

# **From The Ground Up**

*Grassroots Theater in Historical  
and  
Contemporary Perspective*

Edited by

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## Editors' Note

All reports of this kind are provisional. Time and space constraints have only allowed us to provide a sense of what the symposium was like and present its significant highlights. Though we have made every effort to be accurate in this, we can make no claim to being comprehensive. At the same time, the editors take full responsibility for any errors, omissions, or misinterpretations in the report and are happy to receive corrections.

This report is dedicated to Edward Kamarck (1919 - 1992), who enthusiastically helped plan the symposium, but did not live to participate, and to his friend and mentor, Robert Gard (1910 - 1992), who made his last presentation on grassroots theater at this gathering.



The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency, and a collective death-wish.

— Ngugi wa Thiong'o

*Decolonising the Mind*, 1986



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# Introduction

In the 1990s, grassroots theater finds itself in a period of transition and re-definition. The progressive social movements of the 1960s which gave rise to and supported much of this work in its current form have been diverted and diminished by more than a decade of conservative attack. Communities have changed; economies have worsened. Many artists have burned out or been drawn into other kinds of theater, for personal or financial reasons. Many theaters are facing difficulties in passing the work on to new generations, as well as in coping with unforeseen challenges such as the AIDS crisis.

At the same time, many grassroots theaters seem more robust than ever, their work never more vital and necessary. It is the grassroots theaters, the theaters that have had a larger social purpose to their work than simply “doing plays,” that are managing to survive relatively intact the economic and societal pressures that have caused many comparably-sized theater organizations without their sense of mission to close or change focus significantly. The grassroots theaters have continued to produce work of high quality and have continued to have a direct effect on the lives of their audiences and communities.

Oddly enough, it is their on-going vitality and impact which are creating new challenges for grassroots theaters. As non-grassroots theaters are becoming more threatened economically and more isolated socially, they are becoming attracted to the grassroots theater’s promise of relevance and connection. Already some basic ideas of grassroots theater, such as empowerment and commitment to community, have found their way into the rest of the theater world, so far as little more than rhetoric. Though the acknowledgement of the value of grassroots theater is long overdue on a national level, such acceptance may only be the first step towards its greater imperilment, especially as the already scarce resources for this kind of work would get shared with organizations that have no grassroots history and only a professed commitment to it.

This seems a particularly good time, then, to ask what is the state of grassroots theater today? How has it changed over the last decade and the last century? What will the next century bring and how can we prepare for it?

With these questions and concerns in mind, one hundred practitioners, scholars, and interested observers of grassroots theater met in early October 1992 at the Center for Theatre Arts at Cornell University for a two and a half day symposium, entitled “Grassroots Theater in Historical and Contemporary Perspective.” Part of the Community-Based Arts Project, a three year joint effort of the Cornell Department of Theatre Arts and Roadside Theater of Whitesburg, Kentucky, in association with Junebug Productions of New Orleans, Louisiana, the purpose of the symposium was to review the history of grassroots theater in the United States, to determine what grassroots theaters from various cultures and communities currently have in common, and to begin to prepare a concerted response to the present and a strategy for the future.

To the organizers’ knowledge, the symposium was a first. There had never before been a gathering solely devoted to surveying the breadth of grassroots theatrical activity, contemporary and historical, nor one which involved people from so many cultures, generations, geographical regions, and professions. The participants included Chicanos and other Latino Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, people from Appalachia and other European Americans; theater workers active in the 1930s, the 1950s, the ’60s and ’70s, and today; people from California, Colorado, Texas, Louisiana, Kentucky, Washington State, Washington, D.C., Maryland, and other states, as well as the New York region and New England. Professionally, the group included directors, performers, playwrights, critics and historians, professors of theater, primary and secondary school teachers, graduate and

undergraduate students, theater administrators, and arts funders. Attendance was not limited to those involved with grassroots theater, but included artists and managers from all kinds of theater, from off-Broadway to the alternative theater to the large not-for-profit regional theaters. This kind of mixing was seen as important and necessary to the success of the symposium, a central aspect of which was its emphasis on fostering and expanding dialogue.

The symposium began the evening of October 9 with a presentation of a new play, *Junebug/Jack*, a collaboration between Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions. Saturday, October 10, opened with a series of presentations on the histories of different grassroots theaters: the African American, the Hispanic/Latino, the European American rural theater, and the Depression-era Federal Theatre Project. Saturday afternoon, the participants were divided into eleven groups, more or less equal in size, for discussion about the history, present, and future of grassroots theater, and about their own work and concerns. The day concluded with an evening of staged readings: *Wedding Clothes* by Grace Kiner, originally performed in the 1920s as part of the New York State Rural Life Plays Program at Cornell University; two Spanish-language vaudeville sketches by Netty and Jesus Rodriguez, one from the 1920s and the other from '30s; and excerpts from *A Medal For Willie* by William Branch, first staged in 1951 by the Committee for the Negro and the Arts in Harlem.

Sunday morning, October 11, started with a plenary session, in which summaries of the previous afternoon's small group discussions were presented and discussed. Then, the groups reconvened and each was given a scenario to develop, which required the participants to make a case for grassroots theater in a non-arts setting, for instance, at a school board meeting or before a Congressional subcommittee hearing or to a commercial publisher. After an hour or so of preparation, the rest of the afternoon was devoted to the enactment of these scenarios. The symposium ended with closing comments and an informal celebration.



This report has a two-fold purpose. The first is to serve as a document of the event itself and as a means for communicating its significance to a wider audience. Toward that end, attention has gone into trying to retain the tone and quality of the exchanges at the symposium. Included in the report are edited versions of the historical presentations, excerpts from the small group discussions and the plays presented, excerpts from the scenario presentations, and an appendix which contains a schedule for the symposium, a list of attendees, a list of books and texts relating to grassroots theater, and other supplemental materials. In keeping with the goal of documentation, the report follows the symposium in its order. The reader, however, should feel free to skip from section to section while reading it.

The second purpose is to deepen and extend the dialogue begun by the symposium. Historically, people in the grassroots theater have not had much opportunity to talk with each other about the work they are doing, about its unique values and needs; just getting the work done has been nearly all-consuming. Unfortunately, this has kept the discourse about grassroots theater at a basic level, even among its makers. With this report, we hope to forward the discussion of the issues that inform grassroots theater by identifying and elaborating upon the themes and the ideas expressed at the symposium.

Two sections of the report are devoted to this effort. The "Matrix Articulating the Principles of Grassroots Theater" is an attempt to derive a multi-layered description of the general characteristics of grassroots theater. The last section, "Issues and Concerns for Further Consideration," came out of an analysis of the materials from the symposium — including commentaries by the participants after the event — during the months that the report was being put together. It is an attempt to look ahead, to anticipate what areas require addressing, what questions about the past and present can shape our choices for the future.

Though conceived and written by the editors, each of these sections was reviewed by several of the symposium's participants during the course of its development. We hope that these sections will be a step towards providing a basis for serious examination of what unifies grassroots theater, and for clarifying its goals, needs, and purposes on terms delineated by its makers. These issues, of course, don't just apply to grassroots theater and the editors hope that people active in other areas of grassroots culture and politics will be able to find parallels to their own work.

One further aspect of the report should be noted. In keeping with the symposium, the word "grassroots" is used throughout this report to describe a theater that comes from and serves those with the least power in the society. Over the decades, this kind of theater has been described by various names and is now commonly referred to as "community-based." "Grassroots" was chosen for this report in order to emphasize the connection of this theater work to progressive political work which similarly gets its support and draws its inspiration from the bottom instead of the top, from the broadest range of people. Of the many words in current usage, "grassroots" seemed to come closest to conveying the spirit and intention of such theater.

On the other hand, the use of the words "community" and "community-based" have been minimized in this report. There are several reasons for this. First, "community-based" does not adequately describe what is unique about this kind of theater. All theater comes out of and expresses the concerns of a community, though for much of the theater activity in this country that is a community of privilege and wealth. In contrast, the defining characteristic of grassroots theater is to preserve and express the values of those without privilege. To describe that kind of theater as "community-based", when the term can just as easily describe a theater with values and goals in opposition to it seems limiting, if not self-defeating. Blurring the distinctions between theaters allows the cachet of grassroots work to be adopted without its substance and weakens the ability of those working at the grassroots to differentiate themselves effectively.

A second reason is that the idea of community itself is in transformation. There is no longer a single, shared understanding of what community means and we didn't want to get sidetracked into trying to define it. Is community in its traditional sense — that based on living one's life in a particular place, on knowing others of that place in terms of their life histories and beyond their societal functions or occupations, on having the activities of one's life shaped directly by the cycles of the natural world — still valid, even though so few of us now have any experience of it? Are the more common connections based on social, political, occupational, or cultural affinities — and supported by powerful, new telecommunications — forms of community in a new sense, though most have yet to evolve the level of complexity and the continuity that communities have had traditionally? At this stage, perhaps all that can be said is community is something almost everyone feels strongly about, but few can agree upon what it is.

Further complicating this is the fact that all of our efforts to formulate community take place in the context of a larger culture that is built upon displacement. We are dependent on an economy based upon the manufacture of need and the elaborate shipment of goods from place to place which denies and disrupts local self-sufficiency; we rely upon electronic and print media, whose ceaseless torrent of images and ideas flood our homes and minds. We are all steeped in this larger culture, affected by its values, its structures and contents, whether we recognize it or not. The reach of this culture, this culture of displacement, goes far beyond the media and the arts; it is expressed and reinforced in architecture, fashion, how products are packaged, in almost every aspect of our lives.

In other words, the interface with the larger culture no longer begins at the edge of town, as it once did, or even at the threshold of our homes. It is not a matter any more of the "community-minded" versus those who are not. Rather, the interface with the larger culture is now within each of us. Our efforts to forge any kind of alternative to it must reckon with

that. A recurring image as we worked on the report was that of a fly in amber, the amber being the culture of displacement. Our attempt to explore community, however defined, is an attempt to expand the bubble of air around the fly, around us, and perhaps bring it into contact with the bubbles around other flies. However, we have been stuck for so long that the amber is not simply outside our bubble, but has seeped into our legs, our wings, our eyes.

For grassroots theater, these considerations are not merely questions of semantics or metaphors, unfortunately. There are indications that "community" and "community-based" will become in the 1990s what "multiculturalism" and "cultural diversity" were in the '80s, a set of ideas which most theaters lay claim to but which few practice in earnest. In fact, whether inadvertently or by design, multiculturalism has become a means by which the groups that dominated the national cultural discourse could continue their dominance. The lessons of the last decade are clear in this regard. Despite modest changes, most of the resources devoted to theater at the beginning of the 1990s are going to the same theaters that received them at the beginning of the 1980s or the 1970s or even the 1960s. In light of such history, it has never seemed more imperative for the grassroots theater to devise, with discipline and care, a definition, vision, and practice which resist being appropriated by those that don't share them.

# Five Historical Presentations

**T**hough there has been a rich history in the U.S. of attempts to create a theater which is open to and reflective of the concerns of ordinary people — what we are now calling grassroots theater — much of that history has been lost or obscured until recently. This is due in part to a lack of systematized documentation of much of the work while it was being made, either for lack of time or attention to such things. But it is due even more to a bias within the theater as a whole and particularly among those in theater training and the academy to legitimize only one strand of the diverse theater tradition in this country — that coming out of the nongrassroots, commercial theater.

One of the main goals of the symposium was to reclaim some of these lost histories and to introduce them into the contemporary discourse, especially among active grassroots theater practitioners. In other words, to have them inform our work in the present. Of the many and varied histories, the symposium organizers chose only four for presentation, primarily due to time constraints: the African American, the Hispanic/Latino, the European American Little Theater Movement, and the Federal Theatre Project of the Works Projects Administration. Each of these represents a different and vital attempt to create work of specific local and cultural relevance. The timeframe of much of this work overlapped, though in general there was little mutual awareness or communication among these efforts. In presenting all four histories at once, however, a new and complex history of the theater emerged.

William Branch, Professor of Theatre, Dramatic Literature, and Communications at the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University and editor of *Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*, winner of a 1992 American Book Award, addressed the history of African American theater. Robert E. Gard spoke about the New York State Plays Project, a program in regional playwriting at Cornell in the 1930s and 1940s, which he helped establish. In addition to his work at Cornell, Mr. Gard taught at the University of Wisconsin, where he founded the Wisconsin Idea Theatre, a model program for the collection and creative use of indigenous literary materials. Nicolás Kanellos discussed the history of the Spanish language theater in the U.S. through the 1930s. Mr. Kanellos is the founder and director of Arte Publico Press and the Americas Review, both of which have received national recognition and awards, such as the American Book Award. He is also the author of five books on U.S. Hispanic literature and theater. Lorraine Brown, Director of the Institute on the Federal Theatre Project and New Deal Culture at George Mason University, presented an overview of the Federal Theatre Project. She is the author and editor of several books about the Federal Theatre.

The historical presentations as a whole were introduced with a talk by Peter Jemison, a member of the Seneca Nation of Indians, who put all of our efforts at the symposium into a larger context of history and place. Mr. Jemison is the manager of the Ganondagan State Historic Site in Victor, N.Y., the site of a seventeenth century Seneca town. A professional artist, he is a graduate of Buffalo State College and a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at the University of Buffalo.

What follows are edited transcripts of all five presentations, combining the speakers' written texts, their verbal comments, and their responses to questions from the audience and the editors. Cuts to the texts were made only to keep the talks focused more or less within the same time span, from the origins of the work to the 1950s. In addition, excerpts of plays presented at the symposium are included along side the speakers' texts to illustrate some of the work that was done in these different traditions.

## PETER JEMISON

*Note: Jemison began his talk with a blessing in Seneca.*

**Y**ou deal with language. That's our language. I'm a member of the Onondowaga, the Seneca Nation. What I gave was a very brief greeting and, then, a thanksgiving. A giving thanks for my family, for this day, and for this earth which supports our feet and provides everything that you and I need to eat. We call the earth our mother and we mean it literally, that she sustains us, that she provides us with everything, all of our needs. You and I are in a relationship which is like this, interlocked with her; we cannot be separated from her. All the while that we will be here, we will be taking and receiving from her and taking care of her, if we understand that relationship. When we are finished, we will return to her, and she will take us and we will be a part of that which sustains those faces that are coming in the future. That's how we think about this earth and this place.

Here, where we are, is in the heart of the Cayuga people, the Cayuga Nation, one of five original nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. Beginning on the West, it was the Seneca Nation, my nation, then the Cayuga Nation, the Onondaga, the Oneida, and the Mohawk. These five nations make up a confederacy that lives in what is today called New York State. We call ourselves Haudenosaunee. Others have called us the Iroquois Confederacy or the Five Nations. Later, we were joined by a sixth nation, called the Tuscarora Nation. So, today we are a six nation confederacy, also made up of many other native people who came under the wing of the various nations. For example, in the Seneca Nation, there are people who are Susquehanna, people who are Erie, people who are Huron and so forth, who came under the wing of the Onondowaga. When we say that, we mean "the people of a great hill," and we point to a hill on Canandaigua Lake as a point of origin for us.

I was asked to give a few words of greeting today, a welcome to Cayuga territory here. The Cayuga people go by several names, and they had a lower and an upper nation of Cayuga people. Same people, they just lived in two areas of this lake. The Lower Cayuga were down here. Not too far up the shore I came by this morning was an old Cayuga town site that is now called Taughannock State Park. On the northeast side of the lake was a major town for the Upper Cayuga people, a town that was attacked by the Sullivan campaign in 1779.

Some of you may have heard of the John Sullivan campaign, launched by General Washington to annihilate the Haudenosaunee. It was a burn and destroy campaign, which came through our territories and destroyed all the food that they thought we could eat and burned all of our homes to the ground. When they arrived at our territory, the Seneca, we were living at the north end of Seneca Lake. They found the finest corn that they had seen since they began their journey in Pennsylvania. They found corn plants ten feet high and the best apple and peach orchards. But they followed the instructions of General Washington and cut them down. They destroyed everything that they thought we could eat, so if they could not defeat us militarily, they would starve us to death. Following that campaign of Sullivan's, we had one of the most severe winters on record. We had five feet of snow. Many people found it very difficult to survive that winter, but we managed to.

I live on a Seneca historic site known as Ganondagan. Ganondagan is a site of a seventeenth century Seneca town. It is, by the way, the only historic site in the state of New York dedicated to a Native American theme. Three hundred years ago approximately 4,500 Senecas lived on this town site that I today manage. It is 377 acres of land with hiking trails and a visitors' center and special programs that we hold throughout our season. The site was dedicated in 1987, literally three hundred years, almost to the day, after it was destroyed. We opened it as a Seneca historic site, as part of an attempt to interpret our history from our perspective, from the perspective of the Haudenosaunee. All of the advisors that worked on that site were Haudenosaunee. White anthropologists did some of the grant writing and research work, but primarily we chose from the historical records, the archaeological

records, and our oral tradition. We chose an interpretation that we wanted that historic site to have. We have a membership organization of 500 people and this past weekend we held one of our major festivals, a pow wow, an Indian summer festival, and we had 10,000 people. It was like an ant hill, on top of this hill. Ganondagan sets on the top of a big hill, as other Seneca sites before it have.

Now, not too long ago, one of our elders reconstructed a journey called the journey of the Peacemaker. Among our people, we had a man travel who was a Huron by birth and he brought a message of peace and unity. We believe he brought this message about a thousand years ago to bring us together into this five nation confederacy I spoke about. This summer, an elder by the name of Chief Jake Thomas retraced the journey of that man and came here to Ithaca, because there was a Cayuga site here, and he came to remember the words of the Peacemaker. He recited those words and remembered the message that the Peacemaker gave when he came here. Then, he came to Ganondagan to remember the words the Peacemaker used to bring the Seneca into the confederacy. So, this oral tradition is still alive among us. This summer, Chief Jake Thomas did a translation of the Great Law, the Law that the Peacemaker brought when he put our confederacy together. It took nine days for him to recite that, every day. He spoke in English for those who could not understand his language. He speaks five languages: Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca, Oneida, Mohawk. Our oral tradition and our languages, I want you to know, are still alive.

Now, I know that you are involved in theater and in support of the creative arts. I am an artist by training, not a historian, not an anthropologist. I was hired to run this historic site because I am an artist and because of my experience running an art gallery in New York City showing contemporary Native American art — and because of my gift for gab, I guess. It's a challenge to maintain, to be an administrator, and to keep the creative part of your life going. So, I want to share with you what I've been doing recently, to tell you where we are in terms of the creative arts. Perhaps at no other time have there been as many exhibits of contemporary Native American art traveling around the country. I happen to be in one that is called *Submuloc*, which is Columbus spelled backwards. It is installed now in Oswego and it will be coming to Cornell in November. It is our response as Native artists to the Columbus quincentenary. At the same time, there is another exhibit called *Shared Visions*, sponsored by the Hurd Museum, a look at Native art in the twentieth century, which is traveling around the country. The National Museum of the American Indian is well on its way and an exhibit will open in 1993 at the Customs House in New York City. This will be the inaugural exhibit for this new national museum, which will have a building on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Finally, we will be able to take all of our beautiful artifacts and the things that we want to be shown out of a warehouse in the Bronx and put them on display for people to see.

This evening, I fly to Boston to tape a segment for the PBS show *Dance in America*. I've been working with the American Indian Dance Theater, putting a Northeast suite of social dances into their repertoire, and they are premiering it now at Emerson College. How that suite was integrated into their repertoire is the subject of the PBS segment. Last night, I was in Rochester, where we have a project called *The River of Light*. What they've done with laser lights, sound, and slides projected onto the wall of the river gorge is to give a history of Rochester and the use of water power. It begins with the Seneca. This is urban cultural renewal, supported by the New York State Office of Parks, which also supports Ganondagan. I saw the images that I had suggested to be a part of the show, which was very exciting. So, there is a lot going on in the arts. I leave here to go to Montana, to a large gathering called the Keepers of the Treasures, involved in the preservation of our heritage and traditions, our language and indigenous way of life. This is going on all over the United States, as far away as Hawaii, and, of course, Canada. We are all gathering in Montana. In Minneapolis, I will give an address to ATLATL, the only national organization for the advancement of Native American art and artists. I attended the first meeting of this group in 1975 and the

organization is still alive and strong.

Our community activities are alive and well. We are all hurt by the cuts in funding, and all looking at what will happen next, and questioning how we can continue to do what we know is so important to do, which is to share the artistic traditions that we come from and to give people something to hope for, to believe in. Think of us. For five hundred years, we have had to put up with a lot of things. And we are still putting up with them. Look at the situation of the Lakota on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Not too long ago, three Guatemalan farmers came to visit me and talked about living under a military regime that daily kills people, that daily makes their lives almost impossible to continue. This is the legacy five hundred years later. If we can survive that, then we as artists can certainly survive the current things that we are experiencing. We have to survive, because that is the future. The future is what we do now to care for the earth, to show how much we care for humanity, and to love one another.



*A Medal For Willie* by William Branch was originally produced by the Committee for the Negro and the Arts in 1951 at the Club Baron in Harlem. The morning after it opened, Mr. Branch reported for induction into the United States Army.

Excerpt from *A Medal for Willie*  
by William Branch

Scene 1

(Lights come up revealing Mrs. Jackson seated at a table while her daughter, Lucy Mae, applies a hot pressing comb to her hair. The table is spread with newspaper, upon which stands a small mirror, a hot plate, a box of hairpins, and a jar of "Dixie Peach" pomade. Mrs. Jackson is in her slip and has a towel around her shoulders. She is still fairly young, though hard work and lack of care have left her tired and wilted. Lucy Mae is wrapped in a non-descript bathrobe and wears bedroom slippers. Her fresh hairdo is protected by a hairnet. She is fifteen.)

MRS. JACKSON

Ouch, baby, be careful! You came a little too close that time.

LUCY

I'm sorry, Mama, but you got to hold still. How do you think I'm goin' to get through if you keep movin' your head around?

MRS. JACKSON

I'm doing the best I can, Lucy Mae.  
(Sighs.)  
What time is it?

LUCY

It's something to one. We got plenty of time. They won't be here to pick us up before two.

MRS. JACKSON

I know.  
(Wearily.)  
Lord, I wish it were over already.

LUCY

Don't say that, Mama! Why, this is a day we

## WILLIAM BRANCH

*Note: Branch's comments on African American theater extended to the present. For this report, only his remarks through the 1950s have been excerpted.*

**T**his morning we are dealing with a number of different areas; my area happens to be the first African American community theater. The first African American community theater? Well, let me see, now, when could that have been? I suppose some of you would think, "Well, in terms of what history I know, that would be back in the Harlem Renaissance of the '20s or maybe a few years earlier." There have been people who have speculated on that to some extent. Unfortunately, some of them have been vastly, vastly wrong.

In 1988, Richard Bernstein, writing in the *New York Times*, on Sunday, March 27 — in case any of you are interested in looking it up — in an article entitled, "August Wilson's Voices From the Past," wrote the following: "The tradition of a Black American theater is not a long one, going back only a generation or so to the work of such playwrights as Amiri Baraka." Now, with all due respect to Baraka, how a supposedly trained and competent newswriter such as Bernstein can cavalierly pen such rubbish without doing a lick of research, without even feeling the need to do a lick of research — and get away with it! — says something about the current state of journalism at the vaunted "gray lady on 43rd Street." A letter to the editor on that score, by yours truly, predictably went unpublished and unanswered.

But as Loften Mitchell's *Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theater* and other readily available sources amply document, substantial contributions by black playwrights and black theater companies to a long-established black theater tradition, occurred long before a generation or so.

If you will permit me, I'd like to quote from a work of my own, *Black Thunder, an Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*, in which I have an introduction entitled, "The Legacy of the African Grove: From *King Shotaway* to *The Piano Lesson*":

When the ubiquitous Mr. Brown opened a tea garden behind his home on Thomas Street in lower Manhattan, New York City, in the early nineteenth century, and began presenting "acts" and "exhibitions" for his customers' entertainment, little could he have realized that he was about to launch an artistic and cultural tradition that was to last far beyond his own lifetime, and that today has become known as Black Theater — or as the term is increasingly re-employed, African American Theater.

Mr. Brown (his given names are apparently still in some question among theater historians, although at least one has identified him as William Henry Brown) was at first seeking merely to broaden the cordiality of his modest establishment, which catered to a small but growing community of free African Americans in the City, and possibly to enhance his economic situation somewhat as well. But by 1821, when these occasional entertainments of song, recitals, and skits had expanded and grown to a formal organization called the African Company — which, under its leading actor, James Hewlett, had established its own

facility at Mercer and Bleecker Streets named the African Grove Theater — Mr. Brown found himself presiding over not only a proud and popular entertainment attraction, but also an activity perceived as a potential threat to a long-established white theatrical enterprise in the area: the Park Theater, run by one Stephen Price.

It appears that Price and a powerful friend — a local newspaper editor, politician, and sometime playwright named Mordecai Noah — took umbrage at the audacity of former slaves and their descendants presuming to undertake the high Caucasian challenge of the introspections of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, let alone the dire threat to Western civilization — particularly the sanctity of white womanhood — posed by the "miscegeny" implicit in *Othello*. In addition, Mr. Brown's thriving enterprise had become so popular, despite denunciations by the white press (including the *National Advocate*, edited by Mordecai Noah), that white people were clamoring to pay good money to be let in — albeit in a segregated area set aside by Brown because, as he saw it, some whites did not know "how to behave themselves at entertainments designed for ladies and gentlemen of color." Further, these black pretenders to the art of dramaturgy had had the nerve to fashion a play of their own, entitled *The Drama of King Shotoway*, in which they called upon their enslaved brethren in the U.S. to emulate the Caravs of the Caribbean and revolt against their masters.

But worst of all, as a politician, Noah was alarmed about a pending proposal before the New York State constitutional convention that would open the franchise to African Americans, fearing that local black folk, if enfranchised, would vote for his political opponents. "These people do not want to vote," he editorialized in his paper. "They are perfectly happy to visit the African Grove [theater] and talk scandal."

Something had to be done — and, of course, it was. Whether at the direct instigation of Mr. Brown's competitors or not, white hoodlums began to heckle and disrupt the troupe's performances, and when the police were summoned — you guessed it! — they arrested and carted off not the white hoodlums, but the black actors on the stage. (It seems Mr. Noah had been appointed sheriff!) The African Grove Theater ceased to exist in 1823, closed by the authorities as a public nuisance.

Importantly, it must be added that Ira Aldridge, a young actor with the African Company, migrated to London, where in short order he became a stellar attraction as a Shakespearean actor — for example, playing *Othello* to Ellen Tree's *Desdemona*. Later, as the head of his own troupe, Aldridge toured the leading theaters of Britain and Europe, garnering high praise from critics and decorations from royalty until his death on tour in Lodz, Poland, in 1867. To this day, his portrait hangs in a place of honor at the Bakhrushin Theatrical Museum in Moscow, and a chair adorned with a plaque in his name is to be found in the fourth row of stalls at the Shakespeare Memorial Theater in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Ironically, though records and references to Aldridge's extraordinary career are readily found in numerous European theater histories and reviews, Ira Aldridge remains little known in this, the country of his birth, having been left out of many works on European theater by white American writers.

Nonetheless, by establishing the short-lived African Grove Theater, Mr. Brown had succeeded in providing an invaluable legacy. In initiating an African American theatrical tradition that refused to accommodate to pressure, he ennobled himself and his peers, and left to his many unborn heirs an inspiration, and a challenge, that is no less vital today than it was in 1823 — a tradition which, though oft-times sputtering, gasping and wheezing, has managed, against both the usual artistic odds and those additional roadblocks created by prejudice, to survive and occasionally even to flourish in the nearly two centuries succeeding.

Mr. Brown was a very important figure in New York at the time

can be proud of all the rest of our lives. It's not like it's going to be a funeral, Mama. We're not supposed to be sad.

MRS. JACKSON

(Slowly.)

No, it ain't a funeral, exactly. Don't guess Willie had a funeral.

LUCY

Oh, they always have something. They always read over them before they — I mean, before —

MRS. JACKSON

Go ahead and say it, Lucy Mae. Before they bury 'em. Ain't no use in us tryin' to make Willie ain't dead and buried. We all got to die sometime.

LUCY

It still seems kinda — kinda funny, Mama.

MRS. JACKSON

What?

LUCY

About Willie. I keep thinking he's still just away with the Army. I just can't get used to thinking he's not coming back — ever.

MRS. JACKSON

(Quietly, half to herself.)

I know, Lucy Mae, baby. I get that way too, sometimes. I hear a step — somebody comin' up the street — and I get real quiet-like and listen, just hopin' to hear 'em turn in the yard and come up the steps. I know in my head it can't be Willie. But I listen just the same. Guess it'll be a long time before I stop listenin'.

(She turns.)

Better heat up that iron some more, honey.

LUCY

Okay.

(Places the iron on the hot plate.)

Aren't you awfully proud of Willie, Mama? Winnin' a medal and all? I always knew Willie'd do something someday, 'spite of the way Daddy used to call him no-count.

MRS. JACKSON

Your daddy didn't understand Willie.



**Handbill from A Medal for Willie**

LUCY

(Going on.)

All the kids at school are just so thrilled. They even point me out when I walk down the halls. "There goes Willie Jackson's sister," I can hear them whispering! And all the teachers are so nice. And the Principal, too, Mr. Torrence. He got up in assembly that day and made the announcement about the ceremony and all, and he said we should all be very proud because Willie was a product of our own school.

MRS. JACKSON

Yes, child, I know, but I guess you done 'bout forgot the times I had to get off from work and go up there to beg Mr. Torrence to let Willie back in school. I guess Mr. Torrence has 'bout forgot it by now, too.

LUCY

That's nothing, Mama. You know Willie just didn't like school. He never got along with any of the teachers except for the football coach. And he wasn't learning anything.

MRS. JACKSON

They sent him to school in the Army, Lucy Mae. They taught him all about machine guns and fightin' and how to kill and they didn't have no trouble. Why couldn't they take a

and there are many references to him in the annals of New York. Yet, those references cease shortly after the demise of the African Grove Theater. Nobody knows what happened to Mr. Brown after that; he merely disappears from the record. He is not forgotten, however. Among other honors, the National Conference of African American Theater, which meets every spring in Baltimore, Maryland, each year presents an award to a person outstanding in African American theater circles. The award is known as the "Mr. Brown Award."

The reason his first names are in some doubt is the fact that there are a number of references to him under several names, but identifying him at known addresses where he had lived. Why he used various first names, or aliases if you wish, we don't know. Could be that he had the same problem with bill collectors that some of us do now and then. Nonetheless, Mr. Brown is the term under which he is affectionately known in today's African American theater circles.

After the demise of the African Grove Theater, it was a long time before other organized theatrical activity took place among African Americans. There were reasons for this, of course. Most African Americans were enslaved in the South and those who were free in the North had other concerns — trying to get an education, trying to survive and, unfortunately not infrequently, trying to stay ahead of lynch mobs. For many decades thereafter there was a period known as minstrelsy, which pretty much blanketed out the possibility of any African American legitimate theater activity.

Minstrelsy, which began as occasional entertainments on Southern plantations by slaves for their masters and the ruling class, was adopted by white commercial producers who sent troupes of whites with burnt cork on their faces throughout the country. It fast became America's first indigenous theatrical form, as well as its most popular for most the nineteenth century. Blacks were not used and were not welcome in this activity for many years, but eventually black troupes, too, began to mount minstrel shows and, ironically, they, too, had to black their faces in order to be accepted as "authentic" minstrels. This prompted one critic, James Weldon Johnson, to call this "a caricature of a caricature," insofar as the white minstrel tradition was satirizing and caricaturing the original black tradition on the Southern plantation. The blacks, in effect, had to caricature those that had been caricaturing them.

Minstrelsy continued well into the twentieth century, with whites continuing to dominate the field. A black-faced Al Jolson sang "Mammy" in the first talking motion picture, while two white radio minstrels, known popularly as "Amos 'n' Andy," made fortunes, first in radio and then in television — albeit the latter with an African American cast. Bert Williams became the most successful African American minstrel, starring on Broadway in the Ziegfeld Follies, while privately eating his heart out at what he was doing to the image of his people.

Towards the end of the 1800s, some black theatrical activity did begin to surface. During minstrelsy itself, there were a number of important black theater troupes, including Charles Hicks and a group called the Slave Troupe, which was founded in 1866. This troupe toured widely in the North in the United States and went to

Europe and even to Asia with their shows. During that period, a second group was known as The Hyer Sisters Negro Operatic and Dramatic Company. Great title. It came out of San Francisco in the 1870s. They produced two musicals with abolitionist themes, *Out of Bondage* was one and *The Underground Railroad*. The authors are not listed, per se, but the troupe apparently collaborated in the presentation of these musicals. In New York City, there was a black group called the Astor Place Colored Tragedy Company in 1884, which lasted for a while. Then another, Robert Cole's Worth Museum All-Star Stock Company, founded in 1896, which specialized in Shakespearean productions, harking back, of course, to the days of the African Grove Theater.

With the turn of the Century, there were other theatrical companies that developed. In 1906, a group was formed called the Peking Stock Company of Chicago. Why it was called the Peking Stock Company, I've never been able to find out. In 1915, in New York City, an African American woman named Anita Bush established a company of her own, called the Anita Bush Company, which after having a spectacular success, suddenly went broke. She was obliged to hand over the company to Robert Levy, who operated the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, which still stands today.

In the 1920s, Rose McClendon, a splendid African American actress flourished for a time and in the 1930s when the Federal Theatre was established, she allegedly persuaded Hallie Flanagan, who was the head of it, to establish Negro Units. The Federal Theatre was not, apparently, conceived to embrace African Americans. Rose McClendon insisted that African Americans have a part in this and segregated Negro Units were set up. These produced a number of original works by black playwrights.

The Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre in New York is most famous, perhaps, for the production of a "voodoo" *Macbeth*, directed by Orson Welles. During that time, the premiere of the "voodoo" *Macbeth*, which took place at the Lafayette Theater, was a prime opening. They had limousines with people coming up from downtown and there were lights and marquees and festivity. This became the "in" kind of thing to do. This was the period, as Langston Hughes called it, "when Harlem was in vogue."

The Ethiopian Art Theater of Chicago was organized in 1923 and among its sponsors was the wife of the famous white author Sherwood Anderson. Mrs. Sherwood Anderson was instrumental in helping to found that theater. The Art Theater came to New York and presented several productions from time to time and stimulated further activity in New York.

I don't know for sure whether W.E.B. DuBois saw the Ethiopian Art Theater of Chicago when it performed in New York, but somewhere along the line, he too became particularly interested in using the theater to advance the cause of black Americans, to advance the quest for equal rights. Though he never considered himself a playwright, he did write an expansive pageant which was produced in 1913. This in turn led him to establish in *The Crisis* magazine, which he founded and edited for the NAACP, a one-act playwriting contest. He invited submissions from people all over the country.

little patience with him in school, 'stead of puttin' him out in the street where he could get into trouble.

LUCY

But, Mama, you know Willie just couldn't stay out of trouble.

MRS. JACKSON

What you mean?

LUCY

Well, what about the time he and them boys broke into that grocery store and stole some beer? If it wasn't for Daddy's boss-man down at the icehouse, they'd had put Willie in jail.

MRS. JACKSON

Willie wasn't no angel, honey. I know that. And I never stuck up for him when he was wrong. I whipped him myself for doin' that — wouldn't let your father touch him — he'd a killed him. But if Willie'd been in school that day 'stead of bein' put out in the street, he'd never got into that trouble.

LUCY

Maybe so, Mama.

MRS. JACKSON

I couldn't blame him much when he quit. I tried to get him to go back, but he said he was gonna get him a job and work awhile.

LUCY

(Scoffs.)

Humph! Shining shoes at the barber shop wasn't much of a job, was it, Mama?

MRS. JACKSON

No, but it was all he could get. He did right well with it, too, considerin', till he got girls on his mind.

LUCY

I know who, Mama! Bernice Myers! Willie was crazy about her!

MRS. JACKSON

(Smiles.)

I know. I met her. She was a right nice girl. Willie sure 'nough wanted a real job then. I bet he was even thinkin' about gettin' married.

(Her smile fades.)

But he couldn't find no better job. So he got tired and went ahead and joined the Army.

LUCY

(Resumes her hair fixing.)

Hold still now, Mama. I guess Willie just kinda took to the Army with his rough ways and all.

MRS. JACKSON

You been listenin' to your father again, Lucy Mae. Willie wudn't all that rough. You remember that little wall-thing he made me in his shop class? The one that's hangin' in the corner in the front room with the little flowerpot on it?

LUCY

Uh-huh. That's a whatnot.

MRS. JACKSON

A what?

LUCY

A whatnot. That's what you call it.

MRS. JACKSON

Yeah? Well, *whatever* it is, it's beautiful! It took lotsa time and lovin' care to make that. Willie wudn't rough. He was a little stubborn sometimes when somebody was botherin' him, but he wudn't rough.

LUCY

Well, anyhow, we can all be very proud of Willie, now, Mama, can't we?

MRS. JACKSON

Yes, baby. Only I been proud of him all along.

LUCY

Everybody's gonna be at the ceremony today, Mama. Just everybody! And for the first time at a public meeting in Midway, the seating's going to be unsegregated. Anybody can sit anywhere they want, no matter whether they're white or colored. That's makin' history!

MRS. JACKSON

(Patiently.)

Yes, Lucy Mae.

Hundreds, hundreds of plays poured in to that contest. Only a few of them were ever published or produced, but it is amazing that as early as that there were people in the African American communities all over the country who were interested in theatrical activity, who actually sat down and wrote original plays and submitted them to these contests that were organized by Dr. W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois, himself, then, decided to found a little theater group of his own. He founded one in New York and groups with the same name were established in other cities across the country. The group was called the Crigwa Players and the reason for "Crigwa" was that it was an acronym for The Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists. They gave their productions in the basement of the old Carnegie Library, which still stands on 136th Street, right next to the modern building which is the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture on the corner of 137th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem.

DuBois' founding of the Crigwa Players and his championing of black theater led to the establishment of other groups across the country, including the Aldridge Players of St. Louis. Now, this was particularly significant because this was founded by a man named Frederick O'Neal in 1926. He directed the Aldridge Players for a number of years and eventually came to New York City. In New York, he established another group with Ford Foundation money and in collaboration with a black playwright named Abram Hill. That group was known as the American Negro Theater, active in the 1940s, and we'll come back to that.

In 1927, in Cleveland, Ohio, the famed Karamu Theater was established by a white couple named Russell and Rowina Jelliffe. Mrs. Jelliffe, the last I heard, was still alive, she's about 101 years old. Karamu Theater spurred all sorts of theatrical activity in the Midwest. Among its proud graduates are some names that you might recognize: Ruby Dee, Robert Guillaume, and last by not least, Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes was playwright-in-residence at the Karamu Theater for many years. Hughes eventually left Cleveland and came to New York where he established a group of his own, which he called, interestingly enough, The Harlem Suitcase Theater. People in theatrical activity are always bemoaning the fact that they have to live virtually on a shoestring and all that sort of thing. He accepted that as natural and just called his theater the Suitcase Theater because he pretty much lived out of a suitcase.

He wrote a piece for his theater, which was a compilation of poems and songs called *Don't You Want to be Free?*, which opened in Harlem and had a phenomenal run for the time. It ran for over a year, principally on weekends, and also played at downtown theaters. This was Langston Hughes' first success in the theater. Prior to that he had collaborated with Zora Neale Hurston on a piece called *Mulebone*. That unfortunately led to a split between the two of them. They were collaborating by mail and somewhere along the line Zora Neale Hurston informed Langston that she was either fed up with the project or tired of it and it was left presumably in suspension. However, Zora Neale Hurston then went ahead to finish it on her own and to offer it for production by groups. The next thing Langston knew he was reading in the paper that Zora Neale Hurston's

*Mulebone* was going to be produced somewhere else. That led to some unpleasantness. *Mulebone* was recently done in New York in its original version at the Lincoln Center Theater.

The Rose McClendon Players arose in the 1930s. I've already mentioned that Rose McClendon was a stellar figure in black theatrical circles in New York City. After her death, a group dedicated to her was founded by the legendary Dick Campbell, who is still alive today and to whom we presented The Mr. Brown Award at the National Conference on African American Theater just a couple of years ago.

As I mentioned, in 1940, the American Negro Theater was founded by Frederick O'Neal and Abram Hill. The American Negro Theater lasted for approximately ten years. It's most famous production was a rewriting of a play called *Anna Locasta*. It was originally a play about a Polish American prostitute. Nobody, but nobody was interested in producing that play in New York, but somehow or other the playwright was told to take it to Harlem where the American Negro Theater was beginning to get somewhat of a reputation for doing black versions of white plays. They took *Anna Locasta* and Abram Hill virtually rewrote the play; it was transferred into an African American idiom. It was presented in Harlem and then optioned for Broadway, where it became a huge, huge success.

The production had several companies. There was a national company — in effect the original company, which was taken out of New York and moved to Chicago, while a new company, headed by Ruby Dee, was put into New York. The original company had such stellar figures as Hilda Simms, Earle Hyman, Canada Lee, Frank Silvera, Frederick O'Neal, Alvin and Alice Childress, Rosetta LeNoire. The second company also featured Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, and, eventually, a young man named Sidney Poitier. There was also another young man who got involved with *Anna Locasta* when he was a freshman at Northwestern University. He became an understudy with the national cast in Chicago and, for better or worse, this launched his career in theatrical circles. His name was William Branch.

In 1940, also, there was the brief appearance of a company called The Negro Playwrights Company, which was managed by a black playwright named Theodore Ward. He had written a play called *Big White Fog* that was originally done by the Federal Theatre. This was particularly interesting. Theodore Ward, in *Big White Fog*, gave a decidedly negative view of American democracy and its capacity to address equality and equal opportunity for African Americans. So much so, that at one point in the play, one of the characters speculates that if America did not lighten up in terms of its discrimination and segregation against black Americans that black Americans just might find Communism of some attraction. Well, it took the personal intervention of Hallie Flanagan to afford *Big White Fog* a staging under Federal Theatre auspices.

The Negro Playwrights Company in 1940 restaged the play. Unfortunately, it was the first and also the last production of the Negro Playwrights Company. Dissention over the Communist issue tore the company apart and it ceased to exist.

LUCY

And they're going to name the new colored park after Willie, too! When they get it built, that is.

MRS. JACKSON

Yes, Lucy Mae. And after two years already of notin' but promisn', you better make that "if" they gets it built.

LUCY

(Undaunted.)

And you and me and Daddy's going to sit right up on the platform right along with the Mayor and the Superintendent and the General from Washington — !

MRS. JACKSON

Yes, Lucy Mae.

LUCY

And they're going to present you with Willie's medal! Oh, Mama, won't you be just thrilled?!!!

MRS. JACKSON

(Slowly, with great feeling.)

Yes, Lucy Mae, I'll be thrilled, I guess. It's all very nice what everybody's doin' and I'm proud, very proud. Only — where was everybody when Willie was alive? Where was they when your father and me was strugglin' to feed him and put clothes on his back and bring him up decent? Where was everybody when he needed help in school, but they put him out instead 'cause they "didn't have time to fool with him." An' where was they when he was walkin' the street lookin' for work? It's all very nice to give him a program he can't come to, and a medal he can't wear, an' name a park after him they ain't built yet. But all this can't help Willie now! It ain't doin' him no good.

(She blows her nose into the towel and wipes at the corner of her eyes.)

That's 'bout enough, baby. My hair ain't been like nothin' since I been bendin' over them hot stoves in the white folks' kitchens. I don't guess you can do much with it now. I'll finish fixin' it. You go and see if your father's through with the wash tub and go get your bath.

LUCY

(Near tears.)

Mama — !

MRS. JACKSON

Go on now, Lucy Mae baby. We won't want to keep the Mayor and the Superintendent and the General waitin', now do we? We all want to be on time.

(She pats her arm.)

Go on now, go get your bath.

(Lucy starts off, pausing for a last glance of concern at her mother before she exits. Mrs. Jackson stands looking after her for a moment, then her hands reach up to touch her hair as the lights black out.)

In 1950, the Committee for the Negro and the Arts emerged. It's first production was a play by Alice Childress called *Florence*. *Florence* is a very key play in the history of African American theater in that it established for a number of people the viability and attractiveness of addressing political issues having to do with black activism and black aspiration on the stage. Among those who saw and were enlightened by Alice Childress was yours truly. A year or two later, the same group, the Committee for the Negro and the Arts, presented a play of mine called *A Medal for Willie*. Other plays that were done by the Committee for the Negro and the Arts included *Just A Little Simple*, also by Alice Childress, a musical which was based upon the Simple Stories by Langston Hughes, not to be confused with his own later musical known as *Simply Heavenly*.

In 1953, a group was established in Baltimore, Maryland, which still exists to very this day, the Arena Players of Baltimore, founded by Samuel Wilson. It is the oldest, continuous producing African American community theater in the United States. We are indeed fortunate to have Mr. Wilson with us today.

In the 1950s, the Greenwich Mews Theater, which was an inter-racial theater in New York City, became a prime production group in terms of black theater. Interestingly enough, the Greenwich

Mews Theater was founded inter-racially with the idea of providing what is known as non-traditional casting opportunities for non-whites. As a result, originally, they did essentially white plays, but cast them irrespective of race. I recall the first play I ever saw there was a play about a Jewish household. The mother, the Jewish mother, was portrayed by a black actress, Hilda Haynes; she had two sons, one was white, one was black. The neighbors, some were white and some were black, but they were all Jewish. This was a Jewish play. Now, people coming to the Greenwich Mews Theater for the first time and not knowing the policy understandably were somewhat confused for the first few minutes of the play at least, but eventually, catching onto the idea, they would then settle back and enjoy the play and enjoy the performances, the actors and actresses for what they were worth.

That policy was carried out for a number of plays, until a play was submitted to the Greenwich Mews Theater that they decided to do which had as its basis a racial theme. That play was *In Splendid Error* by yours truly, which was a historical play about John Brown and Frederick Douglas just prior to the Harper's Ferry incident in the Civil War. After the relative success of *In Splendid Error*, the Greenwich Mews Theater went on to produce a number of other plays on African American themes by African American playwrights, including Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind*, Loftin Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* and, eventually, Langston Hughes' musical *Simply Heav-*



Scene from the premiere of *A Medal For Willie* by William Branch, Oct. 15, 1951, at the Club Baron in Harlem. Photo by J.A. Harrison

*enly*, which transferred to Broadway.

The leading lights behind the Greenwich Mews Theater were unusual. Early on, the Artistic Director was a woman named Osceola Archer Adams. If any of you are members of the black sorority the Deltas, you will recognize the name. She was one of its founders. She was active in theater as an actress and director right on up until to her death a few years ago at 95 or 96. She was succeeded at the Greenwich Mews Theater by a blind woman named Stella Holt. Stella Holt and her companion, Fran Drucker, then ran the theater for a number of years until her death. They concentrated very successfully on presenting plays by African American playwrights.



Grace Kiner wrote *Wedding Clothes* in the 1920s for Alexander Drummond's *Rural Life Plays Program* at Cornell University. Not much is known about Ms. Kiner, other than she lived and worked on a farm in upstate New York.

*Wedding Clothes*  
by Grace Kiner

(The rather poorly furnished combination kitchen and dining-room of the farmhouse on the Moore's rented farm. It is a morning in early spring. Mr. Moore is seated at the end of the table with an account book before him. Mrs. Moore is seated by the window sewing. Both are past fifty.)

MR. MOORE

I don't see what I can do, Ma.

MRS. MOORE

You couldn't borrow a little more at the bank?

MR. MOORE

Jackson wouldn't give me no more. He didn't want to renew the note the last time.

MRS. MOORE

You ain't sold the potatoes yet.

MR. MOORE

I been figuring. It'll take every cent of it to pay the rent and the interest on the note — maybe more. Potatoes ain't bringing nothing now, anyhow.

MRS. MOORE

We might try and charge the things.

MR. MOORE

We can't run up no more bills, Ma. What have we got to have?

MRS. MOORE

Why, you just got to get a new suit, Pa.

MR. MOORE

I can wear my old one.

MRS. MOORE

You can't, Pa. It's five years old and so shiny that I can't do anything with it.

MR. MOORE

I could send it to the cleaners and make it do.

## ROBERT GARD

I am sure that anyone expecting to understand what went on in grassroots theater and academic theater here at Cornell and New York State from about 1918 to 1960 must start with Alexander M. Drummond. His middle name was Magnus. It was his personality and beliefs which colored more than three decades of Cornell and Central New York State life and spread influence to many corners of the United States.



Robert Gard

I suppose that now with all the funding sources and wide-spreading of theater arts departments across the country, Drummond might have done some things differently. But at the time when he developed his early ideas about people and their ability to create theater in and of themselves, America was really just entering her first great awareness of mighty creative forces at the grassroots. Many more persons wanted to participate in the arts than ever had before and a new concept of native roots, local awareness, and folklore as well as a new consciousness of the possibility of an American drama depending on themes and subjects beyond mere superficial romance and popular traveling roadshow humor and story was rising.

America was growing up, and growing up very fast. On the wide American scene there was an advent of new community theaters which took root in many places and offered wide opportunities in acting and theater arts. A vigorous native playwriting movement began in such places as North Carolina and a whole movement of playwriting was being founded on regional awareness and knowledge of personal roots. In North Dakota, Alfred Arvold established "The Little Country Theatre" to which students, many from ranches and farms, came to write plays about their own lives and the lives of their communities.

It was, I am sure, an exciting time for a man like Drummond, who was prepared by his region, family, and his natural bents, to become a part of the new awareness of American subjects. He studied dramatic techniques at Harvard with George Pierce Baker, chief mentor of the new playwriting movement, and at the same time, when he was preparing himself for new, important work in local drama, he enlarged his knowledge of world theater and notably of theater aesthetics, preparing the way for the outstanding programs of graduate study he was to offer later at Cornell.

I look upon Drummond as the greatest of the early academic developers of an American spirit and consciousness in regional and local drama. His interests and genius was broad enough to encompass warm appreciation of America as it was and had emerged from its mighty century of frontier expansion, a development to be reflected in many, many creative works devoted to homeland, to homeplace, to community building, and the slow planting of the idea that art was important at home, in the rural areas, as well as in the great cities and great city institutions.

Drummond encompassed all that and brought forward into his classes and programs at Cornell a whole world-knowledge of theater which made Cornell the coveted study ground for many American scholars.

I arrived at Ithaca on the Black Diamond train in September, 1937. I was brimming with new hope, I had a fellowship to the graduate school of Cornell, and I was going to work with the man then said to be the leader in a movement to engage the people at the grassroots in theater. I had heard of such things going on in beginning ways in North Carolina and Wisconsin. But I was a Kansas boy and I wanted to learn fast about this idea which had so intrigued me.

I wanted to talk with Professor Drummond the first day I arrived in Ithaca. I wanted to discuss communities and writers and stages and people who lived on farms and in small places.

I saw absolutely no sign of him for three weeks. I took to lingering outside his office door in Goldwin Smith Hall, hoping that he might appear. Finally, he did. I was overwhelmed by his size, his definite, sure movements, and especially by the fact that he propelled himself on crutches.

I had not known then that at the age of sixteen he was stricken by polio; but even so, though one leg was useless, the legends about him grew. He became a sought-after athletic coach, and some folks told hero tales about him...How he could lean back into his crutches and throw a football seventy yards down field; how his outlook on life had changed so many lives; tales about his incredible integrity.

This was the man I most wanted to meet.

As I slowly came to know him, I could see that Professor Drummond's thinking about theater in the region centered around the hope of developing fine original plays authored by the people of the area.

His theory of countryside playwriting was that writers should be encouraged to consider the subjects and themes closely allied to their own homeplaces. Cornell, the leading institution of higher learning in the region, ought, he thought, to assume a leading role by drawing attention of writers to the promising subjects and materials. Cornell should also stand ready to assist the local writers once they had plays underway.

Drummond himself was a master play doctor. He believed that a highly usable body of plays might be jointly developed by the authors and by someone like himself able and willing to straighten out the kinks in the scripts. These plays, once they were developed, would be of great service to local theater groups which, ideally, ought to be concerned about the regions where they existed.

The prices they charge in town for clothes is out of sight and there ain't time to send away for anything.

MRS. MOORE

I know, but like as not Margaret will want you to give her away and you got to look right.

MR. MOORE

Well, we just ain't got the money, Ma. What did you think you had to get?

MRS. MOORE

I'll just have to have a new dress. I ain't got a thing but my old brown flannel and it's been made over twice. And we got to have some new curtains for the sitting-room windows. They'll have to stand up in front of the bay window and those curtains are a shame and a disgrace.

MR. MOORE

That would take all of fifty dollars.

MRS. MOORE

We can't have Margaret ashamed of us before her young man the first time he sees us.

MR. MOORE

I guess he won't care much what we look like.

MRS. MOORE

But Margaret will, and we ought to get her something for a present, too.

MR. MOORE

There ain't no use talking about it, I guess.

MRS. MOORE

Pete Sampson was over yesterday when you was gone hauling shell corn.

MR. MOORE

What did he want?

MRS. MOORE

He wanted to talk to you again about the calf.

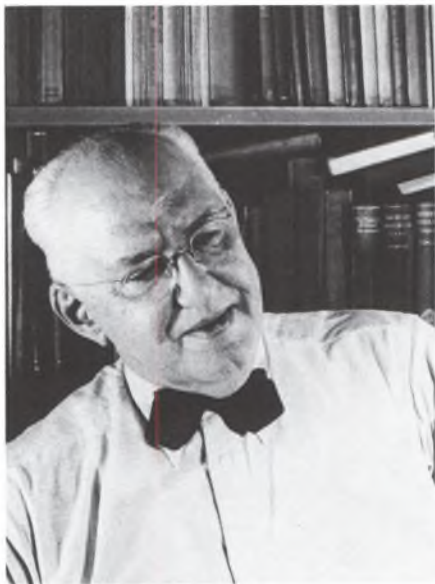
MR. MOORE

Did you tell him I wasn't going to sell it?

MRS. MOORE

Yes, I told him that you didn't want to. He said he'd give you seventy-five dollars for it.





Alexander Drummond

me back several times, just to chat about inconsequential matters. I was very puzzled when I left his office. I was sure that he knew a great deal about me; but that I knew nothing about him.

I wish I had space to dwell upon the fascinating and at times unbelievable method by which Professor Drummond taught. Possibly it is enough to say that it was an ordeal by fire under a terrifying master. His famous Course 66 was where one had to measure up, absolutely, to the Drummond standards of scholarship. It wasn't easy,

but at the end, you found that you were a whole lot less conscious of small conceits and vanities and foolish ambitions.

I built scenery in the theater, assisted with play production and did whatever was required of me, and wrote, I thought, some credible plays. He gave no sign whatever that any of the things I had been doing impressed him. Finally, he cast me in a play for which I was sure I was unsuitable, the character of Captain Shotover in Shaw's *Heartbreak House*. I had such a small voice in those days that Mr. Drummond called me "the whispering Mr. Gard." But he seemed to think it worthwhile to create a voice for me; and his sure coaching gave me at least some hope of portraying the character. Maybe I was partly successful, for a lady from New York who happened to see our production told me, "Oh, yes. Your Captain Shotover was much, much more effective than Orson Welles'." Since I had no way of comparing, I took her at her word.

But there was precious little talk about a theater of the people and nothing about a new playwriting movement. I guess I became very discouraged, finally. I had written a full-length play that I liked and had passed it on to Professor Drummond. He had held it for three months. I thought he must think it awful. And then one day in May I received a letter from Nita Glass, President of Sweet Briar College in Virginia, offering me a job as instructor and head of the theater.

I was terribly in need of a job and I decided that I must see Professor Drummond and tell him I had to leave Cornell.

Finally I did tell him.

"Who told you to go?"

"Well, nobody. I just thought . . ."

"Better think it over."

He obviously had more to say. I stayed waiting. "Better think it over," he repeated. "I've been working very hard the last two months to get you a fellowship with the Rockefeller Foundation. I want you to stay and help me start a new theater project in New York State. Maybe we can learn something about stories and people and theater

MRS. MOORE

You can raise another calf next year.

MR. MOORE

There won't be another one as good as this.

MRS. MOORE

I suppose not. Has the mail gone yet?

MR. MOORE

It's time for the mailman, ain't it? I expect I can go down and get it.

MRS. MOORE

Seems like we ought to hear from Margaret again.

MR. MOORE

It ain't likely you'll hear again, when she's coming tomorrow. There's somebody coming up the road. Maybe they thought to stop and get it.

MRS. MOORE

Who is it?

MR. MOORE

Looks like Pete Sampson's team. What's he coming for?

MRS. MOORE

He said yesterday that he would stop in this morning to see you again about the calf.

MR. MOORE

Did you tell him I'd let him have it?

MRS. MOORE

No, I didn't say you would.

MR. MOORE

I want to do what's right for Margaret, Ma. You don't see what it means to sell the calf now.

MRS. MOORE

It don't seem to me like a calf's very important against Margaret's getting married. The last child we got.

MR. MOORE

I can't see as children are such a sight of comfort after Carrie.

MRS. MOORE

Hush, Pa. Don't you say nothin' against Carrie.

MR. MOORE

Pete's tying up. Mrs. Sampson's with him.

MRS. MOORE

You better go out, Pa. Come in, Mrs. Sampson. There ain't no use of your standing out there to freeze.

MRS. SAMPSON

It's real fresh out this morning for March, ain't it?

MRS. MOORE

You might just as well be in the warm while Pa talks to Mr. Sampson. Come over to the register. Pa just fixed the furnace.

MRS. SAMPSON

The heat feels pretty good all right.

MRS. MOORE

You had quite a drive. Won't Mr. Sampson come in?

MRS. SAMPSON

No, Pete never gets cold. I guess they can talk better without women folks around.

MRS. MOORE

You better lay off your wraps, you'll catch cold when you go out.

MRS. SAMPSON

Is Sam going to let Pete have the calf?

MRS. MOORE

I'm afraid not. He hates to sell it so bad. It's the best one he ever raised.

MRS. SAMPSON

Pete tried to buy it in town last week and Sam said he wouldn't sell it for love or money.

MRS. MOORE

Pa's counting a lot on taking the prizes at the fair with it.

MRS. SAMPSON

So he told Pete. Funny how men are about things like that. You'd think the world would come to an end if they don't get some prize or a cent more for their hogs.

MRS. MOORE

There's lots of things more important than prizes.

MRS. SAMPSON

What you working on?

that will help the whole idea of American theater along."

I sat very still. The reversal was terrific. I felt like laughing, then I felt a great wave of affection for this great man who knew exactly what to do.

He said, "I had just this morning received a letter from Dr. David Stevens in New York. He would like to have you come down to the Foundation to see him."

I stood up. "I would like to stay at Cornell if you really think I can help." He suddenly shoved the play I was so proud of across the desk to me. "I was going to send you back your play this morning. I'm sorry I held it so long."

I saw that he had written on the cover, "This play has a real flavor of America that I like tremendously. Come and see me. I have some news for you."

That evening, I dined with Professor Drummond at the Ithaca Hotel. After dinner, the check lay between us for a long while. Then, suddenly, I recalled the legend: that if a graduate student achieved any kind of respect in Mr. Drummond's eyes, he might be left to pay the check. I guess I picked it up. I don't know to this day how I ever paid the bill. Perhaps I still owe the Ithaca Hotel for that dinner. It was worth it! The next morning there was an envelope for me with a round trip ticket to New York, and a note that said merely, "Good Luck."

I did see David Stevens; he became my great and lifelong friend. When I met him I clutched my play. I thought he might like to read it, right there. He made no such suggestion. He said, "Glad you could come down. I've just talked with Professor Drummond. Your fellowship is arranged. We want you to go to Kansas for a week to visit your mother. Then you can come back to Cornell and go to work."

I traveled all over the state. I met the people everywhere. I heard yarns about outlaws, bogeymen, farmers, pretty teachers, milk strikes, revival preachers, murderers, buried treasures, race horses, haunts, wondrous cures, and probably hundreds of other things. I sat in crossroads stores, hung over back fences, sat on front steps, milked cows, chewed the fat with the boys at the Spit and Whittle Club at Dryden, New York, and generally engaged in any occupation that allowed for yarn swapping. It was a happy time and all through it Professor Drummond left me quite alone. Then one day he sent for me.

I went to his office with acute hesitation. Surveying my activities I could not actually see that I had accomplished much. I felt that what I had seen and heard from the people had point in the sort of theater I imagined might spring from the land and the people, but I feared that Professor Drummond would ask me what books I had read and I knew that I could not impress him. I expected the ax to fall.

I went into his office. He was writing and he wrote for a while. Then he said, "Well, what have you been doing?"

I blushed and said, "Professor Drummond, I have been hearing stories and swapping lies."

"Where have you been?"

I named two or three dozen places I had visited. He said, "Well,

there's plenty to do."

"Yes, sir."

"You think this floating around is worthwhile?"

"Yes, sir."

He said, "I was hoping you would think so. It's the only way you ever get the real flavor of the region." He stood up. "I have my car downstairs. Let's go!"

Touring the central New York countryside with Professor Drummond was like being blind and suddenly seeing the unbelievable beauty of sunlight and landscape. It was like that, yet something more, for he seemed to endow the land with a mystic poetry that sprang from his sensitivity to present and past. There seemed no back road that Professor Drummond did not know. There was no hilltop he had not seen and no valley to which he attached no mysterious significance. The land, the people, the winds, and rains all added up to a complete and satisfying unity for Professor Drummond, and so perfectly were these things reflected in his observations that word pictures dropped from his lips like impressionistic paintings.

Sometimes at night we would stand on a high place called Butcher Hill from which all the land seemed to drop way to the north, to Lake Ontario, and then all the grumpiness, all worldly disillusion, the entire burden of life rolled away from him and he would speak for hours of the legend and of the folklore of places.

As such talk went on and on, broken occasionally by excursions to eat wonderful country food in corners of the land that only Professor Drummond seemed to know, I fell more and more under the spell of the country. It was a bewitchment that stimulated fantasies of imagination and sapped creative strength. I lived every day as a mad kind of excursion, breathing into a subconscious creativeness everything I saw and felt and heard. I had no inclination to work. I rebelled against writing. The whole state was my stage, but I could not formalize the product of my senses into characters that were like life, nor could I merge the fantasy of ideas that rushed through me into tight packages that were the plots and themes of plays.

There was a sudden stop to this madness. I visited a county fair one day at Morris, New York. In one tent a stage had been set up, and the tent was packed with people. They were old folks and young folks and farmers and city people. They were eager; they were in festival mood. They wanted theater, excitement. They wanted hearty humor, dramatic picture, furious impact. They had a right to expect such things, for the plays they were there to see were billed as being from rural life. Rural life to these people meant kindness, neighborliness, strong appreciations of land and wind and color. Rural life meant the strength of outdoor bodies, the good simplicities of food and work and neighborhood fun. Rural life meant songs and games, stout problems in land economics, education for the kids, and a savor of the things that were part of their own place. Rural life meant a tiny thread of loneliness, too, and maybe a very occasional breath of tragedy. Rural life meant the neighborhood arts of careful canning, weaving, quilting. Rural life meant everything these people knew and understood — the whole goodness of their lives.

MRS. MOORE

A new shirt for Pa. I have to make all his shirts myself. The store ones don't seem to fit him in the arms.

MRS. SAMPSON

Nice piece of goods. What kind of material is it?

MRS. MOORE

English broadcloth, the clerk said. It was terrible expensive.

MRS. SAMPSON

Ain't it terrible the way goods stay high. You folks must be getting all dolled up. Going to New York to see Margaret?

MRS. MOORE

No. Margaret's comin' home tomorrow.

MRS. SAMPSON

Well, that's fine for you. Is she going to make a very big stay?

MRS. MOORE

No. Just for a day.

MRS. SAMPSON

Not a very big visit for such a big trip.

MRS. MOORE

She's coming home to be married.

MRS. SAMPSON

To be married! Well, I never. Who's she marrying?

MRS. MOORE

A young man she met there. He's an engineer.

MRS. SAMPSON

An engineer? On a train?

MRS. MOORE

Oh, no, one of the kind that builds bridges and roads and such.

MRS. SAMPSON

Is he coming with her?

MRS. MOORE

Yes, they're just coming to be married and going right back. He can't stay away from his job any longer than that.

MRS. SAMPSON

Well, well. Ain't that fine.

MRS. MOORE

What do you suppose those men are doing all this time?

MRS. SAMPSON

Oh, they're just arguing, I guess. Are you going to have a wedding?

MRS. MOORE

No, just Carrie and the minister and his wife. She didn't want much fuss because his folks can't come.

MRS. SAMPSON

Well, I think it's just fine to have her get married at home. So many young folks don't nowadays.

MRS. MOORE

I always wanted to have a nice home wedding. I never felt just right about Carrie getting married away.

MRS. SAMPSON

Yes, a woman sort of feels better to see her girls get married. Have you seen the young man?

MRS. MOORE

No, you see Margaret ain't been home since last summer. She sent us a little picture. It's kind of dark, but you can see what he looks like.

MRS. SAMPSON

He ain't no beauty. But handsome is as handsome does, I guess.

MRS. MOORE

He must be real nice from what she says. I wish she could stay a little longer, though. She ain't been home now for a year.

MRS. SAMPSON

Why didn't she come sooner, so she could of got her sheets hemmed and some comforters tied? I'd 'a' been glad to help you. It'll cost like everything if she has to buy everything.

MRS. MOORE

She wrote that he was likely to have to go to Texas any time now on a big oil job, something about a pumping station and he wanted she should go along.

MRS. SAMPSON

Well, she better take him while he's willing. Good men ain't so easy to come by. So, you're getting new clothes for the wedding.

The plays were billed as rural life plays and they were played by local young people and adults. When they began, I, too, was eager, for I had seen the broad, free life of American country places. But when the plays were over, I looked at the faces around me. Anticipation had turned to a solemn disinterestedness. There was no laughter, no tears — only definite exodus that was filled with vague irritation. There was no festival here — only the departure of an initial eagerness that had seemed very precious and deep.

The reason seemed to me then quite clear. The plays were not rural plays. True, they were supposedly set in the country, but their characters had no relation to the kind of country life I and the folks around me knew. They had very little relation to life anywhere. They were dreary in tone: they were filled with bad jokes lifted from a collection read somewhere or heard on somebody's radio. The characters were stereotypes of real people. They maundered on and on about poor housewives who had no pianos or washing machines or they talked in clichés about cruel fathers who would not let sons or daughters have boy or girl friends or join 4-H clubs. They hinted at shotgun weddings, and they dusted off the only conflicts between the farm and the city. They sawed back and forth on the fringes of obscene jests about the farmer's daughter and the city slicker.

I remember thinking, as I walked out of the tent into the autumn sunlight, that this was the only real theater the people in this place knew, that there could be only failure and disillusionment in such plays, and that such plays were evil and would kill any art that might grow here. I paused as I thought of the rural life that I knew in Kansas, of the wheat fields, of the mighty machines biting through the yellow grain, of the harvest parties, and of the wild singing and dancing. I thought of New York State grape pickers singing on a steep hillside, of a farm mother holding a little child against her breast, of the terror of a violent storm, and of faces full of suffering from pain and lost crops. As I stood thinking, the great Butternut Valley that was all around Morris turned golden in the afternoon light. I looked at the hills, and suddenly my spirit was filled and lifted with a clear knowledge. I knew that there must be plays of the people filled with the spirit of places, and my aimless activities assumed meaning. I felt the conviction then that I have maintained since — that the knowledge and love of place is a large part of the joy in people's lives. There must be plays that grow from all the countrysides of America, fabricated by the people themselves, born of toiling hands and free minds, born of music and love and reason. There must be many great voices singing out the lore and legend of America from a thousand hilltops, and there must be students to listen and to learn, and writers encouraged to use the materials.

The next day I went back to Ithaca and sought out Professor Drummond. When I told him what I had been thinking, he said, "I'm glad some of the ideas have been jelling for you." And we sat down at his table and made some plans for a playwriting project from the State of New York.

Professor Drummond said that there were probably a lot of people in New York State who wanted to write plays. He said that we would try to get in touch with these people and that the result of our efforts

might be such a bloom of country-grown plays that the entire state would enjoy the aroma of up-country life. He said that outside the University playwriting classes, there had been almost no attempt to get the people to think and write dramatically of themselves. When I asked him how many people might try writing a play, he refused to estimate, but his eyes warmed up, and I knew that he was dreaming of a large number and that both he and I were hoping for sensational results. I suppose that when we were alone and remembered the soul-tormenting rigors of playwriting, we had some serious doubts, but these doubts did not in the least deter us from trying. Indeed, so great was our faith in the people, so real was our dream of a people's theater, and so confident was our belief in the goodness of the folklore and life of the region that it was almost as though some old central New York Indian god had endowed us with this dream as a special mission.

This dream soon became a reality. Our first task was the preparation of a letter which we circulated widely through the mails and got printed in papers and magazines. The letter pointed out that many persons, young and old, should be interested in writing a play about New York State, that as soon as good plays became available they would be circulated through-out the state, and that anyone might receive advice and perhaps assistance by writing to Professor Drummond or me at Cornell University. The letter stated also that we were eager to get in touch with folks who might have some good ideas for plays so that we might pass these ideas on to possible authors and that we wished people would get in touch with us who might like to present some of these plays in their own communities.

Perhaps Professor Drummond knew what we were letting ourselves in for, but I did not. All I had was enthusiasm and a capacity for work. I needed both, for immediately our mail overflowed the boxes. There were letters scattered everywhere. Such a good thing as a secretary to help handle this spate of potential culture was a part of our dream that he had not dealt with. But every letter was answered, and the ideas, the encouragement, the offer of free publicity, good will, even love, made us believe that maybe, just maybe, we had touched a popular chord. The letters were filled, some of them, with a sort of fresh hope, as though a farmer or a housewife or a grocer or a country doctor after years of working and thinking and dreaming suddenly saw a chance to speak of the things he lived by. Some of the letters were neatly typed. Others were written in illegible scrawls and soft lead pencils. A few were written in foreign languages — in French, German, and Finnish.

There were letters that I remember particularly well. One was from a farmer's wife in Cattaraugus County, New York, Mrs. D.H. Chambers. She wrote that she was much interested in writing a play about the Dutch Hill War, a rather comic incident of the land troubles of the 1840's which took place on her farm. She wrote: "I have never expressed myself in the dramatic form, but I am willing to learn. I have a brother who has been fairly successful in dramatic writing and you may have heard of him. His name is Maxwell Anderson."

People began to drift into Ithaca to see us about their work. A woman from Buffalo brought her play about underground railroad

MRS. MOORE

I don't know if we can get much or not. We really ain't got anything suitable, neither Pa nor I, but you know how tight money's been lately.

MRS. SAMPSON

I should say I do. You ought to hear Pete go on about it.

MRS. MOORE

It's worse for a renter. We can't hold the potatoes. The landlord wants his rent.

MRS. SAMPSON

Pete's holding his. He says they'll go to a dollar before the winter's over.

MRS. MOORE

I'd like to get a nice present for Margaret, too.

MRS. SAMPSON

The calf ought to bring enough to get most of the things. Pete'll pay cash.

MRS. MOORE

I don't know if Pa'll sell it or not.

MRS. SAMPSON

Oh, Pete'll talk him into it. Pete always gets the things he sets his heart on. He's been talkin' about the calf for the last month.

MRS. MOORE

I'm so excited over the wedding. I ain't slept a wink since we got Margaret's letter.

MRS. SAMPSON

You don't say.

MRS. MOORE

I tell Pa I wasn't so upset when I was going to be married myself.

MRS. SAMPSON

I expect I will be too, when my girl gets big enough to be thinking about weddings. When I was married, I'd been to a party every night the week before and I was so tired I just about went to sleep at the wedding dinner. Pete jokes me about it yet. Are you going to have a dinner?

MRS. MOORE

Yes. Margaret wrote that they would have the service at noon and eat at one, so as they could catch the three o'clock train.

MRS. SAMPSON

What are you going to have to eat?



MRS. MOORE  
We're going to kill one of the turkey hens we been saving and I got some canned pumpkin for pies.

MRS. SAMPSON  
Could you use some of my quince preserves? I had extra good luck last fall and they kept fine.

MRS. MOORE  
Why, I don't want to rob you. My grape jell is all gone.

MRS. SAMPSON  
It won't be robbing me at all. I got plenty. I'll just send some over in the morning.

MRS. MOORE  
I hate to have you go through to so much trouble.

MRS. SAMPSON  
There come the men folks. Sam let Pete have the calf; they got it on the wagon.

MRS. MOORE  
I sort of hate to see him go. He's such a nice calf.

MRS. SAMPSON  
I knew Pete would get him. That's why he drove over in the wagon instead of using the car.

MRS. MOORE  
He's a pretty good load.

MRS. SAMPSON  
Well, I must be going. Pete's in a hurry.

MRS. MOORE  
Won't he come in for a minute?

MRS. SAMPSON  
Oh, no, he ain't never cold. I hope you have a nice day tomorrow.

MRS. MOORE  
Well, thank you. Come in again sometime, when you can stay a little.

MRS. SAMPSON  
I will. I was telling Pete the other day that I was coming over here sometime and just spend the afternoon. We folks in the country seem to get out of the habit of visiting. Tell Margaret to stop in a minute if she has any time to spare.

days at Niagara Falls. An old man with long gray hair came to see me with a jolly little play about antique collectors. A machinist from around Rochester brought two scripts about workmen. A girl from the western part of the state brought her play about grape pickers. A thin young man came with his play about a schoolhouse that was painted in big red and white checks. (One faction in the community had once wanted the schoolhouse painted red, the rest of the community wanted it white. They had compromised.) Folks came from all points of the compass with plays that reflected many facets of regional life.

There was excitement in meeting these people and talking with them. They were new signs of an art expression that seemed to be springing up joyously everywhere, and so infectious was the spirit of this simple movement that Professor Drummond and I were caught up in it. We began to write, too, and several plays were our individual or joint efforts.

We tried out a lot of new plays in the Cornell University theater and slowly began to build up some really actable scripts. Then we decided that we must write a long show that would set the temper of the thing we were trying to do. We hoped that such a play might draw the attention of the state to our project. For a subject we turned more or less naturally to one of the greatest of the New York State tales, the famous yarn of the Cardiff Giant.

Almost anyone, these days, knows the story of this hoax that took place in 1869 in the little village of Cardiff when a great stone man was uncovered by well diggers on the farm of "Stubby" Newell. The discovery of this figure aroused thousands of simple, God-fearing folk to fever pitch, for they believed the stone giant to be a religious manifestation, one of the Biblical giants of Genesis. Great scientists, too, were hoodwinked for a time and considered the find to be one of the important paleological discoveries of the age.

The hoax was actually fabricated by a cigarmaker from Binghamton named George Hull. One day George was arguing with a preacher in Fort Dodge, Iowa. The preacher claimed loudly that there "were giants in those days" and Hull maintained there were not. The preacher did George down in debate, and George went out and hired men to cut a great block of gypsum out of the river bank at Fort Dodge. Then George shipped this block of stone to Chicago where he got a tombstone cutter to carve the block into the form of a giant. George got the giant to Binghamton then shipped it by wagon to Cardiff, the wagon travelling at night for secrecy.

George was first cousin to "Stubby" Newell. Stubby let George bury the giant on his farm. In the dead of night the deed was done. The giant lay buried for a year. Grass grew over the spot secluded under the shadow of a great hill. One day, Stubby hired a couple of men to dig a well right on the spot where the giant lay buried. When the men encountered a great stone foot and dug a little more to see what manner of creature lay buried there, they both tossed their shovels and ran to the village to spread the news.

In a few days, Newell's farm was tramped over by seething humanity. A tent was erected above the giant's grave, and Hull, Newell, and Company, which included by this time the famous

Homer, New York, banker, David Hannum (later known fictionally as David Harum), were coining money at the rate of 5 percent on \$4,000,000!

Everybody wanted to see the giant. Certain ladies viewing the sculptured wonder fainted dead away, for Hull's tombstone carver had left nothing to the imagination. A dentist, Dr. Boynton, pronounced the work to be of Caucasian, not Indian origin, and called it the noblest work of art that had come down to us. The Board of Regents of the State of New York came to view the colossus, bearing with them insurance in the words of the state geologist, Dr. Hall, who called the giant the "most remarkable object brought to light in the country deserving of the attention of all archaeologists."

And so it went. Preachers basing sermons on the giant gleaned converts like falling chaff. One fool from the Yale Divinity School identified the giant as a Phoenician idol brought to this country several hundred years before Christ. P.T. Barnum, recognizing the giant as a magnificent showpiece, offered to buy it for sixty thousand dollars, and when he was refused, went off to New York to make a duplicate. He displayed it as the only authentic Cardiff Giant.

Professor Marsh of Yale at last exposed the hoax for what it was — a crude and recently carved block of gypsum, something which President Andrew D. White of Cornell had maintained from the first.

While Professor Drummond and I were speculating about the Cardiff Giant as a potential dramatic subject, a dreamer from the South came to visit us at Ithaca. This was Paul Green, who long before had caught a vision of a people's theater with Professor Koch of North Carolina University.

This tall man with the sensitive face and deep eyes made a profound impression on me. His plays were pointed out as the foremost regional dramatic expression in America. He spoke simply, yet like a poet, and everything in the earth and sky and of men had a philosophic meaning for him. He spent long hours talking with me. When he heard the story of the giant he began to grin and get excited and to walk up and down. He said the yarn demonstrated the universality of human folly, and he insisted that Professor Drummond and I start writing the play immediately.

So one day in the early spring we drove up to Cardiff, up Highway 11 that runs north from Cortland to Syracuse, and we paused a little while on a great hill that the glaciers left across the Onondaga Valley like a high wall. We looked down the valley flats, across the salt well derricks, toward the little town of Cardiff near which the giant once lay. The valley was quiet and mysterious, with the hill they call Bear Mountain shadowing it from the west. It was a scene to inspire awe.

We found an old man in Cardiff, Mr. Nichols, who lived alone in a shack. He was the son of one of the fellows who had dug the well and uncovered the giant's foot. Mr. Nichols had seen the giant lying in its grave, and he had some yellowed photographs of the scene and the wonder. He took us to the exact spot where the hoax

MRS. MOORE

I'll tell her. Did Pete give you the check, Pa?

MR. MOORE

Yeah, I got it. I made him give me eight-five for him.

MRS. MOORE

Eight-five dollars. That's a lot of money for one critter.

MR. MOORE

He'd 'a' been worth a lot more next winter.

MRS. MOORE

I know, Pa. But there didn't seem to be no other way to get the money.

MR. MOORE

Well, there ain't no use of crying over spilt milk. I suppose you'll be wanting to go to town this afternoon.

MRS. MOORE

Yes, I'll get right at the dinner so as we can get a good early start. You know how long it takes you to get a suit.

MR. MOORE

What kind of a one have I got to get?

MRS. MOORE

It better be a black one, I guess. Your shirt is just about done, all but the buttonholes. And I'll get a black silk, they're always so dressy. I hate like poison to buy one ready made, they charge so much for them. But I ain't got time to make anything.

MR. MOORE

What are we going to get her for a present?

MRS. MOORE

I been thinking. We could get her some wool blankets, she'll need them.

MR. MOORE

Seems like you ought to get something more fussy than that.

MRS. MOORE

We better wait till after we get the things we got to have. If we got enough left we might get some silver knives and forks, maybe the spoons, too.

MR. MOORE

They cost like everything.

MRS. MOORE

I expect they would. I want to get some curtains for the sitting room, too. I'll have to run them up on the machine after we get home. It's a good thing we got busy and cleaned up the house yesterday. We better stop on the way in and see the minister.

MR. MOORE

I better go and feed the team if we are going to get an early start.

MRS. MOORE

Why, they're coming back. What do you suppose is the matter?

MR. MOORE

I don't know. Left something, maybe.

MRS. SAMPSON

Forgot to give you folks your mail. We got it when we came up by the box. Thought we'd save you a trip down.

MR. MOORE

It's too bad to give you so much bother.

MRS. SAMPSON

No bother at all, we almost forgot it. Goodbye.

MRS. MOORE

Any letters, Pa?

MR. MOORE

Guess not. Yes, I guess there is one. It's from her, I guess.

MRS. MOORE

Yes, it's from Margaret. Telling us some more about when she's coming, I suppose.

MR. MOORE

Well, read it, Ma.

MRS. MOORE

"Dear folks, I've only a second to write. We must rush for the train." Why she wrote this Saturday. She wasn't taking no train then.

MR. MOORE

Go on. Maybe she tells where she was going.

MRS. MOORE

"Howard was ordered to go to Texas yesterday and he didn't dare to try and put it off. So we were married this mornin — " Oh, Pa, she's married already.

had taken place. From him we got the atmosphere and the flavor of the event. We found other old-timers who remembered songs that were sung at the revival meetings or who had poems that had been written to commemorate the find. We discovered relatives of Stubby Newell, and little by little we assembled a fine body of working materials.

Such materials included, in addition to the items described, notes made from the newspapers of the period, the *Syracuse Journal* and the *Ithaca Journal*, especially, from articles in magazines describing the wonder, and from actual statements gleaned from published lectures by various personalities involved. We also dug a bit into the backgrounds of Stubby Newell and George Hull, and we did extensive reading relating to the topics of the times and to the state of New York crops and climate in 1869. In other words, we assembled a fairly complete body of information pertaining generally to the region in the particular year we wished to set the drama.

During our work collecting materials, we discussed the form of the play. We believed that the play must be flexible in form to allow for the inclusion of many scenes and numerous characters. We wanted to draw a merry picture of country life in New York State with its color and variety including the social "bees," the rural school, the church picnics, the political argufiers, and all the rest. To do this we knew that we must think more in terms of a "show" than of a strictly plotted play. Therefore, with the excellent models of the ancient Chinese theater, the "living newspaper" dramas of the Federal Theatre, and the newly produced *Our Town* before us we conceived a New York State show.

I got up a first draft of the play which seemed pretty good to me, but Professor Drummond said: "Gard, this is too long. We'll have to cut it." And then he began to work on the play. He proved that he was a true lover of New York State and her stories, for he lengthened the play, added characters, scenes and generally filled the whole thing with his intimate understanding of the people, the language, their music and poetry. The final draft of *The Cardiff Giant* had ninety-eight speaking parts. In the first production in the Cornell University Theater I played nine parts myself.

When the curtain rose to an enthusiastic crowd of New York Staters and the Narrator was on the stage saying, "You gotta imagine your back in 1869; that's when the hoax jelled — in October 1869," it was as if the spirit of central New York State had come alive.

And in the very first scene the folks began to go to Cardiff to see the giant, and the Erie canallers sang their famous song:

"We was forty miles from Albany, Forget it I never shall.

What a terrible time we had one night, On the E-r-i-e Canawal!"

Politicians, farmers, merchants, professors, Indians, rich men, poor men, beggarmen, dogs! And the preachers began preachin', and the ladies of the Methodist, Free Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Hard Shell, Spiritualist, and all the other churches began singin' revival hymns, and Dave Harum, P.T. Barnum, Bob Ingersoll, the Board of Regents of the State of New York, the Bloomer Women, and the Yale professors all got on stage at once yelling that the giant was an honest-to-God sign from on high! Yes, sir, in the first scene

there was a lot going on. But there was more to come, with the giant lyin' in his grave there on the stage, and crowds of people milling around and demonstrating plenty of kinds of human folly!

When the audiences saw the big show they went away thinking that the New York State Plays Project was sure off to a good start, and some of them went home and did some thinking about New York State and sent us a lot of good yarns.

I can still feel the central New York State land calling me. When I close my eyes, the patchwork hillsides across the deep valleys are as vivid to me as though I stood on the Cornell campus on a May morning and looked west toward Mecklenburg. I might have lived and dreamed forever in the Finger Lakes country if it had not been for the war. But suddenly one day, there it was, and the course of our creative project in New York State was instantly altered. There was writing, yes, but it was frenzied writing on war-time themes, and when we looked about the land, there were no longer home-grown plays on country stages. Sadly, we admitted that the dream must wait, and for me, indeed, the New York State Project is only a green memory. I have never lived in New York State since.

There were many ideas that I took away from Cornell. Most of these ideas were simply a part of the maturing of other, larger ideas and not definable in themselves. But the large ideas about regional theater that I took away were definable. Reduced to general terms they are these: A concept of theater must be broad enough to include many things. The traditional materials of the region, at least those having possible literary significance, must be assembled. Writers must be encouraged throughout the region. The people of the region must be "let in" on what the regional drama project is trying to do and a friendly public attitude toward the project must be established. The university should take a role of leadership in the theater arts not only on campus but throughout the region.

MR. MOORE

Is that all she says?

MRS. MOORE

No, there's some more. "I hope you won't mind. It will save you all the work and fuss. We'll try and come home after Howard gets done with his job. I'll write more later. Love, Margaret." Oh, Pa, and you sold the calf and we got all ready.

MR. MOORE

I would 'a' taken the prize at the fair if I'd 'a' kept it. I suppose Pete Sampson'll show him now.

MRS. MOORE

Don't you suppose he'll let you buy it back?

MR. MOORE

Not much. Pete don't give up the things that he wants himself.

MRS. MOORE

I did so want one of the girls to get married at home.

MR. MOORE

There, there, Ma. Where did she say she was going?

MRS. MOORE

She didn't say. Seems like she might 'a' written a little more about it. I hope they had a minister.

MR. MOORE

Yeh, it seems like.

MRS. MOORE

Maybe we ought to send her the money for a present. She'll need lots of things, getting married in such a hurry.

MR. MOORE

Maybe. We'll see how much the potatoes bring. Guess, I better go tend the stock.

MRS. MOORE

You might as well turn out the old turkey hen.

MR. MOORE

Yeh.

CURTAIN

**Me Voy Pa' Mexico** (I'm Going to Mexico) was written and performed in the 1920s by Netty and Jesus Rodriguez, a brother and sister vaudeville team from Texas. This sketch was discovered by Nick Kanellos on a 78 rpm record, which had been made because of its popularity. A rough translation into English by Mr. Kanellos follows.

**Me Voy Pa' Mexico**  
by Netty and Jesus Rodriguez

NETTY

¿Cuando salimos, Panchito?

JESUS

Pues, ¿quien sabe, vida mia?

NETTY

Esta muy mal lo que hicimos, y lo que es yo no me iria.

JESUS

Ten un poco de paciencia.

NETTY

iPacencia! Ya es demasiada.

JESUS

iComo tienes impaciencia! Vale la pena guardar. No hay que retroceder por ir nuestra tierra a ver.

NETTY

Pos yo no me espero mas. Me quedo y busco trabajo. Y si tu quieres, te vas porque yo, prieto, me rajo.

JESUS

¿Quiubo, chata? ¿Que sucede? Cierre su pico atrevido, Ud. quedarse no puede porque se va su marido.

NETTY

Pos, vete, si quieres, anda. Porque yo aqui bien estoy. Y Ud. a mi no me manda, iy sepalo! iNo me voy!

JESUS

iPero como viene fiero! El hombre manda, ¿lo oyo?

## NICOLÁS KANELLOS

*Note: Kanellos incorporated a number of slides into his talk. The following text combines his introductory remarks with comments made about the slides.*

I am going to give a few highlights of the development of the Hispanic theater in the United States. These highlights will deal with the themes of this conference, although the whole history is much more diverse, more expansive than just grassroots theater.

The problem has been that when and if any kind of theater commentary is done on Hispanic or Latino traditions in the United States it has usually been of the folk or rural theater. People have gotten the impression that that was all that existed, some old, antiquated plays from the Middle Ages that were imported by the christenizing Franciscans and Dominicans. These turned out to be shepherd's plays, which are very important in their own right and have created a long standing tradition that still lives today.

But at the same time, in the late 16th Century, when these Franciscan and Dominican missionaries and soldiers came to the New World and were moving up into what has become the Southwest of the United States and Florida, there is secular theater from all that time, theater that goes beyond the religious, folk theater. Even in the Colonial days in New York, Massachusetts, and Philadelphia and during the early 19th Century.

The emphasis in my writing on the history of this theater has been on the work that has not been done, that is, in documenting the theater companies, the theater houses, their modes of transportation, and their economic base. In my talk today, I'll be limiting myself to a brief period, the first part of the 20th Century in the Southwest.

As a background to that, let me say that in California when it still belonged to Spain, as early as the 1790s, we have news of plays by subscription, of companies actually performing for the communities out there. They were performing in pool halls — yes, there were pool halls — and inns for the travelers. These same pool halls and inns were important in the development of resistance against the invading American forces during the Mexican-American War. They were cultural centers that spanned the gaps of the social strata. They brought together people who were cowboys as well as hacienda owners.

This theatrical tradition built up along the California coast because there was a cattle industry and a mining industry. The cattle industry especially developed the need for the creation of ports for the export of hides. They would be exported through Mexico. By the middle of the 19th Century, steamships were traveling up and down the California coast to Acapulco, Mazatlan, Baja, California, San Diego, San Francisco, Monterey.

What developed in the 1840s and 1850s was a cadre of traveling companies that presented Spanish grand dramas, melodramas, four and five act plays. They would take a whole evening to perform with all kinds of occasional entertainments in between — songs, skits,



Don Lalo (Leonardo Garcia Astol), a peladito in Mexican American vaudeville.

dancing. Most of the people that belonged to these companies were Spaniards, or claimed to be. These theater companies would come up by steamship to Baja, California. They would take a stagecoach across Baja, take a ferry to Northern Mexico, go from town to town by stagecoach up to Tucson, take the coach across from Tucson to Los Angeles, in Los Angeles get on the steamboat again and go up to San Francisco. You can imagine what that must have been like.

One theater director emerged on the scene in the

1860s and he is known in Mexican theater history as the first to take theater out into "the provinces." That was Gerardo Lopez de Castillo. He joined one of the Spanish troupes, married the leading lady, the daughter of the founder, and toured what had become Northern Mexico after the Mexican-American War. The troupe later settled down and became a resident company in San Francisco. They used that as their base to tour around California.

The most important thing about this is that once there is in the Southwest a Mexican culture within an Anglo political/economic context, the Mexican theater from that point on takes on a context and a social role that it never had in Mexico. (The same can be said of the Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Spanish theater in New York or the Spanish and Cuban-American theater in Florida with regard to Havana, San Juan, or Madrid.) It now becomes a place to preserve language and culture within an alien environment. It becomes a place for community organizing, a place where the contestatory role of Hispanic culture is borne as an alternative to the official culture, news, and information of the larger society.

During the rest of the 19th Century, this role is preserved more in the community setting and expectation than in the kinds of plays being presented, because the plays presented continued to be the melodramas and grand dramas of Spain; once in a while, there's a Cuban or Mexican play presented, but the Cuban or Mexican or Puerto Rican stages were not really developed yet. There's no such thing really as a Mexican culture at that time, identified as such. The rise of nationalism comes later in the early 20th Century. It's the things that go on around the plays that provide the new social and political context in the United States.

Gerardo Lopez de Castillo, for instance, became the President of the Junta Patriótica Mexicana, the Mexican Patriotic Society, and was a political organizer in the community. Many theater people became organizers in the community and the theater space itself was quite often used for that purpose. This tradition becomes collateral

NETTY

Yo no soy su mandadera. Aqui el hombre manda, y...no.

JESUS

¿Y no manda? Eso creiste.

NETTY

No lo creí, que lo se.

JESUS

¡Que pronto te lo aprendiste! Y lo que yo se ensene, que pronto se te olvido. El hombre es hombre dondequiera y debe ser respetado siempre por su companera. Cuando me amarro en Celaya co amantes ilusiones, yo llevaba la saya. Y porque oyo platicar que aqui la ley es tirante, ya me quiere cambiar lo de atras pa' adelante. ¡Pues se equivoca la ingrata! Si chilla porque esta aqui, le desquebrajo una pata, a que se acuerde de mi.

NETTY

¡Ah, como trae vaqueta! ¡Juele con su valentia! Si llama a la policia, ya veras si me respeta.

JESUS

¡Ora veras!

NETTY

¡Andele! ¡Pegeme!

JESUS

¿Pa' que la voy a pegar, si en mi suelo mexicano sobra quien me quiera amar?

NETTY

¡Como me las cargas, Pancho! Pero no importa, compadre, tengo el camino muy ancho pa' jalar donde me cuadre.

JESUS

Pues que sea feliz, mi chatita, si no me quiere seguir. Quedese en hora bendita, al finno me he de morir. Alla las tengo de amar, y en llegando a Manzanillo, alli me vuelvo a amarrar. Y alla no sere tan maje, buscare una mujer muy mujer que no se raje y sepa agradecer los afanes del marido, una mexicana pura que no cambie de opinion y no deje las tortillas por jot queques y jamon.

NETTY

Que ya se esta propasando.

JESUS  
Pos ¿por que se rajo, desgraciada?

NETTY  
¡Como sera, hablador! ¡Callese!

JESUS  
¿Por que me he de callar? ¿Cuando le neque mi amor pa' que se quiera quiera? ¿No trabaje muy bonito pa' comprarle güenos tenis?

NETTY  
Sure.

JESUS  
¿No la llevo su prietito a revalsarla por Venice?

NETTY  
Ummmmm hmoooo.

JESUS  
¿No me estava camellando un ano sin descansar? ¿Y Ud. nomas vacilando y enseñandose a polvear? A como sera Ud. ingrata, xcomo me ha dado Ud. guerra! ¡Que mal se porta mi chata! ¡Que ya olvida hasta su tierra!

NETTY  
Eso si, no me lo diga.

JESUS  
Entonces, ¿por que no vienes?

NETTY  
¿Como quiere que lo siga, si ya tierra alla no tienes?

JESUS  
Y me las echa de un kilo. Ya ni vergüenza le da. Como se ha hecho del estilo y las costumbres de aca. ¡Voy a sacar el divorcio!

NETTY  
¡All right, very well, all right!

JESUS  
Senora, no me las trabe. Si es que yo aprendí a espiguiar, hableme como Ud. sabe, y no me la venga a enredar.

NETTY  
No diga que se lo enredo, ique ya mas claro no hay! Si Ud. se va, yo me quedo. ¡Adios, Panchito! ¡Bye, bye, hoo hoo!

to the actual play; it's the whole experience, what the people do when they are in the hall and relating.

Over the years, the theater became one of the three most important institutions in the Hispanic community, a place where people came together. The three institutions were the Church, the mutualist society, and the theater. The theater played this role because of its organizing function and because it was a place for preservation of culture and language. As more and more immigrants came in, they perceived that their culture was at a disadvantage, was endangered because of the influence and total pervasiveness of "Americanism" and their very tenuous position in the United States. The theater often took on the mission of preaching, of letting people know how to behave in society; it often became a school for young people, a place to learn how you should act.

In the 1920s, with the growing liberation of women in the United States, the men, who very much held the reins of the culture and were the leaders of the Hispanic community, converted the woman into the cultural battlefield. The Mexican Revolution had produced thousands upon thousands of immigrants, the majority of whom were men; men remained the majority for a very long time. The community — identified by the leaders as a community in exile — saw itself not only threatened by the pervasiveness of English and American culture in general, but also by the liberalized customs regarding women in Anglo-American society. In the newspapers, in publications, and in the theater there were quite often attacks on "flappers," women who cut their hair short, wore their dresses short, smoked in public, and mixed their English and Spanish. They became "agringados" or "pochos" or "renegados," which was the



New York's famed vaudeville house, the Teatro Hispano, c. 1939. It featured artists from all over the Hispanic world and the U.S. Southwest.

worst of all. Now, "renegado," you know from old Western movies, that's a really bad guy, a renegade. Well, renegade is actually from the New Testament; those who denied Christ are the renegades. This came into the vernacular as those who denied their identity, their

mother culture, their language.

A very important thing happens to this theater tradition, which started off with grand drama and melodrama in the 19th Century, with rather large touring companies that then became resident companies in San Antonio, San Diego, Baja, California, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. As soon as what are perceived as hordes of immigrants, laborers, economic refugees from the Mexican Revolution come into the United States, the theater becomes really empowered. You have to bear in mind that there was no television or movies then. There are silent films, that catered to an Anglo American audience. Theaters were segregated; Mexicans were not allowed in the Anglo American theaters to see the movies. There were very few places for entertainment.

A very important person in developing the theater in the United States, as well as throughout Mexico, was Virginia Fabregas. She was called the First Lady of the Mexican Stage. She was known for touring theater throughout the Spanish speaking world. Her tours would extend from Spain to the Philippines with the United States in between. She'd go to Puerto Rico, Cuba, come into New Orleans and go through Texas, throughout the Southwest to Los Angeles, up to San Francisco, then go to the Philippines and back. I even found her going into Guam. Today, there's still a Teatro Fabregas in Mexico City, founded by her son, who's also a very fine stage and film actor, Manolo Fabregas.

She toured from 1900 to 1940 throughout the United States. Every time she toured, especially during the Revolution, there were people who defected from her company for the lucrative stages in the U.S. They would found their own companies and become the heads of resident companies in the Southwest. She is also very important because she shows the role and leadership of women in the stage. This was one of the few places in Hispanic culture in this time where there were businesswomen, not only as artists, but as entrepreneurs. She and numbers of others became very wealthy, very important. They ran companies that had forty or fifty people in them, they traveled with bands, whole orchestras, all kinds of stuff.

These companies were worshipped by the communities. Weeks before they would come to San Antonio or El Paso, the newspapers were writing about them and telling everyone to go and there were sold out performances. The stature is like rock stars today, the way that they were followed. Fabregas was known for importing a European modern theater into Mexico and bringing it wherever she toured. She would be playing plays from Spain, France, Germany, in Spanish translation. She was also picking up plays by resident playwrights in the United States and taking them on the road with her.

During the 1920s, the Hispanic film industry began, with films being made at night in the same studios in Hollywood that were used to produce the Anglo American industry. This drew artists from all over the Spanish speaking world, from as far away as Spain and Argentina, to Hollywood. All of this produced in Los Angeles twelve main theater houses presenting plays on a daily basis — different plays every day; they still maintained the wonderful institution of

JESUS

¿Para que es su amor tirano, si esta lleno de interes, si no es puro ni esta sano, ni me promete honradez? Porque en el pecho me lleve, voyme a Mexico, y veras. Que el amor, aqui se muere. Alla vive hasta demas. Si, a Mexico querido donde amar es un honor, donde el amor ha vivido sin mas precio que otro amor.

NETTY

¡Ay, Panchito de mi vida, ya no puedo resistir, triunfo mi patria querida, yo tambien me quero ir!

JESUS

Por fin se viene conmigo.

NETTY

Y esperando tu perdo, pa dondequera te sigo.

JESUS

Pos, pa' Mexico, mi chata.

•••

*I'm Going to Mexico*  
by Netty and Jesus Rodriquez

NETTY

When are we leaving, Panchito?

JESUS

Who knows, my dear.

NETTY

What we did was very bad, and what's more, I wouldn't be leaving.

JESUS

Have a little patience.

NETTY

Patience! It's already too much.

JESUS

How impatient you are! It's worthwhile to persevere. One shouldn't back down about going back to our homeland.

NETTY

I'm not waiting any longer. I'm staying here and looking for work. If you want, you can go, handsome, because I'm not going.



JESUS

What's the matter, baby? What's wrong? Shut your smart mouth, you can't stay because your husband is leaving.

NETTY

Well, go ahead, leave if you feel like it. Because I'm fine right here. And you don't give me orders, get that straight! I'm not going!

JESUS

You're really coming on like a wild animal! The man is the boss, get it?

NETTY

I'm not your flunky. Over here the man gives the orders and...doesn't.

JESUS

He doesn't give the orders? That's what you believe.

NETTY

I didn't just believe it, I know it.

JESUS

How fast you learned it. And what I taught you, how fast you forgot it. The man is the man anywhere he might be and he should be respected by his woman. When you snared me back in Celaya with romantic dreams, I was wearing the pants and you were wearing the skirt. And now that you've heard that up here the law is a tyrant, you want to turn everything around on me. Well, the ungrateful woman is mistaken! If she squawks about being here, I'll break her leg, just to give her something to remember me by.

NETTY

Ah, what a grudge you carry! Get out of here with your tough guy threats! If you call the police, then you'll see if you respect me.

JESUS

Now you'll see!

NETTY

Go ahead, hit me!

JESUS

Why should I hit you, if my Mexican homeland is overflowing with women who want to love me?

NETTY

the prompter. On weekends, they would have three different performances Saturday and Sunday. In addition to those twelve main theater houses, there were another twelve or thirteen secondary houses offering entertainments to the community, everything from drama, melodrama, zarzuela, real operetta, opera, and vaudeville. A lot of the workers, empowered by the dollar, began to vote with their dollars and some of their popular entertainments began to make incursions into this zarzuela, operetta, and dramatic tradition. Vaudeville came on the rise and by the 1930s it conquered the other forms of entertainment.

This is important because it is through vaudeville that the basis of the Mexican-American identity began to be reflected. (And in New York, we can talk about Puerto Rican or Cuban identity, the same in Florida; they all had rich Spanish language vaudeville traditions.) It is vaudeville that becomes a kind of sounding board. The material is drawn right from the community, the language is drawn from the community, the music, everything. This begins to take form on the vaudeville stages in the urban centers and then later on, especially during the Depression, out in the hinterlands. At that time, the movies moved into the theater houses because they were more economically advantageous for the theater owners. So, the vaudeville performers got kicked out and ended up in tents, continuing to tour through the little towns along the Rio Grande Valley, for the farm workers, the migrant workers, et cetera. It is here that the contestatory nature of the theater continued to grow. It is here where all the experiments with bilingualism, biculturalism and all the types of theater particular to the United States, as opposed to Mexico or any other of the Hispanic countries, grow up.

In the '30s, we see on the scene such characters and types and stereotypes as the Pachuco, that in American history really starts to come in at the end of the war, the Zoot Suit riots and all that. They are already on the stages as a kind of hybrid between American and Mexican culture in the 1930s. There's also the U.S. versions of the peladito and peladita, "the shirtless one," the Cantinflas type character that grows up through the Mexican stage, which was also influenced by the English clowns of the 19th Century. You can make the comparison of a Cantinflas and Charlie Chaplin.

Finally, much of this suffered a very, very traumatic blow with the Depression. It not only kicked people out of the theater because there was no economic base, but more importantly throughout the Southwest there was an institution called Repatriation. When it was taken into the hands of the social welfare system and the churches, people were forcibly put on trains and shipped back to the border. The communities became de-populated and couldn't support many of the entertainments that they did before. Some of the theater artists were able to move up to New York, where there were more and more Hispanic immigrants moving and where they were supporting a lively vaudeville stage. There was this kind of mixing and blending that took place on the stages of New York — Teatro Hispano, Teatro Varidades de San Jose, Teatro Cervantes, the Apollo Theater.

How you exaggerate, Pancho! But it doesn't matter, compadre, I've got the road wide open ahead of me to go wherever it suits me.

JESUS

I hope you'll be happy, my dear, if you don't want to follow me. Go ahead and stay, it won't kill me. Back home I've got lots of women to love, and as soon as I get to Manzanillo I'll get hooked again. And back there I won't be so foolish, I'll look for a woman who's a real woman, who doesn't give up, and who knows how to be grateful for her husband's hard work, a pure Mexican woman who doesn't change her mind and doesn't give up her tortillas for hot cakes and ham.

NETTY

Now you're going too far.

JESUS

Why did you give up, wretched woman?

NETTY

What do you mean, liar! Shut up!

JESUS

Why should I shut up? When did I ever deny you my love in such a way that would make you want to stay here? Didn't I work real hard to buy you nice tennies?

NETTY

Sure.

JESUS

Didn't your handsome man take you to have a good time in Venice?

NETTY

Ummmmm. Hmmmmmm.

JESUS

Didn't I work really hard for a whole year without rest? And weren't you just having a good time and teaching yourself how to put on make-up? How cold and ungrateful you are! What a hard time you've given me! How badly my sweetheart is behaving! She's even gone and forgotten her homeland!

NETTY

That's the limit, you can't say that to me.

JESUS

So, why don't you come with me?

NETTY

How can you ask me to follow you, if you no longer have any land down there?

JESUS

She really lays it on me heavy. Now she has no shame left at all. She's really picked up the style and customs here. I'm going to get a divorce!

NETTY

All right, very well, all right!

JESUS

Madam, don't tangle up your words. Since I know how to speak, talk to me like you know how, and don't go tangling me up.

NETTY

Don't tell me I'm tangling it up, nothing could be clearer! If you leave, I'm staying. Farewell, Panchito! Bye bye, hoo hoo!

JESUS

How come your love rules me like a tyrant if its full of self-interest, if it's neither pure nor healthy, if it doesn't promise me honor? So that you'll carry me in your heart, I'm going back to Mexico, you'll see. Our love, it dies right here. Too many more live down there. Yes, I'm going to dearest Mexico where to be in love is an honor, where the only price of love is to be loved in return.

NETTY

Ay, my dearest Panchito, I can't resist anymore, my beloved homeland has triumphed, I want to go, too.

JESUS

At last, she's coming with me.

NETTY

And hoping for your forgiveness, I'll follow you anywhere.

JESUS

Well, off to Mexico, my dear.

Adapted from Sinclair Lewis' 1935 novel, *It Can't Happen Here* opened in October 1936 with twenty-two simultaneous Federal Theatre Project productions in seven languages in eighteen cities. Nearly 500,000 people saw the play, which altogether ran for an equivalent of 260 weeks. Though this play was not presented at the symposium, the editors thought it was important to include it in order to illustrate the kinds of plays the Federal Theatre developed.

Excerpt from *It Can't Happen Here*  
by John C. Moffitt and Sinclair Lewis

Act I, Scene 2

(It is three o'clock of an early afternoon in the neighborhood grocery store of Clarence Little, in Fort Beulah, a small city in Vermont.)

Through the glass door, almost totally obscured by the back of a poster, and through the front show window, partially obscured by a display of merchandise, we catch a glimpse of the red brick shops across the street, and the citizens milling about on the sidewalk. They apparently are waiting for a patriotic event of some kind. Some of the children have cheap American flags in their hands.

Clarence Little, an insignificant, dependable man, is behind the counter, chatting with Mrs. Whitcomb, a Fort Beulah housewife.)

CLARENCE

How about some laundry soap, Mrs. Whitcomb? We got a special on — if you take a whole case of it.

MRS. WHITCOMB

Not today, I'm afraid...I couldn't lug it to the car. They won't let you park on Main Street today...because of the parade.

CLARENCE

The parade. Buzz Windrip and his marching clubs! Keeping cars off Main Street! I'll go to the Mayor!

MRS. WHITCOMB

Don't know what good it'll do you.

CLARENCE

People around here won't stand for monkey-

In 1974, the Library of Congress put the Federal Theatre materials on the campus of George Mason University, 20 minutes outside of Washington, D.C., and it's been our great good fortune to have them. When they came to us, they were packed up the way they had been packed up in 1939, in footlockers, in filing cabinets, in any kind of box with baling wire and whatever.

The Federal Theatre Project lasted from 1935 to 1939, four years. Not a very long time. But at midnight on June 30, 1939, the Federal Theatre Project rang down curtains for the last time all across the country: in Florida on *Remember the Day*...in Boston on *The Trial of Dr. Beck*...in Cleveland on *The Emperor's New Clothes*...in Seattle on *The Taming of the Shrew*...in Chicago on *As You Like It* and *Street Scene*...at the San Francisco World's Fair on *One Third of a Nation* and *Swing Mikado*...in San Francisco proper on *Two-a-Day*, a vaudeville...in Philadelphia on *Prelude to Swing*.

In New York City, three plays, of many, reflected the diversity of the Federal Theatre. At the Ritz Theater, Yasha Frank provided a new ending for *Pinocchio*. This last night, after having conquered selfishness and greed, Pinocchio did not become a living boy, but instead turned back into a puppet. The stagehands knocked down the set in full view of the audience, and the company laid Pinocchio to rest in a pine box with the legend: "Born December 23, 1938; Killed by Act of Congress, June 30, 1939." The actors and the crew walked out of the theater and into the streets carrying the pine box and placards with slogans such as "Who Killed Pinocchio?" and "Wanted — Representative Clifton A. Woodrum for the Murder of Pinocchio."

At the Maxine Elliott Theater, George Sklar's *Life and Death of an American* presented for the last time the life of Jerry Dorgan, "first kid of the 20th Century, born at twelve seconds past midnight, born to grow up with America, with the century." Scenes included the boy's first job, his marching away to war, his return to joblessness, his despair. Every night, the same agonizing ritual: his wife would ask, "what does one person count?" Jerry always answered, "everybody counts." This last night, the director came out to announce the closing of the Federal Theatre and appealed to the conscience of the audience, "we only wanted to live as decent human beings, like the hero of this play."

Meantime, at the Adelphi, as the Project came to an end, in *Sing for Your Supper*, the song "Papa's Got a Job" took on a new meaning. At the point where Papa had been hoisted high in the air by neighbors celebrating his newly found work, the action stopped, the producer stepped out to announce, "Yes, Papa had a job — but they're taking it away from him at 12 o'clock tonight."

So, the curtains came down on many plays, on an extensive coast-to-coast theater plant worth \$1,000,000, on people, and swiftly and thoroughly on the records and activities of those people. Maurice Clarke, New York City Director of the Project, tells of hurrying back to his office after hearing news of the Federal Theatre's demise to find workmen breaking down partitions, axing

**MAYAN THEATRE**  
HILL of 11<sup>7</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

**OPENS SAT. AUG. 1<sup>ST</sup>**

**"TRIPLE A PLOWED UNDER"**



**NITES 8<sup>30</sup>**  
25¢ • 55¢  
and 85¢  
TAX INCLUDED

**MATINEE SATURDAY 2<sup>30</sup> PM.**  
25¢ • 55¢  
TAX INCLUDED

FEDERAL STAGE SHOWS - DIV'N OF W.P.A.

Poster from an original 1930's production of *Triple A Plowed Under*.

suspended." For some, as startling as its demise was the silence of its former friends and supporters. It was very, very quiet.

The Project actually began in the summer of 1935 when the relief rolls in American cities showed that thousands of unemployed theater professionals were destitute. Years of depression and technological inventions had displaced thousands of musicians and actors and writers and technicians. The Federal Theatre came into being because Harry Hopkins said he thought that "theater people got just as hungry as other people," and the Roosevelts, and I think it's probably more Eleanor than Franklin, believed that the skills and talents of artists were worthy of conservation. It was posited that professional theater workers, painters, musicians, and writers were part of a nation's wealth, a resource that America could ill-afford to lose. Consequently, the arts projects of the WPA gave unemployed people a secure anchorage that enabled them to preserve their skills and dignity, and brought them, not incidentally, closer to the people. A quote from *Fortune Magazine* in 1937 makes a very interesting statement, I think: "The American artist and the American audience were brought face to face and the result was an astonishment needled with excitement, such as neither the American artist nor the American audience had ever felt before."

At its peak, the Federal Theatre Project employed 12,700 people and you wonder what all the fuss was about over twelve thousand people. More than nine out of every ten workers came from relief rolls; it was a relief project. Nine out of every ten dollars had to be spent on wages. At the lowest prevailing wage, an actor in the South got \$18.75 a week, and the going rate in New York was \$23.86 a week. Other costs they had to pay were, of course, theater leases and traveling expenses and costumes and scenery.

chairs and tables, and hauling away the file cabinets. The kind of fury in back of that has always interested me very much.

The Project was ended because Congress, who had created the government-sponsored theater, had killed it, not as an economic move, not because of a human issue or a cultural issue, but because the Federal Theatre had become an important political issue. After years of struggles with reduced appropriations, closed projects, repeated reorganizations, battles over censorship and hostile WPA administrators, the Federal Theatre had its work "sus-

ing with their rights! My grandfather didn't fight in the Civil War for nothin'.

MRS. WHITCOMB

Well, I don't know what the world is coming to. Young folks staying up until half-past eleven — thinkin' you're a tyrant if you tell them to get in at a decent hour. At least the Corpo Marching Clubs stand for discipline.

CLARENCE

I believe in freedom! Better let the kids stay up than have 'em bossed all the time!

(Mrs. Whitcomb is now opening the door.)  
How's Caroline?

MRS. WHITCOMB

Oh, her arm's knittin' fine, but you know how children are —

CLARENCE

(Opens the glass case and puts two sticks of candy in a paper sack.)  
Tell her here's a present from the grocery man.

MRS. WHITCOMB

Thank you.  
(Through this there is a burst of band music outside. Through the window the villagers can be seen lining the curbstone.)  
My, there's the parade! You know, I sorta like music and uniforms.

CLARENCE

(Snorting.)  
So did Grandpa! But he don't now, in the churchyard.

(The music has been growing. The Corpo Guard, young men with uniforms and shining helmets, are now marching by. Over the heads of the spectators we see the tops of the helmets and the flags they carry — American flags and banners bearing the slogan "Windrip and Prosperity." The Corpo Guard begins singing to the tune of "The Campbells are Coming.")

THE CORPOS

(Full-throated male chorus.)  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
America's flag is nailed up on the moon — and  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!

(Throughout the remainder of the scene, this

song is repeated cheerfully and monotonously.)

(Clarence comes around from behind the counter, opens the door wide, kicking a brick in front of it, so that it will stay open. With the door open, the Anti-Corpo poster is clearly seen. The poster is printed in bold red ink and reads: A Vote for Buzz Windrip  
Is A Vote for Dictatorship!  
Support the People's Party!)

#### THE CORPOS

(Continuing their song.)

The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos are coming to capture Fort  
Beulah,  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!

#### CLARENCE

(With growing dislike, begins to shout at the paraders from the doorway.)

Tin soldiers! — Drugstore cowboys! — Boy Scouts! — Yah! — Corpos! Want to be dictators!

(He repeats "Dictators" several times. He jumps up and down to look over the heads of the people. Noting various individual Corpo marchers, he screams belligerently, although not at all hysterically:)

Jim Nickerson! Corporal Nickerson! Dead beat! How about that twenty bucks you owe me! Dead beat! Corpos! Dictators!

(He is pushed from the door, back into the shop by a high-ranking officer of the Corpos. This is Effingham Swan, a slim, athletic man between forty and fifty years old, very suave and literate looking. He is followed by four Corpo privates in uniform and helmets. Their entrance has been swift and quiet.)

#### SWAN

Noisy little man, aren't you?

#### CLARENCE

Who's going to stop me?

#### SWAN

Perhaps I should introduce myself — Commissioner Swan, Senator Windrip's representative.  
(He addresses the Corpo Guards clearly, affably.)

Expenditures from appropriated funds in the first two years of the Federal Theatre Project amounted to approximately \$25,000,000 — half the cost of one battleship, as Hallie Flanagan, National Director of the Project, liked to boast — for which the Federal Theatre presented over 42,000 performances of drama, comedy, circuses, vaudeville, and marionettes and musical revues to an audience in excess of 20,000,000 people. That was an audience located in city and hamlet, in village and remote crossroads, and in leased theaters in selected major cities. Only a small proportion of that audience was ever called upon to pay any admission charge at the box office. It was a vast audience and I think that's very important. Sixty-five percent of them were seeing a live play for the first time.

Flanagan was sworn in as National Director on August 27, 1935. It was her fortieth birthday. From the outset, she emphasized that local and regional theater expression must be developed, not a New York conception of theater, nor a theater dependent on ideas emanating from Washington. Nor was she thinking of ornate concrete edifices, no national building certainly. This plan would be modeled on the Federal government; the general policy and programs would be outlined in Washington, but the execution would rest with the states. The Federal Theatre Project would be a federation of theaters. Boiled down, she talked about its being "national in scope, regional in emphasis, and democratic in attitude."

Her own experience had been at Grinnell College, that's where she knew Harry Hopkins, where she wrote and directed plays; she worked with E. C. Mabie at the University of Iowa; she was in George Pierce Baker's '47 Workshop at Harvard — although when you see the list of names, you never see her name — she later acted as his assistant; she also taught at Vassar, where she directed the Vassar Experimental Theatre. Her experience had been outside of New York, which was the reason, rumor has it, Hopkins chose her as National Director. He saw the Federal Theatre Project as an "American job, not just a New York job" and she understood theater outside of New York.

In Flanagan's hands, the Federal Theatre's national program developed along several distinct lines. Not so much concerned with finding individual hit shows — although it did that, too — as with developing a comprehensive dramatic program, the FTP planned to give its audiences:

I. Classical Plays, "great plays of the past done with fire and imagination." Flanagan recommended the "Negro" *Macbeth*, *Dr. Faustus* and Arthur Hopkins' *Coriolanus*. The nationwide cycle of plays by George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill had earned the authors, Flanagan felt, in their lifetimes a place in the classical repertory;

II. Plays that made audiences laugh, since the country was suffering from the Depression. Circuses, musical comedies, and Gilbert and Sullivan all fit that bill, as did Chicago's *O Say Can You Sing*, a highly successful production that showed the Federal Theatre's ability to laugh at itself;

III. Theater for Youth. Working with psychologists and educators, the Federal Theatre Project planned plays for various age levels. *Hansel and Gretel*, *Pinocchio*, *Treasure*

*Island*, and *The Emperor's New Clothes* received Flanagan's special praise;

IV. Dance as it related to themes of American life. This was reflected in *An American Exodus*, a Los Angeles festival of the dance, in the New York production of *How Long Brethren?*, and in Chicago's *Ballet Fedre* with Katherine Dunham;

V. New American plays, which constituted the Federal Theatre's greatest challenge. Hallie Flanagan encouraged playwrights to write about legendary figures such as Paul Bunyan, Davy Crockett, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. She was just as keen for pageants about whole periods of American development, such as the history of Arkansas done in *America Sings*. She praised plays that attacked problems of industrial and economic life, such as *Altars of Steel* in Atlanta, *Big White Fog* by Ted Ward in Chicago, *Class of '29* in Boston, and *Turpentine* in Harlem. The Living Newspaper, a terse, cinematic, hard-hitting dramatic form evolved under the Project and dealt with contemporary factual material in *Triple A Plowed Under* on agriculture, *Injunction Granted* about the history of labor in the courts, and housing in *One-Third of a Nation*; and

VI. a particular commitment to "Negro Theatre". There were sixteen Negro units across the country. While Flanagan cited with pride units in Harlem, Hartford, Seattle, Chicago and Los Angeles, she envisioned a National Negro Theatre. The training was to take place at Howard University.

At its best, the Federal Theatre worked toward "an art in which each region and eventually each state would have its unique, indigenous dramatic expression, its company housed in a building reflecting its own landscape and regional materials, producing plays of its past and present, in its own rhythm of speech and its native design, in an essentially American pattern." This was Hallie Flanagan's dream; the reality of creating that kind of theater and maintaining it under the unblinking eyes of the WPA, and maybe the eyes of people we're just beginning to know about, proved to be another matter.

In October of 1935, Flanagan brought theater leaders to Washington, D.C. for the first meeting of regional and state directors of the Federal Theatre. The meeting took place in the long-vacant McLean Mansion, taken over by the WPA to house the arts projects. Behind beaverboard panels were massive woodcarvings, a wooden serving table imported from Italy and a buffet costing \$32,000. The great ballroom was now housing filing cabinets and clicking typewriters. These surroundings for Flanagan symbolized an era when art was a commodity possessed by only a few people. How different was the task of those gathered with her now to discuss the problem of the artist in Depression America and to take on the task of making American art the province of the entire people, not just a privileged minority.

Those gathered in Washington reflected very different back-

Work on him, will you? Might as well get used to it.

(Swan starts toward door, turning to add to Corpos, as the four of them start briskly toward Clarence.)

And be careful of those new uniforms.

(Without another glance he swiftly crosses to the door tearing the red-lettered poster down and throwing it on the floor as he does so. He steps out into the street jauntily. The other Corpos back Clarence to the counter. They are clumsy but menacing. Clarence is terrified. The light from the street has begun to fade.)

#### THE CORPOS

(Song rises triumphantly from the throats of the marchers.)

The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos are coming to capture New England,  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!

#### BLACK OUT

#### Act I, Scene 3

(Through the darkness can be heard the marching feet of the Corpos and the sound of their singing which dies down during conversation, welling up occasionally during scene.)

#### THE CORPOS

The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos will capture the vote of Chicago,  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!  
The Corpos will eat all the beans up in Boston,  
The Corpos are coming, hurrah, hurrah!

(When the lights come up, it is fifteen minutes later, in the living room of Doremus Jessup, editor of the Ft. Beulah Informer. With him are Lorinda Pike, who writes the paper's society column, Francis Tasbrough, a local industrialist, Dr. Fowler Greenhill, Jessup's son-in-law, and David, a small boy, Jessup's grandson.)

#### TASBROUGH

(Looking out the window — to Doremus.)

A fine-looking body of young men!

(Turning to his host.)

Mighty nice of you to invite me, Doremus —

best place in town to see a parade.

DOREMUS

Mighty glad to have you, Frank. Guess this window's the one thing I've got on a plutocrat like you.

FOWLER

(Looking out the window. Gesturing at marchers, he asserts:)

This military drill may have its faults, but it does keep the young fellows off the street corners. I tell you, a doctor sees some awful results from all this loafing and unemployment.

TASBROUGH

What I always say is, young fellows with any ability can find something to do, same as I did...

LORINDA

Start washing dishes and get to be a great manufacturer like you!

TASBROUGH

Well, why not? Whatever modest wealth I may have made is entirely due to my own unaided enterprise.

(David has been looking out the window, gloating over the military spectacle. Now, with the inconsistency of childhood, his attention has wandered away. He decides to scare himself.)

DAVID

(Making an arched claw of his right hand and sticking it in front of his face.)

Ohhh!

(He squeals delightedly.)

Big spider!

FOWLER

Quiet, son!

DAVID

Did you know black widow spiders are poisonous?

FOWLER

Yes — never saw a case though. Come —

(Goes back to the window.)

This drill certainly pulls 'em together.

LORINDA

Young bullies! Always squabbling...

grounds and artistic achievements. From vaudeville and variety on a nationwide scale, Eddie Dowling, Broadway actor-producer; from New England, Charles Co-burn, actor, director, almost instantly succeeded by Hiram Motherwell, formerly editor of *Stage*; from New York, Elmer Rice, Broadway playwright-producer, assisted by Philip Barber, dramatist, actor, stage manager for the New York Group Theatre; from Pennsylvania, Jasper Deeter of Hedgerow Theatre, one of the few co-operative repertory groups in the country; from the Midwest, E.C. Mabie, director of the Iowa University Theatre; from Chicago, Thomas Wood Stevens, originator and director of the Globe; from Ohio, Frederic McConnel, director of the Cleveland Community Playhouse; from the West, Gilmor Brown, director of the Pasadena Community Playhouse, assisted by J. Howard Miller, formerly actor and stage-manager for Max Reinhardt; from Seattle, Glenn Hughes, dramatist, director of the University of Washington Theatre; from the South, Frederick Koch, creator and director of the North Carolina Playmakers, and John McGee, dramatist-director; from the Bureau of Research and Publication, Rosamund Gilder, associate director of *Theatre Arts Monthly*.

The artistic policy which Hallie Flanagan articulated was based on three beliefs. First, that unemployed theater people wanted to work, and that millions of Americans would enjoy the results of this work, if it could be offered free or at prices they could pay. Second, that the people on the rolls should be regarded not as relief cases but as professional workers competent to carry out an ambitious nationwide program. Third, that any theater sponsored by the government of the United States should do no plays of a cheap or vulgar nature.

Her words inspired them. "We live in a changing world. Man is whispering through space, soaring to the stars in ships, flinging miles of steel and glass into the air. Shall the theater continue to huddle in the confines of a painted box set? The movies, in their kaleidoscopic speed and juxtaposition of external objects and internal emotions, are seeking to find visible and audible expression for the tempo and psychology of our time. The stage, too, must experiment — with ideas, with psychological relationships between men and women, with speech and rhythm forms, with dance and movement, with color and light — or it must and should become a museum product."

As the directors returned to projects all over the country, Hallie Flanagan and her Washington staff remained in the center. First, "physical plans had to be made available: halls in which to rehearse plays and theaters in which to perform them; workshops for the manufacture and assemblage of scenery, costumes, properties, and electrical equipment. Space also had to be provided casting directors, play readers, designers, typists, and publicists."

The organizational problems were, of course, always aggravated by the financial limitations within which the Project had to work and worsened by the hostility and obstructionism of influential elements both inside and outside the government. Congressional disapproval, WPA regulations and the use of anti-Roosevelt newspaper columns vilified the efforts of the Theatre Project from the beginning of its existence. WPA Administrators didn't like contrac-

tors, didn't like people giving out the dole, as they saw it; you can imagine what they thought of arts projects. Jasper Deeter talks about trying to get a desk, trying to get a typewriter, trying to get somebody who could really give him a space to work. He would work in a coffee shop. Even professional theater people opposed Federal Theatre performances at nominal prices, charging it took business away from them. They seemed unable to look ahead to the vast new audience for the theater that would be developed for the coming decades.

It was an agonizing period of beginnings, not only of testing bureaucratic procedures for running a theater, but for new and innovative theater activities, such as the Bureau of Research and Publications, the *Federal Theatre Magazine*, the Living Newspaper, and the Negro Theatre, all originating in New York, but nationwide in scope. These activities, as Hallie Flanagan pointed out, had never been tried in this country nor elsewhere in the world.

From the very first, there were attempts at censorship, in New York with *Ethiopia*, the first Living Newspaper, and in Chicago with *Model Tenements*, then *Hymn to the Rising Sun*. You can simply trace example after example after example of the government trying to choose the plays for the Federal Theatre, trying to close them down. Hopkins' dream had been "free, adult, and uncensored" and it certainly never was the case. An enraged Elmer Rice asked if Washington would ever permit anything other than "pap for babies and octogenarians" to go on the Federal Theatre boards. Hallie Flanagan fought throughout her career to really keep the choice of plays in her hands.

There were successes for the Federal Theatre in the first year. In New York, there was *Chalk Dust*, an attack on America's educational system, *Triple A Plowed Under*, and *Murder in the Cathedral*, T. S. Eliot's verse drama about Thomas á Becket. There was the "voodoo" *Macbeth*, produced by John Houseman and directed by Orson Welles, at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, where "ten thousand people clogged the streets, followed the scarlet and gold bands of Negro Elks, and watched the flash of jewels, silk hats, and ermine." Gold footprints were painted on the sidewalk, so you knew where the theater was.

Yet, they still had somehow to gain national recognition and they did that in the Fall of 1936 with *It Can't Happen Here*. *It Can't Happen Here* opened October 27th and it had twenty-two simultaneous productions all over the country. That meant you had to have quite a theater plant in order to pull that off and it may have been the death knell of the Theatre Project that early. If you could do that kind of thing and get it organized and get it on, you probably should be stamped out.

It had tremendous audience appeal. Nearly 500,000 people saw the show. It played 260 weeks, the equivalent of five years. The implications were not lost on Congress or the Press. Burns Mantle, writing in the Chicago Tribune November 8, seems like a good quote for this group. "It indicated rather revealingly what would happen here, if the social body ever became theater-minded in a serious way. This was a demonstration of the uses to which people's theater might reasonably be put." So, he got it, and so, unfortunately, did a lot of other people.

Hallie Flanagan herself continued to work tirelessly to put into

DOREMUS

Now, now, Lindy! Maybe they scrap a little, like all boys do, but you never heard of the Corpos hurting anybody.

TASBROUGH

And you never will! But now you take the lazy workmen...never hear of them getting pleasure out of doing an honest day's work...No, sir! All they holler for is higher wages and shorter hours. Labor unions! Regular Communists!

DAVID

(Who has been sneaking in a few self-scares in silence, now runs to his father.)  
Can I go to the movies tonight, Daddy? I want to see "The Son of Frankenstein."

LORINDA

You're looking at Frankensteins!  
(Gestures toward the window.)  
A whole street of 'em!

DOREMUS

Now, now, Lindy! Don't be a Joan of Arc till you've got a battle!

LORINDA

(Positively.)  
Got one now!

DOREMUS

The idea! Just because the Corpo Guards won't let their members run around all night...

FOWLER

And make 'em wash!  
(Turning to Lorinda.)  
You don't object to their being tyrannized into washing their necks, do you, Aunt Lindy?

LORINDA

Don't call me Aunt Lindy! Course, the Corpos take care of their men. Baby 'em. And if Buzz Windrip gets elected, they'll baby the whole country — in prison!

DOREMUS

Nonsense! The people of the United States'll decide for themselves whether they want Corpoism and Efficiency, or...the People's Party and Walt Trowbridge's oratory.





Hallie Flanagan

LORINDA

Tin soldiers! Soda-counter heroes! Trying to grab the Dictatorship!

(The front door opens swiftly. All are startled by the swift, silent entrance of Commissioner Swan. He still wears his uniform. He is followed by Julian Falck, a young man dressed as a Corpo private.)

SWAN

(In his silky voice.)

Good afternoon!

(He glances around the room with disturbing keenness.)

DAVID

(Making a spider again with arched hand.)

Oooh!

(He shrieks enjoyably. Everyone laughs except Swan, who smiles agreeably.)

JULIAN

Mister Jessup! This is Commissioner Swan from Boston, our new Corpo party manager for Vermont.

(Swan favors them with snappiest salute ever performed in this living room.)

SWAN

(Affably joking — to Julian.)

And your cruel boss, young-fella-me-lad!

effect the first year's hard-won lessons. In a meeting in Birmingham of leaders from the South, she suggested simultaneous productions of plays about contemporary problems, anti-war plays, Living Newspapers on regional themes, children's plays, and plays on religion. Entertainment was also to be reconsidered and made a regular part of Federal Theatre offerings.

The Birmingham meeting served still another purpose, for at it John Temple Graves, lawyer and newspaperman on the *Birmingham Age Herald*, called for a play on steel, since steel and cotton were dictating the new political economy of the South. The Federal Theatre readily complied the next year by producing *Altars of Steel* by Thomas Hall Rogers, a Birmingham author. Produced in Atlanta, the play stressed the need for economic freedom in the South and the development of its teeming resources. Praised, blamed, and fought over, the play and the furor it created made it clear, not only in the South but across the country, that playwrights and audiences were keenly interested in plays with social and economic themes, whatever commercial producers in the Thirties, as well as in the past, had concluded about the theatrical appetites of American audiences. Sixty thousand people in New York bought tickets for *Power*, a Living Newspaper on the TVA, before it opened.

After John Houseman's departure from the Lafayette Theatre to head the 891 classical unit, the Negro unit produced *Turpentine*, a play about the conditions in the Florida turpentine camps. Written by Gus Smith and Peter Morrell, the play sparked little interest in the downtown public who preferred the Negro as "exotic," rather than seeing him perform in, what they called, "overall" plays. The *Amsterdam News*, on the other hand, found "plain working people and their problems were movingly dramatized."

The Federal Theatre found the subject of the Negro experience in America of sufficient interest to warrant serious artistic treatment. It made one of its greatest commitments to Helen Tamiris' *How Long Brethren?*, which opened in May 1937, dramatized in dance form Lawrence Gellert's *Negro Songs of Protest*, songs gathered in the South during his assignment to the Atlanta unit of the Federal Theatre. "To the singing of a Negro Chorus and music by Genevieve Pitot, Tamiris and her group danced seven episodes of Negro life all simple in pattern but dramatic in intensity." *How Long Brethren?* drew praise from critics and audiences and won the award from *Dance Magazine* for the best group choreography of the season.

After fifty-five years, we re-staged *How Long Brethren?* with choreography by Diane McIntyre, at our theater at George Mason, and I can tell you it was an incredible experience, an outstanding theatrical event. People have been blaming us for not publicizing it better or not running it longer. One of the things about having an Archives, which I think is very important, is putting some of the works to the test. Anybody can claim any kind of success, as long as you don't have to see it.

What had become very vigorous theater activity during this crucial year of 1937 took place always in the shadow of impending cuts. The protests from the year before when eleven members of the dance unit had been arrested while picketing, when a sit-down strike

had occurred, and when a group from the arts projects visited Mayor La Guardia were fresh in everyone's mind. On March 25, 1937, Mrs. Flanagan actually moved her headquarters from Washington to New York City and assumed the New York City directorship in addition to the national directorship. Although the demands on her personally were greatly increased, she felt that this was the best working arrangement the Federal Theatre in New York ever had, and the Project's morale was being restored.

On June 10 of that year, the order to cut the New York project by thirty percent was received and clearly signaled a changing point of view in Washington. Subsequently, *The Cradle Will Rock* was prevented from opening and, more importantly, the publication of *Federal Theatre Magazine* was stopped. The Project had done a wonderful thing with audience surveys and the audience surveys were also stopped. It was very crucial things that were pulled back, even that early.

In spite of the cuts, the protests and the picketing, and the bitter disappointment and anger over the cancellation of *Cradle*, the Federal Theatre went on with its plans for a summer caravan season in 1937. Five trucks went rolling out to the boroughs of Richmond (now Staten Island), Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Manhattan. Brooks Atkinson thought that these occasions were really festivals and he described in his column the families, "men in their shirtsleeves, women hushing babies, young men with their best girls, thousands of people filling the hillside." Plans for the first Federal Summer Theatre to be held at Vassar also continued, but by the end of the summer over a thousand people had been cut from the Federal Theatre rolls.

By September 1937, a badly tattered and bruised Federal Theatre began its third season. John McGee's southern region had producing centers left in only three states. In the Midwest, only the Chicago project, a children's theater in Gary, and small production units in Detroit, Des Moines, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Springfield, and Peoria had survived. In the East, units in Rhode Island and Delaware closed down, and cuts in both Los Angeles and New York meant fewer productions during the new season.

Anxious to see for herself what might be done to strengthen the Project across the country, Hallie Flanagan set out in October 1937 for a two month tour. Beginning in the East, Mrs. Flanagan met with George Gerwing, formerly California director, now regional director of New England and the Middle Atlantic states. He stressed the varying artistic quality of the work done by the units in this area. Generally small, most of the units struggled to keep costs down and win public support. While some units, like the Connecticut project, were making tremendous artistic strides, the Buffalo Unit needed reorganization, and both Philadelphia and Boston suffered from their own special brands of ineffectiveness.

The Midwest hardly reflected a cheerier situation. Except for Chicago, where *O Say Can You Sing*, a musical spoof of the Federal Theatre, *The Lonely Man*, Howard Koch's drama about Lincoln, and O'Neill's *The Straw* followed each other in rapid succession, the Midwest needed help. Pleased by the professional quality of these

JULIAN

That's right, sir!

(To Doremus.)

You were the first person in town the Commissioner wanted to meet, Mr. Jessup.

TASBROUGH

(Stirring importantly and irritably.)

Hmmmm!

DOREMUS

(Advancing to shake hands with Swan.)

Have a chair. Sit down, Julian.

(Swan sits. Julian stands at attention at the back of the room.)

We've been more or less supporting the Corps.

SWAN

No one knows it better than I! It might surprise you to know we read your editorials at Boston headquarters.

DOREMUS

Do sit down, Julian.

SWAN

At rest, Falck!

(Julian goes sits on the bottom step of the stairway.)

DOREMUS

This is Miss Lorinda Pike — she edits my Society Page.

(They bow to each other.)

DAVID

(Running up to Swan.)

Are you a Corpo?

SWAN

I try to be, Captain!

DAVID

Aw, I'm not a Captain! I'm Dan'l Boone.

SWAN

Sorry, Mr. Boone.

DAVID

I'm going to explore Brazil.

DOREMUS

Dan'l Boone never explored Brazil.

DAVID  
He's going to.

DOREMUS  
Skip out and play, General. Parade is about over.

DAVID  
Aw, I want to go to the movies!

FOWLER  
(Parentally preempt.)  
Beat it!

DAVID  
Okay!  
(He slowly exits during the following.)

LORINDA  
"Okay!" — Toy machine guns! At Davey's age! There's your Corpo influence.

SWAN  
Better than dolls, Ma'm!

DOREMUS  
(To Lorinda.)  
Don't you worry about that boy! He'll be the scholar I wanted to be.  
(To Swan, indicating Fowler.)  
Dr. Greenhill, my son-in-law, Commissioner — living with me here since my wife passed away.  
(Swan bows to Fowler.)

FOWLER  
Certainly is a pleasure to know you, Commissioner. They offered me the medical officership of the Corpo unit here — but we're building a new wing on the hospital...

DOREMUS  
And this is Mr. Tasbrough. Our chief manufacturer.

TASBROUGH  
(Ever since Swan came in, he has become increasingly irritated at being ignored. He now shakes hands with Swan patronizingly.)  
I suppose you've already dropped in at my little textile mill, Commissioner. Too bad I was away.

SWAN  
No, sorry... Haven't had the chance yet.

Chicago productions, Mrs. Flanagan left for the West Coast.

Visiting Seattle, San Francisco and, finally, Los Angeles, the second largest project, Mrs. Flanagan found much to her liking all along the coast. Productions of *Ready! Aim! Fire!*, a musical satire on dictatorship, *American Exodus*, the contribution of the dance group, Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Androcles and the Lion* all awaited her viewing and approval in Los Angeles. Not that California didn't have its share of delegations and investigations to contend with, but her pride in the Los Angeles project couldn't be dampened. The unit was a model of administrative efficiency and its productions reflected the professional quality she always encouraged. The combined talents of Gilmor Brown, Howard Miller, and George Gerwing had built a thriving project that serviced the entire West Coast.

Of particular interest to her was the Theater of the Southwest, Los Angeles' equivalent to New York's experimental unit. There, Mary Virginia Farmer, applying her experience from both Hedgerow and the Group Theatre, worked with writers and actors on a cycle of plays about California. An experiment in communal living and working, the unit conducted research and collaborated on all aspects of theatrical production. One of the three proposed contemporary plays about California agriculture, *The Sun Rises in the West*, Mrs. Flanagan saw in rehearsal and was so impressed by the eagerness and intelligence of the group that she wrote a letter to Miss Farmer on the train going home, offering her suggestions for further strengthening the play.

Summoned home from that trip by the message that the projects were being ousted from the McLean Mansion, Flanagan returned to Washington full of fears about the Federal Theatre's demise. It was pretty much over. She had four plays running in New York at that time: *One Third of a Nation*, *Haiti*, *Prologue to Glory* and *On the Rocks*. Not as many as before, perhaps, but certainly a strong theater program. Flanagan called them the strongest quartet the Project ever had running simultaneously in New York City.

While Flanagan's thoughts turned toward expanding the Federal Theatre Project and correcting the concentration of its activities in metropolitan areas by reviving the idea of touring companies, she was forced into thinking more about defending the Federal Theatre, first from the Dies Committee in 1938 and then in 1939 from the sub-committee of the House Committee on Appropriations chaired by Clifton A. Woodrum of Virginia.

While these hearings are beyond the scope of this talk, one should take note that the Federal Theatre willingly offered to open its files, testify about its theatrical activities, to confront witnesses and, in the case of the Woodrum Committee, its investigators. However, Flanagan's letters were never answered, critics and other theatrical professionals were never called to testify. With the exception of Flanagan's belated appearance before the Dies Committee, only the less well-informed WPA administrators were allowed to provide testimony before committees. This ritual we have come to know so well in Washington, trial by insinuation, trial by headline, and, in this case, trial by play title — a thorough and effective dress rehearsal for the McCarthy hearings twenty years later.

What was never revealed at the time was how the committees got their information about the goings-on in the Federal Theatre. A dissertation now being written points out that there were investigations underway from 1935 which focused on box office irregularities, supervisors, et cetera. All very small time stuff, but copies of reports were being furnished to the Justice Department and the FBI! Some of the investigations were clearly fishing expeditions; they were very intimidating to some in the Project who resigned.

In spite of the vitality of the Project and the calibre of the people who had struggled so valiantly to keep it alive, by June 1939, members of the theatrical world from all over the country found it necessary to join in a campaign to try to save the organization, which was in mortal danger. In her book, *Arena*, after discussing the Dies and Woodrum committees at length, Flanagan was philosophical and still idealistic. Proud of the Federal Theatre as a fearless presenter of problems touching American life, she admits that had it been less alive, it might have lived longer. But neither she, nor, she speculates, would anyone who worked on the project regret its having stood against reaction, against prejudice, against racial, religious, and political intolerance. The Federal Theatre fought for a free theater, she concludes, as one of the many expressions of a civilized, informed, and vigorous life.

I'm more and more convinced the longer I look at the material and talk to people that the reason for its close was that the Federal Theatre had really been quite successful — not as people would have us believe — but quite successful in creating a vast national audience, out of diverse and divided regions, classes, and ethnicities. It did that at the same time that it perfected a few very important performance genres. No one dreamed how successful a so-called relief project could be nationwide. At the time of its life and death struggle, the Federal Theatre was gaining substantial international recognition as well.

Increasingly, the Dies Committee investigations focused on the experimental nature of what the Federal Theatre Project did; making that experimentation seem amateurish, not professional like the commercial theater. They also hated the idea that the Project never bought into the star system, upsetting yet another hierarchical arrangement in the arts. Lastly, the vast new audience that the Theatre Project had created during its four years represented a microcosm of all the New Deal represented to the enemies of the Administration, its spending policy, its attitude toward labor, immigrants, blacks, the poor, minorities, and even — god forbid! — Russian theatrical practices. Flanagan says "it was, perhaps, the triumph as well as the tragedy of our actors that they became, indeed, the abstract and brief chronicle of the time."

TASBROUGH

Why, it's the biggest single industry in the county! And I've been ordering — well, you might say urging — the hands to vote Corpo.

SWAN

Splendid!

TASBROUGH

I understood you were coming...

SWAN

Well, here I am, my dear fellow!

TASBROUGH

And I was all ready for you. In fact...

(He takes a fat wallet from pocket, elaborately opens it, takes out a signed check and hands it to Swan as though he were conferring royal favor.)

I had my party contribution all ready. Here it is, my boy! One thousand bucks! One - thousand - bright - gold - dollars!

(Swan contemptuously hands check back to Tasbrough who takes it incredulously.)

SWAN

Error, I'm afraid, sir! I'd understood your quota was five thousand.

TASBROUGH

Five thou —

SWAN

So, I think we'd rather not have you as a contributor at all. We'd thought of you as one of the inner council, but we don't care for anyone who isn't passionate about our idea...

TASBROUGH

All right, sir, just as you feel about it.

SWAN

That's just the way we feel about it.

TASBROUGH

(Deflated.)

Well — well — I can't fool around any longer...On the job.

(Waving an inane farewell.)

Be good, all of you.

(He glares at Swan and stalks out.)

# Contemporary Response

**A** central goal of the symposium was to foster an exchange among its participants, to encourage discussion of common goals, needs, and ideas. This was accomplished primarily through the use of small group sessions, which met Saturday afternoon and part of the day on Sunday.

After the historical presentations on Saturday morning, the symposium participants were divided into eleven groups. Care was taken to have each group represent as fully as possible the spectrum of people who were in attendance and to bring those unknown to each other into contact. The mix itself was seen as important to ensuring dialog and debate, from which the most robust ideas would arise. The participants included theater professors, secondary and elementary school teachers, graduate and undergraduate students, arts funders, managers of theaters, directors, performers, and playwrights from both the grassroots and nongrassroots traditions, cultural and political organizers and activists. Each group's discussion was led by a moderator and tape recorded.

The groups were all given the same charge: to look ahead at the next ten years of grassroots theater, to give thought to where we want to be and what we need to get there. Two or three recommendations or concerns were requested from each group and were presented at a plenary session Sunday morning.

What follows are excerpts from these small group sessions. Interestingly, it was the needs of the present more than the future that occupied much of the discussion across all the groups. The topics covered are wide-ranging, but broadly speaking can be broken down into six main areas of concern: the relationship to community, place, and tradition; barriers to doing the work and ways of getting around them; community-based business and creative practices; grassroots theater as a form of resistance; the interface with the non-grassroots culture and between those working at the grassroots; evaluating progress and preparing for the future.

These excerpts are slightly edited transcripts selected by the editors from what was said in the small group sessions. Though summaries from each group were presented Sunday morning, the editors thought it more compelling to print what the participants actually said. No words have been added to any comment, but sometimes related comments by the same speaker have been put together into one thought; cuts have been made only to avoid repetition. The thoughts of different speakers have not been combined.

Also, included among the comments are further thoughts on the questions and issues raised by the groups, which were taken from letters sent in by participants after the symposium. All comments are presented without attribution.

## RELATIONSHIP TO COMMUNITY, PLACE, AND TRADITION

The theaters that have survived the '80s, surprisingly enough, are the community-based theaters and ensembles, while the small resident theaters are collapsing all around us, the people that went the conventional route.

In the past twenty years, we've evolved from a student guerilla theater group to the point where we've purchased a one story elementary school building and own about a quarter of a city block. We've got a one hundred seat theater, a black box. For the past three and a half years we've been running our own seasons. I thought we were moving into this space because I was going to just do my art and not have to concentrate on other things. But what has happened is that our community needs something different. It wants much more than that. We have no other on-going performing arts space in the state for Latinos/Chicanos, despite our large population. The community has begun to demand other things, so now we have a dance studio, an art studio, we're developing other projects. It's causing us to become an arts center.

One of the things that our kind of theaters are doing is helping to create other kinds of communities. Helping to create a progressive sense of community rather than a reactionary sense of community. At a time when people are adopting orthodoxies of various kinds in order to have any community.

I think it is an interesting issue, the issue of place. Especially if you put it next to something like the environment. Place is important in the natural world. It's a sort of syndrome. We've locked in the destruction of the natural world along with the destruction of the local culture and local life. The loss of local life being aware of itself.

So much of what we're talking about is basic civics, what participation in democratic government and society is all about. How do we ensure that a value of participation is included in our educational system, and not just talked about, but demonstrated? I believe that we wouldn't be advocating "community arts" if there was a value in social participation; it would just be there, and we wouldn't have to single it out.

What worries me about the exploration of ethnic identity is the mythology that lies behind it. I think of my own experience with the Irish and going back into that. What troubles me is how often the mythology of a culture is regressive, in terms of women's roles, for instance, or the attitudes towards violence and domination. So, in replaying it in theater, in celebrating that, I'm very disturbed by it. Must I mythologize a vision I don't share? Yet, at the same time, I need to have that sense of identity. It's a conflict, a confusion for me.

*Junebug/Jack is a co-creation of Appalachia's Roadside Theater from Whitesburg, Kentucky, and the African American Junebug Productions from New Orleans, Louisiana. For almost two decades, the two ensembles have been making and touring original plays about their places and people. This is their first collaboration on a new script. The musical play was first performed in New Orleans in 1991.*

**Excerpt from *Junebug/Jack***  
by Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions

JUNEBUG

There was a time when Black people would give blood, sweat, and tears to gain the right to forty acres and a mule. But now Black-owned land is being lost at the rate of about 42,000 acres a month...42,000 acres. It's hard to see it when land is being lost 'cause the land don't go nowhere.

NANCY

Now it's not that hard to see in the mountains, 'cause they'll cart off a whole mountain in the back of one of them dump trucks to make a strip mine. Still and all when people lose their land they sort of drift off a few at a time so you don't really notice what's happening till they been gone for a while.

I don't rightly know when things started to change. They never did for me really. Saw all my younguns marry off and leave, but even 'fore then, it wadn't the same. I never liked the idea of my children moving off, nor going to work in the coal mines, but they wadn't nothin' I could do about it. Once they knowed about them things they didn't have, it was too late.

We worked hard and I can rightly say my younguns never went cold or hungry for lack of somethin' to wear or food to eat. We never had much, but we always had plenty. It's not what you've got, it's what you're satisfied with.

I know children are different from their parents, but they's things that they want that I don't even know about, nor care to. But I guess that's the whole thing. You know what you know. It's kinda like that little story about Adam and Eve, it wadn't the apple that got

'em in trouble, it was what they knowed after they eat it. And they ain't no turning back from that.

KIM

When we went to Dayton, I was so excited about living in a big city. Playing with other kids that wadn't my cousins. Get new clothes. Go to the movies. But I never did fit in. I tried, but I was just too different. Mommy said it wadn't me different, it was them, but it didn't seem that way to me. I got to thinking there was something wrong with me. You know it seemed to me like goin' off to Dayton was like headin' for the promised land...but I ended up in the wilderness, believing nothin' or nobody.

### Cities of Gold

(RON)

Tell me where do you come from  
Tell me where will you go.  
To the mountains around you  
Or the Cities of Gold.

(Chorus — ALL)

Cities of Gold, Cities of Gold.  
Oh so lonely and so cold.  
You can lose your very soul  
Living in Cities of Gold.

(RON)

Now the people, they said to Pharoah  
You better let our children go  
Cause we're tired of living our lives  
So you can build your cities of gold.

(Chorus — ALL)

LATTETA

Everybody in my family could sing. No matter how tired Momma was when she got in from work she'd be in the kitchen humming to the pots and pans. After dinner, my brother, my sister, and Daddy would start harmonizing on some old church song and it'd be no telling how long before we went to bed.

But we were not the only ones who could sing. We had ourselves a powerful singing preacher at our church. Sister Reverend Gary didn't just sing — she knew how to bring the music out in people.

(The other cast members begin to sing and shout.)

Our whole church would be rocking. Music

I think the word community is being taken for granted. I can't remember ever living in a community, except for sub-communities. In other words, I have lived in the sub-community of academics, in the sub-community of Cuban-Americans in the United States, I have lived in the sub-community of women's relationships. Therefore to take for granted there is such a thing as community — I have never lived in one. When I go to the theater, when I go to see Latino theater, Chicano or Puerto Rican or Cuban, whatever, I am seeking, consciously seeking, these bonds, this sense of community. And it is very temporary. I wonder what community is in U.S. society these days. I have no idea, I don't know what we are talking about.

Grassroots theaters are very often serving multi-purpose functions: providing theater, community organizing, educational programs, youth programs, and social service programs. Not only the building, but the theater workers themselves play many roles in their community.

We speak of grassroots theater interacting, connecting with a community, and, of course, this is where, how, why theater began — as a primary way for a group to come to terms with itself and the outside forces that influenced it.

I asked C. Bernard Jackson at the Inner City Cultural Center, "Have you tried to make any in-roads to be connected to any academic institutions? You need to really start doing that." He said, "No, I don't. Because I have validation from my own community. That's why we've been in existence for twenty-seven years. All the other theater institutions around here don't. As long as the community wants me here, I have everything I need right here in this community. That's what my group's about." He's at the point with his organization where if the grants were to stop tomorrow, Jack isn't even worried. He's going to survive with or without the twenty percent he relies on every year from the grant money. He's been validated by his community.

When we talk about our audience at our theater, we don't talk about numbers. We talk about people who share in the process with us. In the creation, in the development of the ideas, and in hearing the work.

How empowered people are when they articulate their attachment to place. Not only to a racial culture or a gender culture, but to the physical place in which they live. It's almost as if you say the name of your place and you have a power. It's like Antaeus in the Labors of Hercules. Every time he got thrown to the ground he arose with greater strength because the earth was his mother. That's been a metaphor for me of the power you draw from the place you associate yourself with.

Culture is our last frontier. Our land has been taken. Our languages have been taken. Our identities have been taken from us. The last

frontier that we have now, that we can still say we own is our culture. All of a sudden everybody wants that as well, everybody wants to buy into it. Everybody wants a Malcolm X cap. I see white children running around wearing little Africa pendants in red, black, and green. I want to say to them, "Why? Why are you wearing that? Why don't you have a Europe?" I am very protective that this is my last little frontier.

## BARRIERS TO DOING THE WORK AND WAYS OF GETTING AROUND THEM

Many people involved with this field did not have the financial foresight and sophistication to recognize the limitations of the dependency that this kind of theater had in its early days on government funding. The political winds blow too much and too far to the right for this kind of work. At one time we had maybe five or six teatros in San Francisco. Now we have really one that has any kind of heartiness. It's an interesting dilemma. How do you keep your engines running, keep yourself fed, and keep yourself connected to the source of your work?

When you get right down to it a lot of people still don't think that the kind of thing we're talking about today has any artistic value. They define that with two words, one is professional and the other is quality. If you can measure up to some professional standard, then you have more possibility of attracting more attention, and more aid to what you're doing. If you can't then you're not likely to get anywhere at all really in the present way things have been interpreted. I have always taken the point of view in my work that the main thing in human life is to provide unusual and unique opportunities for people who may not have them available.

California's a strange place in which to think about community. We talk about going into the region and the stories, and those exist in California. But the population's so transient. In San Diego, where our theater is, people move on an average of every three years, two or three years, from their homes. So, California's becoming this huge computer bank and it seems, at times, its random access memory is cleared every day. So, to say here are the stories...it makes me wonder. When you move around like that and live between so many cultures what is your home, what are your stories? Increasingly, a lot of people live in that, in that world.

In listening to the history of the Federal Theatre Project and its demise, I was struck by the vulnerability of what we are doing now. We talk about creating networks nationwide. But let's keep them all flexible and loose enough so they can't be cut at once. It may not be a question of money for that so much as it is a question of strategy and thinking well.

Fifteen years ago on the Federal level, it wasn't just the National

tied our family together, united the members of the church and community. Music everywhere; revivals, funerals, weddings, or a big rally of some sort. And we'd be there...singing.

One Sunday morning my cousin Sheila paid us a surprise visit at our church. Now before Sheila moved to Dayton, she was the best singer around. When she walked in she looked like a picture straight out of Ebony Magazine. She took her seat in the choir. A hush fell over the church. Rev. Sister Gary said, "Sheila sing us a song." Sheila stood up, cleared her throat, and cut loose. Child, three people asked to be accepted into membership before Sheila finished singing!

The very next day I said, "Momma, I'm going to Dayton where Sheila live." Sheila told me, "Girlfriend, the only reason you won't get what you want in the City is if you don't have the gumption to stoop down and pick it up!" Mama said, "Dayton or no Dayton — if you don't finish high school you might as well go out and get your butt on the welfare roll right now, cause I ain't going to take care of your children in my old age!"

(Nancy — "AMEN!")

Well, I finished high school, mainly for her, but the ink wasn't dry on my diploma when I was on the bus heading for Dayton. Sheila looked like a different person at the Greyhound station. Girlfriend was having a bad hair day — it was all over the place! And her face was all pinchy and she was coughing all the time.

This white man said, "You got your claim check?" and I said, "Yassuh, right here." Sheila said, "Girl, you better leave all that country stuff at home. You don't have to be sniffing up to no white folk here in Dayton. Here, man, just give her her stuff!" Well, we got out of there!

Sheila got me a job in the plant where she was working. I worked side by side with this white woman. Kim. Me and Kim hit it off pretty good. Both our hands going non-stop to keep the assembly line moving. We hit production and then some. One day we found out we knew some of the same old church songs. We just started singing together, while we worked, during break, after lunch, just for the heck of



it. 'Course she sang like white folks sing, and I sing like Black folks. But we ended up laughing our heads off about how it sounded when we put it together. And we found out that neither one of us was scared to speak up for our rights. We didn't take no stuff off of nobody. That's how we became union leaders. And we seen that of all the promotions that year, not one had been a woman, a Black, or a Mexican. So we spoke up about it. Sheila coughed and said, "You better leave that crazy white girl alone. Ain't neither one of y'all got no sense." But before long a Black man got promoted.

But the mess really didn't start till we seed all the supervisors and the managers walking around wearing these white protective masks over their faces when they were on the floor. Well, we didn't have masks on the line. We were the ones working right there in the pollution and we didn't rate to be protected. Me and Kim said, "Hey, what's up with that? So we went to the boss and he listened. "Um huh. Um huh. You fired. And you fired, too."

Me and Kim, we lost our jobs. Sheila kept her job and kept on working there. But Sheila never sang no more. Sheila died before she made 32.

#### JUNEBUG

I was eighteen years old before I got set to go. A lot a fellers hung around back home till they was big enough and bad enough to go in the army, but the first one I ever remember to outright leave home with no intention to return was my friend, Philip Anthony "Po" Tatum.

#### MICHAEL (As PO.)

I'm going to the City  
Where the women's really pretty  
And they tell me that the money fall like rain.  
I'm tired of picking cotton!  
Mississippi's gotten rotten  
I'm gonna pack my bags and jump the  
quickest northbound train.

#### JUNEBUG

'Fore long, everybody was singing Po's song.

#### PO

I'm going to Chicago, baby  
Heading for the City  
I'm going to Chicago, baby

Endowment for the Arts that was supporting the arts. There were a number of agencies that were giving a lot of money into the arts, between the CETA programs and the Model Cities programs and Small Business Administration, HUD. There was a lot more Federal money going into arts programming and after school programming, really on a much more neighborhood level. With the change in priorities under the Republican administrations all of that dried up. The NEA became it, the only agency doing it. Before this change, at the Endowment itself funding was much more comprehensive. In the Expansion Arts Program, for instance, a lot of work was being done at the neighborhood level. It had a Neighborhood Arts Program, which became a City Arts Program, which became block grants to city arts commissions to do neighborhood sub-granting. Eventually, the NEA had to pull out of all that completely. The cumulative effect of all these years of hanging on by your fingernails has been profound. The greatest amount of activity for grassroots theater occurred when all that money from various Federal sources was available. With all the attention on lobbying in support of the Arts Endowment, of getting more money for the Arts Endowment, we should also be trying to influence other agencies — which probably have more power than the Endowment — into getting them to fund the arts again. We don't think very much about that.

What we've heard today and last night is a whole litany of examples of theaters which have been crushed because their own success aroused the attack dogs, who said "This has got to be stopped, it's too popular, it's too exciting, it's too political. This protest is keeping me awake, I've got to kill it in order to get back to sleep again." If we think politically, we have to deal with that barrier that is faced as soon as the politicians, who are the true criminals, get frightened when they see something exciting happening down at the street level.

Part of the reason I'm here is that in teaching through storytelling I'm always stuck with validating these personal stories, what's regional. People don't find much value in that. Students, when they come up with their stories, always want to find something that looks better to them — jokes that they had heard, stereotypes. I find it's very hard to get away from that.

As soon as we get all the schools and the young people and everybody mobilized into thinking about the arts, participating in the arts, supporting the arts, then the big corporations or people who have the funds will say, "Well, they've already got it together and there's an audience already built" and somehow they take over. They've done that all the time. But that can't be a deterrent. That's just the process. As soon as they take it over, you go back and regroup, like we're doing now. When we started out there were no opportunities for black people to participate in the theater in our area, except as a maid or butler, something like that. So we started our own group and the other theaters discovered, "Oh, there are black folks over there that will go to the theater if we start doing

some black theater." So, they start doing it better than us. Because they have more money, they have a theater. We have to rent space; and the space gets more and more expensive, more and more difficult for us. So, we can't do big theater any more. The others had found that we had developed a market for them. So, we had to go back to the drawing board and now we are doing something else. We're taking social dramas, putting them into a suitcase and taking them to the kids. All over the state we're creating audiences. And now they feel that, "Hmm, there's money in social drama, we'll start doing social dramas bigger and better." They get these huge grants and they can go off and tour the social dramas free. All we ask for is a small amount, just to cover our expenses and these people don't have that to give to us. My people don't have the resources to just give and give and give. So we know we are going to be squeezed out of that eventually. One of the things I came here for was some inspiration, encouragement, some new ideas. I'm going to have to do something different in order to survive in my community.

How can we legitimately assert — in an increasingly generic, impersonal, electronic era — that "place and story" are values as important as "property and money?" I actually consider them of paramount importance.

The parents of the students I work with feel like they are not a part of society as a whole. They are mostly blue collar workers and generally uneducated. They don't have anything to say about what happens in politics or what happens to their lives. They are poor, white, and disenfranchised. And they pass that on to their kids, who then feel that in terms of their town, their community, nothing is happening. That they don't have a voice. When they start to tell their stories they realize that they do have a voice. That's what feels so rich about what I've been doing.

## COMMUNITY-BASED BUSINESS AND CREATIVE PRACTICES

At this point in the development of Chicano theater we are faced with a troubling question: How "professional" can we get without losing that vital link with our community/constituency? Our artists deserve to live off of their cultural work, yet as their income rises, so does the cost of attending their theaters. Also, we are asking ourselves how much we are actually benefitting from our sometimes uneasy alliance with so-called mainstream theater companies.

One way we keep in touch with the grassroots is by constantly getting involved with the community and getting them to be involved with us. In every production, we combine amateurs, community artists, and professionals — in all disciplines. Every production. This keeps us all down to earth. Sometimes it means you have to recreate the wheel. "Didn't we do this last year or five

(ALL)  
 Heading for the City  
 Chica-Chica-Chica-Chica-Chica Chicago  
 Chica-Chica-Chica-Chica-Chica Chicago  
 Chica-Chica-Chica-Chica-Chica Chicago  
 I'm going to catch a northbound train.

"ZUDIO!" LATTETA

Zudio

(ALL)  
 Here come Zudio, Zudio, Zudio.  
 Here come Zudio, all night long.

Step back, Sally, Sally, Sally.  
 Step back, Sally all night long.

Walking down the alley, alley, alley,  
 Walking down the alley, all night long.  
 Looking down the alley, what did I see?  
 A BIG, FAT man from Tennessee.

(JUNEBUG: "There he is!")

I betcha five dollars that you can't do this!

To the front, to the back, to the side, side, side!  
 You lean way back, then Ball the Jack!  
 You lean way back, you get a HUMP on you back.  
 You lean way back, you get a HUMP on you back.  
 You lean way back, you get a HUMP on you back.  
 You do the CAMEL WALK, You do the CAMEL  
 WALK,  
 You do the CAMEL WALK!

JUNEBUG

By the time Po got to the city there were lots of games like Zudio to be learned but Po already had his mind set on other kinds of games — games where there was money to be made. He started playing with the boys from the big time, ended up in jail. Years later, I found Po in Chicago. One of the things he was trying to do to straighten himself out, get his life back together, was making a garden in the city and organizing others to do the same. By that time he had changed his tune:

PO  
 I got a garden in the City  
 My okra's really pretty  
 I ain't had no greens that tastes so good since I  
 was home  
 I had to put aside my shopping

That grocery bill left me rocking  
I had to leave that doggone grocery store  
alone.

I'm living off my garden, baby  
Garden in the city.  
I'm living off my garden, baby  
Garden in the city.  
Diga-diga, diga-diga, diga Chicago  
Diga-diga, diga-diga, diga Chicago  
Diga-diga, diga-diga, diga Chicago  
Trying to make myself a brand new home.

JUNEBUG

Yeah, my man Po. Seemed like the system just  
got the best of him. He went out in a blaze of  
glory trying to change the whole thing all by  
himself.

(MUSIC)

JUNEBUG AND PO

You can't judge a book by looking at the  
cover.  
You can read my letter, but I bet you can't  
read my mind.  
If you want to get down, down, down,  
You got to spend some time  
I want to walk with you, I want to talk with you  
I wanna, wanna, wanna, wanna rap with you.

PO

When you grow up in the country, things are  
hard, times are tough

JUNEBUG

You growing your own food but it never seems  
enough. You too smart for the country

PO

You got to get away

JUNEBUG

You move to the city, got to be a better way!

PO

So you move to the city, put the country stuff  
behind

JUNEBUG

But when you hit the city, it starts to messing  
with your mind. You struggle and you  
scramble to do the best you can

PO

You think you working for a living?

years ago and we have to start all over again?" But that's part of the  
process. It's the mix that's important. We're always putting them  
together, always.

Half of our board is affiliated with organized labor, particularly  
from the larger unions in New York, like 1199 and District Council  
37. They give us financial support, but also a great deal of outreach  
into audiences. Last year, for example, with *Ascension Day* by  
Michael Henry Brown, its first few weeks were soldout before we  
even started. A lot of these people are seeing live theater for the first  
time.

Why are we creating a dependence on those who are withdrawing  
funds from us? Why aren't we instead learning to build connec-  
tions in different directions?

The term "legitimization" sends me off, okay? And it sends me off  
because of a lot of people I know who are "illegitimate" because  
father wasn't there. We have reached the point with children in  
this country where most people don't talk about "illegitimate  
children" any more. All children are legitimate; if they're born  
they're legitimate. It seems to me that that's where the community  
arts movement is and it's not just theater for me. Everything that  
happens is "legitimate" in my book. Legitimate is a word I've  
stopped using. When I talk about this, I talk about validation.  
When I judge a project that comes to me with an application, I'm  
looking for the validation of the community for that project. And  
that's the standard I hold.

The ethnicity of the community started changing around Inner  
City Cultural Center. It had gone from Jewish and Black to basically  
El Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, Guatemalan, and so on. How did they  
deal with that? C. Bernard Jackson said "We have to come up with  
ways to bring the people into the Center." Noticing that the new  
immigrants needed to fill out forms and all those sorts of things,  
Jack set up a program where if you brought in a ticket stub from a  
show you could get free English lessons, you could get your forms  
filled out, you could get legal services. As long as you had ticket  
stubs from shows. People started coming in droves. Jack said, "This  
is a community theater. We're not going to sit here and worry  
about 'well, do we pack up and move to another community where  
everybody looks like us and acts like us and feels like us?'" Jack said  
no. What we're going to do is stay right here and deal with the  
community that we're dealing with right in this neighborhood.  
Their community is in transition again from Latino to primarily  
Korean, Vietnamese, and Cambodian. They are bringing people  
who speak Cambodian, speak those languages and are making  
plans to reach out to that community.

I didn't learn theater through formal education, I learned it  
through the process of working. I have no background at all in

theater except for the living tradition from my own community. I think it's important in talking to students to emphasize that everything is so divided in the training process. I'm always amazed that you have people who do just one thing. I do lighting design, directing and writing and music and all of those things. Basically to me it all translates to the same thing, the work that needs to be done.

We always do an African ritual to begin the single Junebug pieces, which is libations to the ones who can't be here and the ones who came on before. And we sanctify the space. It's done very casually, but it makes a special space. That conception, though highly respected by them, is anathema to the performing style of Roadside. Their whole thing is that you can sit down anywhere, honey, and do it. You don't need a special space. I'll do it on my porch, I'll do it around the kitchen table, I can sit over here. So, over the course of four or five days while working on *Junebug/Jack* we tried to figure out how to reconcile this, how to come up with a beginning that satisfied both traditions. We even got to one point where they said, "Let's put a circle around the whole group." And we all went, "No, no, you don't circle anything you don't know what's in it. You don't want to contain — you got to keep bad juju out and good juju in. You don't want to just close them in here." We resolved it in a subtle way. We do not separate the space. What we did was we start from the house, sing a song about coming together, and then open it up in a circle. That little bit of staging took us a long time culturally.

## GRASSROOTS THEATER AS FORM OF RESISTANCE

Our area has a hundred year history of economic domination and we're in a hole. You know, we say in the mountains, that if you think about it, a mountain upside down is a hole. We're in this kind of hole, certainly economically. We've got to try to get to some level field before we feel we can even begin the discussion of trying to pick up the threads of a democracy, to move towards a democracy. A lot of our particular task is to call attention to the hole we're in and try to fill that in. We do that at home by affirming the culture in a selective way and being part of a complex cultural puzzle there. We not only do it through theater, but through all of our work.

I am still trying to puzzle out how class fits into our work. The class situation cannot stay the same, there has to be a shifting of class. What is the relationship of our theater to that? It can't just be about making it okay for us to talk to each other. That's not the solution to the problem.

I always looked at myself as an activist first and an artist second. All the artists I remember as I came into this practiced art for art's sake and thought that art was this certain thing that was exclusive rather than inclusive. So, I put myself among the activists. Yet, even in times when we were at the height of political activity, I don't believe there was ever an acknowledgement of what our work is. That our

Hell, you working for The Man!  
People stacked like chickens on the way to meet  
the slaughter,  
Flopping all around the ground like fishes out of  
water.

JUNEBUG

Blind man on the corner, holding up a sign,

TOGETHER

"No More Water, y'all, the Fire Next Time."

RON

AT EASE!

KIM

G.I. Haircut  
G.I. Shoes  
G.I. Hard Tack  
G.I. Blues  
G.I. Love You  
G.I. Do  
G.I. Hope you love me too.

RON & JOHN

SOUND OFF!

Attention!

You had a good home but you left, your right  
You had a good home but you left, your right  
Sound off: 1, 2  
Sound off: 3, 4  
Bring it on down  
1, 2, 3, 4  
1, 2, 3, 4

Brother to Brother

KIM

Now that you've gone away  
The sunlit days don't seem as warm as they  
used to be  
Since you're not here with me  
What once was clear now seems all lost in a  
mystery

CHORUS

Brother are you safe and well  
There's so much to tell  
I need me someone just to talk to  
Brother won't you come home soon  
No one else can cheer me  
No one else can chase away the gloom

Brother why'd you go away

Brother what's a hero  
Leaving home makes no sense to me  
Daddy said you had to go away  
Tell me what you're fighting for  
Brother help me understand your wars!  
Brother help me understand your wars!

CHORUS

Stay safe, my brother  
Hurry home, my brother  
There's someone here who needs you  
And loves you

"Brother, what's a hero  
And why do you have to go away to be one?"

NANCY

When my son, Luke, graduated from high school, it looked like there was no way for him to go on to college like some boys was able to do. So he'd been talking to them recruiters that was always at the school telling the boys about all the military benefits. Oh, he didn't want to wait, he wanted us to sign for him so he could go on in.

His Daddy wouldn't do it and I didn't want to. But he was getting into trouble pretty regular at the time, and he told us that it looked like he could go off to the service or go off to jail. Well, his Daddy said at least he'd be alive in jail, and he still wouldn't sign. Luke kept at me and kept at me, and he got into more and more trouble all the time. Finally, I signed.

He had just turned eighteen when he finished basic and shipped out to Viet Nam. He ended up a machine gunner in the 8th Battalion Marines and was pretty much in constant combat for a year. We got letters from him. Sometimes the handwriting was so big and scrawled that he would only get about five words on a page.

MICHAEL

When I was in Nam I laid up on a ridge looking down at this village. There was women, children, pigs, I felt like I was home instead of someplace else. I told the captain, "We might as well go home. The only way we gonna win this war is to kill every man, women, and child in the country."

JOHN (as captain)

"Well, if that's the way they want it."

work in itself is political work. I remember performing at rallies and always getting stuck in between boring speeches. We were kept there in order to keep the audience involved. Yet, we were never brought into the political dialogue. This was reflective of a lack of understanding of the integration of what art is into our culture, into the make-up of our being — even on the Left.

One of my responsibilities with my company is to develop our local program, which we call NOCAP, New Orleans Community Arts Program. This is an attempt to collect and produce work that is of New Orleans, for the New Orleans community. New Orleans, as many of you are aware, is the home not only to what we call American popular music, but also what we describe as American dance. That's where it came together, the African, the Native American, and the European. We have the challenge to grasp what there is in New Orleans for the people there and put it into some kind of context so that they cannot only celebrate — because they do that anyway, that's the kind of place we live in, we celebrate all the time — but also use it as an instrument for community development. That is a far more substantial challenge, certainly much more complicated than to celebrate: how to make it integral to the life of the community and how people feed each other in terms of lifting our particular community out of its longstanding mire.

I was struck by how often the theater was de-politicized in our discussions. How we spoke about theater movements and forgot about the political movements with which this theater is integrally connected. Is this because as our theaters become institutionalized we have grown away from the grassroots movements which once nourished us? Is it because it is more difficult to define a movement these days? Is it because discussing the grassroots at an Ivy League academic institution by nature de-politicizes it?

The direction of my theater is not towards trends, it is towards ideas. It is about the preservation of my community. It's about my own preservation. It's about life. That will continue. It is not a trend. There's a problem in dealing with that and it comes back down to the real issues. What are the central issues? There is racism and there is classism. It has to do with economics in this country. It has to do with who has the power. Them that have the power have the money — it's the same equation — and them that don't have the power don't have the money.

In Los Angeles, I conduct workshops for the nurses who are in the L.A. County General AIDS Clinic. We have one of the two largest AIDS clinics in the world, the other is in San Francisco. I consider these nurses, most of whom are Third World women, the shock troops dealing with this major health crisis. We do these workshops to get some perspective and way of handling being the late 20th Century MASH unit, if you get me. Two weeks ago we had a story circle, which means we just go around and share stories, stories of

empowerment and strength from the patients. It was so meaningful hearing stories in that context, that kind of theater.

## THE INTERFACE WITH THE NONGRASSROOTS CULTURE AND BETWEEN THOSE WORKING AT THE GRASSROOTS

In our theater, we have a role as a translator of the culture. We spend a good amount of our time away from our community — up here, or in Iowa, in California — going out with our culture. All the people in the company not only came up in our region, but came up in its artistic traditions. It would be like coming up in a theatrical family, but in our culture, it's families of musicians, storytellers, liars. So, we have that well to draw from. If all of our regional and national funding crashed, we would stop going out and fold back into our community — where we would be taken care of. But the work would change. It would become less accessible to people outside the culture. And, in a sense, would become much deeper, more of our place, more particular, idiosyncratic. We would take on more of our home speech patterns, the singing would gain richer harmonies that are locally specific. What would be lost would be the recognition of our place in contemporary U.S. culture. That is what we now bring back to the well from going out.

The role of funders and outside institutions should be one of serving and supporting the grassroots theater, not one of "leading" it. To be able to best serve the movement, funders, institutions, and critics need to be trained or "developed" to understand and appreciate the grassroots theaters' work. If there are critics from outside a grassroots theater's community, then they must understand the community, understand the role grassroots theater plays in that community, before valid criticism can be made of its work.

I am not so much concerned with grassroots theater reaching across racial, social, political, and class lines to bring people directly into contact with each other — one of the themes of the conference — so much as I am concerned about grassroots theater maintaining a policy of allowing the community to actively participate in the art. In that sense, grassroots theater for me is a by-product of community itself.

People forget that even within racial and cultural groups there is a wide diversity. This is especially true among Latinos, where we have African Latinos, we have European Latinos, we have Latinos with very indigenous roots. Cubans have quite a different culture and set of priorities than Chicanos, who have differences with Puerto Ricans, et cetera. We're trying to build a unification just among ourselves, trying to build a political voice and using the theater as one way to do that. At the same time, we must recognize that there are these differences between us, within our groups — under the labels we carry around, Latino, Hispanic, Asian American, whatever — and that there is going to be conflict because of those differences.

### Viet Nam

I went walking one morning  
The devil took me by the hand  
Said, "Come on let me show you 'round my  
little Place  
I call it Viet Nam  
Ain't so much to look at  
Just a quaint little jungle land  
Before I'm through  
It'll mean the world to you  
You won't forget Viet Nam"

### CHORUS

Viet Nam, where the sweetest flower  
Died on the vine  
Viet Nam, it'll steal your heart  
Steal your mind

Come all you space age children  
You never gonna understand  
If you want to see real living and dying  
Come over to Viet Nam  
Pride's the first thing to leave you  
Your fear is the last thing to run  
You can't see too well  
Staring straight into hell  
Down the barrel of a gun

### CHORUS

Mama don't you know me  
I'm the boy next door  
Can I come home  
Mama don't you know me  
I'm the boy next door  
Can I come home

### NANCY

That year my boy was in the war I lost 40  
pounds and my hair turned completely white.  
Seemed like the time would never pass. The  
days just stood still. It was like mothers all  
over this country was holding their breath . . .  
waiting.

When he come home, I thanked God that he  
was safe and that we could go back to being a  
family. But it wasn't long 'til I could see things  
was different - oh, he never missed a family  
gathering but he always come late and left  
early - and when he got married, he never  
even told me about it until it was over and  
done. I tried everything I knowed to bring my  
family back together, but things was never the  
same after that.

JOHN

I was fighting in the Korean War when I found out about the lynching of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi. The Korean people I knew couldn't understand why I was so upset about that one child being killed in Mississippi, when every month Korean children were dying by the hundreds. I tried to explain it, what it was.

After we fought all over the world in the name of freedom, then to have a fifteen year old boy to be lynched in the "land of the free and the home of the brave" was just too much. That's when I knew it was time for me to go home. I was fighting on the wrong side in the wrong war!

RON

I had this buddy. We was both medics. We wasn't in the fighting like them Marine and Army guys. We picked up the pieces after the fighting was over. Day after day, the same thing, trying to save the pieces of what was left. Pretty soon you're looking for anything to talk about instead of that and somebody to talk to.

One day I heard him say he was from Washington, D.C. Most of my people had been forced to move out of the mountains back in the 50's looking for work. They ended up round northern Virginia. I told him about my people and every thing and we started talking. He told me his family was from North Carolina, but he was raised in D.C.

After that we just sorta started hanging out together. Both of us loved Muddy Waters. A lot of friendships been started on less than that. We was friends.

In April that year I got rotated back to the states. It was hard to explain, but somehow I kinda hated to leave. I remember thinking, I must be going crazy, not wanting to go home.

I went home on a 30 day leave. But I swear to God, in a week I couldn't stand it. I'd watch that television and see them pictures and it was like I'd keep looking, trying to see myself. They didn't even remind me of me.

I ended up in Greenville, Mississippi on temporary duty. My orders got screwed up

What we share is a common experience with the so-called dominant culture. That is a starting point from which we can talk. I'm not worried about our being able to accept the differences within our groups. It's a very empowering thing — to realize that we have these differences but we can still talk to each other.

One of the things we are facing is that some of our teachers and professors don't consider our theater real theater. They'll go out of their way to take their students to the Broadway touring shows but not to us. Their visions are very limited. We'll get the instructors in Social Studies, instructors in bilingual education, in Spanish, instructors in many areas — other than the theater and drama departments. We have no problems reaching those other departments and their students. But with the theater departments, no way.

There's a lot of talk about the Balkanization of the society, the dissolution of a social contract. Give me a break! What was the nature of this social contract?! Go visit a city like San Diego where people of color represent more than forty percent of the population, yet their cultural organizations get less than three percent of the city arts money. What kind of contract is that? I don't think everyone signed it. I'm told that there are about 6,000 distinct cultures in the world as defined by language, but that more than that number have disappeared in the last hundred years. Balkanization is a specious argument. Its purpose is to consolidate power.

Too many funders think they're the ultimate outsiders, which used to be called noblesse oblige. Funders should risk as much as their grantees, be out there mixing it up, a part of the debate, subject to public review. We recently completed a two year residency program that was unique in our experience. There were three partners: seventeen rural communities, the state arts council, and our theater. The agreement from the get-go was for it to be an equal partnership — each partner had a share of the risk, and failure and success was ours together. All three of us agreed upon our separate as well as our common goals for the project. The arts council staff was involved continuously with planning and was on the scene with each residency, as both funder and producer. This was a new role for them. For us, it involved going into one of the communities, staying there for a while, encouraging people to tell their stories. We would share in the community process, then go to the next town and develop the same kind of thing. We would meet with choirs or a musician or just people from the community. At the end of the program, we realized that it was much more than the sum of its parts. The process opened all of our eyes to a new way of conceiving projects and working together.

I'm not quite as frightened of the corporate community. When I first started programming in Houston and we would ask for money from corporations, we walked into the kind of situation where they started to dictate, "I'm giving you money, I should be able to say that it's this, that, or the other." So, we started having education

meetings with the corporations. We sat down and said, "You can give your money if you want to, but this is why you don't have a say." And they got it. The President of Texaco Oil got it. I don't think we should assume that people won't get it just because they're in the corporate world. I don't think we should assume they are the bad guys. We have a responsibility, I think, just like we're trying to educate students, just like we're trying to educate our communities, like we're here trying to educate ourselves, to educate the corporate world as well. That's one of the things I really encourage people who are doing workshops or seminars to do, invite some people from corporations so they can begin to hear our discussions of what we are trying to do and understand them.

We have to be very careful. We say we want to break down barriers between us, but sometimes I want barriers. Sometimes I want to feel I have an identity that everyone else cannot buy into, have, co-opt. Everybody thinks that because we want to understand other people's cultures we all of a sudden have to be someone else's culture. You don't have to. We can maintain integrity and identity and history for ourselves as we learn about other people's. One of the things we have to start doing is to define when we are learning from each other and sharing and when we are co-opting. And there is a difference. A lot of times I see somebody's work and say, "That's full of shit. They're co-opting our stuff." Then I can see someone else's and say, "Wow, what a wonderful coming together" — like *Junebug*/*Jack* last night. And you know the difference between the two. But how do you articulate that and get that down somewhere? Right now, it's only something that we feel.

## EVALUATING PROGRESS & PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

In grassroots theater, the community validates the quality of the work, the organization, and the life of the work. The grassroots theater is not validated merely by being funded by the private or governmental funders or by being "housed" in or accepted by institutional organizations. If this sort of "validation" occurs before the grassroots theater's own community has validated the work, then it is not "valid."

We almost have to start by recognizing that we've hardly started on this work. The clientele for grassroots theater is probably larger now than it ever was.

Who defines what quality is? In a race and class and sex-based dominant culture, who's the one that defines that? And how is it defined? And what's valid and what's not valid? It's true I've seen some community-based theater that's been pretty terrible, but I've seen even more "established" theater that's been terrible. I think we're fighting constantly a battle to define our work, to defend our quality, which I find exhausting. I'm at the point where I'm not able to engage in it any more. I think it's an argument that is a waste of

and 3 months later I was still there. Then I'll be damned if my buddy from Nam didn't show up. Oh man, we had a party! It was just like old times.

One night we decided we was gonna go into Greeneville, but there was a big football game that night and town was deserted. Somehow or another we decided to go to a movie. I don't even remember what was playing. We got our tickets and went on in, got some popcorn and Pepsi, started to go in to the movie when this woman says, "Hey you can't go in there!" I said, "Excuse me?"

"Now you know better than that. He can't go in there. He has to set up there."

And she pointed to the stairs going up to the balcony. I said, "We're in the service. Me and him is together, M'am."

She said, "I don't care."

He never said nothing the whole time. Then he just turned around and walked out. I just stood there holding a box of popcorn and a Pepsi.

We got a cab back to the base. But it never was the same after that. (MUSIC STARTS FOR, THE ONLY WAR THAT'S FAIR TO FIGHT) I ended up in Illinois. He went to California. I never saw him again.

### The Only War That's Fair to Fight

MICHAEL

The only war that's fair to fight  
Is the

ALL

War to end oppression

MICHAEL

The only war that's fair to fight  
Is the

ALL

War to win your freedom

MICHAEL

The only war that's fair to fight  
Is the

ALL

war you fight to win your human rights

MICHAEL

The only war that's fair to fight  
Is the



ALL  
War to end oppression

### Tree Of Life

CHORUS

Ain't you got a right (RON)  
Ain't you got a right  
Ain't you got a right  
to the tree of life

CHORUS

You may be black (LATTETA)  
You may be white  
Ain't you got a right  
to the tree of life

CHORUS

Gonna tell my brother (NANCY)  
Gonna tell my sister  
Ain't you got a right  
to the tree of life

CHORUS

You may be young, you may be old  
(MICHAEL)  
You may be hungry, you may be cold  
but ain't you got a right  
to the tree of life

CHORUS (2X)  
(audience sing along)

CHORUS

What did they do with what they took from  
you  
What did they do with mine  
No use complaining what they took from you  
They been stealing from us all a long time.

JOHN

Ancient red man chief stand looking in grief  
At all the damage done to mother earth  
Lot of blood been shed through the years,  
No shame can equal it's worth.  
Can't measure the sorrow of the buffalo people  
Who dwelled from shore to shore  
When the pilgrims began it was the red man's  
land  
Before they were forced to go.  
Those that are left, a land lost few  
Were forced onto reservations

time. How do you define the quality of the work? That's defined by the effect it has on the people you are doing it for.

As a man dedicated to teaching future theater artists/activists I am saddened by the fact that very few university or college theater departments show any commitment to grassroots theater. A quick glance at their seasons will demonstrate how far removed these educators are from the real world surrounding their campuses. Yes, there is a need for all kinds of theater: yes, classical training can produce a fine actor; and yes, our emerging playwrights have much to learn from the old masters. But how often does a theater department take the risk of producing the kind of theater to which we have dedicated our lives?

Grassroots theater does not come up from or exist in culturally deprived communities, but rather sinks its roots into and thrives within the most culturally rich communities of our country. At its best, it will be its own educational training ground. This way it returns to the community (the people) the craft and the art that the community helped to create, indeed, gave their voices to.

I don't think colleges and universities have a big role to play in the grassroots theater. They could, but they don't. They should be places where students and others can take risks. Increasingly, however, the people who can afford to go to college are not people who necessarily face a tremendous amount of risk in their own lives, nor are the people teaching them. Unless the tuition comes way down and a lot more money goes back into the educational system, I don't see how they can do it.

If we learned anything from the historical perspective of this morning, it is that now is the future. What we do now. What we have to get thinking about is how can we in the next ten years affect some of the things that we've talked about? And how can we really begin to do it through the processes that we have? I think the answers are here. For me, this is a symposium that has to do with hope. Because each one of these people, each one of these organizations here — they fly in the face of statistics, fly in the face of politics, fly in the face of all of those things. The opportunity to continue this work is what we are trying to work towards. So that all those things we've learned from the people can be put to use.

The fact that people like Robert Gard were making this kind of theater in the 1930's — long before most of us here were born — makes me less concerned about where we will be ten years from now. Because it comes from the people, this kind of art, our kind of art will survive. People will always have stories. What worries me more is how do you create the spark to begin with, how do you keep it alive?

I almost think that community-based groups should be going to colleges, the way corporations do, to recruit graduating seniors or to get students for summer work. We could be contacting campus

employment offices, setting up tours, conducting interviews for those who may be interested in what we do — they could be student activists, theater majors, whomever — at least in our areas. Most students don't know that the possibility of working in this way exists. Why not try to come to them, instead of waiting for them to come to us?

What is an appropriate success for us? What are appropriate expectations for somebody wanting to do this kind of work? How do you know you're succeeding? How do you know you are making a difference? Because we live in a world that measures success in some pretty ugly ways, it often feels that we are in a constant state of failure. Even though we know in our guts and by gatherings like this that we aren't. None of us would be here if we didn't have a certain amount of courage to be doing the work we are doing. To ensure that courageous people continue to be courageous or to give a voice to people who would like to speak but are scared seems to be another important function of our work.

The trail of tears, battles lost and won  
Endless treaty manipulations  
They been fighting in the courts  
Using the system  
Organizing a plan  
Standing with their brothers and sisters  
They're winning back their land.

MICHAEL

A lot of black people all over the world  
Still fighting a terrible fight  
Thinkin 'bout the past and lookin to the  
future  
Beginning to see the light  
History has proven that it's not acceptable  
To keep a people down  
Pain and suffering all those years  
Shackled and whipped to the ground.  
Families disrupted, where is the justice?  
Millions gone to slave ship sea.  
with faith intact they broke their backs  
Three hundred years of labor for free.  
The only request after giving their best  
Was for forty acres and a mule  
Asking and waiting and asking again  
Still treated like a fool.  
It's been a long time since 1865  
Some changes are hard to see  
But freedom for you and freedom for me  
Everybody in equality!

CHORUS

RON

For over 100 years people in the mountains  
Lived in peace and harmony  
Helping one another, living on the land  
They knowed what it meant to be free.  
Then some men from the banks, church and  
government  
Men from the industry  
Took a look at the mountains, put their heads  
together  
said with disbelief:  
There's something wrong with this picture  
here  
And there's gonna be hell to pay  
You need money to spend, credit and bills  
To live the American Way  
You can't buy my pride, You can't stop my  
hope  
You can't steal my identity  
and when the air we breath is sold a breath at  
a time  
hillbillies will still be free!

# Scenarios

**A**fter the plenary session that started the symposium's second day, the participants were again divided into small groups. This time, each group was given a scenario to prepare over the course of an hour for presentation to the rest of the participants. The afternoon was devoted to these more or less extemporaneous presentations.

The scenarios were conceived to give all the participants the chance to think concretely about the issues of grassroots theater and how to articulate them under unfamiliar circumstances. Those presenting a scenario served to frame and stimulate the discussion; the rest of the participants tried to challenge or support the ideas presented. For instance, in one scenario a group is testifying before a Congressional labor subcommittee about including support for grassroots cultural centers as part of its community development programs. In another, parents and teachers are addressing a school board about the effect of a proposed performing arts magnet school on a community. The responses of the audience in the roles of the subcommittee or the school board were as important as the presentations themselves.

In all, eleven scenarios were presented. The presentations resulted in many spirited exchanges and active role-playing, providing good insights and at times welcomed humor. They also demonstrated the areas where those involved with grassroots theater may need to hone their thinking and skills of persuasion. With hindsight, it would have been useful to add a third step: an opportunity for the presenters to step out of their roles to explain the rationale for their arguments and the opportunity for all to critique the effectiveness of the exchange in discovering the issues. It is also interesting to note that in many cases, it was easier to ask the questions challenging grassroots theater than to find the appropriate answers in defense of it.

To show the range of responses, we have included edited versions of three of the scenario presentations. For clarity in reading, the members of the small groups are designated as "Presenters" and the rest as "Audience," each playing whatever role is required for the scenario. Following the excerpts is a complete listing of the scenario topics.

## SCENARIO

The neighborhood surrounding your theater changes in a short time from 65% middle income white to a 65% low income community divided between African-Americans, Caribbean, and Asian immigrants. The Artistic Director has to present a five year plan to the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees which responds to this changed community demographic.

## PRESENTATION

### Presenter 1:

. . . We want to tell you there can be no five year plan. What we want to propose to you as the Executive Committee is this: the first year, we will have a progressive plan. We will hold a town meeting and invite the entire community. Also, representatives of the staff will go into the various communities and give personal invitations and encouragements to begin to work on the Center becoming a common ground space.

At the first meeting, we want to host home artists from the various communities that are represented by the change in our town. We want to have food representative of those communities. And then we will have a limited thirty to forty minute discussion about the Center and about the changes in the community. We will ask the individuals who attend that event to go back to their specific communities and elect representation, whether that is one person, whether that's many people, to come to a second town meeting.

At the second meeting, we'll have an agenda. The agenda will be: what are the needs facing the community as a whole? How can we begin to set up a process by which we access those needs? As the second meeting continues, we will hash out the vision for the Center. The vision for the Center cannot come from the Executive Committee or the existing Board, rather it must come from the community as a whole. What needs cut across ethnic lines? What needs don't? How will the Board be chosen for the Center? What are the ethical obligations to the founders of the Center and to the existing staff of the Center? How do we value human resources and experiences? Some funding may be connected to the present Board and we must take that into account.

We want the whole story of the community represented. The community needs to make a decision about whether there is a new Board, whether we continue with the existing Artistic Director, begin a search for a new director, work out a collective kind of direction — and set a timeline for those actions . . . In addition to that, while we are in process, in transition, our program is still going on. So, we will invite people to attend all of the Board meetings which will continue to take place for that year. Invite people to come to the Center and evaluate the existing programs, while we work with home artists and others artists in having workshops and presentations in community spaces that are not the Center, as well as having them in the Center. Do you have any questions?

## RESPONSE

### Audience:

Did I understand you to say that the community will say yes or no to the Artistic Director? That the community, instead of the Board, will hire the Artistic Director?

### Presenter 1:

What we are saying and proposing to you, in order for the Center to continue to have a life, it must be representative of the community. If the current Artistic Director and the current Board do not represent its needs, cannot identify with those needs, the Center will die and blow away.

**Audience:**

You didn't answer my question.

**Presenter 2:**

I think the response to the question is that we don't know. There is clearly a lot of experience on the current Board and in the current artistic leadership of the Center. The community is still 35% of what it used to be, European American, which means that all of that has to be folded into this discussion of the community and what happens to the Center and some consensus needs to be arrived at about how to move forward after this year of planning.

**Presenter 3:**

How do you re-define the Center without losing the experience and the resources that the current board and the current Artistic Director have to offer? To not just throw it out . . .

**Audience:**

I've been on the board for seven years, now. And I've put a lot of time into it, as you know. I feel the mission we've developed over the past several years has been well thought out and it's an important one to continue. It sounds to me like you're talking about starting a new organization. If you feel a need for an organization that's going to represent the community and reach out to new artistic traditions than the ones that we've been supporting for years, maybe there should be one. But we've got a strong mission already. I think we should make sure that the new community has access to the resources and cultural traditions that we've been fostering. But I don't see why we should effectively be starting a new organization with the same name.

**Presenter 3:**

We're not trying to start a new organization. What we are trying to do is re-define and make our Center responsive to the current needs of the community. I think it was fine when we started the Center, but I think the needs of the community have changed and we need to go out there and do a reassessment . . .

**Presenter 1:**

There is also a portion of the community, 35% of the community, which is the same. It is still their community. We're not saying, we no longer care for what you think about. What we are saying is this is what is here let's build upon it and make it better. And, yes, you have done an excellent job on the Board and we'll look forward to your continued support.

**Audience:**

How could the programs that we have talked about on the Board, defined as a group and agreed as having value, how could those values change simply because the color of the neighborhood has changed? What changes those values that we had before?

**Presenter 1:**

I think one of the things that we are trying to do with the assessment of the community is that some of those values may be the same, some of those may be different, but we don't know. What we have to do is have the input, have the voice, have the communication, and then we'll know.

**Presenter 2:**

For example, this community has become largely an immigrant community. Which means a significant proportion of that population may not speak English. So performances in other languages may have to be added to our mission, simply to increase the interest of the new members of our community in what is being presented at our Center.

**Presenter 3:**

Maybe the values haven't changed. What has are the needs themselves, how those values

are expressed. That's what we are trying to address. I think the Center's values — the fact that we do want to represent the culture and the history of the community — will remain the same, the traditional mission statement. What we want to do is try to broaden it to address the new needs.

**Audience:**

We're talking about maintaining the mission that we've had. We don't even know if those people have anything like the arts. Do they really know what the arts are? I don't know anything about them. They don't know anything about me.

**Presenter 1:**

I think that is one thing that we are hoping to look at with our plan . . . Are we talking about the same thing, are we talking about something different? We have to have an education process both ways. Then I think we will begin to know. That's the scary thing that the Board must keep in mind, that we have to keep in mind. The first meeting is not going to give us the answers, the second meeting is not going to give us the answers, but is going to lead us on the path of finding those solutions. I think that we will be surprised to learn that we are excited about differences and that many things are similar.

•••

## SCENARIO

You are interested in getting a variety of grassroots theater materials published, including new and long out-of-print books. You must convince the nationally recognized publisher of the validity of the subject area by presenting a clear definition of grassroots theater and identifying a market for such work.

## PRESENTATION

**Presenter 1:**

Thanks so much for your response to our letter. What you need to imagine is that Harry and I are here with ninety-eight other people. These are people we've just spent some time with at a conference at Cornell University dedicated to grassroots theater. This was a group consisting of people living in very small places, people living in our major urban areas, people of many different cultural backgrounds, people from different generations. We are artists, we are government people, we are foundation and corporate people, we are educators in the public schools, K-12, we are educators in our college campuses. What we share is a common concern about the place of community in the future of the country . . . It would be a publication series with a common theme, and this theme would be through the grassroots theater to give voice to communities in order to enable them to grapple with issues of social justice and human survival in America.

**Presenter 2:**

Now, we know that when you hear "theater," "social justice," and "human survival" you think book-sized sleeping pill. That no one would buy this book. But, in fact, what we've discovered and what we are so excited about, beyond the books themselves, is that there is a very large audience for this. Maryo described the different people from all parts of the country who came to the conference. This is a movement that has developed over twenty years, in many different communities, that is now coalescing. There are networks being formed from San Antonio to rural Kentucky to upstate New York trying to share information. And it's not just theater people who are involved. It's not just artists from other disciplines. But everyone is affected on many levels by the question of community. How do we hold together our society? What is my community? How do we communicate across communities?

Academics, historians, sociologists, teachers are all involved with these questions . . . In addition, social service organizations, health and human services organizations, and foundations are also grappling with them — Rockefeller, Ford, on down to very small community-based foundations, as well as government funding agencies. What is our community? How do we support this development? You've heard the phrase multicultural society and that has many different meanings. It is all being investigated and turned up and discovered. And this series of books will help in that discovery.

**Presenter 1:**

Harry's used the word community a lot, as have I, of course. Through the theater, people can address a broad range of issues in the community. By this we mean a spectrum of things. We mean a community in an urban sense, we also mean a community in a rural sense. We mean a community of place; we mean community of culture. In the books we propose, we intend to be inclusive in the use of that term. To illustrate, we have brought with us the two manuscripts we described in our letter. Before leaving them with you, I'd like to tell you a little bit about them both.

The first is by Dr. Victor Leo Walker of Stanford University and is entitled *The Politics and Polemics of Art: A Biography of the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center 1965-1992*. It is exceptionally timely. I don't have to remind you, of course, of the recent conflicts in Los Angeles and the attention that has brought to the American public. This is probably the first in a series of urban self-searching, urban conflict, urban difficulty that lies ahead. Dr. Walker's book addresses the use of multiculturalism in the theater as a model for understanding multiculturalism in urban America today. At the other end of the spectrum, is a book by Robert Gard, called *Grassroots Theater: A Search for Regional Arts in America*. Originally published in 1951 by the University of Wisconsin Press, it is now out-of-print. It is an important book because it helps people reflect on the place where they live, the community they live in as the essential first step to getting a handle on the issues of human survival that everyone of us is struggling with today.

**Presenter 2:**

We know you don't have much time and we appreciate the time you've taken with us. But before we go, I want to say that this series, these books, are of tremendous importance and value, that these issues of community, of communications between communities are being met now. This is not for some future Utopia or something. This is very current, this is now. In theaters, in schools, in the workplace, in the streets. These books provide both practical guidance and inspiration to use theater as a model for investigating and — I've used this word before — discovering what these issues really mean. Thank you.

**Presenter 1:**

And we're confident that the ninety-eight other people from the Cornell conference would join with us in offering to serve as a resource to you in any way you wish, in terms of marketing, in terms of reaching the networks of people that we represent to make our series, your series a success.

## RESPONSE

**Audience:**

As publisher of this company, my economic demographics tell me that most of the people who buy my books are white, middle class, come from households with incomes of \$50,000 a year or more. I've also talked to a number of prominent theater scholars and historians who have told me that in most theater programs they don't even have a grassroots or ethnic theater studies program. So, if these books are as valuable as you say, why are most of them out-of-print? And Mr. Walker's manuscript about the Inner City Cultural Center? Why is

that valuable?

**Presenter 2:**

Mr. Walker's manuscript is being offered for the first time for publication. I don't know what is more current than Los Angeles. What you have in the Inner City Cultural Center is an organization, a theater organization that has remained in the middle of Los Angeles for twenty-seven years, applying these issues, trying to bring people from all different cultures together. That community, the area where Inner City has been, has transformed in those years. It has gone from being a primarily Jewish and African-American community to being a much more diverse and largely immigrant-based community and they have weathered these changes. This book is a practicum, in a sense.

**Audience:**

But the economic demographics of my people and their level of education tells me that they are not interested in this stuff. Show me where my particular economic constituency — the people who buy my books — will be interested in this.

**Audience:**

Actually, if I might respond to that. I deal with a different section of our company's publications. I must say that you may not be aware of the demand for projects dealing with multiculturalism and diversity. The requests for books, for information, for histories on that material that I receive from academics every single day is overwhelming, a non-stop succession of letters. So, I just wanted to point out that there is, in fact, an audience begging for this material.

**Audience:**

Look, kids, I can't accept your manuscripts. I want to save you the Xerox money, I know you need it. It warms my heart to see the level of idealism that still remains out there, but when you come to my offices here at Random House you have to understand that this is an entertainment corporation and that 65% of the books in the United States are sold through the chain stores. You know, that's like going and buying Kellogg's in the supermarket. We publish two things. We publish fiction and non-fiction. We don't even know that word theater, poetry, we don't know about that stuff. Nobody comes into the supermarket and says I want a book on theater. No. We look at the bottom line and that bottom line doesn't deal with only the book store, but it deals with the author writing the thing, and we already got it programmed into t.v. and a mini-series and we have the foreign rights sold and all that kind of stuff. We're talking here about megabucks. You say you've got the constituency? That's good. You ever hear of desk top publishing and niche publishing? You can go and start your own business, you can do that yourself. But don't come to us. We're publishers for the world.

**Audience:**

I think you'd be better off at a university press.

**Audience:**

I'm a university press. I can't give you any creative money, but I can give money for production and national marketing. We know there's a market out there in college theater departments, libraries enough to support it. We think it's interesting, but we have just a couple of minor suggestions. For example, we think "grassroots" or "community theater" are terms which are not really going to read to people. So, we have a suggestion for the title of one of these publications, which might be *Twist and Shout: Theater That Anybody Can Do*. As a university press, we have to compete for shelf space with the übermensch of Random House. We are trying to create a more accessible way for it to grow this readership . . .



**Presenter 2:**

It's very interesting making a presentation to you editors, because we don't have to say very much. It's very wonderful to hear you all talking. But, in fact, this is what this project is about. It's about giving voice to people who don't ordinarily say very much.

**Audience:**

That's why we have Cable Access.

**Presenter 2:**

I think that you are underestimating a huge audience that isn't currently buying your books. I know you have a demographics of a few people with \$100,000 a year, but there are many more people with \$25,000 a year who could invest in books to learn how to give voice to what they are not hearing in the culture.

**Presenter 1:**

I've heard some of you suggesting that we're only talking about a series of books about the theater and suggesting that perhaps this is relevant only within the theater community. I suppose the point we are trying to make is that we are talking to that community of American people who are concerned with living together, living in harmony, understanding one another's cultures, reconnecting to our places, better understanding our communities. So, we're really addressing broad issues of American life, of American cultural survival. So, I hope that you wouldn't hear this just as a narrow series of books to, by, and for people in the theater . . .

...

## SCENARIO

You are testifying before a Labor Subcommittee to articulate why cultural/arts funding should be part of a national rural and inner city economic development plan.

## PRESENTATION

**Presenter 1:**

Distinguished members of the subcommittee of our esteemed Congress of the United States of America. We believe that the arts could play a very important role in the economic development plan for rural and inner-city neighborhoods and communities.

The first role it can play is in providing jobs. There has been a loss of jobs in the rural areas which has led to migrations to the urban areas where the situation is worse. We believe that, for instance, the building of a theater/art gallery/concert hall in every community — not every city, but every community — in the country, would lead not only to a place to work for the artists and the teachers of our children, but also jobs for architects, designers, contractors, laborers, suppliers, who would do the renovation and construction of these spaces.

But more important, we feel that the arts can play a role in the development and healing of the human spirit. We have Head Start programs for children, but I think we need something like a "Keep Going" program for our teenagers, who are in perhaps a more difficult period of their lives. It is hard to say something like, "Just say no," when there is nothing to say yes to.

We have 148 witnesses here to talk to you, some of them from your own districts. Before we get to those, I would like to say that some of the most ancient classical theories of education say that the music, the arts, and the theater are the building blocks of all education and that

playing with shapes forms a foundation for math, science, and humane technology. Recent studies have proven that students with a strong foundation in the arts do better on math and science aptitude tests. And that the IDM has done a study that says the best way to learn how to read is to learn how to write. So, with that, I'd like to introduce our first witness, Jorge Piña from the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center.

**Presenter 2:**

Buenos Tardes. Thank you for this opportunity. I am from the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. My colleague just spoke about the role the arts could play. I think we are an example. It has happened for us. I feel that we are the future.

Let me tell you a little about the Center. We have six programs. We produce, present, and teach in the disciplines of dance, film, music, visual arts, literature, and, my program, theater. Our location is in the barrio of San Antonio, Texas, on the West Side. The same situation as in the South Bronx, in the Appalachian Mountains, and in the barrio of San Antonio; we are the poorest per capita in the country. Our history is we started as a grassroots organization in 1979 with our first grant, a \$5000 grant. Today, our budget is \$1.8 million. We have 22 full-time staff and we hire between 300-600 artists throughout the year, from a one day residency to a full year residency depending on the grant and the artist's need. The breakdown of the budget: one third comes from income, the selling of t-shirts, box office tickets, etcetera; another third comes from the city of San Antonio; the last comes from monies from the private sector, the federal government, NEA, the state, etcetera.

We believe that investment is the key here. We believe that the Center is an investment. The nonprofit money that we receive and generate goes back to the community, not only to the small business person there, but also to the artists. I believe that a true artist is a representation of a community. He is a voice of the community.

We are now the pride of the city of San Antonio. We provide tourist money. We bring plenty of tourists to the city of San Antonio in different ways. One of them is in the festivals we provide. One festival is the Conjunto Festival. We're in our twelfth year. The Conjunto Festival is basically a music festival. When we first started, it was a two day event. We provided fourteen conjunto groups. Conjunto music is the music of our area of south Texas. An accordian, bajo sexto, basically a four piece group. It started in the rural areas and now it's everywhere. The Festival is now a seven day event and we bring in over fifty-two conjuntos. Over 40,000 people come to this event, not only from Texas, but they come from as far away as Japan, Canada, South America . . . And because we are the pride of the City of San Antonio, we also bring a lot of politicians. Politicians love when things are going great. Now, for example, the Presidente of Mexico comes to our Center, has seen a performance. It is quite, quite good. Like I said pride. And pride to a lot of politicians means money, investment, jobs.

How did I get here? I'm going to switch over to how I started, how I feel about working at a cultural center, my profession. A cultural center is a very unusual animal. It has just been started in the past ten years or so. Some cultural centers have a long track record history, others have just barely started. I grew up poor. And growing up poor, one doesn't realize about all the opportunities, it's just survival. Growing up in Mexico and growing up in Texas, I was lost in two worlds. Basically, a stranger in my own land. In Mexico, I was a Pocho. In the United States, I was a wetback. When I was in San Antonio, crime was heavy. Crime was pretty heavy when I was growing up as a teenager, but things didn't really shake me up politically until I buried my cousin when he was killed in the Vietnam War. I needed some way to speak then. I didn't want to join radical groups, to disrupt, to create riots. I wanted to give something back. So, I started forming teatros in the streets to confront the situation, not only the Vietnam War, but also the police brutality that was happening in our city, and also the situation that was happening to our farm workers and that still continues today.

When I was sixteen I saw three teatros: Teatro Campesino, Teatro de la Justicia, and Teatro de la Verdad. Two of those companies no longer exist; they only existed two or three years. Teatro Campesino still exists and continues to still inspire. It inspired me. I really feel that teatro for me is a medicine of healing, spiritual healing. It made me proud of who I am. It made me proud of what I can become. Now, as an adult, almost forty, I now inspire children and I inspire senior citizens in my Cultural Center. I truly believe that cultural centers are the future, like I said. What I tell politicians in my home, in my city, is that my vote is not cheap. I earned it. Not only did I earn it. When I was born in this country this vote was given to me. In the words of Willie Velasquez, "democracy is a living paper." And I tell these politicians, in my little area, in my district, that you work for me. Make it possible.

Investment in grassroots organizations, community organizations, cultural centers is not just a good idea for the economic development of a poor community. This money will provide answers to who we are as a people, how we look to the future, how we work together with different cultures, not just in our own country but outside our country. It is also an investment in communication on many levels. For example, April 29th . . . When people were looking for answers on April 29th, when L.A. was burning, in my Cultural Center people were talking. Police department, politicians, poor people, everybody. We were talking, we were not rioting, we were not burning. Yes, we were angry. Yes, we were frustrated. But we were communicating, we were talking.

I truly believe that the cultural centers are the future. If you don't believe that cultural centers are the future, just look at April 29th. That is also a glimpse of the future. If you continue not investing in cultural centers, we will see many more uprisings come about. If you invest in cultural centers, like the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, like Appalshop, like Inner City Cultural Center, and many others, you provide a glimpse into a different future. Thank you.

## RESPONSE

### **Audience:**

We've got a labor program here and our job is to make sure that these things have an economically sound basis, to make sense in those terms. And that a development effort that occurs is going to be able to take care of itself. Now, the model that I think you are talking about and that you can help us with so that we can support your program, first involves building a building in each community, building or renovating . . . In your community, if I understood you, if I'm not wrong, Jorge, you got two thirds of your money coming from tax sources. Is that correct? So that it's one third that is actually supported by the community itself. My colleagues on the Republican side here will be trying to argue with me that what you've really done is you've created two government jobs for every private sector job. Is that the kind of thing that would be the result of our doing these cultural centers?

### **Presenter 2:**

My attitude is that you should be paying us one hundred percent.

### **Presenter 3:**

The money that you are spending is our money. I think that is the point. It is tax money that has been collected out of these communities and recycled back in support. I also think it important to note that these are not government jobs. Most government jobs are in large bureaucracies. We know the amount of waste that occurs in large bureaucracies. When you fund community-based cultural organizations that money goes directly into the community. It is direct economic activity in the community. It is not going into large bureaucracies. It takes effect directly in the neighborhoods where it goes. It is very efficient.

**Audience:**

Well, I am certainly in favor of culture and I support the kind of programs that Mr. Pina is describing. But when you say that the Congress spends your money. The Congress is charged with spending the American people's money. And I think the American people, a very large section of the American people, feel betrayed by artists. I would like to ask all of you people in the arts if you feel that you have the right to spend the American people's money on a sculpture of Jesus Christ in a bottle of urine? Does the American taxpayer have an obligation to support what you define as art, regardless of the feelings of the majority?

**Presenter 2:**

We are here to talk communication. Communication has broken down so badly. It's totally disturbing. It is all political . . . You want to get political? I vote. My district votes. We're just going to keep working at it and working at it until we get the right people in Congress.

**Audience:**

I love culture. Unlike some of the other senators, I've even seen some. But I think there is plenty of it. Why can't the people you talk about go to the opera like I do or why can't they go to the ballet, we've got ballet companies all over?

**Presenter 2:**

We produced an opera. For many people who came to see this opera it was the first time. Many musicians in this opera performed for the first time. That's a lot of firsts. So, just give it to them and they will come . . .

**Audience:**

I'd like to say that I love culture, too. In fact, I come from a place where culture is very important. I'm a Senator from the State of Virginia, Central Appalachia, by the way. So, I understand how you feel. I grow'd up poor, too, and I'd like to speak to you sometime, just talk about that. But you know the truth is this is a hard job, Lord knows, I didn't ask for it. It's a hard job. I take it on myself to serve my people. You know what I mean? You know what I mean, you talked about that. I'm trying to do the very same thing. I just want to point out that where I come from, I hate to admit to it, but the God's truth is that unemployment in my district is running somewhere around 20-25%. There ain't enough to go around in this country for these kind of things. The truth is that I will find it real hard to convince my constituency that I'm going to put money into this sort of thing. That I'll give money to fund art when I can't even feed the people back home.

**Presenter 2:**

Let me respond by with a quote: "You can feed me today and I'll be hungry tomorrow. You can teach me a song and I'll sing that song until I die." Culture is food for the human spirit.

## SCENARIOS

1. You are testifying before a Labor subcommittee to articulate why cultural/arts funding should be part of a national rural and inner city economic development plan.
2. You are theater majors/graduate students: the senior theater arts faculty has agreed to hear your proposal for the addition of new courses and the rationale for a shift in the theater curriculum to include the study of grassroots theater.
3. You are making your initial remarks to a public school board that has asked you to advise them on plans to establish a performing arts magnet school. The population of the district is 50% African-American, 40% European-American, 5% Asian-American, and 5% Latino.
4. You have been asked by a national coalition of environmental and social justice activists to articulate a role for arts activists in a two year campaign for change.
5. You are presenting to a private foundation's board of directors the rationale and practical pros and cons of your nonprofit theater's decision two years ago to change from a hierarchical to a collective organizational structure. Your theater's board of directors is comprised of employees and significant operational decisions are made collectively.
6. You are interested in getting a variety of grassroots theater materials published, including new and long out-of-print books. You must convince the nationally recognized publisher of the validity of the subject area by presenting a clear definition of grassroots theater and identifying a market for such work.
7. Congress has designated funding for a national program of Earth Science Education. A group of distinguished scientists have been called upon to design this program. As a member of a national arts coalition, you have been asked to speak to them and present a case for the inclusion of cultural arts programming as a part of any earth science education.
8. A symposium on grassroots theater has asked you to report back a servicable definition of grassroots theater that will be the touchstone to carry the movement forward in the next ten years.
9. Your grassroots arts organization, funded initially by the Department of Labor/CETA, has operated continuously since 1970. A graduate school has asked you to extrapolate the reasons for your success.
10. The neighborhood surrounding your theater changes in a short time from 65% middle income white to a 65% low income community divided between African-Americans, Caribbean and Asian immigrants. The artistic director has to present a five year plan to the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees which responds to this changed community demographic.
11. The NEA offers you, the arts council of a rural southern county with a \$500,000 budget, a \$50,000 - 100,000 grant to design and implement a program for underserved constituencies in your county. What do you propose to the NEA?

# A Matrix Articulating the Principles of Grassroots Theater

**W**hat makes a grassroots theater a grassroots theater? What ideals and principles distinguish it from other kinds of theater activity in the country? What elements and goals do the various grassroots theater efforts in the U.S. have in common?

Discussions at the symposium made clear that many of us feel a need to answer just such questions. Few involved with grassroots theater have had the time over the years to reflect upon what they have in common with others doing similar work; just getting their own work done has been all-consuming. But the need to identify common purposes and qualities has become important, as has the need to articulate in our own terms what makes our work unique. An understanding of the principles and purposes we share can help us overcome isolation, allow us to learn from one another and work more effectively, both on our own and in collaboration. Hence the following matrix.

Why a matrix? In trying to arrive at what characterizes grassroots theater, we wanted to move away from a pat definition. Instead, we wanted to emphasize the relationships among the various features we had identified, which, though meaningful individually, only gain their full meaning when taken as a whole. The principles stated below are not intended to be read hierarchically, nor as some kind of checklist. Rather, they are offered as a set of ideals towards which grassroots theater is striving.

## MATRIX

Grassroots theater is given its voice by the community from which it arises. The makers of grassroots theater are part of the culture from which the work is drawn. The people who are the subjects of the work are part of its development from inception through presentation. Their stories and histories inform the work, their feedback during the creation process shapes it. The audience is not consumer of, but participant in the performance.

Grassroots theater grows out of a commitment to place. It is grounded in the local and specific, which when rendered faithfully and creatively can affect people anywhere.

The traditional and indigenous are integral to grassroots theater and valued for their ability to help us maintain continuity with the past, respond to the present, and prepare for the future. Thus, the relationship to the traditional and indigenous is dynamic, not fixed.

Grassroots theater strives to be inclusive in its producing practices. Presentation of the work is made in partnership with community organizations. Performances are held in meeting places where the entire community feels welcome. Ticket prices are kept affordable.

Grassroots theaters recognize that management structures and business practices are value-laden; they affect the mission, goals, and creative processes of organizations. Through their structures and practices, grassroots theaters endeavor to support broad participation, self-reliance, and collective responsibility.

Grassroots theater is linked to the struggles for cultural, social, economic, and political equity for all people. It is fundamentally a theater of hope and often of joy. It recognizes that to advocate for equity is to meet resistance and to meet with no resistance indicates a failure to enter the fight.

# Issues and Concerns for Further Consideration

**T**hough perpetually stressed and occasionally flattened, the contemporary grassroots theater has for more than thirty years managed to embody the needs and expressions of many of those most excluded in our society. As we enter the 1990s and get ready for the next century, there is little doubt that grassroots theater of some kind will find a way to continue to exist. The need for it will remain and perhaps grow even greater.

But how can we build upon the work that has been done in order to go beyond simply existing in the future? How can we draw upon the themes and ideas of the past and present to forge a stronger, more cohesive grassroots theater? What steps can we take not only to ensure that we maintain the ground we need to stand on, but to expand it?

Knowing the history of grassroots theater is essential to answering these questions. The symposium was particularly successful in placing the theater work we are doing today into a larger context, in helping us see that work as part of a generations-long effort — spanning every part of the country, involving nearly every ethnic and cultural group — to preserve culture, demand recognition, and affect social change. Though much of the history (or more accurately histories) remains to be uncovered, there is already much we can learn from what others have done, the ways they succeeded, how they may have failed, what forces opposed them.

Of equal importance is determining what grassroots theaters from different communities, cultures, and regions have in common. What are our shared needs and interests? How can these be reinforced and extended and bonds of mutual support created from them? At the same time, how can the differences among grassroots groups be respected and not get in the way of working together? A lot more effort needs to go into developing these mutual understandings, a lot more time needs to be spent together. In this respect, the symposium was only an introduction. As it came to an end Sunday evening, many of the participants felt that they were just getting to know each other.

What also seems to be needed is a vision for the future. What are we preparing ourselves for? What greater roles can we imagine for grassroots theater to play, both within our communities and beyond them? As we come to know one another from across the country, we can begin to articulate together a set of ideas, goals, and concerns for guiding our work in this larger sense. What is the purpose of the work we are doing? What are we building by it? What are we aiming at?

Without seeming grandiose or quaintly out-of-date, it is possible to consider grassroots theater as part of an effort to remake U.S. culture as a whole into a grassroots culture. A national grassroots culture of this kind would be decentralized, determined at the local level, while being informed by national and international realities. Are our individual efforts taken together sufficient to bring this about spontaneously or is something more needed? Some would say it is pointless to think in such expansive terms after so many years of existing at the margins. But to put it another way, we have managed to do so much in an environment which is often hostile to our efforts. What would it take to create an environment in which our efforts could flourish instead?

What are the issues, then, that grassroots theater must face if it is to try to shape and not just respond to what lies ahead in the coming decades? What areas must we address if our work is to develop to its fullest?

Among the most fundamental issues seems to be the ongoing need to clarify the ideas and concepts central to grassroots theater. This also could be called coming to grips with



reality. For instance, how can grassroots theater contribute to a deep examination of the idea of community in its various forms? Though we often speak of our work as being in relationship to a community, we seem to use that word rather loosely. What is community in contemporary U.S. society and what is the nature of grassroots theater's relationship to it? How can grassroots theater serve as a nucleus for the formation of community in its most dynamic sense, one whose borders are open, yet which maintains its integrity, which supports the individual while fostering a collective identity, which allows for change but values continuity?

Further, what is the relationship of place to community? Is it possible to have a sense of community without a commitment to place or is that one of community's defining characteristics? Can grassroots theater reintroduce the value of being in a place — of being engaged by the history, geography, biology, culture, and people of a specific area — as an operating principle for the work and community involvement? Can an equation be drawn between our efforts to maintain our society's cultural diversity and the need to maintain the earth's biological diversity? Grassroots have to grow somewhere, after all. Curiously, the notion of place was hardly mentioned at the symposium by those active in grassroots theater today. What does that indicate about the awareness of place and the natural world in their work?

With the same kind of rigor and clarity, we need to inquire into such frequently used concepts as "tradition," or "culture," or "empowerment," among others. What do they mean to grassroots theater work? Related to this is the need to develop a language that suits the kind of theater work we are doing, that embodies and expresses its creative values and ideas directly. How often do we rely upon general theater terms to describe what we do? If artistically it is understood that grassroots theater productions are forwarding a new content onto the stage and as such often require new forms to do so, then why shouldn't the same be true for the way we talk about our work in its entirety? Are we being hobbled by existing terms, ideas, and phrases which only partially allow for what makes grassroots theater different? Can we evolve a vocabulary which accepts and elucidates that difference?

Establishing a methodology for critiquing grassroots theater is another significant issue to be addressed. How do we evaluate each other's work, as well as our own? More than just a shared vocabulary, this requires creating trust that we are heading towards the same goals and an allowance for different styles and subject matters to get us there. With some exceptions, there seems to be little discourse about the work itself, the plays, productions, and events we are creating, and how to take them further, creatively and politically. What is the relationship between artistic needs and social ones? How does one project build upon and lead to the next? Of particular necessity is to create an open process which discourages self-censorship and allows for failure.

This leads to the larger question of assessment. Beyond looking to improve the work itself, how can we evaluate the impact grassroots theater has had on the people for whom and with whom it is made? What measures can we make to gauge its longterm effects on our various communities? For example, if prompting people to recognize their own creativity is a goal, how has that been encouraged through the theater? How has the formation of a local and community identity been stimulated? Or an awareness of a history of struggle? Such assessment is necessary on an on-going basis in order to give direction to the work and to take it beyond mere faith that our efforts have value, especially as communities change. As one symposium participant put it, "Are we meeting the challenge?" Or to turn that around, how are we enabling those for whom and with whom we do the work to better meet the challenges in their lives?

One area that should be looked at as part of assessing our work is the audience. Are we reaching all those we want and need to reach? Is the full breadth of the community (however we define it) participating in the theater? The relationship between grassroots theater and progressive grassroots political efforts — local, national, and international — also merits

evaluation in this regard. How can the potential ties between them be strengthened? How can organizers come to see grassroots theater as another form of political work? All too often it seems that those doing purely political work view grassroots theater more or less as entertainment. Informative, perhaps, but ancillary.

On a national level, it is even more difficult to assess the overall impact of grassroots theater. This is due in large part to a sheer lack of information. How many groups are there working in this way? How many individuals? It is not known. A comprehensive survey of grassroots theater activity across the country seems most needed at this time. (Interestingly, prior to 1950, several national surveys were commissioned periodically by private foundations.) Ideally, a survey of this kind would gather information on individual artists and groups, their histories, the way they work; would catalog and document the work they've created; would encompass the work of every cultural and social group and the widest range of forms, from environmental pageants to story-tellers to dance theater companies to puppeteers to theater in the European tradition to indigenous theatrical expression, and would include presenting organizations as well. Completing such a survey could involve a process which serves to bring those working in grassroots theater into sustained contact with each other.

Though we have touched upon it already in this report, the organizational structures of grassroots theaters should similarly be assessed. Which structures have served to support our work and which haven't? Which have evolved uniquely out of our practice and which have we taken on because of convention? Of particular interest would be to evaluate the effects of the not-for-profit corporate structure on the work — managerially and artistically — of the many grassroots theaters that have adopted it. What factors led to its use? Has it encouraged these theaters to organize themselves in a compartmentalized, hierarchical way, at the expense of more participatory, collective structures?

More to the point, can the not-for-profit structure be seen as the leading edge of the dominant culture, the amber described in this report's first section, by introducing values which are at variance with those being pursued in every other aspect of the work? Has a divide grown between not-for-profit grassroots theaters and those groups that have not incorporated? Have they developed different expectations and needs as a result?

The last issue we'd like to raise in this section is how to involve younger generations. In its work, grassroots theater has long been future-oriented, made to include the youngest members of the community as well as the oldest. But as an on-going pursuit, it remains difficult to get young people to commit to the work, to embrace its mission and purpose, to find joy in its practice; far too few may even know that working in grassroots theater is a possibility. The same can be said for involving the many and varied recent immigrant populations that have swelled in many of our communities.

How can we begin to make a change in this? Is it possible to compete successfully against the inducements of other media and other kinds of work? As the oldest active grassroots theater people enter their fifties and sixties, nearly two generations of work — of living history — remains to be documented and learned from. But this is not just a matter of preserving the skills, stories, and traditions that already exist. Just as important is how the next generations, both native born and immigrant, can bring the knowledge, skills, and passions they have to enrich, enliven, and transform the grassroots theater, to make it their own without having to start again.

Equally important is preparing these coming generations — once they do become involved — for assuming leadership. What kinds of formal and informal mentoring processes can be put into place to ensure the passage of experience and knowledge? How can these be seen as extensions of the oral tradition which informs so much of our creative work?

Ultimately, many of the questions raised in this section can be summed up by the idea of self-reliance. How does grassroots theater become self-reliant in the fullest sense? How

can we build up and rely upon the resources within our communities to support the work we are doing? How can the people we are seeking to serve through this work become its primary supporters? This is not the case for much of grassroots theater today, unfortunately. Yet, what does self-reliance mean for grassroots theater given current local, national, and global social and economic realities? How can we begin to arrive at an understanding and practice of it that leads to genuine independence, without denying our inter-connectedness.

In many respects, the issues and concerns listed here are the same that the contemporary grassroots theater has faced since it began. Despite current difficulties, there are thirty and more years of working, experimenting and surviving for today's grassroots theater practitioners to draw upon. And there have been many successes in that time.

The symposium was a step in setting the ground for what needs to be done. But like all brief gatherings of its kind, it could only touch upon ideas, hint at possibilities, suggest connections. The rest, as always, is up to us and the communities we are part of.

The work continues.

# Appendix

## I

### Symposium Schedule

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*All events will take place at the Center for Theatre Arts, 430 College Ave.*

#### October 9

3:00-6:00	Registration	Reading Room
4:00-6:00	Reception	Lobby
6:00-8:00	Dinner (on your own)	
8:00-9:30	<u>Junebug/Jack</u>	Black Box Theatre
9:30-11:00	Small group discussions	classrooms and studios

#### October 10

9:30-10:00	Continental breakfast	Black Box Theatre
10:00-10:30	Welcome	Black Box Theatre
	• Peter Jemison	
10:45-12:45	Panel discussions	Black Box Theatre
	• William Branch	
	• Robert Gard	
	(15 minute break)	
	• Nicolás Kanellos	
	• Lorraine Brown	
	moderator: Janet Salmons-Rue	
12:45-2:00	Lunch (on your own)	
2:00-3:00	Panel Presentations	Black Box Theatre
3:00-3:35	Small group discussions	classrooms and studios
3:45-4:00	Break	

## October 10 (continued)

4:00-5:30	Plenary	Black Box Theatre
5:30-8:00	Dinner (on your own)	
8:00-11:00	Readings and discussions	Black Box Theatre

### Me Voy pa' Mexico and Una Mula de Tantas

by Netty y Jesus Rodríguez

Unpublished vaudeville sketches

selected by Nicolás Kanellos

### Wedding Clothes by Grace Kiner

directed by Arthur Lithgow

### A Medal for Willie by William Branch

directed by William Branch

## October 11

9:30-10:00	Continental breakfast	Black Box Theatre
10:00-10:45	Plenary	Black Box Theatre
11:00-12:30	Small group discussions	classrooms and studios
12:30-2:00	Lunch (on your own)	
2:00-4:30	Plenary and closing	Black Box Theatre
8:00	Party	Black Box Theatre

## II

### Attendees

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Caron Atlas  
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### III

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