

# *Moby Dick*

## Case Study: Perseverance Theatre

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### INTRODUCTION BY ANIMATING DEMOCRACY

Alaska is considered by many to be the last U.S. frontier—an area one-fifth the size of the entire United States, where many towns are still inaccessible by car. The state’s people, who speak more than 55 different languages, include a large number of Alaska Natives who have strong ties to their traditions. Since it was founded in 1979, Perseverance Theatre in Juneau has been committed to exploring classic plays and new works through a unique “Alaskan lens.” As the state’s flagship professional theater, Perseverance has premiered more than 50 new plays by Alaskan and national playwrights in addition to producing the world’s classics.

For this project, Perseverance began a statewide dialogue about some of Alaska’s most divisive cultural, political, and social issues, using an Alaskan adaptation of Herman Melville’s classic work, *Moby Dick*, as the artistic catalyst. Perseverance wanted to see how theater could effectively connect to and stimulate discourse about Alaskan issues of subsistence rights and the urban/rural divide in disparate places across the state. The company tried several approaches, including Socratic dialogue in Fairbanks and Anchorage and a culturally grounded potluck in Barrow. They sought media coverage to seed the play-based civic dialogues through features on radio and in print. In the process, organizers came to understand how the “gatekeepers” of civic discourse determine their priorities, and were reminded of their original motivation to bolster a non-official level of public engagement. The company came to revise their initial idea that civic dialogue meant large public gatherings that would address policy, and realized the value of more intimate gatherings in which personal story is a potent motivation and a stepping stone to civic deliberation.

On an artistic level, the project underscored the potential for classic works of art to stimulate civic dialogue. The adaptation of *Moby Dick* within regional and contemporary contexts offered rich ground for a wide range of citizens to discuss issues framed by the project. It also gave the company some new insights into their process for creating and presenting work. Peter DuBois went into the project concerned that dialogue might reduce the quality of the art. Admittedly reluctant to interpret productions, he wanted to encourage audience members to develop their own opinions based on what they saw in the play. Looking ahead to the dialogues, he revised some elements of the original script that he perceived to be too strongly slanted toward one point of view and found that exploring the “grey area” improved the art.

Even after a positive conclusion to the *Moby Dick* project, Perseverance leaders continued to question the theater’s authority and responsibility to initiate and convene dialogue on civic issues. However, encouraged by Native Alaskans in Barrow as well as legislators in Fairbanks and Anchorage, Perseverance has concluded that it has something unique to contribute as a civic player. With a growing appreciation of capacity issues and the work involved in building community relationships, Perseverance has begun to apply newfound skills to mount and tour

subsequent social issue plays and to commit the requisite time, funding, and coordination resources. To do the work responsibly, Perseverance must focus attention on the particularities of each community; only by doing so can the company design relevant dialogue opportunities in which people will have a stake and Perseverance can leave behind something of use and meaning.

These lessons, which guide Perseverance's new work, are further detailed in the case study that follows, adapted from a project report by Perseverance's artistic director Peter DuBois, producing director Jeffrey Herrmann, and dialogue coordinator Susan McInnis. Based on their respective roles in the project, they share the storytelling, incorporating additional insights from exchanges with Animating Democracy liaison Abel Lopez and the Animating Democracy staff.

## **A THRILLING ADAPTATION: CREATING AN ALASKAN MOBY DICK**

JEFFREY HERRMANN

Our project sought to unite Alaskans from across our vast state in dialogue about some of the most divisive cultural, political, and social issues we face as a people. These include Native claims to the right of subsistence, the growing urban and rural divide and the battle between our environment and our economy.

These issues are the subject of front-page stories in our newspapers; heated exchanges on our radio talk shows; federal and state legislation; public policy debates; and, seemingly more and more frequently, litigation in our courts. Alaskans have very strong, emotionally-charged views on these issues, and debate is often confrontational. Our project—a statewide tour of our original Alaskan theatrical adaptation of *Moby Dick*—sought to elevate the tenor of these debates through an arts-based promotion of rational exchange.

### **Interlacing Narratives**

This noble aim was far from the mind of Perseverance Theatre's artistic director Peter DuBois when, in the spring of 2000, he first pondered the idea of staging Melville's epic novel with director Leon Ingulsrud, a member of Anne Bogart's New York-based Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI) Company. Leon first came to Perseverance in the spring of 1999 for a SITI residency, and this partnership produced *Short Stories*, an original, ensemble-built work constructed from interviews with 25 members of the Juneau community. He returned in the spring of 2000 to serve as an instructor in the company's first annual CrossTraining Writing and Performance Project and it was during this visit that he and Peter first began to discuss an Alaskan-themed adaptation of *Moby Dick*.

Leon, a passionate devotee of the novel, had been involved in creating several other theatrical adaptations of *Moby Dick*, most notably in Japan. In Alaska, as in Japan, there is a long and rich indigenous whaling tradition, and the idea of interlacing Melville's narrative with the whaling culture of the Iñupiat Eskimos immediately captured everyone's imagination. It also meshed perfectly with the mission and history of the theater, which, for more than 20 years has pursued a unique aesthetic through a multicultural approach to theater-making or, as we often refer to it, by engineering "cultural collision." Indeed, signature Perseverance pieces over the years have included *Yup'ik Antigone*, a retelling of Sophocles' Greek tragedy through the traditions of the Bering Sea Eskimos; *Odyssey*, an Alaskan re-envisioning of Homer's epic; and *In Two Worlds*, a powerful work by Earl Atchak, a Native Alaskan from the village of Chevak, about the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Furthermore, the opportunity to juxtapose the capitalist-based, Anglo-American whaling traditions of Melville's 19<sup>th</sup> century novel with the subsistence-based, Alaskan Native whaling traditions still practiced in our state suggested a thrilling and all-too-rare political, cultural, and social relevance for this piece. This relevance prompted dreams of touring *Moby Dick* across the state, and this is what eventually led us to the Animating Democracy Lab.

Planning, research, and fundraising for a spring 2001 world premiere commenced immediately after Leon's visit. Peter and Perseverance resident designer Art Rotch conducted preliminary research in whaling communities in Massachusetts; then, in October, Peter traveled to Barrow, Alaska—the epicenter of Iñupiat whaling culture—under the sponsorship of then-State Senator Al Adams, to observe the fall whale hunt. For the better part of a week, Peter played cards and shot pool with whaling captains and elders, looked at artifacts on display at the Iñupiat Heritage Center, went out on the Arctic ice, helped butcher a whale, and, finally, had the opportunity to interview whaling captains Jake Adams, Oliver Leavitt, Deano Olemaun, and Crawford Patkotak.

As we've learned through our many years of cross-cultural work, the difference between *honoring* a culture and *exploiting* a culture can be quite fine. We thus knew how important it would be to not only capture the words of actual Iñupiat whaling captains in the piece, but to physically bring the Iñupiat people into the rehearsal room as the piece was being created. To this end, Al Adams escorted me to Barrow in February 2001 to observe *Kivgiq*, a quadrennial Iñupiat cultural festival. On this trip, I scouted for an Iñupiat performer who would be able to join an ethnically and geographically diverse cast of performers and was fortunate enough to find Andrew MacLean, a young actor, drummer, and dancer. I explained to Andrew that he would be expected to speak for and represent the interests of his community in the rehearsal room, and this challenging responsibility seemed to excite him tremendously.

### **Looking at the Issues Through a Unique Prism**

Full-time rehearsals for the piece commenced in March 2001 with a half-Caucasian/half-Native cast of six from around the state. In addition to Andrew, we welcomed Ishmael Hope, a 19-year-old Tlingit storyteller from Juneau who had never before appeared on a stage (and, yes, that's his real name); Jake Waid, a Tlingit actor from Fairbanks; Owen Hutchinson, a 16-year-old actor who had been regularly appearing on the Perseverance stage since the age of four; actress Sara Waisanen from Anchorage; and Darius Mannino, then the company's marketing director.

Under the direction of Leon and Peter, and with the assistance of young playwright Lucy Thurber, the cast developed the script from scratch over the course of nearly six weeks, employing improvisation and writing exercises that drew on thousands of pages of research and supplemental materials, as well as Peter's interviews with the whaling captains and the novel itself. As we had hoped, Andrew was on the phone daily with the Iñupiat Heritage Center, with elders from the Barrow community, and with his mother, Dr. Edna MacLean, a linguist and President of Ilisagvik College in Barrow, to seek guidance, clarification, permission, and cultural information as he and his cast mates developed the script and learned traditional Iñupiat dances.

During this rehearsal/writing process the larger political, social, and civic issues really emerged. Though hoped for, this was an entirely organic process and the neutral way the issues were ultimately presented in the final work is reflective, I think, of this genesis. As Ishmael Hope described in an article on the production in the *Anchorage Daily News*, "There's no 'Eskimo whaling good/white whaling bad' thing. If two people with two different viewpoints on whaling

came out of the show feeling validated, we were successful.”<sup>1</sup> As Peter continued, “By putting the two stories side by side, people get to make their own judgments.” At this point we knew that this piece needed to be seen by the rest of the state: Not only would it prove an entertaining and engaging work of theater, but could also function as a unique prism through which to approach some very divisive issues. We knew that the dialogue this project could engender would make it an ideal fit for the Animating Democracy Lab.

Following a 25-hour marathon community reading of the novel on the local NPR affiliate, the show opened at Perseverance in May and ran for 19 performances. Reviews and word of mouth were uniformly excellent and the show ended up being one of the best attended season-closing productions in the theater’s history. (After the long winter, Alaskans are loath to choose a dark theater over the lengthening daylight of May and June). We were particularly thrilled with a letter we received from Lieutenant Governor Fran Ulmer, who commented that “...having just been in Barrow for a whaling experience myself, I know how authentic you were...I think you should take it ‘on the road!’” In July 2001, when we received the letter from Americans for the Arts informing us that we’d been awarded \$50,000 to take *Moby Dick* to Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Barrow the following February, we were able to tell her that we’d be doing just that.

### **Envisioning the Dialogue**

The approach that we had successfully articulated in our application—developed after countless phone calls to our project partners and other Alaskan individuals and organizations interested in promoting civic dialogue—involved dialogue activities on subsistence rights, the urban/rural divide, and the struggle between environment and economy in conjunction with performances of *Moby Dick* at each stop of a statewide tour that would take in our biggest cities and at least one Native village. Most importantly, these activities were to be specially tailored to the needs, mores, and customs of each community. Methods suitable in Barrow, a Native village of 3,000, wouldn’t necessarily work in Anchorage, an urban, mostly Caucasian metropolis of 300,000, and vice versa. Nevertheless, we planned to employ a few consistent principles.

- We would seek out representatives of key constituencies in each community for endorsement, guidance, and participation;
- We would detach all dialogue activities in both time and space from the performances to ensure that they became more than simply “post-show discussions”; and
- We would employ radio, an indispensable format in Alaska, to expand the reach of dialogue activities in each community.

We certainly didn’t expect to produce solutions to these huge, entrenched issues. But we did hope to demonstrate to the public, as well as to policy makers, social leaders, and activists that the arts can serve as a relevant and active catalyst for civic engagement. Also, we hoped to promote intelligent exchange in grappling with these issues, which often evoke contentious and emotional response.

Upon receipt of the award, we contracted Susan McInnis, a Fairbanks-based writer and producer, who had hosted her own weekly public affairs interview program on radio and television in Fairbanks for nearly a decade, to serve as our dialogue coordinator. Peter, Andrew, Susan, and I were all looking forward to the Connecticut Animating Democracy Learning

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<sup>1</sup> “Melville Meets Muktuk,” *Anchorage Daily News*, May 31, 2001

Exchange in September 2001 as an opportunity to get together in person and really map out our plans when world events tragically intervened. Finally, two months later, Susan and I attended the Chicago Learning Exchange, and this opportunity to meet with other grantees influenced the development of our project and dialogue activities. Other projects inspired Susan to experiment with the idea of smaller dialogue groups where personal story and direct experience could serve as the doorway to conversation. She also left Chicago committed to the idea of commissioning print and radio journalism on our dialogue issues in each community before, during, and after performances of *Moby Dick* as a way of “seeding the atmosphere.” We added “InReach” performances for school groups to help us reach a broader demographic. Finally, we made the decision to pursue subcontractors in Barrow and Anchorage to help tailor the dialogue activities to each of these communities.

Leon, Peter, and the cast came back together in January 2002 to trim, rehearse, and reshape the show. Following a single send-off performance at Juneau Douglas High School for an enthusiastic audience of 340, we packed the set and costumes into our 18-foot U-Haul truck (which then had to be ferried six hours north to Haines in order to access to the state highway system) and flew to Fairbanks for four performances at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, followed by four performances in Anchorage at the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts and two performances at Barrow High School.

## **ORGANICALLY GROWN DIALOGUE: SEEDING THE UNEXPECTED**

SUSAN MCINNIS

I came away from my first exposure to Perseverance’s *Moby Dick*—on videotape—remarkably stimulated. I wanted to talk about what I’d seen and heard, and to listen to what other people thought—about how different peoples have evolved such divergent approaches to resource use, and how their relationships to the land, its bounty and innate hazards, have created through time what we take for granted as a flow of history, economics, cultures, even religions. I sensed that if I was so inspired by a video, others might be, too.

Our plan was to send copies of the videotape to several of Alaska’s brightest writers and producers, inviting them to reflect on the ideas and issues *Moby Dick* raises, on anything from Alaska’s subsistence wars to live theater and civic dialogue. We hoped that as the play moved from Juneau to Fairbanks to Anchorage to Barrow, essays and broadcast segments would “invite” people to the performances, and deepen the coming community dialogues. People who had already thought deeply about Alaska’s resource issues and the gulfs between its peoples would be invited to open our events to further stimulate discussion.

When we returned from Chicago, I got on the phone and on e-mail—and hit a wall.

The state’s newspapers and radio and television stations were interested in news, not in reflection or essays. As an editor said bluntly, “News is now, Susan.” They were unwilling to be drawn into the subsistence debate without a news catalyst. When the play came to town, editors and producers said, they’d be happy to send a reviewer.

Alaska’s preeminent Native leaders were scheduled months in advance. Delighted when an Anchorage subsistence advocate agreed to participate (the first to come on board), I was dismayed when, in my very next phone call to an equally respected activist, I was chastised for inviting a white priest to weigh in on a Native issue. What was I thinking? And timing was problematic. In Fairbanks, February was a very busy month for Native leaders lobbying the State

Legislature and Congress. March was worse. April didn't look much better. In Barrow, ideas generated in a first phone call fell flat in the next. In call after call, people wanted to know what our angle was— What side were we on? What were we after? Who else had we called? Were they participating? Why? Why not? I fretted we'd end up with nothing at all in Barrow, and rote presentations from opposite poles in Anchorage and Fairbanks, followed by a quick Q & A with the audience, coffee and cookies.

I've said this from time to time: I felt like I'd asked Elvis to play the prom. A high school classmate may have actually suggested it the fall of 1964, but whether she did or I made it up, it's a useful metaphor. It's not inconceivable that Elvis would have played the San Rafael High School senior ball the spring of '65. But getting him there would have been a remarkably complicated process, with consequences entirely unrelated to how it would feel to get all dressed up and dance cheek-to-cheek while the King crooned.

In retrospect, had we followed our plan, we might well have inspired the media (at least some of them) to produce pieces that seeded the air, using the play as a natural springboard for civic dialogue. The voices of leaders, advocates, and activists, all gathered from around Alaska in the same period of time, sharing their experience and viewpoints, would, I think, have deepened the possibilities of discussions we anticipated. But, like getting Elvis, it would have been a remarkably complicated process. A few days after returning from Chicago, I got an early (and late) warning from Steve Lindbeck, an editor for the *Anchorage Daily News* who had formerly been director of the Alaska Humanities Forum (AHF). To do the project "right," he said, would take a year, with core people working in each community to create sufficient buy-in among the press, Native and non-Native leaders, local governments, activist organizations, non-profits, and churches to generate a public groundswell in time for the performances and dialogues.

We didn't have a year.

### **Unlocking the Door**

Still, in retrospect, I can see that over the next weeks there was a sea change. As I talked to people, I found myself telling them how our version of *Moby Dick* came to be a play: How the stories of everyday Nantucket whalers, engaged in the unremarkable events of survival and economy, became Melville's classic work; how they'd been woven together with the life stories and reflections of four Iñupiat whaling captains from Barrow. In return, I was led to people with interesting and powerful personal stories to tell—about subsistence life, being Alaskans, Native and non-Native, about relationships to the land, culture, and family. In each town, the hand-to-hand contacts and connections seemed an intelligence guiding emerging events, everywhere drawing the dialogues away from standard, positioned politics towards story, shared experience, personal and nuanced; life's warp and weft.

Greg Gustafson, Fairbanks' Lathrop High School Drama teacher, grew truly excited when I told him Jake Waid, a Lathrop graduate, was in the cast. "Make sure he comes," Greg said. "My kids need to see that a Native kid can be an actor. They need to hear *his* story. And we're studying how Shakespeare's plays came out of both local, personal lives and great politics. This is a good fit for my students."

In Anchorage, Ira Perman, Executive Director of the AHF, suggested I talk with Panú Lucier, who developed and runs AHF's Urban/Rural Exchange Program. He described her as a strong Yup'ik woman who would bring a clear voice to the dialogue. Panú's father was Charles Lucier, noted ethnographer of Iñupiat culture. Her maternal grandparents, she told me, were among the first Native Bureau of Indian Affairs schoolteachers, and they moved from village to village starting

schools. Panú, who was raised in Anchorage and Fairbanks, said she would gladly join the roundtable in Anchorage, and would bring one or two young high school students who had participated in AHF's Exchange Program. Their stories, she said, would add a lot.

Other phone calls led me to Herb Anungazuk, a whaling captain from the Yup'ik village of Wales, where he is still a captain for traditional hunts, and who works for the Parks Service in Anchorage; and to Gabe Sam, an Anchorage resident and subsistence advocate who was raised traditionally in the Athabaskan village of Huslia. Both were intrigued by the idea of a roundtable/talking circle, and felt they had much to teach those who would listen. As it turned out, they did.

### **Shaping the Dialogue**

Saunders McNeill, of the Alaska State Council on the Arts, said I must talk with Dick La Fever, an American Indian from Minnesota who introduced the Socrates Café to Anchorage. The Socrates Café was developed about five years ago by Christopher Phillips, a California ex-journalist who was frustrated with the level of "official" public dialogue and the lack of opportunities for dialogues among "the people."<sup>2</sup>

The Café sounded like a good fit for our dialogues in Anchorage and Fairbanks. Dick was delighted. His "group" had met twice, but had never taken on anything as meaty or Alaskan as subsistence, and he thought it was a great idea. For the co-host at a Café in Fairbanks, he suggested Henry Cole, a long-time Alaskan with a brilliant, roving intellect and an appreciation for Alaska's culture and people.

In Barrow, library archivist Fannie Akpik said she would arrange a traditional foods potlatch to welcome the cast and crew, with Iñupiat dancing afterwards. As we worked together via phone and email, I began slowly to understand that her offerings were more than gracious hospitality. By connecting *Moby Dick* to Iñupiat welcoming traditions—shared food and dancing—Fannie was welcoming the play into the community, showing approval, inviting the community to come see it. She sent me to Jana Harachek of the North Slope Borough School District. Jana's innovation was to arrange for the videotaping of the play so it could later be broadcast to seven village schools in the district, where classes—but also the entire village community—could see it.

Diana Gish, reporter for Barrow's KBRW radio, offered to interview Peter and Andrew when they arrived in Barrow, and invited cast members to read from *Moby Dick*. The interviews and readings were broadcast over KBRW the week of the activities, reaching Barrow and the seven surrounding villages. In Fairbanks, KUAC-FM interviewed me and Henry Cole about the play, the dialogues, and the upcoming Café. Newspapers in the three communities ran short news pieces on the coming performances and dialogues, and reviewed the play when it came to town.

In the end, story unlocked the door to our dialogues. Elvis did not come. The dance was cheek-to-cheek.

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<sup>2</sup> More information on Socrates Café @ [www.philosopher.org](http://www.philosopher.org)

## MULTIPLE TONGUES, MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

The project involved the communities of Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Barrow in performances, theater workshops, Socrates Café sessions, open discussions and, in Barrow, a Potlatch and celebration. The company also presented “Inreach” performances and workshops for middle and high school students in all three communities, and a public presentation at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Attendance at these events varied widely, but all succeeded to some extent in eliciting stories and engaging participants in conversation about the issues. Five events were particularly illuminating in terms of our goals for community dialogue.

### Socrates Cafés and Other Events

SUSAN MCINNIS

“Know thyself” was a great Socratic precept. In the Café, the Socratic method extends to all of the people in the group, who listen, ask questions, and consider the “truths” each speaker brings. This allows firsthand knowledge to come into discussions that have long been held hostage to opinion. I immediately felt that by having the voices least likely heard on issues like subsistence come to a public place and share their experiences and their knowledge with a general, uncharted group, we would be inviting the whole group to put prejudices down and pick up other points of view for consideration. In this way, our various events (including classroom experiences) would promote the same sort of exploration of subsistence that *Moby Dick* provided on the stage.

#### “The Meanings of Subsistence” - a Socrates Café in Fairbanks

Five days after the run of *Moby Dick* concluded in Fairbanks, the Socrates Café dialogue was held at McCafferty’s Coffee House. About 20 people attended. Henry Cole led off by asking open questions about the play and we quickly realized that only a quarter of the attendees had actually seen it. Those who hadn’t seen *Moby Dick* attended because they had heard about the play and the Socrates Café event through radio, newspaper, or word of mouth. To bring everyone “into the room,” I gave a brief synopsis of the play and, as a way of framing the play as a “bridge” to the subsistence issues we hoped to tackle, discussed how both the play and the subject matter had moved me. Another person picked up on this approach and said that the facts and figures of 19<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts whaling presented in the play had moved him and made him think about subsistence. The discussion continued to gradually move away from the play and towards the issue of subsistence and, most usefully, to the participants’ personal experiences as related to subsistence.

The foundation of the play continued to appear and disappear throughout the evening. (People often returned to it for examples). In this way, *Moby Dick* functioned successfully as a catalyst and stimulus for the dialogue, helping lead people to the personal stories where opinion and belief are formed. It is at this point that the Socratic method can really kick in, forcing us to ask ourselves and each other: “Where does this belief come from?”

Henry had convinced a big game guide, Henry Tiffany, and his wife, Clover, to attend. They were reluctant, and said so, fearing that the room would be biased against them. They told of developing long-term relationships with people in the villages around which their clients hunted, about leaving behind meat, bone, skin, rack and antlers for use by villagers, and about trying to educate clients to Native ways of respect for life, as they’d been educated. They also talked about feeling trapped by negative public opinions—about guides and commercial hunting, even



about Native Alaskans. Their contributions stimulated questions, and then other stories, perspectives and opinions—some cynical about Native subsistence. (“Alaska Natives live mostly in Fairbanks and Anchorage—there’s grocery stores everywhere!”)

June Rogers directs the Fairbanks Arts Association and owns McCafferty’s with her husband, Bill. She was raised in a west coast village near Nome, by her Scandinavian miner father and Yup’ik mother. Her story came towards the end of the Café: June said she’d once participated in a focus group where she was asked what it means to be Alaskan. She answered, “Blueberries.”

Every summer, she told us quietly, her grandmother, mother, aunties, and cousins, their friends and neighbors, gathered blueberries together. Gathering, they worked as families, shared stories, taught the little ones, sang, played games, laughed. Blueberries wove through the year, in meals and treats, summer memories and cultural connections—with the land, with Yup’ik people, with family. June says she is an Alaskan because of blueberries, a metaphor she passed on as a way of understanding subsistence.

One thing that surprised us about this Café event was that the mixture of people who had and hadn’t seen *Moby Dick* proved to be ideal. If no one had seen the play, it would have been difficult to launch the conversation: The play provided a slightly abstract—and thus terrifically effective—place to start the conversation. Had everyone seen the play, the discussion might never have moved beyond the work. There was no control group to compare with, so it is possible that if I hadn’t had to spend time explaining the play to everyone, we would have gotten deeper into a subsistence conversation...and sooner. (The two hours allotted for the discussion seemed to fly by.) But because not everyone in the room had seen the production, the common link became living in Alaska at a time when subsistence is a pressing issue. (In Fairbanks, it is especially so: ten minutes from my home, I can be out on “the land.”)

The Café’s goal was not to reach consensus or come to conclusions, but to probe assumptions, beliefs, opinions, positions, and possibilities to gain greater understanding. It seemed successful—and became a spontaneous, functioning “leave-behind”—for the Animating Democracy project in Alaska, as did the Café in Anchorage. Both continued to meet regularly and address such questions as “What Is the Nature of Security?” (addressing personal security and, in the wake of 9/11, national security); “Is Alaska a Failed State?” (a dialogue in response to a pointed public query by a local activist); and “What Does It Mean to Be Sane/Insane?”

### **“The Meanings of Subsistence” - a Socrates Café in Anchorage**

Approximately 15 people attended Anchorage’s Socrates Café, which took place at Cyrano’s Café & Theatre four days after the first Anchorage performance of *Moby Dick*. Several participants had experience with rural living and the subsistence lifestyle, although it is not clear whether they were Alaska Native. The discussion was lively, interesting, and story-filled, with questions, probing opinions and statements. Still, Dick La Fever, who organized the event, noted that, “collectively we did not know the real meaning of subsistence, as an Alaska Native might. We seemed to all support the idea of a referendum going before the people of Alaska for a vote, and we seemed to support a rural preference for subsistence. To bring more depth to this discussion, we need a good balance of urban/rural and Native/non-Native perspectives, facilitated in a Socratic manner.” One participant had started off the dialogue by saying that the play had nothing to do with Alaskan resource issues but, by evening’s end, had reversed his position and felt that the play allowed people an opportunity to look at subsistence and the urban/rural divide in new ways. The people who came that night met again the following week to continue their discussions about subsistence and, as in Fairbanks, the Café has continued to gather monthly in Anchorage, in a larger venue.

***“Subsistence in the 21st Century” - an open discussion  
at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage***

I had hoped to be at this roundtable/talking circle, which took place about a week after the Socrates Café, but was foiled by a plane that was late by two hours. Serenity Chya, of the Alaska Native Heritage Center, who had so graciously made sure the Center would serve our every need, stepped in as host.

Our round table included Herb Anungazuk, a whaling captain who had been raised in subsistence tradition; Panú Lucier, who had never practiced subsistence; Gabe Sam, a subsistence hunter and advocate; and two students, Erin Steinkruger and Ariel Larson, who had recently traveled out to the bush, experiencing village life and subsistence for the first time. Only some of the audience and some of the round table members had attended the performance and, as in Fairbanks, this seemed to seed the room well for dialogue.

Gabe Sam had told me before the event, “As a subsistence specialist for the Rural Alaska Community Action Program, it is my job to educate the general public about why the Native people’s subsistence way of life is more than just about food, it is a cultural way of thinking: [a recognition of the] sacredness of it all”—a statement as serious as it was cheerfully ironic. He said he had been working with the ethical [hunting] guides to establish long-term relationships and shared responsibilities for the conservation of the resource. Others, whom he called “rogue guides going for the almighty dollar” had publicly cast doubts on Native hunting practices that are integral to the Athabascan way of life. “We highly respect that way of life. ...It’s like religion, you know? You don’t have to believe in it but you should at the very least respect it,” he said.

Panú, who said that her father didn’t hunt, but that her mother depended on friends and relatives to provide traditional foods for the family when they lived in Anchorage, wanted the students to speak because of the gap in understanding between those who live in Alaska’s cities and those who live in the “bush,” in rural Alaska. By sending white, urban high school students to villages, Panú said, the program helps them “learn first-hand, in a way that changes perspectives. They live with a host family, doing whatever the family is doing. In March and April, there’s ptarmigan hunting. In summer, there’s gathering.” Indeed, Ariel Larson left Anchorage a vegetarian and animal rights activist, and returned with a new perspective and attitude about subsistence.

I arrived just as the Miracle Drummers and Singers, tradition bearers of the Yup’ik culture, began their program. When we were planning the roundtable at the Alaska Native Heritage Center, Serenity suggested the group several times, and each time I said no. We were trying to keep costs down. She would suggest them again, and I would decline. When it came time to sign the contract, Jeff and I saw that the Drummers and Singers were included. We shrugged. Serenity must know something we don’t, we agreed. She’d been right about everything else. The cost wasn’t so great. Jeff signed.

There were 18 or so drummers and singers, from a three-year-old who disappeared behind his drum when he played, to dancers and drummers in their 60s, among them a teenage boy who moved like silk. The leader taught as he introduced each song, made everyone laugh, and was thoughtful in making connections between tradition and innovation, dance and life, stresses and the relief of a continued cultural experience. I think the dance program perfectly complemented what the panelists did before I arrived. In fact, this was the part of the program in which the audience was most directly involved; a number of them got up and danced with the group. This is not uncommon when it comes to Alaska Native performance; the wall between

performer and audience, stage and auditorium is quite permeable. Although not a “dialogue” in words, it creates a strong sense of connection among people who might have arrived at the event as strangers.

There were only about 20 people in the audience, which disappointed the presenters, but they were still pleased with their evening and glad they’d come to do it. Panú, Gabe, and Herb all said they felt they’d gotten to some good places with the presentation, though Herb was concerned that there should have been more time for it. Ariel had never shared her experiences publicly before and was really jazzed to have done it, excited to meet Gabe and Herb, the other speakers, and to recognize and talk with members of the Miracle Drummers, whom she’d remembered fondly from her village experience.

### **Barrow Stories and Celebration**

JEFFREY HERRMANN

#### **“Telling Our Stories” workshop - The Iñupiat Heritage Center in Barrow**

Our first event in Barrow was not a dialogue but a workshop at the Iñupiat Heritage Center, which drew the majority of the Iñupiat Theatre membership. Ron Brower, the center’s director, had requested it, excited by how the company’s presence in Barrow might advance his goals for the center to diversify its cultural services and offerings. We covered what it means to manage a nonprofit cultural organization. Most fascinatingly, we discussed the complicated issues of royalties and performance rights in relation to the traditional Iñupiat stories this troupe is dedicated to dramatizing and performing in the Iñupiat language. Who owns these stories? Who can or needs to give permission for such stories to undergo dramatization? Who then should be entitled to share in the proceeds from performances of these stories? This workshop established our presence in the community for the upcoming *Moby Dick* events in a positive way.

The following night Peter and the cast led a discussion with 25-30 participants on the creation of the show and how personal history and stories of everyday life—i.e. interviews with four Barrow whaling captains who had shared their experiences, memories, expertise, and cultural traditions—became a play. Peter’s role shifted during the evening to that of moderator as the discussion gradually moved from the show itself to the underlying civic issues with which it grapples.

According to Peter, the scenes that triggered the most discussion, surprisingly, were not the voices of the captains, but the voice of Melville. “I think this is because it is very impolite for Native people to speak for one another and so they felt less comfortable commenting on the interviews,” he noted. “Having said that, I think that the fact that we included the interviews—the fact that the captains felt free to speak with me—helped free the voices of the folks at the dialogue. Because these four captains, highly respected community leaders, spoke freely on these issues, the other community members felt more entitled to speak out.”

In particular, the differences (and similarities) between Yankee and Iñupiat traditions were explored in depth, as was the emotional question of whether or not the Alaska Native Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) should be opened up for oil drilling. It was powerful watching community members wrestle with an issue that, for them, is not a philosophical abstraction, but one that will have real, immediate, and dramatic impact on their everyday lives. As might be expected, passionate and opposing feelings about this issue were aired.

Peter further notes, “We had engaged the community several times over the past year before this particular dialogue ... and the night prior, we had given something to the community—a free organizational workshop—and many of the workshop attendees returned for this event. So

there was a level of trust and a relationship going into this dialogue and, as a result, there was a passion and energy to this discussion that I don't know we would or could have seen in Anchorage or Fairbanks. One woman, the daughter of our host, anthropologist Ron Brower, tearfully told stories about how the retrieval of her ancestors' bones were upsetting the ancestors. And then Ron's older sister scolded him for his views on ANWR. I don't think the conversation would have been so candid without first building trust over an extended period of time."

We discovered that in this community personal history was the doorway through which we could approach larger civic and political issues; that the personal *is* the civic and the political. This was a huge realization for us and suggests a strategy we can explore in future projects involving Alaska Natives and Alaska Native culture. This evening was a real success and we attribute this to the how the discussion was kicked off: through stories and personal narratives.

I also think that this event and the Saturday potlatch prepared people and "softened" them up for what they were going to see at the subsequent performances of *Moby Dick*, which occurred at the end of our stay in the community. This is actually something we talk a lot about at Perseverance: How do we prepare our audiences, in advance, for what they're going to see, especially when the material is strong and possibly controversial? I believe that these pre-*Moby Dick* events helped people understand the underlying issues going in and prepared them in advance. When those individuals emerged from the performance, they were noticeably fired up and ready to talk some more. They also knew who we were and so felt comfortable approaching us with comments and questions.

***"Potlatch and celebration with Iñupiat dancing by Nuvukmiut dancers" - The Iñupiat Heritage Center in Barrow***

This event was a social gathering organized by Ron Brower, head of the Iñupiat Heritage Center, and Fanny Akpik, leader of the Nuvukmiut Dancers and head of the Tuzzy Library at Ilisagvik College. It happened on a Saturday night following Saturday afternoon's performance of *Moby Dick* and preceding the Sunday matinee. In addition to the *Moby Dick* cast and crew, 25-30 other people attended. A Native foods potlatch was to have been followed by a "thank you" performance by the Nuvukmiut Dancers; unfortunately, a village Elder had died just a few days prior to the event and custom prohibited any dancing for a period of time. Still, the event provided a chance for cast members to interact with very welcoming and excited community members and there was a great deal of discussion about the show over the *muktuk* (whale meat), seal, and caribou soup. Peter said that what he noticed most was people's desire to act upon the relationship that was forming: "The conversations were about what we could do together next to help keep the dialogue alive—radio plays, bringing more theater to Barrow, bringing Iñupiat performers to Juneau." This was yet another demonstration to us of how the social provides the way into complicated civic and political issues in this community. While the celebration was taking place, a whaling crew was building a bearded seal skin boat in another room at the Center in preparation for the upcoming spring whale hunt. We gradually moved over to watch as Philip Fitzgerald, our stage carpenter, actually participated in lacing up the boat and lashing down the seal skin.

Three hundred people in Barrow saw *Moby Dick*. Following the last show, we offered lumber and metal from the set to anyone interested. Several representatives of Barrow whaling crews who were preparing for the spring hunt in April and May, brought trucks to the high school that afternoon and claimed much of the materials. It gave us great pleasure to know that the set for this show was going to be put to use "out on the ice." It brought the project—which began

almost two years earlier with Peter collecting stories from these individuals—satisfyingly full circle.

## HOW THIS PROJECT MADE A DIFFERENCE

### Artistic Impact

PETER DUBOIS

The artistic impact of the dialogue project manifested itself in two ways: in creation and in performance of the piece. *Moby Dick* was, literally, built from dialogue: The interviews I conducted with the Barrow whaling captains are key to a piece which was then built through six weeks of discussion and dialogue between cast members, the directors, the playwright and, through Andrew MacLean, the Barrow community. Because of this, the dialogues related to the play felt like a natural extension of the play.

Thinking about civic dialogue also got me thinking about how the best art leads me to engage new questions and fresh associations. This realization allowed me to go into the work and edit out strong “positions” so that the audience might create their own positions from what they saw. For example, we cut an entire scene about “leavers and takers” between the original Juneau production in the spring of 2001 and the statewide tour in February 2002 as it appeared to be a heavy-handed critique about Western culture. I felt this critique would limit the dialogue and polarize communities. This was an example of how preparing the piece for civic dialogue actually improved the art itself.

In terms of the performance, I found that when the audience is able to talk about the work, the artists are able to see what is reading—what is coming across—and what isn’t. Building a stronger bridge between the actors and the audiences through dialogue activities also made the actors more concerned with the clarity of their artistic intentions: The actors and I had to ask, more diligently than ever, “What is this moment communicating?” because if we weren’t clear, it might come back and haunt us during a dialogue. This differs from usual character development work because it is more inclusive of the spectator. I tend to believe that the performance should speak for itself and that any attempt to define the work, or guide people’s interpretation of the work, somehow compromises the integrity of the work. I was therefore anxious about leading dialogues surrounding the play. What I found was that rather than fencing in the play, the dialogues cracked the performance open to a range of interpretations I had not imagined. For example, in Barrow it led to conversations about Shamanism and the incarceration of Shamans in asylums; in Anchorage a surprising number of people were interested in seeing white Alaskans participate more in Native cultural rituals; in Fairbanks it exposed prejudice and cynicism about dialogue in the Native community. Exposing this prejudice became important to individuals who are working statewide to educate in the areas of subsistence and the urban/rural divide.

I think that when people feel passion, they are looking for a frame to put it in. I think a facilitator needs to provide that frame, so that the emotions are able connect to our thoughts and then, ideally, to action. In the dialogues I facilitated in Fairbanks and Barrow, I used questions about the play as a framing method: What does Ahab have in common with an Iñupiat whaling captain? What does he have in common with an oil speculator? What do the interview captains have in common with Ishmael? With Ahab? In general, I felt the play served as an excellent springboard for dialogue because it had a level of ambiguity and did not stake out a position. It therefore helped people get to both the gray areas and the areas of common ground quicker.

The biggest challenge we faced was simply the impact the dialogues had on the artists' schedules. Touring is exhausting and the days are brutally long. Adding dialogue activities to those days exacerbated the problem of exhaustion.

### **Civic Engagement**

SUSAN MCINNIS

“It’s not about anger; it’s about education”  
—Gabe Sam

The play informed the civic element of this project from the very beginning. Its multiple narratives and voices (open-ended, filled with perspectives but without an editorial position) guided us toward an open-handed way of developing the dialogues, permitting and inviting many voices in return. While we saw this potential in the planned, media-driven project, it had an unexpected, personal, hand-to-hand impact when the civic dialogues came to fruition. With all voices welcome, it was safe to assume that we could all speak to each other—an opportunity in three communities to set aside differences, as Gabe Sam might say, and become “about education.”

When Jeff, Peter, and I first talked in the fall of 2001, we generally agreed that much of the dialogue regarding subsistence and the personal and commercial uses of Alaska’s natural resources takes place between public figures, in the press, the legislature, in positioned forums—points of view talking to other points of view across gulfs. Less dialogue takes place among “the people.”

We succeeded most, I think, at this “people’s” level, and the project may have its greatest impact there. The stories celebrated onstage were also celebrated in the dialogues, and created memorable metaphors like June Rogers’ “Blueberries.” In Anchorage, “audience” members got up to dance with the Miracle Drummers and Singers. In Barrow, people with different views, not always friendly to each other, sat down to dinner and talked. In Anchorage and in Fairbanks, a tangible leave-behind in the Socrates Café will continue the practice of dialogue, as people gather from month to month, thinking and talking together.

With regard to the detachment of the dialogue activities in both time and space from the performances, as well as the issue of not having the director or cast present for the dialogue activities, Peter reflected: “What worked was that people weren’t feeling tired or rushed, as is often the case at post-show discussions. I also believe that people recalled the play better, in some ways, with distance; the work had time to settle in. As a result, I think participants were able to achieve a deeper level of discussion and analysis. What didn’t work was that, in many cases, the cast and I were not present. Without artists in the room, the goal of having the work inspire the dialogue lost some steam. We also had to rely on second-hand accounts of how the work interacted with the ideas raised in the dialogues. If we could do it all over again, I would place the dialogues closer in time to the performances and make sure they are scheduled so that at least one artist is at each event. That way we could better keep the art at the center of the dialogue.”

## Organizational Impact

JEFFREY HERRMANN

### External perceptions of the organization

The *Moby Dick* project enabled vigorous pursuit of our organizational mission and goals. At Perseverance, we are dedicated to serving artists and audiences throughout Alaska. This is quite a challenge for a mid-sized theater located in a geographically isolated town of 30,000 in a state twice the size of Texas, where communities are separated by oceans, tundra, and glaciers. Over the years we have sought to overcome this challenge through radio plays, a statewide internship program, and, most importantly, statewide touring. *Moby Dick* was by far our most ambitious effort, visiting more locations over a greater geographic expanse and a longer period of time with greater success than ever before. This has solidified our resolve to regularly tour. The gains we realized in artistic achievement, recognition, fundraising, audience development, media coverage, and network building in the wake of this epic trek are simply too profound to ever turn our backs on. We've crossed a threshold; everyone in the institution can feel it. Largely due to our recent touring efforts—capped off by the *Moby Dick* tour—the Rasmuson Foundation, Alaska's largest (and virtually only) foundation, has established a fund to help support theatrical touring in the state. This will help ensure our ability to continue this vital work in the future.

The *Moby Dick* project has also forever changed the way we will approach touring. We've seen now, first hand, that establishing a connection to each community is key to gauging the needs and norms of each community; designing dialogue efforts, and making a lasting impression that will make a future return both easier for us and welcomed by the community. It is also key to developing the huge resource and support network a tour requires.

Our *Moby Dick* project has also altered the perception of the company throughout the state. I remember speaking to a young Republican legislative staffer from Fairbanks, who saw the tour's kick-off performance in Juneau. After the performance, he told me, "When I first realized that you were twisting what I thought was going to be a straight-up adaptation of *Moby Dick* into a forum on subsistence, I got really angry... 'Who the hell are they to weigh in on this issue?' ...but as the play drew me in more I started saying to myself 'Why not them?'" I heard many similar comments from individuals at both the performances and the dialogue activities. The project was clearly effective in challenging and, in some cases, changing people's perceptions about Perseverance as well as of theater and the arts in general.

The danger of treading into civic and political realms in this way, of course, is that the theater opens itself to attack on more than simply aesthetic grounds. But the networks we were able to establish by undertaking this project, alone, make it worth it: academics, civic thinkers, journalists, politicians, Native leaders, school officials, and social service organizations were all drawn into our orbit thanks to the dialogue component of the *Moby Dick* tour, introducing and binding us to many new friends and supporters who we can now draw on in the future.

The project has enhanced the company's national profile and stature, too. It provides significant leverage as we approach other national funders to support the work of a small theater located way up in Alaska. The project led to exciting discussions with the Iñupiat Heritage Center and the New Bedford Whaling Museum about taking the production to Massachusetts. There has also been some interest in the production in Hawaii and St. Petersburg, Russia.

### **Organizational capacity**

Unfortunately, in hindsight, the organization's internal capacity was not sufficient to execute a statewide dialogue project with the rigor it demanded or deserved. While there were many successes and we are all proud of the work we did accomplish, we all wish we had a second chance to do the whole thing all over again.

If we could, the first thing I would do is budget more time. We had just seven months to prepare for our first performance of this tour. It was simply not enough time to prepare ourselves, much less three widely diverse Alaskan communities spanning more than 2000 miles, for civic dialogue. Another 12 months of meeting and talking and preparing would have been ideal.

I would also ask for more money. As a theater with experience in statewide touring, we were, predictably, pretty good at estimating our production expenses. As a theater not very experienced in producing statewide dialogue, we were, predictably, pretty bad at estimating our statewide dialogue expenses. Given a second crack at this project, I would add travel money so Peter, and Susan and I could meet with each other and with each community several times in advance of the tour; so we could rent space for the dialogues in each community and provide food and drink at dialogue events; so we could arrange for transcription and audio and video recording services at each event, provide stipends for all dialogue leaders, enhance our marketing efforts (including more extensive radio and newspaper advertising), and hire additional contractors and labor.

Finally, I would have made different decisions about staffing. It was not fair to expect Susan to coordinate and execute dialogue in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Barrow. It was also, in hindsight, a fundamental violation of our determination that all dialogue activities be "specially tailored to the needs, mores, and customs of each community." Susan would have been terrific just coordinating events in Fairbanks, which has been her home for nearly two decades. We should have found someone similar in both Anchorage and Barrow who would have been attuned to the needs of those distinct communities. I also would have relied more on our project partners in each community to help shoulder the burden and set the agenda, because they all have resources in their respective communities that Perseverance simply does not possess.

Nonetheless, I am ultimately satisfied that the basic premise of the project and our approach was correct. Our Alaskan adaptation of *Moby Dick* did provide a disarming opportunity for participants to approach divisive Alaskan issues. An arts organization can take a lead role in catalyzing civic dialogue on important issues. Carefully tailoring dialogue activities to each community and bringing key and diverse stakeholders into the process IS the right way to pursue dialogue on a statewide level in Alaska. With proper time, money, and personnel, this approach would have produced superior results. And that's terrifically comforting to me because resource allocation is (relatively) easy to fix; artistic work and a philosophy about dialogue and methodology are not as easily addressed.

Our next touring effort—a statewide tour of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* in February and March 2003—benefited from our experience with *Moby Dick* and, in many ways, emulated and deepened the most successful elements of the project. In a state with the highest abuse rate for women and girls in the nation, there was and continues to be a huge need for the message *The Vagina Monologues* delivers. We worked directly with Eve's V-Day organization on this tour, as well as with women's shelters, domestic violence programs, and, especially, Native organizations all across the state to develop an education and awareness arm of the project that was as prominent (if not more so) than the performances themselves. We talked with groups and



individuals we first connected with on the *Moby Dick* tour in preparation for this effort and this project simply would not have been possible nor could have been conceived of in this form without our having experienced the *Moby Dick* project first.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

### Assumptions, Realizations and More Questions

JEFFREY HERRMANN

My assumption about our civic dialogue project—of which I was quickly disabused—was that success would result only from highly visible events that would involve mass numbers of Alaskans. Regardless of what I wrote in the application about not expecting to produce solutions to these huge, entrenched issues, I suppose that my ultimate hope was that our project would somehow capture the imagination and attention of the entire state as we traveled from community to community; that our dialogue activities would attract thousands of people inspiring them, “Oprah”-style, to open up and share and listen in ways they never had before; that our project would spawn countless editorials, television news stories, and letters to the editor; and that Peter, Susan, and I would be carried off at the end on everyone’s shoulders, like football heroes. The small scale of the interactions proved a bitter disappointment to me at first, but I soon realized that these were, in fact, the successes and were what we should have focused on from the very start.

On the back cover of Malcolm Gladwell’s recent book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference*, the tipping point is described as “that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, or spreads like wildfire... Just as a single sick person can start an epidemic of the flu, so too can a small but precisely targeted push cause a fashion trend, the popularity of a new product, or a drop in the crime rate.” Simply putting two people together to talk about the issues and events that matter deeply to them is triumph (and, as we learned, difficult) enough; if it’s the right two people at the right time, that interaction might well be “the tipping point” for a sea change in the psyche of the state on these issues.

The toughest question we faced—one with which I still grapple—is the validity of our impulse to engineer dialogue in the first place. Who are we to say that dialogue is the proper response to subsistence rights movement, the growing urban/rural divide, and the struggle between environment and economy in Alaska? And that people must engage in dialogue about these issues in ways we motivate and proscribe? It is true that we sought to adapt our dialogue activities to each community by involving members of that community intimately in our planning; but there’s still something paternalistic about the original impulse that continues to bother me.

I remember saying, with perhaps overly dramatic frustration at the end of the Chicago Animating Democracy Learning Exchange, that if language itself is an “unsafe space,” then authentic dialogue would be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. So why bother? My friend Peter Carpenter, echoing speaker Richard Harwood’s comments earlier that day, replied by saying that the answer is to muddle ahead anyway because the risk of offending or alienating someone is better than not attempting to communicate at all. I suppose that this provides a way of extricating myself from this philosophical dilemma. Ultimately, at some level, someone has to take a risk and make a stand or nothing would ever get done. Not the cleanest solution, certainly, but a pragmatic one for a very real world.

## Surprises and Enlightenments

SUSAN MCINNIS

Many moments of discomfort and points of enlightenment were woven throughout the project. It's worth repeating that good ideas were tempered to meet the interests of the communities, and a community intelligence—good, knowledgeable informants everywhere—guided and molded emerging dialogues. Andrew McLean knew the contribution Tuzzy Library Archivist Fannie Akpik could make. Fannie knew to bring both potlatch and dance to the company's contributions in Barrow. Serenity Chya knew that the Alaska Native Heritage Center event would be deepened by Native dance and drumming.

KBRW's Diana Gish offered interesting wisdom on “outsiders” in Barrow. When, in our first phone call, I told her about Peter's interviews with Barrow whaling captains Jake Adams, Oliver Leavitt, Deano Olemaun and Crawford Patkotak, she was silent, and then said, “Have you ever heard of ‘Hit and Run Science?’ Scientists have been in and out of Barrow for decades. They come study the whales, the people, the ice, the cold. They ask a lot of questions, take a lot of readings. Then they go away. They don't come back. ‘We’ don't ever know what ‘they’ve’ learned. That's ‘Hit and Run Science.’ I have to tell you, this is the first time I remember the ‘scientists’ coming back!” That we would bring *Moby Dick* “back” to Barrow, inviting the community to see and talk about it, she said, was a marvelous thing.

This may seem hopelessly naïve, but I am still surprised by ‘the wisdom of people.’ It made our successes. I was also surprised, again and again, at the number of good ideas that hit the gravel in this project—how time and happenstance opened and closed doors.

In Fairbanks, I struggled longest trying to create the talking circle that never happened. I had heard so many times how important it was to have “the leaders” talk—without them, I was told, others would hold back, not come, not speak. Too late, I dropped by Denakanaga, the Athabaskan elders' organization in Fairbanks, to deliver flyers advertising the first Fairbanks dialogue at the downtown library and found myself sitting at a kitchen table, listening to revered Fairbanks elder Poldine Carlo talking about being raised “on the river.” “I never heard the word subsistence,” she said. “We just lived as we lived. I didn't know I spoke Athabaskan. I just grew up speaking our language, and then English, too... I didn't insist my kids learn their language. I knew they would need to grow up differently than I did. The world was different for them... Things change. My people have always adjusted as the world changed around them. It's why we've survived.”

I regret that her story was not heard, and that I believed those who cautioned against “common voices.” (Not that there's anything common about Poldine Carlo). A roundtable of elders and youngsters in Fairbanks would have been—still would be—a wonderful thing. In this case, I failed to hear the people's wisdom soon enough. A sad surprise, still sad.

We strove in our plan to connect people by using the conventional voices of media and leaders to seed dialogue. Although I still like the idea of using the media to promote civic dialogue (much as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, for example, has taken on issues, using the paper to educate and argue for social change), I think now that the cart got in front of the horse. In the November phone call with Steve Lindbeck, he said something I'd barely heard, and only really connect with now because of our experiences developing and participating in the dialogues. Steve said that the strongest lesson he'd learned from a similar project was that mass instruments don't really work for this kind of project, which is inherently personal and intimate.

Had we kept with the plan, I think we would have had a traditional project. That we did not—turned away at nearly every gate from the beginning—resulted in a smaller, less ambitious gathering of dialogues. But I think the gatherings were more true, and were stronger for it.

Lessons Learned? It's Sometimes Hard to Tell from the Drawing Board Which Is the Cart and Which Is the Horse. .... Don't Push the River. .... As Doors Close, Windows Open. .... Listen to Learn. .... Communities Have Their Own Wisdom. .... Don't Invite Elvis if You Want to Dance Cheek-to-Cheek. .... Be prepared to Drop the Plan and Catch the Ball.

I'm sure there are others.

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**Peter DuBois** is the former artistic director for Perseverance and is currently associate producer at the Public Theater in New York. Previously, he co-founded Asylum, a multi-national "squat" theater in Prague. Between Prague and Juneau, DuBois completed his graduate studies at Brown University and worked as a freelance director at Trinity Repertory Company and Clemente Soto Velez (NYC). He has developed new works with The Joseph Papp Public Theater New Work Now Festival, The New Group (NYC), and Rattlestick Productions (NYC). Peter has received two Rockefeller Multi-Arts Production grants, one for directing *The Doll Plays* at Atlanta's Actor's Express, and the second for his work on Chay Yew's upcoming *Cannery Project* at Perseverance Theatre. He is a board member of Theater Communications Group and a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts.

**Susan McInnis** has been an Alaskan resident for 30 years. A producer and interviewer for public broadcasting in Fairbanks for over a decade, she hosted "Conversations with Susan McInnis," an award-winning weekly public affairs interview program for radio and television. She earned an MFA in creative writing and nonfiction in 1999. She now owns and runs Wordsmith, specializing in writing, editing, and project development for private and public clients.