliar community with a specific and useful skill set to offer, rather than as ‘experts’? And what is the promise, the responsibility, of what is left behind? Navigating the creation of a new, impermanent community and the promise of creating significant and lasting change is a constant challenge and often has to be recreated with each project.

On the first afternoon of the gathering, the collaboration skills of the artistic directors were put to the test in front of a very eager and willing new community: a group of 30 students from the acting, dance, and performance studies departments at Northwestern University. With little more than an hour over lunch to discuss who would do what, when, and for how long—and with little knowledge of each other’s teaching styles—the leaders jumped in with trust, energy, and—most significantly—a sense of honest interest in each participant in the room. What emerged was quite remarkable.

Michael Rohd welcomed the group: “For the first time ever, we’ve come together to share our processes with each other and with you. We’ll interrupt each other, jump around, and hopefully share leadership in a way that gives the afternoon some momentum. Thanks for being here.” Peter DiMuro, producing artistic director of the Dance Exchange, and Vincent Thomas, a past collaborator with both Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and Urban Bush Women, helped the group ‘enter’ the work with a reminder that everyone present was in charge of his or her own body and mind. Through a gentle series of greetings—both physical and verbal—and through a simple sharing of personal information in the form of a news headline, the students very naturally began to listen to one another and to transition into a community of artists working together.

As Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of Urban Bush Women, expressed after the workshop, “It’s really clear that we have shared values around creating safety for people. That seems to be the most unifying element.” This was very evident as each artistic director took over leadership, and as each, in their way, reminded the students of their own power and their own voice. For Zollar, that power is in the body and also in the way that they look at each other, something she calls ‘The Authentic Gaze.’ She explained:

It’s this idea that I’m connecting, I’m giving and receiving by the simple act of looking. Give and receive the Authentic Gaze. Introduce who you are and how you are. Entering community is a process of giving and receiving and listening. It’s a conversation of listening together. It is a place where dominance is established or a place where listening is established. Move toward the listening.

The workshop activities also expressed a cultural lesson: that we were of different cultures, races, and ethnicities. Watching Zollar explain to a predominately Caucasian group the challenges of touch and eye contact when working with African Americans was a reminder that everyone does not enter a room with the same set of assumptions and boundaries. It is clear that each company is well versed in navigating those boundaries. They are also very honest in admitting that this knowledge was not formed

overnight. Rather, it came from years of trial and error, mistakes and discoveries, some painful and some profound.

As Rohd and Michael John Garcés, artistic director of Cornerstone Theater Company, began to facilitate the next phase of the workshop, the students barely recognized the transition from pure physical or dance exploration into a more theatrical narrative experience. For the next hour, the students used sculpting, tableau, and bits of text to create group pieces and then share them with the room. Rohd and Garcés were a tag team as they moved in and out of the process, sharing and viewing and riffing on each other's work.

As the end of the session neared, the directors gathered for a quick brainstorming session to decide on a final exercise—some kind of summation to send the students on their way with a sense of finality, of time well spent, and of questions. What emerged was a series of collages encompassing all the elements of the day. The work of all four companies was present in these collages—eye contact, connection, physical sharing, gestural dance, bilingualism, storytelling. Each piece was a small meditation on themes and ideas from the preceding hours, and each was a way for the group to relive the experience, remind themselves of what they'd accomplished, and to say goodbye. DiMuro expressed what many in the room were feeling: "I was struck by the accumulation of all these simplicities that brought these complex expressions in the end."

The artistic directors gathered to debrief after the workshop, and a conversation about entering and exiting community began to find its momentum. Each company pays a great amount of attention to these seemingly simple tasks. Garcés spoke of beginning partnerships:

I was thinking about why [the workshop] went so smoothly, and I think it has to do with how our organizations approach the idea of collaboration and partnering with others. I feel like there is a sense that when we enter a community, we enter into a partnership with others who bring equal value to the table and then we figure out together what our commonalities are and how we work together. That's constantly on my mind.

The understanding that building community partnerships must be a process of learning from one another, of entering the work humbly and with curiosity, binds these artistic directors in a common philosophy.

When Urban Bush Women worked with a community in post-Katrina New Orleans, the organizers requested that the work address education and the children's problem with math. Zollar felt compelled to find a way to respond. Together with the community, Zollar and Urban Bush Women developed a dance and literacy component, identified a local math specialist, and ultimately created a festival to showcase the accomplishments of the youth. While Urban Bush Women went in as artists, not as educators and certainly not as mathematicians, Zollar understood that she was there with a larger purpose and that the community needs had to be met. All the artists agreed that the work must be connected to specific community need: it can't just live as generalized "medicine," a cure-all intended to work for every problem.

The artists felt equally intent on crafting safe and satisfying ways to exit the community when the work had come to a close. Garcés said, "We come together and then at some point it ends. It always ends. We don't say that enough at the beginning. How do we make that happen in a positive and a good way? It's inevitable—it always ends." Zollar echoed the sentiment: "If we know that exiting is a hard thing and we know that people often get depressed, then there's power in that. We can change things."

The group agreed that exiting was a challenge for both the community participants and the artists, though perhaps not in equal measure. Shishir Kurup spoke as a long-time member of the Cornerstone ensemble: “I’m not concerned about us. We have the next project. But [the community participants] don’t have anything next. What happens to them?”

DiMuro shared one of Dance Exchange’s methods for ending with positive intention. “When we take leave we often end work by putting it back on the community: ‘What’s your next step?’ And they say, ‘I’m going to take these tools and I’m going to go do this...’ So there’s action inside the leave-taking.” Kurup explained the rituals involved in Cornerstone’s exiting strategies.

Ritualizing is very important. We enter opening night with the cast assembled an hour or so before our call time and go around the circle and share a moment or line or theme from the play that is or has been of some significance to us. Everyone is invited, including tech staff, designers, stage management, all who have made this journey. It is often a cathartic moment for everyone involved. ‘Now I’m getting a chance to tell the story, why it’s meaningful to me.’ It’s incredibly intense and in the process we hear the play anew and also make deep personal connections as we learn startling new things about how the play vibrates for people in such myriad ways. It reminds us why we undertook this journey in the first place and is deeply healing to the fragmentary process of tech. It is also an empowering hand over from the creators/producers to the cast and sets the stage for the rest of the journey, which also includes exiting the collaboration, post-closing night. It’s a concrete thing that we do for them and for us.

While each group attends to the process of entering and exiting with different strategies, there is a clear sense that these seemingly simple hellos and goodbyes carry great significance for all of them. The respect they give to each community partnership they build might say as much about them as organizations and as people as the work they are putting onstage.

TRAINING INSTITUTES: POTENTIAL TO INFLUENCE MORE, BETTER, DEEPER

Hand-in-hand with their deep respect for thorough and thoughtful community engagement is the group’s commitment to sharing their knowledge by providing training in community-based practice for the next generation of artists. Each company has created its own institute that provides some combination of tools for making work and experiential exploration. Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and Sojourn Theatre primarily focus on offering their participants tools with which to engage in their own art-making; Cornerstone Theatre has long taken participants into communities with them to experience their working methodologies first hand; Urban Bush Women couples traditional dance classes with an exploration of understanding racism and diversity work. Through their institutes, these companies have come in contact with an enormous number of emerging artists. As the group began a discussion of the trainings and their potential, they marveled at the number of artists in the country that had been influenced by the four organizations in the room. Never a group to be satisfied with the status quo, however, the next thought was the question: What is our potential to influence more, better, deeper?

The group explored the purpose of training institutes. Rohd asked the group what they hoped their participants were taking away from their institutes and wondered, “Am I offering tools that are in the training of the particular [pedagogy], or developing a vision and dramaturgy for the work they seek to make?” The group was quick to assert that there is no teaching vision. As Garcés put it, “I don’t think that you can teach vision. I don’t think you can teach directing. There’s practice. All one can possibly do is to give someone the tools, so that they can possibly

pull that mysterious alchemy together that translates as vision.” The group agreed that, while transmitting vision was impossible, community-engaged art-making is useful as a safe space for emerging artists. DiMuro strongly identified with this sentiment, saying, “I don’t think that a vision was so evident in me (as a younger artist). I don’t think that New York would have allowed me the space I needed to develop as an artist. The community-engagement process helped me as an early professional to find my voice, my vision.”

When a student at a roundtable discussion on training asked the artistic directors, “What are you looking for from young artists? What should I be doing in preparation for entering the profession?” the answers were telling.

Kurup from Cornerstone began, “The danger is a militancy to codification. You’re trying to replicate something that someone created out of nothing. Learn it, know it, but you have to adapt it—you have to innovate.” Zollar continued, “Train, do, question, however you do that. We fail, we learn. It continues to evolve. The physical work on the stage may be only one small part of the whole.” Rohd offered, “Bring a passion for collaboration. The skill set is to be honestly curious, making, playing, being, listening. I am at this moment a leader, I am at this moment a listener. Really, it’s the ability to play with others.” DiMuro further explored a notion that he had brought up during student workshops: “Curiosity, and this notion of spectrum. Knowing that we are learning and teaching at any given moment.”

Later, when the group was gathered alone, everyone expressed interest in some form of collective institute to further share their knowledge and passion. The experience of having taught together earlier fueled a deep and perhaps previously unrecognized desire to share specific strategies and to watch and engage in one another’s work. Discussion ensued around what a combined institute might look like, where it might take place, who might support it, and who would benefit. DiMuro brainstormed, “If we added together the weeks of institute that we each have, would it be possible to get an academic institution to support us? To allow us all to link together?” Zollar expanded on the idea, saying, “Approaching someone like an MIT, a Harvard—somewhere students could get the rigor—would they offer a degree in collaborative science? Where can we position ourselves where that is what we do?” The conversation generated many questions with few answers. The excitement in the room, however, was palpable.

CORPORATION AS COMMUNITY: AN EVOLVING SENSIBILITY

Since a fiscally healthy company is essential to longevity, arts organizations are always looking for ways to present themselves as a valuable commodity to supporters and audiences and to develop creative financing tailored to their specific circumstances. Despite reservations from the artistic directors, the companies have either entered into a revenue generating venture or have explored with their boards the concept of working with corporations. The group wondered if it is possible to look at these corporations as diverse communities instead of homogenous monoliths. Can a small arts organization collaborate with a corporation without denigrating the artistic process in some way? As when entering any new partnership, these companies approached corporations as unique communities with specific problems to address.

For Cornerstone, Garcés explained, “We’re unique for a company. We’re structured like a charity; virtually all of our shows are pay what you can. Our income is 15 percent earned, 85 percent unearned.” As Zollar explained, Urban Bush Women is on the other end of the spectrum. “With 80 percent earned income based on touring, we are on the road a lot. We are

market driven; we do not set our own prices." The ongoing struggle of financial sustainability is what drove each company to explore the possibilities of corporate partnerships.

As the conversation began, Zollar said, "My stomach is starting to turn..." "Because you're hungry," Rohd asked, "or because of the idea?" "Corporations," she answered. As an artist who cut her teeth in the 60s, Zollar was firm in her rejection of corporate collaboration. "I don't want to be like the young girl who's had too much to drink and realizes, 'Oh, god, I was in bed with him?'" The board of Urban Bush Women agrees with her sensibilities and has steered the company away from any corporate partnerships.

Sojourn has had forays into the corporate world that helped it grow. Running team-building seminars at Nike headquarters has helped finance Rohd's trips between Sojourn's base in Portland and his professorship at Northwestern in Chicago. Also, Portland General Electric (PGE) has become a big Sojourn supporter and helps spread the word. Rohd recounted: "As soon as Carol Morse [head of philanthropy at PGE] started to understand our work, she brought other corporate funders in the door with her."

The conversation around corporate collaboration became more complex when it moved from corporate grants to deeper, more long-term partnerships and how these challenged the values at the heart of each company.

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange has had mixed experiences with corporate collaborations. It had a very positive experience working with the managers of a large healthcare organization: Dance Exchange led the process and shared tools with the managers, who in turn created dances to rev up themselves and co-workers for a new initiative the company was about to undertake. The sheer physicality of the process balanced all the heady thinking they had done and was a great and palpable relief to those participating. On top of that, that their dances were made of gestures that meant something to them—that translated their thoughts and ideas into a physical form—was what clinched their experience.

At the other end of the spectrum, the corporate partnership with a large labor union in a conference setting was less successful. The Dance Exchange had been hired by a producer who wanted the freshness of the experience to shake up the conference and its attendees. Unfortunately, union higher-ups nixed any shifting from status quo and chose to instead treat the company as entertainment; and in doing, all appreciation for community dialogue presented as part of the commission—and what initially made the project enticing to the Dance Exchange—was lost.

Kurup stated, "If we can affect the DNA of how a corporation operates, that's the only way I can justify this kind of work." The groups tried to re-define how they think of a corporate community. A corporation is often a place where people are engaged in more diverse surroundings than in their home lives. Corporations are faced with not only understanding their own cultures, but addressing the ways that outside communities look at them, the successful integration of a product, the impact of a product on society, and the concept of a company's footprint on the environment. All are navigable terrains where art could lead the way.

Cornerstone has, perhaps, the most successful record with corporate partnerships. It was approached by the Gilead Corporation, a pharmaceutical company that specializes in HIV drugs, after one of their representatives saw a Cornerstone show. Garcés set the stage: "Gilead wanted to use Cornerstone's methodologies to address how patients dialogue with their doctors." So, Cornerstone created three one-act plays interspersed with facilitated dialogue. The plays were performed and received very enthusiastically in Detroit, Los Angeles, and Houston. One of the most interesting parts of this collaboration was that Cornerstone was not legally

allowed to mention Gilead or its products within the performances. Pharmaceutical companies have very strict laws about how they can market. So, creatively, Gilead cut Cornerstone loose. The only restrictions they put on the performances were that the script had to be run by the legal department to make sure Gilead was not mentioned.

The groups agreed that a potential way to change corporate DNA would be to join forces, using their combined strengths to partner with the corporate world. The collaborative work that these companies generate is currently a hot commodity in corporate environments. Through years of exploring group dynamics, each of these ensembles has crafted its own unique brand of "collaborative science". Zollar presented the group with an article from the *Harvard Business Review* on making such alliances work.²

Rohd posited, "Is there a brand that involves four artistic companies, that reflects that we are a body?" He continued, "We are dealing with organizational survival and lineage and legacy. How do we create streams of revenue to support us that takes these ideas into more and more spheres?" A consortium of four performing arts organizations with varied and wide-ranging collaborative strengths could be a valuable commodity in the corporate world.

Recognizing that the challenges within a corporation often mirror the challenges that any community faces, these artists are particularly well suited as facilitators of change. Even though it is still an emerging trend for corporations to explore arts-based practices, this group obviously has a wealth of collective knowledge that could greatly benefit the corporate world.

HOME: FROM THE LOCAL TO THE NATIONAL

Each of the four companies has made an impact on the national art scene. Each also has a home base with which they are intimately familiar—the funding landscapes, the community support, the artistic exploration—and reasons that they chose to settle in that place. Cornerstone chose Los Angeles because of “the incredible sense of layered issues.” Sojourn landed in Portland after it identified a town with strong civic participation and an active art scene, but not much interaction between the two. With each organization’s commitment to community in a larger sense, the question arises: How does each interact with and benefit its own home place, while at the same time continuing its work nationally? There is a precarious balance to be struck: continue growing the national body of work and building partnerships around the country, while simultaneously deepening roots at home and working well with neighbors. The group talked about this tension between home and national identity.

Sojourn Theatre has been receiving national attention since its inception eight years ago and is at the forefront of community-engaged art practices. Getting people at home to appreciate these forward-thinking ideas, however, has been at times a significant challenge. Rohd says:

Portland is behind the curve in the way that funders understand the relationship between artistic practice and community building. They’re not behind the curve in understanding community building on its own, but we’ve been trying to break ground for years as a legitimate arts organization that also does this kind of work. I feel like

² Lynda Gratton and Tamara J. Erickson, “Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams, Simple Rules for Making Alliances Work.” *Harvard Business Review*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, November 2007.

we've done a lot of local educating and, because of that, it's forced us to be thoughtful about the balance of the art and the engagement.

Another challenge at home for Sojourn came from the strain of trying to maintain a workspace. For a year and a half, aided by significant foundation support, it experimented with leasing a loft that provided office and rehearsal space. For the first time in the company's life, the management and art-making happened in the same place, and those performing both functions were able to be in dialogue on a regular basis. It soon became clear, however, that running the facility was a bigger challenge than Sojourn had anticipated. It initially hoped that the studio would become a place where other Portland arts organizations could come to work and collaborate, but the already maxed Sojourn artists and organizers decided against becoming landlords as well. When specialized funding for the space ran out, Sojourn decided that it was time to return to its wandering past, and to the relationship-building that this necessitated.

For Urban Bush Women, talk of home brought up similar concerns. Because the company tours for a large part of each year, it has been challenging to establish a strong presence in its base in Brooklyn. Zollar says, "I'm committed to Brooklyn. I like Brooklyn. But I always hear John O'Neil's voice saying, 'Yeah, but what are you doing at home?' I'm not sure we're doing enough." This is a shared concern for each of the companies—the pull between making work in other parts of the country with financial and organizational support, and having to work as hard, if not harder, to build partnerships and funding sources that keep them at home. "Honestly, I think we're a bit stunted by not having our own [workspace]," Zollar continues. "When you have a home you have accountability. It's a grounding thing, not always a confining thing. It is not uncommon that in a five-day rehearsal week we can be working at five different spaces. The space issue is very big."

In a renovated post office in Takoma Park, Maryland, Dance Exchange makes work and runs the organization side by side. "That space brought us to the next level," says DiMuro. "We're a laboratory for creative work. We are an institute. An active, thinking, moving laboratory. And we need a place to explore." While it doesn't ever have to search for rehearsal space, its challenge is one of relationship building. Although Dance Exchange is considered a major DC-based dance company, it is often away from home, which has in the past kept it from interacting with its community in meaningful ways. DiMuro explains:

If there's one thing I've done in the last two years, it's to define our presence in Takoma Park. For many years we were on the road out of necessity. It created a lot of bad blood, especially in the dance community. 'Who is this Liz Lerman anyway?' So for our 30th anniversary last year, it was very important to me that we did something called *30 years in 30 days*. There was something at home going on every month. Some kind of public performance or movement dialogue with the community. We were present.

Though there are obvious differences in how each company defines and maintains "home," they all have a commitment to how the arts can deepen a personal and communal sense of place. As community-engaged artists, their work is intricately connected to a home place. Yet, as leaders in their field, they have a responsibility to bring their work to national and even global forums. Finding a balance between these local and larger spaces is an ongoing dialogue within and between each of these companies.

MOVING FORWARD

This gathering was significant for a number of reasons. These four companies, as designated by the Exemplar Program, have established themselves as leaders in the performing arts in community-engaged art practices. Having this opportunity for exchange contributed to their respective work as they learned of each other's techniques and methodologies. By working and brainstorming side by side, these companies were able to examine both their roots and their futures. They were able, as Zollar had challenged, to "better articulate their value." In doing so, the possibility of partnerships became a natural formula for growth and sustainability. By the end of the weekend, it was clear that the companies had issued each other a challenge. To leverage new financial and educational resources, are there partnerships to be built? With the combined knowledge, audience, and artistic prowess of these companies, the results could be groundbreaking. Whether anything will come of these partnerships is yet to be seen. What is clear is that through this convening, each company found compatriots who share a deep commitment to the future of community engaged-arts practices. Perhaps, in each other, they have found an extended home.