

# SOMETHING TO BEHOLD

**CAST** (in order of appearance)

**PROFESSOR**

**COMMUNITY**

**ARTIST**

**ORGANIZER**

**PRODUCER**

## **NOTES**

The cast tells its story in close proximity to the audience (there's no "fourth wall"). Actors can wear something that expresses their part – for example, a bow tie for the professor.

The play text, crafted by Jamie Haft with dramaturgical support from Dudley Cocke, is based on an 18,000-word oral history of the events the play depicts. A range of materials about the project are available at

<http://roadside.org/baltimore>, including the oral history, collected by Jon Catherwood-Ginn, Dudley Cocke, Denise G. Johnson, Bob Leonard, Ashley Milburn, and Randy Rowel; a detailed timeline of the events; photos of the events; videos from past readings; and more.

Teachers, community organizers, artists, economists, and many others have found the script a telling way to engage with issues of community development. The play does not require a full production to be effective; a community or a classroom reading or a rehearsed stage reading can lead to a vibrant conversation about the role (and pitfalls) of art and culture in community development.

Roadside typically follows its readings with [story circles](#), the listening to and telling of stories by audience members. Such circles are then followed by participants' reflections and group discussion of opportunities for action. The event, which began with the play, concludes with agreement of who will do what as next steps. Here's a typical format:

- Play reading/performance – 45 minutes
- Audience stories prompted by the play – 45 minutes
- Reflection and agreement on actions and responsibilities – 30 minutes

Please let us know how you used the script, as doing so will help others imagine its possibilities. Email [jamie@roadside.org](mailto:jamie@roadside.org).

## SCENE ONE

### **PROFESSOR**

Good afternoon. I'm playing the role of Professor. (*assumes a professorial demeanor – clears throat*)

Over 50 years ago, the United States designated Baltimore's Harlem Park as one of its first Urban Renewal projects. The City created 22 inner block parks to relieve crowding in the neighborhoods. Then the City implemented a federal Highway Program. The **stated rationale** for the Highway Program: *to connect America.*

### **COMMUNITY**

(*emphatically to audience*) The **unstated rationale** for the parks and highway: To break up minority communities building bases of power and stability. 19,000 people got jerked from their homes, churches, and businesses to make way for the expressway. Then after their displacement, the City announced the highway wouldn't be completed after all.

### **PROFESSOR**

The 52 acres of unfinished highway cut through Harlem Park, midtown Edmondson, Rosemont, and Uptown—

### **COMMUNITY**

(*correcting the professor*) Upton.

### **PROFESSOR**

Yes, ah, Upton. Neighborhoods famous for the Royal Theatre, Billie Holiday, Cab Calloway, and many more. And the City's 22 inner block parks near the abandoned highway fostered illicit activities.

### **COMMUNITY**

Yeah, what was once a **culture hub** became a **drug hub**.

### **PROFESSOR**

At Morgan State University, I study the effects of natural disasters. We know that when a neighborhood is destroyed, its inhabitants suffer *root shock*: a traumatic stress syndrome. The ripple effects of that root shock can impact a population for decades.

## **COMMUNITY**

Community named the 1.4-mile dead-end expressway –  
**The Highway to Nowhere.**

## **SCENE TWO**

### **ARTIST**

The Highway to Nowhere displaced 19,000 folks so I found 14 easily. They were in their 90s. I brought them together to tell their stories.

### **ORGANIZER**

I had just started working as a community organizer so I went one night to see what was going on. A lot of folks showed up, and they were teary-eyed talking about West Baltimore's past. I started thinking about my own memories of West Baltimore and realized, "Damn, this is part of my story too."

### **ARTIST**

Being an artist often carries the perceived trappings of privilege and elitism – not to mention a big ego. So I hesitated to show off my skills. Then one day a community member said –

### **COMMUNITY**

*(to Artist)* "Ashley, man, we need you to share what you got."

### **ORGANIZER**

At the community gatherings, people were throwing out a bunch of great ideas. But as a community organizer, my work is about having an outcome.  
*(Hands on hips)* "Guys, which of these can we move on?"

### **ARTIST**

So we turned the conference room into a gallery. Inspired by community stories, I produced some new pieces –

## **COMMUNITY**

And I bought one! Owning a piece of original art was something I never thought I could afford.

## **ARTIST**

We started meeting regularly, and we even made up a pledge of allegiance to recite at meetings. Hand to heart.

## **ARTIST, ORGANIZER, AND COMMUNITY**

We value culture for its indigenous forms of creative expression. Culture builds and strengthens the foundation of our traditions. This expression encompasses the past and defines our future – Benefitting our youth, who are the living assets of our community.

## **ORGANIZER**

I had organized before around crime, sanitation, infant mortality – you name it. Deficit ideology. To organize around something that the community could *create* – now that was fresh and new!

## **ARTIST**

I began wondering, can we transform the dead-end Highway into a beautiful piece of art?!

## **ORGANIZER**

*(to Artist)* “You gotta understand there’s a history here of outsiders coming in, asking us to spill our guts, and then never delivering on their promise.”

## **ARTIST**

*(to Audience)* Once Denise started coming to our meetings, I hounded her for weeks. Finally, she broke down in the elevator.

## **ORGANIZER**

*(to Artist)* “You’re talking about a big idea. Don’t you drop this project!”

**ARTIST**

That was a threat.

We got a grant to work on large outdoor sculptures with Kenneth Clemons, a young up-and-coming Baltimore artist.

**COMMUNITY**

A group of young mothers suggested the theme of family and posed as models.

**ARTIST**

At one point there was a young man but he stopped coming. When the sculpture was revealed, the young ladies ripped us a new one!

**COMMUNITY**

*(as young mother)* “Put the man back in the sculpture. Even though he comes and goes, we need a vision of a father in this family.”

**ARTIST**

Kenneth learned about being a community artist. He got a fire under him. He started hosting his own meetings – didn’t even ask permission.

**ORGANIZER**

He became a leader.

But we were asking people to imagine a healthier community and work for their vision. It was a lot to ask of folks who had other commitments and responsibilities, including families. Point: you can’t have unreasonable expectations of community members.

**COMMUNITY**

No, you cannot have unreasonable expectations of community members.

**ARTIST**

There’s a guy, a barber, who’s key in West Baltimore. So I decide I’ll get a haircut. It takes a while because the barbershop’s full. Finally it’s my turn. This guy’s cutting my hair with a straight razor, and I start telling him about the project. As I elaborate, I feel the razor getting closer to my ear...

**COMMUNITY**

*(as barber)* “Don’t ever come back here. I don’t want to see you again, and I don’t want you to do anything that you’re talking about doing.”

**ARTIST**

*(to barber)* “Well, brother, I’ll tattoo my name on all my body parts.”  
Next thing I know, I get a call from the foundation financing my work in West Baltimore. Someone had called them suggesting they terminate my fellowship.

**ORGANIZER**

*(to Artist)* “That phone call – don’t you understand that what we’re doing is working?”

**ARTIST**

You’re right! The story is starting to get out.

**COMMUNITY**

On the Highway 50 years ago, the last house standing belonged to a Black pharmacist. He wouldn’t vacate. The construction people surrounded the house, and the boss man knocked on the door, told the pharmacist...  
*(impersonating boss man)* “You own the house, but we own the land. Either you move the house, or we tear it down.”

**ORGANIZER**

Sheila Gaskins dramatized that story in the CultureWorks play, “The Last House Standing.”

## **SCENE THREE**

### **ARTIST**

Our organization, CultureWorks, evolved through what we experienced. I call CultureWorks “the thing between a rock and a hard place.” Some people in power refuse to correct the wrongs done to a community: they are **the Rock**. Then there are people who want change, but they only know how to pound the Rock as the enemy. They become **the Hard Place**. How can we create a **fluid third space, a cultural space** that makes something imaginative happen?

### **PROFESSOR**

The more I got into my research about how communities respond to natural disasters, the more I was like, “Dang, what about the **cultural disasters** in our communities?”

### **ARTIST**

We experienced the power of remembering how the Highway was a **cultural disaster** that the community is still recovering from 50 years later. “**Remembrance**” was a realization that (*pointing to audience members*) *your* memory and *your* memory and *your* memory are a quilt -- and we are in this together.

### **PROFESSOR**

Remembrance creates a shared identity and sense of self-worth, which is necessary for “**Healing.**”

### **COMMUNITY**

The “**Celebration**” comes out of (*to audience member*), “Oh! I’m connected to you?! Let’s enjoy what we’ve done together!”

### **PROFESSOR**

You now have “**Resilience,**” the ability to bounce back from adversity.

## **ORGANIZER**

And now you've got something dangerous: **Empowerment**. You have a community owning its stories, practicing its rituals and beliefs, and engaging in dialogue about its future.

## **ARTIST**

When place matters –

## **ORGANIZER**

People matter.

## **PROFESSOR**

And when people matter –

## **COMMUNITY**

Community matters.

CultureWorks was building "A Highway

**ARTIST, ORGANIZER, COMMUNITY, PRODUCER, PROFESSOR** *(all together)*  
– to **Somewhere!**"

## **SCENE FOUR**

### **ARTIST**

We discovered our biggest challenge was that we didn't have the capacity to engage everybody who wanted to get involved. We needed help.

### **PRODUCER**

Your invitation was a long hoped-for opportunity for Alternate ROOTS. We had all this methodology and for years had wanted to get involved in a local, large-scale action.



## **ARTIST**

CultureWorks and ROOTS worked together for three years. We co-hosted organizing events, bringing in ROOTS' national perspective, and we strategized about new partnerships and projects and ways to grow CultureWorks. Then one day, ROOTS said –

## **PRODUCER**

“Hey, what about a festival in West Baltimore? The festival wouldn't be an end in itself, but a means for community to build power.”

For decades ROOTS had produced festivals where the artists came into a town, but the town had no real stake in the festival. 2011 was going to be ROOTS' 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and we were determined to do better.

## **ORGANIZER**

Disrupting the status quo requires constant awareness of its power and reinforcement of alternative ways to move ahead.

## **ARTIST**

To prepare for the Festival, ROOTS gave grants to its members to make art in West Baltimore.

## **ORGANIZER**

The visiting artists came in with their visions for the art, but their art-making happened outside of the bounds of CultureWorks. My feeling was the visiting artists didn't understand cultural organizing.

## **PRODUCER**

Yeah, and the visiting artists felt like CultureWorks didn't have a wide enough base in community. In the end, we didn't figure out how to involve the visiting artists' projects in the actual Festival.

## **ORGANIZER**

The Festival's promise of money heightened the politics of different community organizations and their agendas. We said no to a lot of groups to honor community. But we didn't fully clue in ROOTS, so y'all were in the dark about the power plays going on.

## **PRODUCER**

Talk about being between a Rock and a Hard Place. I went across town to meet with a college president and local funders, and all they wanted to talk about was moving the festival to **East** Baltimore. Then I come back to West Baltimore, and community members gather up and accuse me, ROOTS, of raising money off their circumstances – essentially pimping poverty. I say, “You may not want to hear this, but your local funders tell me the Festival sounds like a great idea, but **nobody, and I mean nobody**, is interested in investing in the Westside. ROOTS is putting its own money into this.”

## **ARTIST, PRODUCER, COMMUNITY, & PROFESSOR** *(together)*

Twelve months to the festival! *(The actors briskly walk around each other and end up back in the same spots on the stage.)*

## **ORGANIZER** *(watching hurried activity)*

The goal, for me, is for community to own it, execute it, and continue to get empowered by it.

## **COMMUNITY**

*(to Organizer)* Trouble is you kept telling us about the festival and how much help was needed, but other than advertising and talkin’ about it to our friends, we didn’t have a role to play.

## **PROFESSOR**

When the going gets tough, the dominant paradigm can become the default position, even for those of us who want something better.

## **ARTIST, PRODUCER, COMMUNITY, & PROFESSOR** *(together)*

Nine months to the festival! *(The actors walk even faster around each other and now end up in different spots on the stage.)*

## **ORGANIZER** *(again watching and commenting)*

My personality is to take things slow, and I do that to groom people for leadership. But –

## **ARTIST, PRODUCER, COMMUNITY, PROFESSOR, & ORGANIZER** *(sucked in)*

Four months to the festival! *(The actors spin in place.)*

## **ARTIST**

Finally, we had to call the question: Do we go with our limited resources to do the festival with ROOTS? Or do we pull out of the festival to continue building CultureWorks and our local program? It was an impossible choice, but, we decided to abandon CultureWorks to move toward ROOTS Fest with a singularity of purpose.

## **SCENE FIVE**

### **PRODUCER**

The opposition from those in power against the festival happening on the Highway was humongous!

### **COMMUNITY**

*(as City Hall)* “You can have a festival, and we’ll help you, *if* you do it on the other side of Martin Luther King Boulevard.”

### **ARTIST & ORGANIZER**

No way.

### **PRODUCER**

That would defeat our purpose.

### **COMMUNITY**

*(as City Hall)* “Okay, if you’re going to do a festival on the Highway – in a community that, incidentally, we have designated **unfixable** – we’re going to tax you with a... *(inventing the term)* a **CULTURE TAX.**”

### **ARTIST, ORGANIZER, & PRODUCER**

A what?

### **COMMUNITY**

*(as City Hall)* “Yeah, a culture tax. According to our information, the festival is where *you people* are going to blow it out. But hey, for 50,000 dollars, you can prove us wrong.”

**PRODUCER**

As part of Festival week, ROOTS hosted a three-day national Learning Exchange. The goal was to elevate the power of art and culture to build resilient communities. 300 people from across the country signed up for the conference.

**ORGANIZER**

But then at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, we had to change the conference venue to a neighborhood that's considered the suburbs of West Baltimore.

**PRODUCER**

The conference should have been held on the highway, but that would have meant three more days of culture tax. The local and national got disconnected.

**ARTIST**

As we were walking around watching the crews erect the festival tents on the 52 acres of green space adjacent to the highway, this beautiful black guy, huge, bald, crosses our path.

**COMMUNITY**

*(as the guy)* "Who did this? Who did this?"

**ARTIST & ORGANIZER**

"We did."

**COMMUNITY**

"This for white people?"

**ORGANIZER**

"No, it's for you."

**ARTIST**

"It's for us."

**COMMUNITY**

“Really?”

**ORGANIZER**

That turned a page 50 years.

**PRODUCER**

After a welcome and blessing from Baltimore’s Native American and African communities, ROOTS Fest had a star-studded line-up of musicians, spoken-word artists, dancers, and drummers. Chuck Brown, “Godfather of Go-Go,” was the headliner. And there were stands for social change organizations, a community chorus pulled together with the help of ROOTS member Elise Witt, a dialogue with social justice theater pioneers John O’Neal and Luis Valdez, and even appearances with the cast of “The Wire.”

**COMMUNITY**

It was thrilling: the enormous turnout, 11,000 people, and the fact that most were from West Baltimore.

**ORGANIZER**

It was the first time different local social change organizations were together in one spot in 25 years.

**PRODUCER**

I walked with the extra police that ROOTS had paid 50,000 dollars for. I was looking, really, to see “How far away are the SWATs?”

**ARTIST**

But the police said, “I’ve been to almost every festival in Baltimore, but this one is different. I had no idea.”

**COMMUNITY**

Police were talking to people, embracing them, and laughing.

**PROFESSOR**

If you had conducted a stress test for those two days, people would have said, “Today, my blood pressure is down.”

**ORGANIZER**

For two precious days –

**ARTIST**

Alongside the Highway to Nowhere –

**ORGANIZER**

The festival created an **isle of peace**.

(Show [photos](#) from ROOTS Fest 2011.)

**SCENE SIX**

**PROFESSOR**

That was 2011. You have to understand that in 1860, 90 percent of Blacks in Baltimore were free men and women. At that time Baltimore was the largest community of *free* African Americans in the *entire* nation.

**COMMUNITY**

When the festival tents folded, the neighborhoods around the Highway went fourteen days with only two criminal incidents. And both were minor car break-ins.

**PRODUCER**

It took three years for ROOTS to critically reflect on the Festival. That's not a ROOTS problem. It's a problem of our collective ability to sustain a movement.

**ORGANIZER**

If you're hungry and your mind is preoccupied with eating, it's hard to be creative and contribute to the community. We must organize West Baltimore around an economic platform that is driven by cultural development. Creative expression is one of Baltimore's biggest assets.

**COMMUNITY**

The Arch Social Club has a vision for West Baltimore artists to revitalize Pennsylvania Avenue – and many residents have their dreams too.

**ORGANIZER**

The time to build CultureWorks is now. To make it a West Baltimore, people-powered institution capable of demanding a seat at the tables of power where decisions about our community are being made.

**PROFESSOR**

One thing we know in disaster research: when something drastic happens, groups that traditionally don't work together, work together. People decide, "I can't be afraid anymore."

**ARTIST,**

Mike Brown,

**ORGANIZER**

Eric Garner,

**COMMUNITY**

Freddie Gray,

**PRODUCER**

Walter Scott,

**ARTIST**

and Sandra Bland call out to us not to be afraid.

**COMMUNITY**

What you're seeing now in Baltimore is not a riot – it's an Uprising.

**ORGANIZER**

In which West Baltimore can become "Something to Behold."

**COMMUNITY**

Yes, indeed.

**ARTIST**

That's right.

**ARTIST, ORGANIZER, COMMUNITY, PRODUCER, PROFESSOR** *(all together)*  
**"Something to Behold."**

**THE END**