INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

STAGING LOCAL AND ORAL HISTORY IN AMERICA: MARYAT LEE'S ECOTHEATER, BLOOMSBURG THEATRE ENSEMBLE, AND TECTONIC THEATER PROJECT

by

TERRY STOLLER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2003

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

May 19, 2003
Date

Chair of Examining Committee
Marvin Carlson
Distinguished Professor

May 19, 2003
Date

Executive Officer
Pamela Sheingorn

Jane Bowers

Jonathan Kalb

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

Staging Local and Oral History in America: Maryat Lee's EcoTheater, Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, and Tectonic Theater Project

by

Terry Stoller

Adviser: Professor Marvin Carlson

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the dramatic use of written and oral testimony proved to be a rich resource for the American stage in an exploration of how people respond to public and private events and how they view their lives.

In this dissertation I look at theatre companies that have staged community stories and history through the voices of the townspeople. The three companies I focus on each represent a distinctive type of organization. Maryat Lee's EcoTheater, based in West Virginia, was a seminal grassroots company. It viewed urban commercial theatre as one that catered to a small percentage of the population and had little relevance to the lives of the people in rural America. Using indigenous players, it staged its own stories about local history as well as contemporary life and performed those stories mostly for local audiences. The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble is a small-town professional ensemble in Pennsylvania. It also set out to create a play relevant to its community. It staged the words of the rural Pennsylvanians as they had written them to their local newspapers, attempting to

chronicle the history of Bloomsburg over a period of two hundred years. While the Tectonic Theater Project is a professional company based in New York City, it too sought to stage the words of the people of a small American town. Responding to a specific event, the group members fashioned themselves as investigative journalists and traveled to Laramie, Wyoming, to interview the townspeople about the aftermath of a homosexual hate crime. Crafting a play from their interviews and with an eye on dissemination of their work, they performed the finished piece in Denver and New York City before returning to Laramie to present it for the townspeople there.

The variety of approaches taken by the companies to staging local and oral history raises a number of questions that this dissertation explores. Who collects the material? Who shares their stories? And what are the tensions and changes that occur when that material is transformed into theatre?

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Marvin Carlson for so generously giving his time and invaluable guidance. His love of theatre and vast knowledge of the field have inspired me throughout my years at the Graduate Center. Thanks to Dr. Jane Bowers for her constant encouragement and careful reading of my work. Her insightful editing was a tremendous help. Thanks to Dr. Jonathan Kalb for his enthusiasm about my project, his fine editorial skills and his enormously helpful contributions. In particular I am grateful to him for introducing me to Maryat Lee's EcoTheater and for sharing with me significant materials about the theatre company, including his own paper about Maryat Lee.

Thanks to the wonderful people of Laramie, Wyoming, who so kindly spoke with me and showed me Western hospitality, especially the Sadrul family and Beth Loffreda. And I am grateful to Tectonic Theater Project members Stephen Belber, Greg Pierotti, Andy Paris, Barbara Pitts, Sarah Lambert, and Stephen Wangh for granting me interviews. Dr. William French welcomed me to West Virginia and not only shared his memories of Maryat Lee but also facilitated my research at West Virginia University. Thanks to Michael Ridderbusch and his staff at the university's Regional History Collection for their efforts on my behalf. Thanks to EcoTheater's company members for speaking with me and to Martha Asbury for the loan of EcoTheater tapes. The members of the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble graciously allowed me to look through their

archives and granted me interviews. I'm grateful too for Gerard Stropnicky's kindness and generosity to me while I was in Bloomsburg.

My schoolmate Roger Babb has been a true friend, reading my chapters as they developed, giving me valuable suggestions and the benefit of his fine intellect. Thanks to Shirley Zimmerman, a mentor and colleague, for her encouragement and expert editorial advice. And thanks to Elaine Yudkovitz for her insightful counsel.

I appreciate the love and support of my family: my parents, Morris and Florence Stoller; my late sister, Judith Stoller; and my sister and dear friend, Susan Stoller.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Since the late nineteenth century, realism in modern drama has meant using ordinary situations and everyday language as a way to reproduce and represent "real life." That concept has been extended on the American stage periodically throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first in works based on documentary materials, journalistic techniques, personal testimony. The words and stories of actual people have been placed front and center, shedding light on the criminal-justice system, community tensions, hate crimes, women's identity. Productions tend to point to the authority of those words, sometimes for political purposes and sometimes for commercial ones. At a performance in 2002 of *The Exonerated,* a play based on interviews with prisoners who had been on death row, an announcement was made just before the play began reminding audience members that the words they were about to hear were "from the mouths of real people." Advertisements for *The Laramie Project,* which dealt with the aftermath of a homosexual hate crime and which premiered in 2000, announced that the play was based on interviews with the people of Laramie, Wyoming.

The practice of staging actualities in the twentieth century dates from the pioneering work of Erwin Piscator in the twenties in Germany, specifically his play about the history of the German Communist Party, *In Spite of*

Everything—drawn from speeches, newspaper clippings, and pamphlets and presented in a montage of live action, film clips, photographs, and political cartoons. Attilio Favorini calls *In Spite of Everything* the "Ur-text of documentary theatre."[1] In the sixties Piscator honed his work in documentary theatre, directing such politically charged postwar German plays as Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer,* Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* and Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy.*

Documentary theatre found a voice on the American stage in the 1930s through the Living Newspapers developed by the Federal Theatre Project. Some three decades later, the highly politicized times of the civil rights struggle and the protest against the Vietnam War inspired such works as Martin Duberman's *In White America* (1963) and Daniel Berrigan's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1971). Toward the end of the century, the dramatic use of written and oral testimony proved to be a rich resource for the American stage in an exploration of how people respond to public and private events and how they view their lives. In the 1990s, Anna Deavere Smith, investigating controversial incidents that had led to urban riots, staged the words of the people from Crown Heights in *Fires in the Mirror* and from Los Angeles in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992,* to great acclaim. Marc Wolf interviewed and portrayed enlisted men and women, examining the hot-button issue of gays in the military for his solo

---

[1] Attilio Favorini, introduction to *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater,* ed. Attilio Favorini (New Jersey: Echo Press, 1995), xviii.

piece, *Another American: Asking and Telling*. The work of Studs Terkel, in books like *Hard Times* (about life in America during the Great Depression) and *Working* (an oral-history collection that records how Americans feel about their jobs), has been adapted for the stage: the former was turned into *The American Clock* by Arthur Miller; the latter into a musical, which, according to *American Theatre* magazine, is enjoying a revival in 2002-2003 in regional theatres.[2] Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* is based on interviews and stories women shared with her, though the finished piece includes composite interviews, as well as fictional pieces. Emily Mann's theatre of testimony includes an oral history of a Holocaust survivor (*Annulla, An Autobiography*), the stories of a Vietnam War veteran, his wife, and mistress (*Still Life*), as well as documentary pieces that combine interview, trial transcripts and other public records. In 2001 Karen Malpede and George Bartenieff staged selections from the diaries of Victor Klemperer (*I Will Bear Witness*), Klemperer's account of life inside a Dresden ghetto in Nazi Germany, which was first published in Germany in 1995. This is a sampling only, not an exhaustive list.

This dissertation will be a limited discussion of theatre based on actuality. I will not be discussing autobiographical or biographical performance pieces but will limit myself to theatre companies that have staged community stories and history through the voices of the townspeople.

---

[2] Berson, Misha, "Take This Job and Show It," *American Theatre*, December 2002, 32.

The three companies I am focusing on are EcoTheater, the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, and the Tectonic Theater Project. Each represents a distinctive type of organization: EcoTheater is a grassroots indigenous group; the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble is a small-town, regional professional ensemble; and the Tectonic Theater Project is a professional theatre troupe from a major urban center. Each brought a different perspective to the plays they created. EcoTheater, based in West Virginia, viewed urban commercial theatre as one that catered to a small percentage of the population and had little relevance to the lives of the people in rural America. Using indigenous players, it staged its own stories about local history as well as contemporary life and performed those stories mostly for local audiences. The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble in Pennsylvania also set out to create a play relevant to its community. It staged the words of the rural Pennsylvanians as they had written them to their local newspapers, and it attempted to chronicle the history of Bloomsburg over a period of two hundred years. Selections from the letters were performed at their home theatre. While the Tectonic Theater Project is based in New York City, it too sought to stage the words of the people of a small American town: Laramie, Wyoming. Responding to a specific event, the group members fashioned themselves as investigative journalists. Crafting a play from their interviews and with an eye on dissemination of their work, they performed the finished piece in Denver and New York City before returning to Laramie to present it for the townspeople

there.

The variety of approaches taken by the companies to staging local and oral history raises a number of questions that this dissertation will explore. Who collects the material? Who shares their stories? What are the tensions and changes that occur when that material is transformed into theatre? And finally, for whose benefit is the material staged and performed?

Each of these companies sought to put American voices on stage. But American voices are multiple and various and thus not easy to categorize. In an introduction to the book *Performing America,* editor Jeffrey Mason writes about defining what "American" means in light of the influx of newcomers to the nation and the resultant diversity in its population. He suggests that "the stage ... becomes a site of ... struggle, a platform where players and audience may enact conceptions of identity and community, where 'America' becomes both the subject and the consequence of artistic, cultural, and social negotiation."[3] I will discuss whether these three theatre companies, in staging the townspeople's voices, embraced the diversity of the citizens, whether they celebrated the town, or whether they attempted to look at the dark side of the melting pot, uncovering and staging social problems.

The goals of theatre companies that stage oral history

---

[3] Jeffrey Mason, "American Stages (Curtain Raiser)," *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 4.

—especially the grassroots organizations—are in line with those of modern historians who look to record history from the "bottom up." While the collection of oral history has been used to acquire firsthand information about the lives of prominent people (as in the first Columbia University oral-history program pioneered by Allan Nevins in the late forties), oral histories have also been collected that open the door to the lives of ordinary people and bring to the fore previously unheard and overlooked stories and viewpoints. Says social historian Raphael Samuel: "The main thrust of people's history in recent years has been towards the recovery of subjective experience. One might note, in oral history, the overwhelming interest in reconstituting the small details of everyday life; in local history, the shift from 'places' to faces,' from topographical peculiarities to the quality of life."[4] Along with that shift, write the editors of *The Oral History Reader*, comes "empowerment of individuals or social groups through the process of remembering and interpreting the past."[5] Indeed, grassroots-theatre practitioners who stage oral history have sought to empower the members of their community, affirming the importance of the stories of their everyday lives and raising consciousness by reflecting a community back to itself.

---

[4] Raphael Samuel, preface to *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), xiii.

[5] Introduction to *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), ix.

Community-based theatre workers have been inspired by educator/theorist Paulo Freire and theatre director/theorist Augusto Boal to help people evolve from spectators to fully engaged participants in the retelling and staging of their life stories. Grassroots professionals often share the stage with nonprofessional community members, and some insist on the presence onstage of nonprofessionals only, subscribing to a theatre "of, by and for the people."[6]

One merit of oral history—and the same is true of these practices of staging numerous voices—is that it leads to a more rounded version of complex reality than many single-author history books and works of literature do. Social historian Paul Thompson writes that in oral history those who made the history are given a central place through their own words, allowing "the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated."[7] When material is selected by either a historian or a theatre practitioner, the interference can narrow that multiplicity. In my discussion of individual productions, I will look at whether they give voice to the variety of viewpoints in the towns they aim to represent.

When theatre practitioners transfer documentary materials and a community's oral histories to the stage, the theatre company brings its ideas about what works in a theatrical production—in terms of dramatic structure, acting values, staging techniques—which can determine which material

---

6 This is a coinage used by Maryat Lee's EcoTheater and Richard Owen Geer's Community Performance, Inc.

7 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 5.

makes the final cut. The theatre company's editing and shaping of the material can therefore interfere with the community's voice. Thus the questions arise: Whose voices are submerged and whose stories are heard in the final product? Do the choices change the character of the place that is being represented? These are questions I will explore, particularly in regard to the professional productions by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble and the Tectonic Theater Project, in which product is privileged over process for artistic and commercial reasons.

Grassroots practitioners in particular see staging oral history as way to promote social awareness and possible change. Yet Bruce McConachie, writing about the Williamsburg Grassroots Theatre Project, chooses to measure grassroots theatre work according to Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling," which McConachie explains as an emotional bonding "generated by values and practices shared by a specific group, class or culture."[8] The play *Walk Together Children*, developed by students out of community stories about Williamsburg's racial history and directed by McConachie, was performed at the College of William and Mary (Williamsburg, Virginia). It elicited emotional responses from the audience, writes McConachie, which included "a significant number of African American citizens who do not usually attend college

---

[8] Bruce McConachie, "Approaching the 'Structure of Feeling' in Grassroots Theater," in *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance*, ed. Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 35.

productions."[9] McConachie posits that such emotional responses and bonding are to be valued over ideological readings. He also suggests, however, that the experience of grassroots theatre helps audiences imagine "the possibility of an ethical community," and perhaps also spurs them to become more engaged in local politics, although that doesn't necessarily mean they will commit themselves to progressive politics.[10]

When theatre practitioners conduct interviews for the collection of oral history, they become fieldworkers, interacting with their subjects. Historian Thompson views this as the "creative and cooperative nature of the oral history method," in which fieldworker and subject share experience on a human level.[11] As fieldworkers, oral historians and theatre workers who gather oral history move into the arena of ethnography. This is a field in which the emphasis is shifting, says Marvin Carlson in *Performance,* "from the model of the neutral objective reporter of cultural customs to that of a native of one culture observing natives from another, creating a complex interplay of influence and adjustment."[12] For ethnographer Dwight Conquergood, the model

---

[9] McConachie, 32.

[10] Ibid., 42-43.

[11] Thompson, 8.

[12] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 31.

of participant/observer means there's "a shift from monologue to dialogue, from information to communication."[13] In its *Laramie Project*, the Tectonic Theater Project decided to underline that communication, including in its play the participant/observers and their interactions with the subjects.

Oral-history theatre makers, especially those like the Tectonic Theater Project members, who impersonate the interviewees, are in a special position. The relationships that evolve during the investigative process affect not just the selection of the material but also the replaying of it. James Clifford acknowledges that an ethnographer's personal experiences, especially of "participation and empathy, are recognized as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and 'objective' distance."[14] Can the writer and performer of oral-history work maintain that objective distance? I will consider the effect of the bonds forged between theatre makers and community members on production development as well as on performance of the gathered material. I will examine the impact of the production on the "sources," whose personas are displayed on stage.

---

[13] Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," *Communication Monographs* 58 (June 1991): 182.

[14] James Clifford, introduction to *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986), 13.

Objectivity in terms of assembling the collected materials is also affected by the values of the theatre company, which may differ from those of the subjects. In *All That Is Native & Fine,* his study of Appalachian culture, David Whisnant raises concerns about colonialist cultural intervention, in which institutions and individuals define and shape "perspectives, values, tastes, and agendas for cultural change."[15] When theatre workers intervene in another culture, organizing a community for an oral-history production, and shape those stories into a theatre piece, their own values necessarily come into play. One issue to consider then is whether the oral-history accounts are being used to further the theatre maker's agenda.

One might view using people's oral histories to construct a play as an appropriation of those stories. Acknowledging that community oral-history plays raise ethical issues, Richard Geer, a community-performance facilitator, has formulated this maxim for his projects: "Performances arise from an exchange of expertise [of theatre professionals] for expertise [of insider 'experts']."[16] Director Eugenio Barba calls such exchanges cultural barter, in which theatre professionals and "villagers" attempt to

---

[15] David E. Whisnant, introduction to *All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 15.

[16] Richard Owen Geer, "Out of Control in Colquitt: Swamp Gravy Makes Stone Soup," *TDR* 40 (Summer 1996), 111.

enrich one another with their knowledge.[17] However, when the product of the oral-history theatre venture is based on people's stories, is it ethical for a theatre company to produce and perform those stories for its own profit, whether that means professional acclaim or financial reward? In addition, if a theatre group develops the stories into a theatre piece after experimenting with them in improvisational workshops, does the resulting play then belong to the whole company? These are questions I will address in my examination of individual productions.

When nonprofessional locals perform their own histories for other people in their community, the performance has a heightened sense of authenticity, says Richard Schechner. He calls this "the believed-in core" of community-based theatre. Believed-in theatre, he writes, is one in which conviction and sincerity, " 'direct address' or 'testimony' ... are more important than professional acting skills." Further, because the theatre makers believe in the possibility of truth in a town's history, they "perform local materials" and "engage history and memory as these shape social and personal relations."[18] Playwright and director Maryat Lee, whose EcoTheater is the subject of chapter 2, was a pioneer in a kind of community-based theatre that served as a model for the believed-in theatre Schechner is describing in his

---

[17] Eugenio Barba, *Beyond the Floating Islands* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), 159-160.

[18] Richard Schechner, "Believed-in Theatre," *Performance Research* 2 (Summer 1997): 81-82, 90.

article. Lee maintained that the strength of indigenous theatre is the ability of the indigenous players to tell their stories simply, to "be themselves"[19] onstage, to show themselves as people that their audience can identify with and believe in. The following questions arise, however: Who has selected and crafted the stories? How effective are amateur performers in conveying this material? Are they able to maintain that core of truth in repeated performances?

Professional actors participate in a believed-in theatre when the actors are said to have interviewed the people whose words they are mouthing, as the actors are supposed to have done in the original production of *The Laramie Project*. The premise of the actor/interviewers, says Jonathan Kalb in a discussion of the work of solo performers Anna Deavere Smith and Marc Wolf, is that they are "conduits for testimony that might otherwise never be heard"; they possess "a certain secondary 'authenticity' as witnesses of witnesses."[20] But what happens to that authenticity when the actors pretend to be the interviewers and conduits of the testimony? This might be the case in an original production and is likely to be the case in subsequent productions.

The proliferation of projects based on real life has its detractors. Some argue that this is due to a dearth of good new plays; launching projects based on real life fills a void left by inadequate "imaginative" works. In October 2000, the

---

[19] Maryat Lee, "To Will One Thing," *TDR* 27 (Winter 1983): 47.

[20] Jonathan Kalb, "Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self," *Theater* 31 (2001): 19.

Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times* featured two pieces arguing for and against staging "reality." Director Charles Marowitz in "Let's Not Forgo Imagination for Voyeurism" cites autobiographical solo performances as well as *Lifegame,* an improvisational piece based on a participant's story as told to the actors, and then decries the "drought of imagination" in the theatre. He goes on to say that "some of the dreariest experiences we have recently had, both onstage and in films, have been based on true events."[21] The opposite point of view is articulated by playwright Tom Donaghy, who defines realness as "equal parts voyeurism, anthropology, longing and empathy." He says that the works of Anna Deavere Smith and the Tectonic Theater Project's *Laramie Project* bring "a topical immediacy to the stage" and have "reclaimed what was once known as realism for the theater in new and provocative ways." These works "embrace theater's singular power: to contemplate our collective reality."[22] While I agree that the topical immediacy of testimony plays indeed makes for powerful theatre, I propose to explore whose reality is presented in these plays—the townspeople's or the theatre company's.

Contemporary scholarship on community-based theatre for the most part delves into the social and political nature of the work, including such books as Baz Kershaw's *The Politics*

---

[21] Charles Marowitz, *New York Times,* 29 October 2000, sec. 2, p. 22.

[22] Tom Donaghy, "Only Theater Stirs the Soul of Audiences," *New York Times,* 29 October 2000, sec. 2, p. 22-23.

of Performance (1992) and *Performing Democracy* (ed. Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus, 2001). Yale's *Theater* magazine published an issue dedicated to "Theater and Social Change" in 2001, containing articles on documentary solo performance and grassroots theatre, as well as pieces by grassroots theatre practitioners. *TDR* has published numerous articles by grassroots theatre practitioners in addition to critical discussions of the grassroots work. Gary Fisher Dawson chronicles documentary theatre and touches on some oral-history plays in his book *Documentary Theatre in the United States* (1999). And Attilio Favorini's *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater* (1995) includes plays of testimony plus a historical overview of documentary theatre. In my study, I have drawn on these works to take a critical look at the productions under discussion. I have also included wherever possible testimony and material from interviews with both the theatre artists and the subjects themselves. All this material is used with a clear understanding that interviews rely on people's memories as well as their perceptions.

Chapter 1 is an overview of twentieth-century antecedents in American documentary theatre and oral-history works, as well as a brief look at a number of contemporary companies that have created theatre pieces from local and oral history. Chapter 2 looks at EcoTheater, the pioneering grassroots theatre group that sought to draw on local legend and oral history to develop an indigenous theatre in Hinton, West Virginia. Chapter 3 is about the local-history piece put

together by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, which, as a long-established professional resident ensemble, decided to celebrate the town that the members had chosen as their adopted home and to broaden the historical record of that town in a theatre piece. Chapter 4 examines the oral-history project mounted by the New York City-based Tectonic Theatre Project, whose members traveled to Laramie, Wyoming, to get a firsthand account from Laramie's citizens of their reactions to the murder of Matthew Shepard, the victim of the hate crime, as well as to examine the aftershocks of the event on the townspeople.

Chapter One: Antecedents and Contemporary Practice

The staging of local and oral history has roots in a number of theatrical practices: community festivals, social-activist theatre, documentary work, community-based theatre. These forms have often meant the inclusion of people's stories and history as well as participation by local people in development and production. The democratization of theatre has also meant making it accessible to a broader spectrum of people: moving theatre away from concentration in urban capitals and into alternative venues outside the traditional theatre space.

Local and oral history works, possessing the inherent authority of being drawn from life, have been valuable to various ideologies.[1] In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, people's history has been used in presentations that affirmed the conservative ideals of the country and the community. It has also informed theatre that aimed to inspire social and political change. Theatre that aspires to be socially useful feeds into the utilitarian sensibility of Americans: from pageants that came out of a movement to direct Americans' leisure time, to theatre that exposed

---

[1]Derek Paget's *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* explores ideology in documentary works: "The belief that 'the interests of the ruling class' are also served by the reality mediated in many True Stories is the frame through which the argument of this book will proceed." (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 7.

social ills in order to raise political consciousness, to grassroots work that gained legitimacy in community engagement.

In early twentieth century America, the pageantry movement encompassed works that were geared toward conservative values as well as exposing social ills. Civic pageantry served as a people's theatre in dramatic presentations throughout the country involving large numbers of participants, with locales and historical material that had relevance to the local people's lives. Many of the community pageants, inspired by English historical pageants,[2] were local festivals that touted the ideals of democracy, generally requiring casts in the thousands as well as the services of much of the community for every aspect of production: fund raising, advertising, costume making, set building. Community building was one goal of the American-pageantry movement. Naima Prevots, in her book *American Pageantry,* connects pageants with the desire of civic leaders to educate the new immigrants about American history and politics, and to ease assimilation and break down barriers within communities.[3]

In eighteenth century Geneva, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Lettre à M. d'Alembert* famously promoted outdoor

---

[2] David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 43.

[3] Naima Prevots, *American Pageantry: A Movement for Art & Democracy* (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1990), 3.

festivals in which everyone participates, leading to "good-fellowship and civility."[4] American community activities have included parades, community music and dance festivals. "Americans by playing together expressed their fundamental values and ancestral traits," writes David Glassberg in *American Historical Pageantry*.[5] Historical pageantry appeared in America, writes Glassberg, "at a time when local civic officials were casting about for new forms through which to develop public consciousness for a 'collective' history and culture in their towns ... superseding the popular entertainment elements of holiday celebrations integrating all into a responsibly led common civic culture."[6]

These scripted dramas pointed a way to a new theatre for playwright Percy MacKaye, an advocate of pageantry as well as the author of a number of pageants. Seeing pageantry as a form that embodied American ideals, MacKaye advanced a drama of democracy that led to consciousness of civic life and communal self-expression,[7] elaborating on his vision of a theatre for the people in such books as *The Civic Theatre* and *The Playhouse and the Play*. Toward the end of the twentieth

---

[4] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "An Epistle from J.J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva to Mr. D'Alembert," in *Theatre/Theory/Theatre*, ed. Daniel Gerould (New York and London: Applause, 2000), 218.

[5] Glassberg, 61.

[6] Ibid., 283.

[7] Percy MacKaye, *The Playhouse and the Play* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 109.

century, similar claims were made by grassroots theatre practitioners: that their plays inspired community connections and community dialogue; that they raised consciousness by foregrounding the people's stories; that they helped heal and restore pride in the community.

In his book *Community Drama*, the appellation MacKaye prefers instead of pageantry, he writes that mass dramas belong to the new-world art of democracy, and he invokes Christ as inspiration, despite the fact that a number of the new immigrants in America during his lifetime worshipped other gods. For MacKaye, the essence of community drama is its Christian social message of neighborliness, "of resolving the estrangement and conflict of social elements into harmony."[8] However, Prevots points out that the concept of democracy in many of the pageants failed to include American Indians or blacks.[9] (In 1913, W.E.B. DuBois responded to that exclusion, as well as to the misrepresentation of blacks in the pageants in which they *did* appear, by writing a pageant about black history titled *The Star of Ethiopia*.) For some late-twentieth century practitioners, the power of community dramas lies not in harmony but in activism. In *The Politics of Performance*, British author Baz Kershaw suggests that community plays can deal with the hidden history of oppression, becoming "a

---

[8] MacKaye, *Community Drama* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 45.

[9] Prevots, 2.

powerful tool in the hands of contemporary radicalism."[10]

Indeed, the American-pageantry movement included works that addressed social reform, tackling such issues as women's rights, education, and child labor. In 1913, John Reed and the leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World organized the *Paterson Strike Pageant* to demonstrate the oppression of the mostly immigrant silk workers, with some 1,500 of them re-enacting episodes from the strike. As the economic climate in the United States worsened, the battle between workers and bosses provided a wealth of material for a burgeoning theatre movement by and for the people—a theatre that was radical in its intentions and determined to politicize its audience members and empower them to fight for social change.

The twenties and thirties Depression-era America saw the rise of workers' groups, like the Prolet Buehne and the Workers Laboratory Theatre (WLT), which set themselves in opposition to "escapist" entertainment and determined to dramatize the worker's plight, using agit-prop to inspire political action. To take their message to the people, they performed at nontraditional venues, at rallies, picket lines, political meetings, dances. The WLT attracted the interest of socially concerned theatre practitioners and eventually metamorphosed into the Theatre of Action, which included director Elia Kazan and designer Mordecai Gorelik. By 1935, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) subsumed the workers' groups. The FTP meant not only theatre employment and

---

[10] Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 194.

production throughout the United States; it also gave rise to a new American documentary form, the Living Newspaper.

The Living Newspaper adopted the techniques of journalism and documentary theatre to explore the scope of contemporary social problems in America, their underlying causes and the possibilities for change. The idea for the Living Newspapers, which were overseen by journalists and theatre artists, came from Elmer Rice, Morris Watson (a cofounder of the Newspaper Guild) and Hallie Flanagan, director of the FTP.[11] In his overview of documentary-theatre history, Attilio Favorini connects Flanagan and Joseph Losey with the first bloom of American documentary theatre.[12] Losey, a veteran of workers' theatre, directed the first fully produced Living Newspaper, *Triple A Plowed Under,* in 1936. Both Flanagan and Losey, Favorini adds, were influenced by German and Russian examples. In fact Losey had spent some months in Russia in 1935 translating Erwin Piscator's *Political Theatre,* and Favorini credits Losey with the introduction into the Living Newspaper of staging techniques such as epic scene progression, use of projections of factual information, film, and loudspeakers that Piscator had

---

[11] John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, *The Federal Theatre Project: "Free, Adult, Uncensored"* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), 10.

[12] Attilio Favorini, introduction to *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater,* ed. Attilio Favorini (New Jersey: Echo Press, 1995), xxii.

developed in Germany in the 1920s.[13] Piscator's techniques would continue to be used in documentary theatre throughout the rest of the century.

Inspired not just by Piscator's theatre but also by the Blue Blouse groups of Russia,[14] the Living Newspapers put such social problems as substandard housing, labor relations, and ownership of utilities on the American stage via documentary material. They were produced all over the country, and in an effort to make them more relevant in various regions, they were sometimes adapted to the concerns of particular places. Critics have pointed to the FTP as influential in the move toward regionalism in the American theatre.

In the ferment of the sixties, such counterculture theatre troupes as the Bread and Puppet Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe took theatre to the parks and the streets in the cause of radical politics. Maryat Lee, who would later found EcoTheater in West Virginia, had been a pioneer in urban street theatre in Harlem in the 1950s, working with neighborhood people on a play that dramatized the community's growing drug problem. Her vision of street theatre was to develop plays with the locals on issues of relevance to them. When Lee staged a trio of street-theatre plays with teens in East Harlem in the sixties—about homosexuality, drugs and bad schools—newspaper critic Dan

---

[13] Favorini, xxii.

[14] Living Newspapers had been developed in Russia by 1920 and probably at that time in Germany. Douglas MacDermott, "The Living Newspaper as a Dramatic Form," *Modern Drama* 8 (Summer 1965): 82.

Sullivan attended a production. He described how the street-theatre experience invited an audience participation that "would have reduced even the cast of *Dionysus in '69* to tears," with audience members jumping on the stage and yelling at the actors.[15] While most of them might encourage participation that is less assaultive, contemporary grassroots theatres that stage local people's stories are interested in forging a connection between audience and performer. These groups pride themselves on their ability to engage the audience during and after the performance, inspiring audience members to share their own life stories with the performers.

Jan Cohen-Cruz traces a line from the activism of the sixties to the contemporary work of community-based theatre. After the Vietnam War was over, she writes, many socially minded companies, influenced by feminist and nascent gay-rights movements, turned their attention to local issues in the places where they resided.[16] Journals too turned their attention to the growing community-based theatre movement. A number of avant-garde artists became what Vivian Patraka called "cultural workers."[17] Richard Schechner points to the

---

[15] Dan Sullivan, "Theater in East Harlem," in *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology,* ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 100.

[16] Jan Cohen-Cruz, "Motion of the Ocean," *Theater* 31 (2001): 98-99.

[17] Vivian Patraka used this term in "Robbie McCauley: Obsessing in Public; An Interview by Vivian Patraka." *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance,* ed. Carol Martin (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 224.

convergence of performance art and community-based theatre indicated by the change in perspective in *High Performance* magazine, which transformed from a journal focused on performance art to one about community-arts projects.[18] Indeed Linda Frye Burnham, who founded *High Performance*, is now co-director of the Community Arts Network on the Internet and writes extensively about grassroots theatre. Among artists who turned to community work, writer/performer Robbie McCauley in the 1990s launched a series of community-history collaborations in such cities as Buffalo, Mississippi, and Boston, in which she organized and directed projects with local artists (and in some instances nonprofessional performers) to collect and stage testimony about issues like race riots, voting rights, civil rights, and busing.

As community-based projects and theatre groups have gained recognition in academic journals like *TDR* and popular magazines like *American Theatre*, the practitioners themselves have joined together to further their work. In 1992, Cornell University hosted a symposium on grassroots theatre, attended by practitioners and scholars. In a symposium report titled *From the Ground Up*, the editors put together "A Matrix Articulating the Principles of Grassroots Theater." Those principles emphasize a commitment to the people, their culture, the place, and the community of which the theatre is a part. The community people's "stories and histories inform

---

[18] Richard Schechner, "Believed-in Theatre," *Performance Research* 2 (Summer 1997): 89.

the work ... the audience is not consumer of, but participant in the performance."[19] Equally important, they write, is that theatre not intimidate the members of the community, that the theatre space should be a place in which the entire community feels welcome.

Grassroots troupes look to break down the barriers between audience and actor in a variety of ways, including doing away with illusionary staging and using direct address to the audience. While a number of troupes have devoted themselves to their community, living in the community and staging works that reflect their community's interests, at times they have also had to tour for economic survival. This can mean losing touch with the kind of constituency the theatres wish to reach. Dudley Cocke, for example, leads a company that places a high value on maintaining diversity within audiences. Thus, since 1989 his Roadside company has accepted touring engagements only to communities that commit to "broadening participation" by forming partnerships with churches, arts councils, social-service agencies, and schools.[20]

While most community-based theatre troupes have a vested interest in a particular community they call their own,

---

[19] "A Matrix Articulating the Principles of Grassroots Theater," in *From the Ground Up: Grassroots Theater in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Dudley Cocke, Harry Newman, and Janet Salmons-Rue (Ithaca, N.Y.: Community Based Arts Project, Cornell University, 1993), 81.

[20] "Director's Statement," *www.roadside.org*, 19 September 2002.

outside facilitating groups have been invited into communities to organize oral-history projects in which the community members stage their stories. Anna Deavere Smith and Robbie McCauley are among those who have worked with communities as outside facilitators to investigate problems within the community and reflect the people back to themselves in their own words.

Community history has also been transformed into living history, in such restored villages as Plimouth Plantation and Colonial Williamsburg. In contrast to the history works that I will be discussing, these villages are virtual worlds in which performances are unscripted and improvisational. Visitors to restored villages enjoy an interactive sampling of the past.[21] Richard Schechner writes that while these villages foreground and "celebrate mainstream American values," they sideline such issues as racism and segregation and deliver a "reductive, simplified version of the past," ultimately making "history into make-believe."[22]

The "make-believe" constructs are only peripherally relevant to the history I am summarizing, and I will omit them from the examples that follow. The list of professional and grassroots troupes I will discuss, from the 1960s to the present, include companies that have scripted theatre works from community stories and oral history based on ethnic communities and geographic communities. What ties them

---

[21] See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 189-200.

[22] "Believed-in Theatre," 77-78.

together is their sincere belief in the efficacy of their projects—in terms of education, community building, and political action. While some productions are grounded in political movements and seek to inspire social change, others look to enhance the community by recovering and preserving its stories and performing them back to the community. Still others are dedicated to addressing tensions within a community, bringing people together, expressing a commonality and encouraging an emotional bonding among the different segments of the population. These seem to me the most significant examples from the period in question.

Teatros

The teatros came out of Chicano activism in the sixties. In 1965 Luis Valdez, who had been a member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, formed El Teatro Campesino under the aegis of the United Farm Workers Union, using theatre as a way to educate and organize farm workers. Like the workers' theatres of the thirties, El Teatro Campesino began performing short agit-prop sketches (*actos*) focusing on the bosses' exploitation of the workers. The company broke away from the union in 1967 to broaden its focus beyond the strike, to look at the lives of rural and urban Chicanos. It functioned as a collective ensemble for fifteen years, writes Yolanda Broyles-Gonzàlez in her book *El Teatro Campesino,* until it devolved into a production company. Broyles-Gonzàlez positions El Teatro Campesino within a Mexican working-class

tradition of orality and oral culture.[23] The importance of drawing on oral traditions as a way to tap into the resources of a community is a theme among many grassroots organizations, which base their work on the storytelling traditions in their own communities, celebrating voices that might otherwise have been neglected on the American stage.

Restoring neglected voices is central to Broyles-Gonzàlez's version of the history of El Teatro Campesino, in that she attempts to redress those accounts that focus on the group's founder. Broyles-Gonzàlez spotlights instead the other ensemble members, in particular the women, who she feels are marginalized in the annals of the company's history. Her intent is to foreground not just the participation of the other men and women of the company, but also the influences of the Mexican popular performance tradition and working-class experience.[24] Aggrandizing the leader of a production at the expense of the rest of the group is also a recurring problem in the productions profiled in this dissertation. The very nature of mounting local- and oral-history pieces, which often involves collaboration by an ensemble in selection and development of the material, leads to issues of credit for the "product."

In its time El Teatro Campesino was a seminal group, one that Jorge Huerta credits with creating the Chicano theatre

---

[23] Yolanda Broyles-Gonzàlez, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), xiii.

[24] Ibid., xiii.

movement.[25] El Teatro de la Esperanza, of which Huerta was a director for a time, came out of a late-sixties student group at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Beginning in 1971, it allied itself with a Chicano center in Santa Barbara, performing *actos* by El Teatro Campesino as well as creating its own. Huerta writes that in its desire to grow beyond the *acto* form, the group decided to turn to docudrama.[26] In 1974 it investigated the problems of Mexican Americans in Guadalupe, California, looking into a government report on civil rights, which had determined that Mexican Americans were being discriminated against and were receiving an inferior education. The group also examined other socioeconomic problems of the community. The result was a docudrama titled *Guadalupe,* based on the company's research, which included interviews. The play was developed through improvisation. It is a series of scenes in a combination of Spanish and English dialogue connected by musical narration. Huerta, who directed the production, in which commentary on the action plays an important role, says the group's work was Brechtian in intent,[27] in that it demonstrated the problems and stimulated questions and provoked post-performance discussion.

---

[25] Jorge Huerta, "When Sleeping Giants Awaken: Chicano Theatre in the 1960s," *Theatre Survey* 43 (May 2002): 25.

[26] Jorge Huerta, *Necessary Theatre: Six Plays About the Chicano Experience* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1989), 210.

[27] Ibid., 214-215.

El Teatro de la Esperanza continues to be involved in community-oriented theatre and is currently affiliated with the grassroots coalition the American Festival Project (AFP). The AFP is an organization that was developed in the early 1980s out of a collaboration between Junebug and Roadside (discussed below), and includes Pregones Theater and the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, among others. The AFP works along with artists and universities in the community in which the festival is held, generating workshops, storytelling circles and performances that, according to Roadside, "make conversations about issues of race, class, and injustice an exciting part of the community's life."[28]

Dakota Theatre Caravan

Grounded in "people's" politics and committed to a cultural alliance with its audience, the Dakota Theatre Caravan is an early example of a troupe dedicated to staging work based on local oral history. It was founded at Yankton College (South Dakota) in 1977 as a theatre collective. Like other grassroots theatres, Dakota Theatre Caravan aimed to create and perform plays that reflected the lives of the local people, in this case, the people of South Dakota. Member Doug Paterson, writing about the group in *TDR*, says his notion was that "the key to any theatre was its *audience*

[28] "Who Is Roadside's Audience?" *www.roadside.org*, 19 September 2002.

and the theatre's relationship to that audience."[29] Before its dissolution in 1989, the Dakota Theatre Caravan had functioned for much of its history in the summer seasons (funded by grants), collecting stories on such topics as immigration to the United States, as well as town and family histories, and creating plays based on interviews with local people. Performing as a touring troupe primarily in South Dakota and the Midwest, the group kept its production apparatus minimal.

The first summer's production was titled *Dakota Roads: The Story of a Prairie Family,* and in it six actors played sixty characters, using costume pieces to indicate changes of role. Paterson writes that after the show the actors would invite the audience to share responses and stories; many of those new stories were then incorporated into the play. Among other productions were *Dusting Off the Thirties,* which examined "the political and economic aspects of the Depression"[30] and the effect of the Depression on the lives of people in the Midwest. *Welcome Home* explored life in a Great Plains town. The group eventually disbanded, but Paterson, founder and director of the Theater of the Oppressed—Omaha, continues to endorse a people's theatre, one "that creates

---

[29] Doug Paterson, "Theatre for a People: The Dakota Theatre Caravan," *TDR* 27 (Summer 1983): 4.

[30] Mark Weinberg, *Challenging the Hierarchy: Collective Theatre in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992),123. Weinberg devoted a chapter to the Dakota Theatre Caravan and its productions. None of the plays have been published.

dialogue, invites audience interaction and intervention, empowers people to imagine and enact their solutions, and goes on to create even more dialogue."[31]

Roadside Theater

Committed to developing a theatre grounded in the traditions of the people of Appalachia, Roadside Theater, based in Whitesburg, Kentucky, was started as a professional ensemble in 1975 at Appalshop, a rural arts and education center in the Appalachian region. Roadside's director Dudley Cocke, in an essay included in *Voices from the Battlefront*, writes that the company, whose members are from the region, has developed "an indigenous body of plays by drawing on its heritages of storytelling, balladry, oral histories, and church."[32] He goes on to discuss the importance of the community's involvement, first as a resource for material, then as "respondents" during the process of play development, and sometimes as performers in the piece along with the company. In a format that combines a "natural storytelling style with acting and music,"[33] Cocke says the company

---

[31] Doug Paterson, "The TASC Is: Theatre and Social Change," *Theater* 31 (2001): 67.

[32] Dudley Cocke, "Appalachia, Democracy, and Cultural Equity," in *Voices from the Battlefront: Achieving Cultural Equity*, ed. Marta Moreno Vega and Cheryll Y. Greene (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, Inc., 1993), 38.

[33] Don Baker and Dudley Cocke, "About the Theater," in *Alternate Roots: Plays from the Southern Theater*, ed. Kathie deNobriga and Valetta Anderson (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994), 58.

dissolves the fourth wall so that the audience can "sing and talk back to the actors, much like the call-and-response in a southern church service."[34] Giving an example of such interactivity, Cocke explains, "In one of our first shows, which was about the first hanging in the county, if people in the audience thought we'd left out a fact, they'd just stand up and correct us."[35] That play, *Red Fox/Second Hangin'*, based on newspaper clippings, letters, diaries, trial transcripts, and interviews, is included in the anthology *Alternate Roots: Plays from the Southern Theater.* Subsequent productions have included *New Ground Revival,* which draws on the musical culture of the area and was written and performed with the Appalachian gospel singers the Mullins Family.

In other productions Roadside sought to reach out to theatres whose community members were from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, collaborating with such groups as Junebug and Pregones Theater. Writing in the "Theater and Social Change" issue of *Theater* magazine, Cocke lays out his expectations for grassroots oral-history collaborations: "It is through such shared stories and the connection they cause across racial, economic, and class lines that Roadside has experienced authentic social change."[36] Roadside's belief that

---

[34] "Director's Statement," *www.roadside.org,* 19 September 2002.

[35] Quoted in Ferdinand Lewis, "In Sync?" *American Theatre,* May/June 2000, 25.

[36] Dudley Cocke, "Only Connect," *Theater* 31 (2001): 84.

oral-history and grassroots work are important in a dialogue about cultural and social equity is shared by a network of grassroots theatre organizations. One of those companies is Roadside's collaborator, Junebug, dedicated to staging stories of the African-American experience.

Junebug

Junebug was formed in 1980 after the demise of the Free Southern Theater, a group that had been founded as part of the civil rights movement. Artistic director John O'Neal describes Junebug as a New Orleans-based, African-American, cultural producing and presenting organization.[37] Junebug tours to rural and inner-city communities to reach audiences that might not otherwise attend theatre. O'Neal sees the act of collecting and sharing stories as a way to "establish the mutual understanding of people between places and respect for those people and places."[38] He includes in the presentation of the stories an explanation of who the storytellers are, in hopes of giving further insight into those people's lives and the place in which they live.

In a move to connect with the community beyond the performance venue, Junebug has developed the New Orleans Story Network, which collects "oral histories, folklore, songs, poems, narrative dances and other oral literature from

---

[37] John O'Neal, "Letters, Etc.: Announcements," *TDR* 38 (Summer 1994): 12.

[38] Quoted in Kate Hammer, "John O'Neal, Actor and Activist: The Praxis of Storytelling," *TDR* 36 (Winter 1992): 17.

the New Orleans area." Storytelling is seen as a way to pass on a society's "acquired wisdom" as well as a "tool that communities can use to focus attention on themselves and take stock of their values and strengths."[39]

Cornerstone

Cornerstone is a company of theatre artists that assume a social mission to bring together people of diverse backgrounds in community-based plays. The group is currently based in Los Angeles and collaborates with local communities, which it defines in terms of neighborhoods, workplaces, ethnic groups, and faith. For much of its history, however, since its inception in 1986, Cornerstone has acted with a wider net, as facilitators of community-based theatre throughout America under the artistic direction of Bill Rauch. Cornerstone's method is to collect stories from a community, stories that then inform the company's adaptations of the classical canon. According to its Web site, Cornerstone's work represents "epic interactions between classic plays and specific American communities: Molière's disintegrating and combative families in the Kansas farmland; Shakespeare's civil strife in the streets of Mississippi."[40] In these collaborations, the community is involved in all aspects of the production, including the pre-production

---

[39] *www.gnofn.org/87Ejunebug/thestorynetwork.html,* 19 September 2002.

[40] *www.cornerstonetheater.org,* 1 June 2000.

planning. Community members perform alongside the company's professional actors.

In Cornerstone's mission to build bridges within diverse communities, the challenge is to craft plays that address the disparate elements in a community. Sonja Kuftinec, who has written extensively about Cornerstone, says that although there might be racial or ethnic divisions within a community or divisions in terms of values, "Cornerstone sometimes operates with a certain idealism and mythology about the purpose and affective impact of their work ... Most rural productions end with a moment in which all the characters join on stage and sing."[41]

The themes of healing and community building pervade essays and articles about grassroots theatre. Yet a Cornerstone production once roused a controversy in the pages of *TDR*, stimulating public discussion about whether a community play needs to effect social change of a radical nature or whether its potential can lie in its capacity to elicit an emotional response and forge bonds within the community—in its "structure of feeling," as Bruce McConachie has written. An article by Sara Brady, *TDR's* managing editor in 2000, took a critical look at the collaboration of Cornerstone with Touchstone Theatre (an ensemble based in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania) on a piece titled *Steelbound* (1999). This adaptation of *Prometheus Bound* was inspired by the stories of people who had been connected with Bethlehem

---

[41] Sonja Kuftinec, "A Cornerstone for Rethinking Community Theatre," *Theatre Topics* 6 (March 1996): 95.

Steel, a company that closed the last of its local plants in 1998. Touchstone's ensemble performed the piece along with more than fifty members of the community at Bethlehem Steel's iron foundry. Brady was part of the Touchstone company in the capacity of acting associate and had participated in the production. She chronicles its history and objects to the close connections the production had with Bethlehem Steel, which she claims forestalled a real examination of the company's actions and responsibilities toward it workers. Thus, she writes, the production was an example of the "non-radicality" of community-based theatre, in that the piece preferred closure to a call for social change.[42] Both Touchstone and Cornerstone personnel responded with Letters to the Editor. Artistic director Rauch defended the production, including the collaboration with Bethlehem Steel officials, saying, "Cornerstone is committed to involving representatives of all sides of an issue in making art on the issue at hand." Rauch also conceded, however, that he too worries about facile claims of celebration, healing, and closure.[43]

Mark McKenna, artistic director of Touchstone, responded to Brady's critique by pointing to the impact of the production on those who had worked on the piece.

---

[42] Sara Brady, "Welded to the Ladle: *Steelbound* and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre," *TDR* 44 (Fall 2000), 51-74.

[43] Bill Rauch, "Letters, Etc.: Touchstone—How Radical Is Radical?" *TDR* 45 (Fall 2001): 18.

Demonstrating that *Steelbound* held meaning for the participants, McKenna quoted one as saying that being a part of the production gave him a place to be heard, to have somewhere to express ideas and thoughts that otherwise would have remained dormant.[44] Jan Cohen-Cruz, writing about *Steelbound* for *American Theatre,* first acknowledged its shortcomings, suggesting that the play didn't fully question the corporate economics that drove the company to close the plant. This omission, she wrote, might have been driven by close connections the production had to the company, "one of its chief benefactors." But then she overrode those concerns by concluding that the play evoked a "catharsis," and that the expression of emotions might have helped the people of the community to move on.[45] What took precedence then for the play's proponents was the community members' involvement in the work and the use of theatre as a forum for the expression of their voices.

Community Performance, Inc. (CPI)

The same set of priorities seem to govern the organization Community Performance, Inc., which mounts oral-history productions with indigenous players in different communities around the country. For this company, community building suffuses every step of its process from story

---

[44] Mark McKenna, "Letters, Etc.: Touchstone—How Radical Is Radical?" *TDR* 45 (Fall 2001): 8.

[45] Jan Cohen-Cruz, "The Stars of Bethlehem," *American Theatre,* March 2000, 69.

gathering to performance to community response.

Under the heading "Theater of, by and for the People," CPI's Web site talks about its work in creating "a theatrical experience that empowers individuals and reinforces community."[46] Based in Chicago, CPI is made up of a group of facilitators, a creative team that includes artistic director Richard Owen Geer, two playwrights (one who doubles as a director), a choreographer, a lighting designer, and a set designer. These facilitators go out into communities and work with members of the community to develop productions based on their oral histories. The productions are then presented in nontraditional spaces that are "inscribed with local significance ... a renovated barn, a cotton warehouse, and an old produce packing plant."[47] The performers are volunteers from the community.

Geer, who earned his Ph.D. in performance studies at Northwestern University, wrote his dissertation about his first facilitated community play, *Swamp Gravy Sketches* (1992)—a sixty-minute piece with a cast of some fifty people (which would later expand to more than 100) in Colquitt, Georgia. He says Maryat Lee's EcoTheater influenced his adoption of the philosophy that theatre should be "of, by, and for the people," and he names her as one of the

---

[46] *www.comperf.com,* 18 September 2002.

[47] "About CPI," *www.comperf.com,* 9 December 2002.

practitioners who defined the field.[48] Geer is committed to theatre in which the community members perform plays with their own stories for their own benefit, in contrast to theatre in which professional grassroots ensembles perform a community's stories, a practice Richard Schechner terms "professionalized local knowledge."[49]

In the spirit of nonexclusive collaboration, Geer says that whoever shows up gets to participate in a piece. He accepts input, including directorial advice, from the participants. Geer's intention is to emulate Augusto Boal's vision to "transfer theatre's means of production to the people."[50] Yet *Swamp Gravy* and all the subsequent CPI productions have been crafted and directed by professionals.[51] Playwright Jo Carson, who adapted oral history gathered by the people of Colquitt to create the original *Swamp Gravy*, justifies the facilitators' input: "Without us ... the stuff of life just stays the stuff of life and doesn't get

---

[48] Richard Owen Geer, "Community Performance: Efficacious Theater and Community Animation in the Performance Cycle of 'Swamp Gravy Sketches' " (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1993), iv.

[49] "Believed-in Theatre," 83.

[50] Richard Owen Geer, "Swamp Gravy," *High Performance* 16 (Fall 1993): 36.

[51] Director Gerard Stropnicky, an ensemble member of the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, directed the revised *Swamp Gravy* productions in 2000 and 2001. He was originally approached by CPI, but now works for the Swamp Gravy organization.

transformed."[52]

The *Swamp Gravy* plays, which are still running, have covered community history, including agricultural employment (cotton, corn, peanuts), the community's notions of faith, medical stories. Richard Schechner writes that while such difficult subjects as sexual abuse and race relations have been represented, "there are limits beyond which the community is not willing to go yet."[53] The overall objective of *Swamp Gravy,* he adds, is to celebrate the community. Playwright Carson points to a celebratory moment of the piece when she describes a highlight of her versions of *Swamp Gravy:* "There is a ceremony that is part of each of the shows that acknowledges ... the people the stories in the show are about or from ... it is no more than a list of remembered names followed by *Amazing Grace* ... There have been nights when members of the audience have added their own remembers to the list."[54] *Swamp Gravy* has been very popular in all its incarnations. The production is now overseen by the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council and regularly revamped with new stories and music for a month-long run every fall and spring. In fact it has become an institution, having been named the "Official Folk Life Play of Georgia" by the state's general

---

[52] Quoted in Linda Frye Burnham, "I Can Write a River: An Interview with Jo Carson," *Community Arts Network, www.communityarts.net,* 18 September 2002.
[53] "Believed-in Theater," 81.

[54] Jo Carson, "Some Thoughts on Direct Address and Oral Histories in Performance," *TDR* 40 (Summer 1996): 117.

assembly. It has its own theatre (a converted cotton warehouse), a Web site, and it sells an array of "Swamp Gravy" souvenirs. The Swamp Gravy Institute offers its services for storytelling circles and training in oral-history interviewing, which "equips a local core to follow up their vision of a story-based revitalization project."[55]

Despite the commercial success and the long run of the *Swamp Gravy* plays, Geer privileges process over product, echoing other practitioners in stating that "the performance context probably contributes more to social change than could the content of any scene."[56] While that might be a sweeping and difficult-to-assess claim, playwright Carson suggests that "these projects will not turn economics around, but they may give people a reason to try to stay in a place instead of looking for a way to leave it. In other words, they may change how people feel about a community or a place."[57]

Since *Swamp Gravy,* CPI has worked in Newport News, Virginia, in a series of plays that look at the Mennonite, Jewish, and Greek communities in the area. *Turn the Washpot Down* (2002), a CPI project in Union County, South Carolina, attracted the attention of *People* magazine. Union County had been the focus of national media coverage in 1994 when Susan Smith drowned her two young sons by sliding her car into a

---

[55] *www.swampgravy.com,* 19 September 2002.

[56] Richard Owen Geer, "Out of Control in Colquitt: Swamp Gravy Makes Stone Soup, *TDR* 40 (Summer 1996): 109.

[57] "I Can Write a River."

lake with the children strapped into their seats. Smith had at first blamed an African American for the crime, which "caused a racial rift in Union."[58] *Washpot* deals with racial issues as well as the town's history, which includes loss of industry and other financial problems. Geer says about his production: "This is so much more than a show. This is a whole community re-visioning itself, transforming its whole sense of identity."[59] Writer Linda Frye Burnham concurs with that evaluation. In an *American Theatre* article subtitled "A Town in Trouble Turns to Populist Theatre for Healing and Renewal," she says, "The artwork is a group effort to pull Union County back from the brink of disintegration."[60] The notion that theatre can inform a town's sense of its history as well as help it realize its potential to change echoes the claims that David Glassberg made for American historical pageantry: "The belief that history could be made into a dramatic public ritual through which the residents of a town, by acting out the right version of their past, could bring about some kind of future social and political transformation."[61]

But whose story is being staged? Jan Cohen-Cruz, writing about the March 2000 production of *Swamp Gravy*, says that

---

[58] Daniel S. Levy, "Our Town," *People*, 19 August 2002, 105.

[59] Quoted in "Our Town," 105.

[60] Linda Frye Burnham, "A More Perfect Union," *American Theatre*, December 2002, 34.

[61] Glassberg, 4.

only five blacks were in the play and none were in the audience even though African Americans make up more than one-quarter of the town's population. She suggests that one reason for the disparity might be economic, since African Americans of the community are statistically poorer and thus less able to participate in a volunteer project.[62] Jerry Stropnicky, who has directed subsequent *Swamp Gravy* productions, says that he was distressed by the lack of representation of African Americans in the play and worked to find people to join the cast. He was able to find African American women and children who could participate, but there were still only twenty African Americans in a cast of 120.[63] Ethical concerns about who is included and who is excluded recur in all the work considered in this study.

Culture Clash

In the realm of professional groups that now do community work, Culture Clash is distinctive in that it turns the stories it collects on their head, refracting them through the prism of the group's irreverent style. As Culture Clash member Richard Montoya says about the group's working methods on one particular community project in Miami, the intention was "from day one to go in and fuck that town," to

---

[62] Jan Cohen-Cruz, "A Hyphenated Field: Community-Based Theatre in the USA," *New Theatre Quarterly* 64 (November 2000): 370.

[63] Gerard Stropnicky to author, 10 December 2002, via e-mail.

give it a "Mambo colonic."[64] Culture Clash is a trio of Latino artists who began to work together in 1984. The trio generally chooses comedy to represent a community's stories back to it, and in its play *Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami*, it also gave voice to "the hopes and dreams of Cubans, Haitians, Bahamians, African-Americans, Jews and an array of other cultural entities."[65] The piece was commissioned by the Miami Light Project and premiered in 1994 in Miami Beach. It is a series of scenes based on interviews with the people of the area (not used verbatim and including composite characters); the trio plays all the characters from the various ethnic and racial groups as well as themselves and the women, in drag. Culture Clash went on to develop a community piece about San Diego, *Culture Clash in Bordertown* (subtitled an Epic Docu-Theatre Comedy), and New York, *Nuyorican Stories: Culture Clash in the City.*

Culture Clash's Herbert Siguenza says the group comes out of the Teatro movement of the seventies, which informs their political satire and theatrical style.[66] What Culture Clash is creating, says Jorge Huerta, is a "postmodern,

---

[64] Quoted in Dorinne Kondo, "(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 52 (March 2000): 89.

[65] Herbert Siguenza, introduction to *Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami,"* in *Culture Clash: Life, Death and Revolutionary Comedy* by Richard Montoya, Ricardo Salinas, and Herbert Siguenza (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 109.

[66] Quoted in Dorinne Kondo, 91.

postcolonial Chicano theatre that investigates other cultures."[67] And as outsiders, says Montoya, they are more qualified to tell the stories of places like Miami and San Diego than are the residents of those places, whose love for their town could get in the way.[68] During the period 2000-2003, Culture Clash has been working on commissions to research and present two more docu-theatre productions: *Anthems: Culture Clash in the District* (about the nation's capital) at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and *Chavez Ravine* (about the political history of the neighborhood of that name in Los Angeles) at the Mark Taper Forum.

Despite the massive variety of all these approaches to re-presenting a community's stories, what binds the disparate work together is a presumption that each town's or community's stories are worthy of a public forum. In the ensuing chapters, I will operate from that presumption myself. I will explore how in the selection of its stories, each company creates a version of its town—one that reflects the needs of both the townspeople and the theatre company.

In chapter 2, I have chosen to look Ecotheater because it was a seminal grassroots theatre company that dedicated its work to the people and the history of Hinton, West Virginia, the town in which it was based. In chapter 3, I

---

[67] Quoted in Antonia Grace Glenn, "Comedy for These Urgent Times: Culture Clash as Chroniclers in America," *TheatreForum* 20 (Winter/Spring 2002): 68.

[68] Quoted in Dorinne Kondo, 89.

study *Letters to the Editor* by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble because it represents a choice by a professional resident ensemble to strengthen its bonds with its community through a local-history play that draws attention to its connections with that community. And in chapter 4, I focus on the Tectonic Theater Project's *Laramie Project* because it is an example of a commercially successful work that has had an afterlife in towns across the United States as well as overseas.

Chapter Two: Maryat Lee's EcoTheater

In this chapter I will discuss a theatre that defined itself in terms of the place in which it was based and claimed to commit itself to the people of the town of Hinton, West Virginia. It used the resources of the place for its material—its legends, the stories of its townspeople and their ancestors—and sought to involve the townspeople in various aspects of production, most importantly as performers. A hallmark of EcoTheater was its nonprofessional status and its reliance on untrained performers, who were expected to be able to present their true selves onstage. It catered to an audience for whom, according to Maryat Lee, EcoTheater's founder, commercial theatre had become barren. In an announcement of its intentions, EcoTheater adopted the credo "of, by and for the people."[1] Writing in *TDR* in 1983, Lee explained that EcoTheater "comes out of its home environment and respects it, makes comments on it and gives the community a voice."[2]

I will explore EcoTheater's effectiveness as a voice for its community, its use of oral history in providing a forum

---

[1] Program for *A Double Threaded Life: The Hinton Play,* cover. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 9, no folder, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, W.Va. The collection is being reorganized, and box numbers might change. Only a few boxes have numbered folders. Most of the fifty-plus boxes have not been catalogued or organized.

[2] Maryat Lee, "To Will One Thing," *TDR* 27 (Winter 1983): 50.

of expression for its indigenous actors—as well as the presumed authenticity of those stories and performers. I will also look at whether it's possible for this kind of organization, one that purports to be "of, by and for the people," to function as a democracy. I will begin, however, with a brief introduction of how Lee came to develop EcoTheater.

Driven to find an alternative to "theatre that trickles down from the cultural centers,"[3] Lee, a Wellesley graduate who had worked for an oral-history project under the direction of Margaret Mead,[4] made her first foray into theatre "from the bottom up"[5] on the streets of New York City. In the spring of 1951, Lee wrote a piece about heroin addiction, titled *Dope!*, and staged it in vacant lots around East Harlem, with a cast made up of people from the neighborhood, including two local gang members, and one professional actor who played the lead. In the 1960s, Lee pursued a professional career, serving as a playwright-in-residence at Lincoln Center under Herbert Blau, working with the Open Theater, teaching a course in Street Theatre at the New School for Social Research. In 1968, Lee continued her own work in street theatre in East Harlem, founding the Soul and Latin Theater (SALT), writing and producing four plays for this

---

[3] "To Will One Thing," 50.

[4] William French, *Maryat Lee's EcoTheater: A Theater for the Twenty-First Century* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1998), 146.

[5] "To Will One Thing," 50.

group about such subjects as "the scandalous classroom, homosexuality, drugs, and a liberated street woman—subjects taken from the company's experiences and meshed" writes Lee, with hers.[6] Then in 1971, Lee, who had grown up in Kentucky, relocated with her partner Fran Belin to a farm on Powleys Creek, in Hinton, West Virginia, a town of some thirty-five hundred people at that time. And in 1975 she and Belin, the producer for SALT, began EcoTheater.

Although Lee had been part of the New York theatre world in the 1960s, she was adamant in her rejection of the professional theatre, a stance that became a leitmotif in most of her writings throughout her career. Having earned a master's degree from the Union Theological Seminary, she had a religious vision of theatre: "But if you take the basic definition of a church—'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am'—something begins to vibrate. *There I am* is missing in the theatre definition."[7]

With EcoTheater Lee, like other alternative theatre artists of the era, sought to strip away excess and artifice so that performer and audience could congregate and share a basic human experience. Jonathan Kalb in "Requiem for Maryat" writes about connections between "EcoTheater and the establishment avant-garde ... Grotowski's distinctions

---

[6] Maryat Lee, "Legitimate Theater is Illegitimate," in *Toward the Second Decade: The Impact of the Women's Movement on American Institutions*, ed. Betty Justice and Renate Pore (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1981), 17.

[7] "To Will One Thing," 52-53.

between the actor who is there *for* us and the one who is there *instead* of us, or Brook's notion of 'Rough Theatre.' "[8] Lee's prescription for popular theatre meant working with untrained players who would perform for "untrained" audiences, specifically people who were not part of the small percentage of those who attend commercial theatre.

Lee's first company in West Virginia in 1975 was made up of some fifteen teens from low-income families who had registered to work with her under the auspices of the Governor's Summer Youth Program (GSYP).[9] The youths received a weekly paycheck for doing chores on the farm, including office and technical work for the theatre company along with acting in the play. Lee's initial production for her racially integrated company was a play based on the African American folk hero John Henry, whose legendary contest with a steam drill was supposed to have taken place at Big Bend Tunnel, about nine miles from Hinton. The play was researched by Lee and enhanced with material from interviews with elders in the railroad town, conducted by the GSYP teens and a local folk historian/musician, Jim Costa.

A second piece was inspired by a prank phone call of Costa's, in which he had called a local store, pretending to be an eccentric older woman who wanted to return a TV because

---

[8] Jonathan Kalb, "Requiem for Maryat Lee," 4. Unpublished paper from Jonathan Kalb's archives.

[9] EcoTheater performed primarily in the summer months throughout its history in West Virginia.

green men were jumping out of it. Improvising with Costa, Lee constructed a comedic one-act play about a countrywoman, Ole Miz Dacey, who is wooed by a man many years her junior. The initial production featured Costa as Miz Dacey; the title character was later played by Lucinda Ayres, business manager of EcoTheater and a company actress. *John Henry* and *Ole Miz Dacey* were the staples of EcoTheater in its first few years. By 1980 Lee added to the repertoire a revision of her play *Four Men and a Monster,* about mountain men struggling to survive in a northern city, a play that had originally been performed by a professional cast in 1968 at the Playhouse in the Park in Cincinnati, Ohio.

After the initial season, Lee and Belin took two years off to take care of their farm and regroup their energies because, as Lee wrote, and Belin concurs, "It was so exhausting and so absolutely draining."[10] When they resumed EcoTheater in 1978,[11] it was incorporated as a nonprofit educational organization, and Lee added senior citizens to her EcoTheater program. In 1980 Lee included a group of interns (some college students, some former EcoTheater youths, and an actor with experience in amateur theatre) in the mix on the 200-acre farm. When funds from the GSYP were

---

[10] Maryat Lee in "August 8, 1984," 2. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[11] Belin left Ecotheater and the Powleys Creek farm at the end of the 1978 season. Fran Belin, telephone conversation with author, 5 June 2002.

not available in 1983,[12] Lee, who was also being sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Humanities Foundation of West Virginia[13] as well as private contributions, worked solely with nonprofessional adults in *A Double Threaded Life: The Hinton Play*. The play is a series of monologues and dialogues that explore the meaning of the railroad to the town of Hinton, the ramifications of the loss of jobs after diesel engines were introduced in 1955 and trains no longer stopped at Hinton, and stories of the personal lives of the town's inhabitants.

To meet a requirement for funding by the Humanities Foundation of West Virginia, Lee called upon a roster of "humanists" who would spend time with the company and sometimes appear in the play in small roles, but who were there primarily to facilitate discussions with the audience at the end of the piece. Many of Lee's friends participated, among them English and theatre professors, religious leaders, and community activists from around the United States—as well as Ossie Davis and Estelle Parsons, actor friends from New York. William French, a professor of English (now retired) at West Virginia University in Morgantown, was asked to participate as a guest humanist in the early eighties for a production of *John Henry*. Captivated by Lee, French became a devotee and a chronicler of EcoTheater, writing a number of

---

[12] There are contradictory dates in French's book, Lee's writings and testimony in interviews.

[13] Lee's résumé also lists the Arts and Humanities of West Virginia and the Benedum Foundation as funding sources. (Résumé from Jonathan Kalb's private collection.)

journal articles, collaborating with Lee on a compilation of her Appalachian plays,[14] joining the board of EcoTheater and publishing in 1998 *Maryat Lee's EcoTheater,* in celebration of Lee, who had died in 1989 at age 66.

In *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance*, the editors identify three core questions of community-based theater: whose material is performed, who decides and who performs.[15] I will address these questions in my discussion of the Lee's *Double Threaded Life: The Hinton Play*, and also discuss the impact of the experience on the actors and the audience—as far as that can be evaluated. *The Hinton Play*, according to French, is the grand model"[16] of EcoTheater—a play written, reads a 1984 program, "by Maryat Lee from oral history accounts, with a scene by Sims Wicker"[17] (a company member and a Hintonite).

Seeking material for EcoTheater plays, Lee looked to the community she had adopted for stories to stage, beginning with the local legend, then fanning out to her neighbors for

---

[14] This project was eventually abandoned because, French says, the funding never materialized (interview by author, tape recording, Morgantown, W.Va., 9 April 2002).

[15] Tobin Nellhaus and Susan C. Haedicke, introduction to *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance*, ed. Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 13.

[16] William French, transcript of unpublished interview by Jonathan Kalb, June 1991, 12.

[17] Program for *A Double Threaded Life: The Hinton Play*,1984, cover. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 9, no folder.

contemporary and historical tales. The scenes and characters in Lee's plays were inspired by the lives of the people of the area rather than verbatim oral histories: some like John Henry were re-imagined, some entirely invented (i.e., the character from *Four Men and a Monster*), and others like Miz Dacey were composite portraits. Although the events in *The Hinton Play* were not wholly based on oral history, Lee claimed the "symbolic quality" was real[18]—another way of saying the play was fiction. Indeed any intervention by the playwright would result in a mediation of the source materials. Pointing to the intrusion of the personality and the expressivity of the ethnographic writer, James Clifford, in *Writing Culture*, writes that "in recent textual theory [fiction] has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to the truth. It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths."[19]

In fact in *The Hinton Play*, Lee did not attempt to stage a historical representation of Hinton but instead focused the piece on role play (the narrator introduces a scene: "Most people think I'm the role I'm playing. Most people think I'm quiet, average, decent, with a few oddities. I've played my

---

[18] Maryat Lee, "August 8, 1984," 5. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[19] James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986), 6.

part").[20] Lee began many of the post-show talks trying to open up the discussion with a conversation about the roles that people play. Her interest in the different selves one shows to the world versus the hidden self reflects sociological and performance concerns of that time. In 1959, Erving Goffman had published *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* about role playing and the cultivation of fronts performed for the benefit of others. And in the world of performance, writes Marvin Carlson, the exploration of
" 'alternate' selves ... to reveal fantasies or psychic autobiography had become by the mid-1970s a major approach to performance in the United States."[21] Further, during the mid-fifties, Lee had experimented with psychodrama [a process that engages in role play], writes French, although he adds that "she found it limiting to her aesthetic sense."[22] Nonetheless, Lee maintained an interest in the identity of a person beneath his mask. When Lee came to define EcoTheater, she framed that definition in terms of roles, writing: "The EcoTheater concept ... is based on the premise that hidden behind the roles people play, is bravery, brilliance,

---

[20] Maryat Lee and People of Hinton, *Double-Threaded Life: The Hinton Play* (1983 version), 4. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 26, green notebook.
[21] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 114.

[22] French, *Maryat Lee's EcoTheater,* 26-27.

expertise and resourcefulness."[23]

Lee researched her subjects and wrote monologues and scenes, constructing alternate selves for her actors. And she intended to empower the members of the Hinton company through their participation in the developmental process. She described the technique of putting the play together at a post-show discussion: "I invite people to write scenes and incorporate them in the script. Then I try them out and they might say, no, I wouldn't say such a thing like that, so we try something else."[24] Yet despite her desire to include the work of the cast, most of the scenes were written by Lee herself. I found a few scenes in the archives attributed to other writers, but there were notes on them by Lee rejecting them for a variety of reasons. As I shall discuss later in this chapter, Lee's temperament and contradictory nature conflicted with her ideals for indigenous theater.

Throughout the archives there are transcripts of interviews with townspeople (conducted by Lee and EcoTheater staff), as well as scraps of paper and backs of envelopes on which Lee jotted notes describing people in the area. Lee called herself a scavenger: "So a lot of things that people just say end up in the script ... including things the

---

[23] Maryat Lee, "Introductions and Definitions" in "Workbook 13," 22-3 June 1989, 2. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 40.

[24] Maryat Lee, "July 4, 1984," no page. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

audience says."[25] Using the stories and characters from the researched material, Lee would improvise with the actors in a first step toward development of the scenes and monologues, which she would then compose.

In keeping with Lee's goal to create a theatre by the people, she let her writing be guided by whoever she was working with: "An EcoTheater playwright develops scripts inspired by life experience based [on] capacities of the performers, rather than looking for actors to fit the roles."[26] Whereas a piece like *The Laramie Project*, discussed later in this dissertation, would emphasize that "these are the words the townspeople spoke," thus giving voice to their stories, Lee's EcoTheater attempted to give voice to the performers, allowing them to alter scripts when they felt uncomfortable saying certain phrases and encouraging them to think of the roles they were playing as facets of themselves. I would argue that this system resembles a kind of reverse typecasting and that the "Hinton" represented in the piece is a reflection of who participated in the company and of Lee's tastes.

How material gets selected in a portrait of a place and its people is a concern in each of the theatre pieces discussed in this dissertation. In an essay titled "What Makes Oral History Different," Alessandro Portelli of the

---

[25] Maryat Lee, "August 10, 1983," 4. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47.

[26] Maryat Lee in "Narrative Report for Humanities Foundation of West Virginia," 4. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 9.

University of Rome argues that "control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian," who selects the people to be interviewed, who shapes the testimony by asking the questions and reacting to the answers and "who gives the testimony its final published shape and context."[27] While Lee invited her company to be co-creators, she had final control over the interviews, the script (save for ad-libs during the performance), and the arrangement of the material. And authorship of the play would come into question, as I shall discuss later in this chapter. Yet she said she wanted to mine the company's capabilities and provide a forum for her indigenous players. Lee writes in her notes about *The Hinton Play,* that this piece "was an effort to draw a portrait of the town—not only stories about its history, or stories of the present day—but also to reveal the hidden talent of the people who live there."[28] The answer to the question, Whose material is being performed in *The Hinton Play?* is problematic. The writing, however, was mostly Lee's, except for the Sims Wicker scene.

The play was originally titled *The Day Hinton Died,* and in the narration and the sketches, what gets revealed for the most part is nostalgia, regrets, and frustration. This is tempered by comic relief in scenes that celebrate the riches

---

[27] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader,* ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 72.

[28] Maryat Lee, introduction for scene 27. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 26, "Scenes with Notes."

of country wisdom. While there are several versions of *The Hinton Play,* each based on different casts in different seasons, I will describe the series of scenes that make up the version that can be found in the West Virginia University archives, the "Mitch Scott edition," named for its narrator.

The narration that opens the play contrasts the booming Hinton of the early twentieth century with the diminished Hinton of the latter part of that century: "In the span of one person's life, this howling wilderness became a boom town, Hinton, with three hospitals—now it has one. It had three opera houses. Now it has none."[29] A scene in which a railroader tries to warn his neighbor that the diesel engine will mean loss of jobs in Hinton is followed by a monologue adapted from Lee's *John Henry* play, in which the folk hero decides to enter into the contest with the steam drill, the machine that threatens to make him redundant. The Sims Wicker scene gives a retired railroader an opportunity to reminisce about former times. He shares his romantic view of the railroad with a younger railroader on her way to work, much being made of the fact that women now work for the railroad. In the subsequent scenes appear two women, one filled with resentment, both because of the hours of waiting for her husband to return home from work and because of her unfulfilled promise; and a widow who spends sleepless nights trying to figure out who she is beyond her roles of mother and grandmother. The frustrations of the contemporary women are echoed in a monologue titled "Ethel Hinton." Her

---

[29] *A Double-Threaded Life: The Hinton Play* (1983 version), 1.

grandfather incorrectly got the credit for founding the town, so Ethel sets the record straight: it was her grandmother who donated the land for Hinton in addition to the right of way for the railroad. The countrywoman Miz Dacey (adapted from Lee's *Ole Miz Dacey*), who with common sense and seemingly plain ways can outwit almost anyone who arrives at her doorstep, makes more than one appearance in *The Hinton Play*.

Following this core of scenes about the women of Hinton is a monologue by a man who had left Hinton for the big city and has returned home after losing his family in a fire, blaming himself for sacrificing his family to the pursuit of money and possessions. Next a religious man struggles with his anger at the townspeople who have lost their way. The final monologue, about a young woman who betrays her friend in a love triangle, was written for Kathy Jackson, who as a member of the youth company had played John Henry, a role she reprised in the excerpt for *The Hinton Play*. The closing narration celebrates the natural beauties of the town and talks of the importance of the players coming together to tell its story. In the seasons that Charles Haywood—a Vietnam War veteran and Lee's neighbor—performed with the company, he played a scene Lee wrote for him, drawing on his pain as a war veteran. He also acted a monologue from *Four Men and a Monster*. Among the other scenes for *The Hinton Play* are several expository railroad sketches, familial conflict scenes, and a piece in which a historian relishes the pursuit of Appalachian lore.

Because *The Hinton Play* is a loosely connected string of

dialogues and monologues, individual scenes could be removed and rearranged based on which company members were available for a particular performance. French writes that Lee called the removable scenes "tuck scenes," and explains that "they are insurance against the uncertainties of life—sickness, a broken-down truck, a truant babysitter—for her indigenous actors."[30] There were more than forty monologues and scenes to choose from, but only nine or ten were played at one time. With the narration, the performance lasted about an hour and a half. The post-show discussion was open-ended.

In *American Alternative Theatre,* Theodore Shank writes that many alternative theatres turned away from traditional theatre spaces because among other reasons, "the arrangement hinders the development of a community spirit."[31] And in that spirit, in its early days, EcoTheater played in such diverse places as the town square, a post-office lot, a nursing home, the Bluestone Dam, storefronts, flea markets, the state fair, the state prison. The production values were minimal, and the show highly transportable: in the seventies, the troupe at first performed on the grass at Lee and Belin's farm and later on a hay wagon with a painted backdrop. By the time of *The Hinton Play,* the mise-en-scène was a bare playing space, a few chairs, and minimal personal props. *The Hinton Play* was also performed regularly in a more traditional space: one

---

[30] William French, "A Double Threaded Life: Maryat Lee's Ecotheatre," *TDR* 27 (Summer 1983): 26.

[31] Theodore Shank, *American Alternative Theatre* (London: Macmillan Modern Dramatists, 1982), 3.

night a week throughout the summer onstage at the amphitheater in Pipestem Resort State Park,[32] about fifteen miles from Hinton, to audiences ranging from twenty to one hundred people,[33] the majority of whom were not from Hinton, but were tourists.[34]

Talking about EcoTheater's strength, French writes that it is "the close relationship it established among the four basic constituents of theater: the theater as a place; the actor; the play; and the audience. Actor and audience live together in the same place. The actors emerge from the audience, are part of it, are not imported professionals."[35] But with the residency at Pipestem, French's claim of actor and audience living in the same place was no longer a distinguishing feature of EcoTheater. Still, transcripts of the post-performance talks show that the tourists in the audience connected with the people whose inner and outer selves were unfolding before them onstage. Speaking with the audience at the conclusion of *The Hinton Play* in 1983, Sophia Blaydes, professor of English at West Virginia University, said the play could unite the audience and the players and

---

[32] There was also an indoor space available: a large room with a platform in front of a picture window.

[33] Mitch Scott, telephone conversation with author, 19 May 2002.

[34] Pipestem Resort State Park has a golf course, horse stables, a nature center, lodges, campgrounds, and an amphitheater.

[35] William French, *Maryat Lee's EcoTheater: A Theater for the Twenty-First Century*, 64.

cited Margaret Mead, who "said a society can be defined as a group that knows the same story. These people are from Hinton and clearly they know the same stories. And for a moment this evening, all of us ... we have become a society."[36]

Indeed audience members recognized the community and empathized with the characters onstage. One audience member said, "There is a lot that you can identify with in terms of a small town hidden away, human characters, people that you have known, like people in Hinton."[37] Another man, who identified himself as a resident of Summers County, said: "It was interesting to see people that I see on the street and they are very much themselves. I thought that was important."[38] These kinds of reactions were what Lee was after: a verbalization of the connection that had been evinced between performer and audience.

The communications between actors and audience, says company member Joe Bigony, became part of the play and were integral to the experience of an EcoTheater production.[39] A report to the West Virginia Humanities Foundation describes

---

[36] Sophia Blaydes in "July 6, 1983," 4. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[37] Male voice in "Transcript of Audience Comments," 13 July 1983, 7. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 2, Folder 33.

[38] Phillip Dailey in "Transcript of Audience Comments," 13 July 1983, 8. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 2, Folder 33.

[39] Joe Bigony, telephone conversation with author, 7 April 2002.

the discussions as centered on the themes of the performance voices, which included "tension between town and country folks, women's roles, attitudes toward feminism, marriage and veterans."[40] Lee used extracts from these discussions for her grant reports and as program text, particularly those comments that valued her theatre over commercial theatre: "What you're doing is to show the kind of theater that people can relate to."[41] Lee felt that the connection between performer and audience members in the post-show discussions went beyond the verbal. In a 1982 note accompanying excerpts from a discussion, Lee writes that in contrast to previous years in which one-quarter to one-half of the audience stayed after the show, that summer everyone stayed. She then describes a favorite part of those sessions: "Each evening after a half hour of discussion, there was a moment of utter silence—completely unplanned. No one moved. And it was not an awkward moment. It was a lovely moment."[42] Her appreciation of this silent communication harks back to her desire for a spiritual communion in theatre.

On the bare stage, the performers directed the

---

[40] "EcoTheater Inc., 1983, Narrative Report for Humanities Foundation of West Virginia," 4. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 9.

[41] Male 3 quoted in program for *A Double Threaded Life: The Hinton Play*, 1984, no page. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 9.

[42] Maryat Lee, "Excerpts from audience discussions after plays, performances, *The Hinton Play*, summer, 1982," 1. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 2, Folder 33.

monologues to the audience (scenes, however, assumed a fourth wall). Breaking down the wall between performer and audience was supposed to be realized in the post-show communication. But as I read the transcripts and watched a post-show talk on a videotape, I got an impression of a structured rather than spontaneous discussion. The leader gave cues that elicited the same sort of questions from each audience, which in turn prompted almost rehearsed responses from the actors. The performers made much of the fact that they were not trying to act, that they were just "being" and were regular folks: "We're people just being people";[43] "I'm the secretary-treasurer of the Hinton Builder and Supply Company ... I am a nurse ... just a mother ... I am the pastor of the Presbyterian Church."[44] And audience members would affirm their familiarity with the people whose stories they had just witnessed: "My dad was a pipe fitter."[45] "The thing about [planting in] the dark of the moonlight ... my grandmother, came from West Virginia and she used to talk about that and

---

[43] Lucinda Ayres in "Transcript of Audience Comments," 13 July 1983, 2. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 2, Folder 33.

[44] Joe Bigony, Jewell Bigony, and Al Cone, in "Transcript of Audience Comments," 13 July 1983, 1. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 2, Folder 33.

[45] "Excerpts from Audience Discussions After *The Hinton Play*," 11 August 1982, 1. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 2, Folder 33.

we went by it a lot too."[46] "I could identify with the characters and especially the role playing. Typical wife, mother, working career woman and 16 million roles at one time."[47]

The performers, apt mouthpieces for Lee, would then reiterate the theme of role playing: We are able to shed roles in the safety of the stage; these characters we are playing are our real selves. Such lines became fairly rote. (Of course, it's understandable that the performers would develop set answers to questions they heard repeatedly.) Although company member Bigony said the actors could say whatever they wanted during the discussions, it is clear that their pride in their project, their belief in their leader, and their admiration for Lee (Bigony says, "Anybody can do the acting as long as you have a genius to write the play"[48]) informed their contribution to the talkbacks.

The dedicated troupe was a wonderful advertisement for Hinton. Despite the gloom of the original title, the company was in fact valorizing its hometown. As for the future of Hinton, the company members spoke of their hope that tourism would bring a boon to it. Indeed the piece piqued interest

---

[46] Male Voice in "July 6, 1983," 3. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[47] Female Voice in "July 6, 1983," 9. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[48] Joe Bigony in after-show discussion of *The Hinton Play* (7 August 1985), videocassette. This is a tape of an indoor performance at Pipestem Resort State Park. (From the private collection of Martha J. Asbury.)

about Hinton for tourists who told the EcoTheater group they now planned to drive over to see what the town was like.

But not all the Hintonites were pro-Lee. Some people in Hinton "shunned" EcoTheater, says Bigony, because they couldn't accept Lee's sexuality.[49] In defiance of the town gossip, after Lee and her partner Belin moved to Powleys Creek, Lee had put up the sign "The Women's Farm," coopting the nickname the townspeople had given it. Over the years, however, Bigony says, there was more acceptance of Lee. In an aftershow discussion in July 1983, Lee tells the audience that the year before only twenty-two Hintonites had attended the show—and that this was the first time the Summers County Commission had given the company sponsorship: "This is partly that it takes 5-7 years for a town to really begin to accept you."[50]

French says that Lee had difficulty finding people who wanted to act with EcoTheater, but she was able to secure a small core of adult players who performed in *The Hinton Play* for most of its history.[51] Prominent among the members of the Hinton company was Lucinda Ayres, a Hinton resident and mother of four children (three of whom participated in the EcoTheater youth company). Lee credits Ayres with having persuaded her to resume EcoTheater after its two-year

---

[49] Bigony, telephone conversation.

[50] Maryat Lee in "July 6, 1983," 8. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[51] French, interview.

hiatus.[52] Ayres not only acted with the company but also joined the office staff and eventually became EcoTheater's business manager. Kathy Jackson started with the youth group in 1978, continued with the adult company and worked with EcoTheater for several years after Lee's death. Sims Wicker was a retired railroad worker and a former mayor of Hinton. A onetime ballroom and tap dancer, Joe Bigony was in business with the Hinton Builders Supply. Mitch Scott was a relative of Lee's who lived in Lewisburg and worked for one season as a narrator. Lee's neighbor Charles Haywood worked with the company in *Four Men* and *The Hinton Play*, but his participation was not continuous. (Lee describes him unflatteringly in "To Will One Thing" as an "an anti-social Vietnam veteran living down the road in a cabin with four dogs and no other relatives in the world, seeking a haven in which to heal with the help of liquor.")[53]

The primary conceit, that the players were "regular" people and decidedly not actors, was stated in the opening line of the narration for *The Hinton Play:* "Folks, I am not an actor."[54] And at a post-show talk, company member Bigony tells the audience: "We are not trained to act. We are doing

---

[52] Maryat Lee in "August 8, 1984," 2. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, blue notebook.

[53] "To Will One Thing," 52.

[54] *The Hinton Play* (1983 version), 1.

it just as if we would have done it, telling you something."[55] Lee viewed training as an obstacle to being genuine onstage. Bigony told me the requirement for EcoTheater was that you couldn't be a trained actor, that everything was done "naturally."[56]

Lee had faith in the expressive abilities of nonprofessionals. In "To Will One Thing," Lee writes that locals rarely have any difficulty with overacting, whereas she had to work hard to "deprogram" the interns, telling them to "just say the words, make it as boring as you can"[57]—in an effort to rid them of affect and get them back to neutral. Her contention was that nonactors are more willing to show themselves onstage than trained actors.

In the material for her training workshops, Lee wrote: "In EcoTheater we have no actors in the usual sense of the word. ... instead of studying the roles, they experience moments of being themselves ... *They* come through (*per*) the role (*form*). They risk being."[58] Mitch Scott, the 1983 narrator, says he understood that Lee didn't want people to put on airs or be uncomfortable. But he says he was

---

[55] Joe Bigony, "Transcript, August 29, 1984," 5. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[56] Bigony, telephone conversation with author, 7 April 2002.

[57] "To Will One Thing, "50.

[58] Maryat Lee, "The EcoTheater Performer" in "Workbook 13," 11. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 40.

frustrated because he didn't know how to do what she said she wanted. Still, he adds, after the end of the season, at a special performance at West Virginia University, he believes he achieved what Lee was after, something he calls a transcendent state.[59] That could also be called a lack of self-consciousness, merging with the text—or acting. Lee, however, calls this being.

In her last years, Lee was writing a book titled *BEING*,[60] echoing the term used by acting coach Eric Morris. In a list of "Books that Influenced Maryat," French includes *No Acting Please* by Eric Morris and Joan Hotchkiss. Morris, who runs an actors workshop in Los Angeles, trains actors with his Being exercises, in which he encourages actors to delve into their own feelings and reactions, to discover themselves fully so that they can use themselves onstage—and thus achieve authenticity in performance. Lee assumed an authenticity in her indigenous nonactors. However, I suggest that when a troupe has been performing together for number of years, it's difficult to maintain the nonactor stance.

Watching a 1985 video recording, I observed that company members were using gestures and movements to indicate a character's attitudes, a toss of the head, crossing the arms, a hesitation, a sidelong glance, which all looked practiced—and hardly spontaneous or "authentic." Indeed twentieth century actor-training systems were developed not

---

[59] Mitch Scott, telephone conversation.

[60] William French says there were notes for this book on a set of disks for an outmoded computer system. They cannot be retrieved (interview).

only to help actors use their own feelings on stage, but also to help them avoid becoming stilted and stale in a medium that necessitates repetition.

But Lee was adamant about the actor/nonactor divide: "As actors [nonactors] can really do something that—for me—is much more satisfying than seeing a show with a lot of slick trained professional actors."[61] She wrote that when she tried to include trained people, they couldn't adjust to the EcoTheater style. In an introduction for the proposed volume of Appalachian plays, Lee relates a story of casting a man with years of community-theatre experience and warning him that he "would have to go through an ordeal and have to give up a lot of habits and cherished notions about theater." This actor, she writes, didn't make it through the whole EcoTheater season. (Nor did a local young man whom Lee calls a "theatre buff.") However, she writes, her neighbor, the Vietnam veteran, "who had never been exposed to the theater," was successful in the leading role of the play.[62]

In a rare positive reference to the actor as artist, Lee conceded: "To lay aside the roles we all play in life ... to lay aside years of accumulated detritus and bad self images and be there, exposed in all his or her power and fragility ... I know that this experience seems to happen to a few of

---

[61] Maryat Lee in "July 13, 1983, Transcript of Audience Comments," 9. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 2, Folder 33.

[62] Maryat Lee, "Author's *Notes on Four Men and a Monster*," 2-3. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 9.

the very great actors who seem to transcend all kinds of barriers. But it can also happen to plain people, when they take the risk."[63] But for the most part, she felt the need to draw the lines, us versus them, going so far as to title a conference paper "Legitimate Theatre Is Illegitimate."[64]

Lee's anti-theatrical prejudice led her to align herself not just with her indigenous actors but also with a country audience, who, she claimed, "instinctively knows ... that theater is an enemy."[65] Lee chose dramatic ways to express herself, but of course she embraced theatre as her medium, even while setting herself apart from the rest of the theatre world. In a post-show talkback, an audience member expressed his own disregard for professional theatre, speaking first of an identification with the people onstage at Pipestem, and then adding, "I hope I don't have too much in common with some of the things that you see on Broadway which is always either sadistic or lustful or some manner of homosexuality or some garbage such as that."[66] It was in Lee's interest not to disagree with such a comment, and she didn't.

She set her theatre in opposition to TV, films, and

---

[63] "To Will One Thing," 47-48.

[64] Maryat Lee, "Legitimate Theatre Is Illegitimate," 11-24.

[65] Maryat Lee, notes for *Ole Miz Dacey*, no page. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 2, Folder 33.

[66] Male Voice (27 July 1983) in "Excerpts from tapes made during the discussions with the audiences," in "Narrative Report for Humanities Foundation of West Virginia, Part I," 9. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 9.

Broadway, excerpting for her humanities reports such comments as "[the actors] moved me far more than I've been moved by anything I've seen on Broadway and certainly the movies, the cinema, you can forget about it. You have moved me."[67] She persisted in pitting her theatre against professional theatre as part of the promotion of her work, which she needed to aggrandize. David Miller, who worked as a group leader for the GSYP teens and acted in *Ole Miz Dacey* in the summer of 1982, says about the EcoTheater actors: "It was rare that they were really good, but when they were that made the rest of it worthwhile."[68] The acting on the August 1985 tape of *The Hinton Play* is amateurish. Some actors pace the empty stage while speaking, look down at the floor, say their lines as if they didn't know the point of the entire speech, and yet the audience appears to be paying attention: they laugh; they stay for the discussion and say things like, "It was very easy to get into the play. I feel as if I met the woman."[69] Evidence from the tape and the post-show transcripts bears out some of Lee's claims about the power of grassroots theatre.

Lee had invested herself in the Hinton community and

---

[67] Male Voice (31 August 1983) in "Excerpts from tapes made during the discussions with the audiences," in "Narrative Report for Humanities Foundation of West Virginia, Part I," 11. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 9.

[68] David Miller, telephone conversation with author, 3 June 2002.

[69] Audience member in after-show discussion of *The Hinton Play* (7 August 1985), videocassette.

viewed her project as "healing of the community, the restoration of its pride, and the demonstration of our own—your own—creativity and caring."[70] David Miller agrees that *The Hinton Play* gave dignity to Hinton, which it was in need of: "If you just drive through it, you see a rundown, faded town. But it had a nobility to it, and the play gave that perspective to Hinton."[71] That the process of making theatre could feed a community was echoed by British playwright Ann Jellicoe, who in the late seventies and early eighties was responsible for a community-play movement in England. Jellicoe writes in her book *Community Plays: How to Put Them On:* "The unity of the event derives from a simple shift of focus, away from theatre, towards community."[72]

Lee too wished to spread her ideas for her brand of community drama via a series of training courses. Preparing for these EcoTheater workshops, which she conducted from 1987 till her death, Lee attempted to codify her principles. She called the people in the community co-creators who are "experts in their own surroundings" and "can fill the form of the evolving script with genuine ... authority."[73] But

---

[70] Maryat Lee, "Notes to the Company, July 16, 1986." Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Addendum, Box 2 of 4, Folder "EcoTheater."

[71] Miller, telephone conversation.

[72] Ann Jellicoe, *Community Plays: How to Put Them On* (London: Methuen, 1987), vii.

[73] Maryat Lee, "Standards and Patterns" and "Playwright-Director Defined" in "Workbook 13," 7, 8. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 40.

authority was a sticky issue for Lee. She wrote in her workbook and in correspondence about "flipping" authority (letting someone else besides the leader assume it for a time), but in fact giving over control was not something she was willing to do in the end. Indeed to assert her authority, she would use phrases like "the Board and my advisors."[74] The board, a legal necessity for funding of a nonprofit organization, was, says French, Lee's creature; "she appointed people who she knew would do more or less what she wanted to do."[75] So the board was invoked after Lee no longer lived in Hinton (she had left the farm and moved to a house in Lewisburg in 1984) and wasn't physically present to oversee the project. In a 1987 letter to the Hinton company, when Lee was devoting herself to her workshops and no longer supervising the Pipestem performances, she wrote: "The Playwright-Director in training must learn to take authority ... and only then learns how to 'flip' this authority to the performers so that the performers can do what you so brilliantly have shown the world can be done. But the performers truly are co-creators even at this early stage. Then the authority flips back to the author who then has sole responsibility for choices to be made in the further and final writing of the script."[76] She described several more

---

[74] Maryat Lee, "Memo to Hinton Company," 7 July 1988, 1. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 20, "Correspondence 1985-89."

[75] William French, interview.

[76] "Memo to Hinton Company," 1.

flips with the end result being that the playwright-director is in charge. Indeed Judith Walker, who was the playwright-director of the Wyoming County (W.Va.) EcoTheater seed company, told me that for her company, a troupe of five performers, Walker did the oral-history research and the writing throughout its nine-year history.[77]

Because Lee was no longer living in Hinton and because she had a falling out with her business manager/company actress Lucinda Ayres, the Hinton company began to fall apart by 1987. And ownership of the play became an issue. At the outset, Lee had cited both herself and the community as authors and owners of the play, but as time went on her attitude seemed to change. In his 1983 article for *TDR*, French includes the following copyright information: 1982, by Maryat Lee with people of Hinton and Summers County, West Virginia. In programs for 1982 and 1983, the authorship is: by the People of Hinton and Maryat Lee.[78] The 1983 Mitch Scott edition includes the following authors and copyright information: by Maryat Lee and People of Hinton, copyright 1983, Maryat Lee et al.[79] As cited earlier, a 1984 program read: "by Maryat Lee from oral history accounts, with a scene

---

[77] Judith Walker, telephone conversation with author, 19 June 2002. Walker's group began in 1985 and disbanded in 1994.

[78] "Programs and Posters," Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 6, Folder 9.

[79] Maryat Lee and People of Hinton, *Double-Threaded Life: The Hinton Play* (1983 version), 1. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 26, green notebook.

by Sims Wicker." Perhaps in explanation of this change, in 1985, Lee wrote to the Hinton company: "As you know I tried to copyright it in the name of Hinton and me. This turned out impossible to do. So I am copyrighting the material I have written in my name (with acknowledgements of your help) except for the scene that Sims wrote."[80] By 1988, her position on ownership had solidified: "In my enthusiasm years ago, I wanted to copyright the Hinton Play in the name of the people of Hinton. The Board told me I could not do this, nor would it be advisable for many reasons, and that especially because it is a model, historically, I must maintain control to be sure that the process and concept would continue uncompromised."[81]

In each of the three companies I am devoting a chapter to, control and ownership of the property were problematic because of the use of gathered material via interviews and research and because of the improvisational process in script development. In conversation with Jonathan Kalb, French said that Lee was conflicted about writing down the plays for publication because "it's a unique experience, the next time it's going to be different, there's no way that you can

---

[80] Maryat Lee, "To the EcoTheater Company," 19 July 1985, 2. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Addendum, Box 3 of 4, blue notebook.

[81] Maryat Lee, "Memo to the Hinton Company," 7 July 1988. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 20, "Correspondence 1985-89."

pinpoint it."[82] And when she was no longer in charge of the productions and was worried about losing control, she told the Hinton company that if they wanted to do the play, they could perform it but only if they adhered to the "Standards and Patterns" of EcoTheater that she had enumerated in her workbooks.[83]

Lee's workbooks that laid out her principles were to be used to train playwright-directors for seed companies in a three-year program of six one-week workshops, a system, French says, that became almost byzantine.[84] Each seed company would have its own playwright-director and perform its own series of scenes. In his interview with French, Kalb suggests that "the idea of a training center for the development of indigenous theatre is something of a contradiction in terms."[85] In fact when one of the coordinators of the seed companies veered from Lee's proscriptions, Lee told the leader that she could no longer use the EcoTheater name, which she had the rights to and of which she was fiercely protective. By the time of her death, Lee listed seven seed companies using the EcoTheater name, in West Virginia,

---

[82] William French, transcript of unpublished interview by Jonathan Kalb, June 1991, 1.

[83] Maryat Lee in "Memo to the Hinton Company," 7 July 1988, 2. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 20, "Correspondence 1985-89."

[84] William French, interview.

[85] William French, transcript of unpublished interview by Jonathan Kalb, June 1991, 3.

Kentucky, Illinois, and Texas. But the organization couldn't sustain the loss of its leader for more than a few years. After Lee's death, there was a power struggle between two factions, says David Miller, who was by that time a member of the board: one wanted to keep everything together, with authorized seed companies; the other wanted to let groups spin into what they chose to become. "No organization can hold together under those circumstances," says Miller.[86] In the early nineties, EcoTheater, which after Lee's death had been overseen by Kathy Jackson and Martha Asbury, was given over, with the sanction of Lee's brother, to Asbury, who had worked with Lee for only about six months as a secretary, but who had strong organizational skills, says Miller. Asbury continues to lead a small EcoTheater company in Lewisburg, W.Va., performing during the summer at Pipestem. In the past she has used scenes from Lee's plays; a recent piece is about Appalachian women, constructed like *The Hinton Play*, Asbury says.[87]

I contacted some Hinton company members to talk about EcoTheater's impact on them. The retired railroader Sims Wicker has died. Another member, Suzie Keffer, was too infirm to be interviewed, but in 1984 just before she joined EcoTheater, she wrote to Lee: "You're a remarkably talented person who knows how to bring out the best in those around her ... you've done so much for us. I just hope you continue

---

[86] Miller, telephone conversation with author, 3 June 2002.

[87] Martha Asbury, telephone conversation with author, 24 April 2002.

your work in Summers County."[88] Lucinda Ayres, now 57, declined to speak with me. In *The Hinton Play* talkbacks, Ayres, the apparent mainstay and star of the company, said of EcoTheater: "I love it"[89] and "Having been in the theater has changed me drastically. In fact I had a confession to Maryat a couple of weeks ago ... I said, up here on stage was the only place that I did not feel shy and I didn't feel fat."[90] By 1987, however, Ayres, who French said had an intimate relationship with Lee, was being accused of embezzlement as well as lying and causing dissension within the company—and after much interpersonal drama was asked by Lee to leave the company.[91] If the value of the project rests on the experience of the people, then it's particularly unfortunate that such a relationship was allowed to spin out of control and affect the welfare of the company.

Bigony, now 75, has fond memories of performing in *The Hinton Play* and was happy to talk about his time with the company. He said he had fulfilled a lifelong interest working

---

[88] Suzie Keffer to Maryat Lee, 20 November 1984. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Addendum, Box 2 of 4, "EcoTheater."

[89] Lucinda Ayres in "August 10, 1983," 3. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[90] Lucinda Ayres in "August 17, 1983," 4. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, transcripts binder.

[91] Maryat Lee to Lucinda Ayres, 4 July 1987, Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Addendum, Box 3 of 4, "Hinton—LA."

with EcoTheater; because there was no community theatre before EcoTheater, his only chance to act had been in high school. Mitch Scott, the narrator in 1983, developed a taste for performing and in 1987 appeared in John Sayles' film *Matewan* (as did two other EcoTheater members).

Kathy Jackson, who started with EcoTheater in 1978 at age 14, was put in charge of GSYP for Greenbrier County when Lee was able to get funding again for that program in 1987. Without Lee at the helm, scene writing was done by the teens, who tackled such subjects as "father-son difficulties" and "reuniting of a broken family."[92] After Lee's death, Jackson was named artistic director of EcoTheater (Asbury was the administrator). She continued supervision of the EcoTheater youth groups until the early nineties. I was unable to have a conversation with her. Bigony said that Jackson now works as a carpenter's helper. Speaking in a post-show discussion in 1983, Jackson expressed interest in a life in theatre, but when the performers were asked whether EcoTheater had given them a new understanding of themselves, Jackson replied: "It don't change me anyway because once I leave this theater I'm the same ole Kathy Jackson that I am at home. I don't share my parts of the theater with my family or anyone. I do it here and I go home and I just be myself."[93] At the time

---

[92] News Release, 26 July 1987. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 6, Folder 19.

[93] Kathy Jackson in "Pipestem State Park," 17 August 1983, 5. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 47, blue notebook.

Jackson was a single mother with ongoing financial difficulties. EcoTheater allowed her to assume alternate selves onstage and to get recognition and approval for those selves.

By all accounts Lee was a charismatic woman who inspired people to tap into their creativity. Judith Walker says Lee changed her life, helping her realize that everyone has a story to tell and encouraging Walker to collect those stories and turn them into performance.[94] Lee was an able fund raiser and had a network of influential friends who helped her get recognition for her EcoTheater work, including an America the Beautiful Fund National Recognition Award. The reading of scripts and viewing of tapes are insufficient for the evaluation of such a project when the meaning of that project lies in the process, in gathering the material for the text, in having scenes especially written for members of the cast, in the rehearsals in a barn on a farm, in the setting up of their stage and equipment, in hanging out their banner that announced an EcoTheater performance, in the making of theatre where there had been none.

Still, this theatre wasn't entirely able to live up to its democratic credo and instead functioned as a pyramid structure, with Lee at the top and Lee constructing the voices of the plays as well as determining which voices would be staged. The editors of *Performing Democracy* pose the question: "Are the people's stories and lives being mined for

---

[94] Walker, telephone conversation with author, 19 June 2002.

the benefit of the facilitator?"[95] There is no simple answer to that question vis-à-vis *The Hinton Play*. The play didn't have a life beyond its home environment and without the Hinton players for whom it had been written. Despite the memos over authorship and ownership, Lee had achieved her intention: the material, the town, and the performers were inextricably linked.

Kalb's "Requiem for Maryat Lee" cites precedents for Lee's work with EcoTheater, saying it "superficially resembles a scaled-down version of the mass spectacles and outdoor pageants that Percy MacKaye outlined in *Community Drama* (1917)."[96] *The Hinton Play* was very much scaled down: there were only five or six performers in the cast, because as French says, Lee had a hard time getting people to participate. In contrast, Ann Jellicoe's community-drama projects involved hundreds of people as actors and production staff. In the *Politics of Performance,* Baz Kershaw writes that Jellicoe was "particularly influential in 1980s alternative theatre in large part because ... the scale of ... projects almost guaranteed an impact on the community."[97] Jellicoe's community-drama project moved from town to town, and playwrights Howard Barker and David Edgar were among

---

[95] Nellhaus and Haedicke, 15.

[96] Jonathan Kalb, "Requiem for Maryat Lee," 3. Unpublished paper from Jonathan Kalb's private collection.

[97] Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 1994, 1999), 176.

those contracted to write plays for each new venue. However Lee continued to work in Hinton with a small group of people and recycled her play over a number of years, seeking growth instead via training the playwright-directors who then would generate plays in their own communities.

In the "Standards & Patterns" section of her workbook, Lee described the impetus for her grassroots drama: "We believe that people want a place where their sometimes invisible communities can be seen, be in touch with, and nourished by the truths and riches hidden in the corners and under the surface of everyday life."[98] Judith Walker's two scenes about the everyday lives of three particular women that are included in French's book enabled Walker to give voice to women's personal stories, stories that often go untold.[99]

In *The Voice of the Past,* Paul Thompson writes that oral history implies "for most kinds of history some shift of focus ... Without its evidence, the historian can discover very little indeed about either the ordinary family's contacts with neighbours and kin, or its internal relationships."[100] The railroad wife, the war veteran, the businessman who lost his family, the characters of *The Hinton Play,* all represent Lee's attempt to shift the focus of

---

[98] Maryat Lee, "Standards & Patterns," in "Workbook 13," 1. Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, Box 40.

[99] Walker, telephone conversation with author, 19 June 2002.

[100] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 5,7.

attention onto the lives of the people in a small town in West Virginia—through their stories and the onstage presence of the people from that town.

EcoTheater was an example of a grassroots effort to stage the lives of the people from a small American town, a community that can hardly boast of national prominence. While the company's first play was about the legendary John Henry, a folk hero who has been heralded in many stories and songs, the final play, *The Hinton Play,* featured the "inner" lives of the people in Hinton, giving leading roles to the ordinary railroad workers and their families, people whose lives had previously been unsung. The play by its very title and subject matter implied that this was a place worthy of having its story told. While Maryat Lee kept a tight rein on EcoTheater, she encouraged amateur actors to participate in the telling of their community's story. And although those performances were flawed by professional standards, they had significance for the participants and apparently for members of the audience—justifying the premise of EcoTheater as a theater "by and for the people."

In the next chapter, I will look at a company of professional actors, who also wished to stage the voices of the "ordinary" people in a portrait of their town, gathering the material in the *Letters to the Editor* column from local newspapers.

Chapter Three: Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble's *Letters to the Editor*

This chapter focuses on a production mounted by a professional theatre company, the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble (BTE), based in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, whose members set out to construct a theatrical portrait of its town and environs through letters written to local newspapers. With particular attention to the details of everyday life and the foibles of the regional folk, BTE created a loving, romanticized picture of the townspeople throughout the years. I will discuss how the company researched and selected documents to arrive at its version of Bloomsburg, editing the materials, assembling them and interpreting the townspeople's words based on considerations of what constitutes a viable theatrical entertainment and the company's interest in forging connections with the people that patronize the BTE.

Founded in 1978 by a group of actors studying with acting teacher Alvina Krause, the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble calls itself a community-centered professional theatre. It is a nonprofit resident theatre ensemble, with eight full-time members, two buildings, including a 350-seat theatre and an annual budget of $600,000.[1] Member Gerard Stropnicky describes Bloomsburg as a lovely little town of twelve thousand, a rural community that includes industrialists, factory

[1] "A Brief History," *www.bte.org,* 1 November 2001.

workers, farmers, and professors.[2] Bloomsburg University is located there and accounts for almost half the population of the town. Not only does the theatre have a place in the life of the town, says member James Goode, but the actors also participate in the community, serving on committees of civic organizations.[3]

The company was featured in *American Theatre* magazine in summer 1991 in an article by Todd London titled "Gentle Revolutionaries," which celebrated the theatre collective, its democratic structure and its very existence in a small rural community. BTE has been profiled in two dissertations: one looks at the growth of small regional theatres in America;[4] the other is an overview of the ensemble from its inception in 1978 through 1998.[5] In the "Theatre and Social Change" issue of *Theater* magazine, writer Arlene Goldbard included BTE in a list of socially concerned theatres, characterizing it as a deep-rooted regional group and citing the section of its mission statement that talks about working in a rural region where "dialogue with an audience is

---

[2] Gerard Stropnicky, foreword to *Letters to the Editor,* ed. Gerard Stropnicky, Tom Byrn, James Goode and Jerry Matheny (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 15.

[3] James Goode, telephone conversation with author, 20 November 2000.

[4] Vincent Anthony Landro, "Theatres That Work: A Study of Successful Growth in Small Regional Theatres in America" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1997).

[5] Brian Maxwell, "The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, 1978-1998: Searching for a Community's Voice" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2000).

possible."[6] I am interested in examining the nature of the dialogue BTE promoted with its audience, in terms of its selection of the documentary materials and its staging of *Letters to the Editor*.

A typical season at BTE, like that of other regional theatres, is made up of a mix of contemporary and classic plays chosen by the whole ensemble. The plays run from three to four weeks, Thursday through Sunday. The 2001-2 season featured *The Rose Tattoo, A Christmas Story, Cobb* by Lee Blessing, *Defying Gravity* by Jane Anderson and *Death of a Salesman*. The theatre also runs Theatre in the Classroom, which a publicity pamphlet describes as a tour of an original production "based on national or international folk literature" for grade-school students, and Project Discovery, which brings 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-graders from the surrounding counties to free student matinees.[7] A Summer Family Show is produced by BTE, Bloomsburg University Players and community members.

Letters to the Editor began as a company lab in summer 1994, but the idea for the project had been conceived some years earlier. While doing research for a commission for the bicentennial of Berwick, Pennsylvania [*Berwick, America!, 1986*], Stropnicky and ensemble member Leigh Strimbeck found funny letters among a collection of newspaper clippings about the controversy over whether the town's baseball players

---

[6] Arlene Goldbard, "Memory, Money, and Persistence: Theater of Social Change in Context," *Theater* 31 (2001), 131.

[7] BTE publicity pamphlet for Project Discovery.

could have mustaches, which Strimbeck says "gave them a glimpse of a germ of another project."[8] Stropnicky, who calls himself a newspaper addict, started collecting letters, and in September 1991 he submitted a proposal to his company for a piece constructed out of letters to the editor, an "original BTE piece" that would "carry distinctive, colorful and opinionated regional voices."[9]

But the ensemble couldn't afford to mount the workshop until 1994, when the company was awarded a $5,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts/Expansion Arts Program;[10] at that time it also had room in its schedule to undertake such a project. Members of the ensemble began to research Letters to the Editor columns in newspapers of Columbia County spanning two centuries, among them the *Oracle*, the *Berwick Enterprise*, the *Bloomsburg Daily*, the *Sunbury Times*, and the *Press Enterprise*. They were looking not so much for historic events as for characters—as well as letters written by what they call the "common citizen."[11] Two years after the summer workshop, *Letters* was reworked as a two-act play with music and presented as part of the Bloomsburg Theatre

---

[8] Leigh Strimbeck, telephone conversation with author, 31 October 2001.

[9] Memo from Jerry Stropnicky to the Ensemble, 23 September 1991, director's private collection.

[10] The script also credits grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, which contributes to BTE's general operating funds.

[11] "The Unexpected Journey of *Letters to the Editor*," *www.bte.org*, 1 November 2001.

Ensemble's mainstage season; it was revived in 1998. The company toured *Letters* to other towns in Pennsylvania and performed it in a festival in California. BTE was invited to perform a reader's theatre version of *Letters* at the Pennsylvania Newspaper Publishers Conference (1996) and excerpts of it at the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington, D.C. (1997). WVIA public television (Pennsylvania) taped a performance in October 1998, which was aired that November and later sold as a video. The script was published by Baker's Plays (1999).

In addition to the limited tour,[12] BTE and *Letters* were featured on NPR's *Weekend Edition* with Scott Simon, and an off-Broadway producer expressed interest in mounting the piece. The off-Broadway deal fell through in part because the producer wanted to recast the play and use his own director. BTE turned down as well requests from other theatre groups that wanted to mount the play.[13] It was not primarily interested in disseminating its work. In 1998 Simon & Schuster published an expanded book version of the letters, with additional research and editing by Stropnicky, Goode, actor Tom Byrn and the play's stage manager Jerry Matheny. Along with the letters, organized by theme—"Crime Log"; "Women and Men: Marriage"; "Your Next-Door Neighbor"—are

---

[12] James Goode, interview by author, tape recording, Bloomsburg, Pa., 12 October 2001.

[13] In fall 2002, a local high school mounted the play. Stropnicky to author, 16 January 2002, via e-mail. BTE also present a staged reading of the play, including community members in the cast, in summer 2002 to celebrate the town's bicentennial.

photographs of Bloomsburg, as well as pictures of some of the letter writers, old picture postcards, and sidebars that give historical information.

Letters to the Editor, the play, covering material from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, looks at the changing face of an American town and its attitudes toward citizenship, war and its aftermath, racism, drug use, as well as marriage and the family. The piece is laced with comic letters and even the serious issue-oriented sections are punctuated with comedic bits. Stropnicky says, "I believe that you can't get people to listen unless you get them to laugh."[14] Throughout *Letters,* the thrust is to be entertaining, not just in the choice of material but also in the pacing and staging. The opening letter begins: "I feel it is about time someone said something good about Bloomsburg,"[15] after which the script suggests that the actor take a long pause, which in both taped versions of the play gets a big laugh,[16] until the actor resumes speaking and hesitantly comes up with a few good things about Bloomsburg: the schools never went on strike and even turned out some fine students.

The letters in act 1 go back and forth in time. There

---

[14] Gerard Stropnicky, interview by author, tape recording, Bloomsburg, Pa., 9 October 2001.

[15] Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, *Letters to the Editor,* adapted for the stage by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble (Quincy, Mass.: Baker's Plays, 1999), 5.

[16] Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, *Letters to the Editor,* dir. Gerard Stropnicky, Corey Productions, 1996, videocassette. Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, *Letters to the Editor,* prod. and dir. Richard E. Briggs, WVIA, 1998, videocassette.

are complaints about the lack of upkeep of the houses in town; an examination of the benefits and drawbacks of the town's expansion; a diatribe against mistimed traffic lights; a paean to the Bloomsburg Fair by a senior citizen who collapsed there and was helped out by boy scouts on the fairgrounds; a series of letters that unveils a postage scam in the late nineteenth century; another series of letters by a dedicated oppositionist named John Q. Timbrell who takes umbrage at ethnic diversity, the state lottery, and anti-nuclear rallies; a letter from a puppy who gets tied up outside in the cold for too many hours and one from a woman whose underwear is being stolen off her laundry line by, she suspects, a man who likes to dress in women's undergarments. On the more serious side, act 1 ends with a long section of war letters, dating from the Civil War through Desert Storm and chronicling the hardships suffered by soldiers in combat.

The droll material in the first and second acts is drawn from a column called 30 Seconds, which was introduced in the local paper in the early 1990s and invites people to phone in their comments. Though they are published alongside the letters, which must be signed, the 30 Seconds callers can remain anonymous. The call-in sections are sprinkled throughout for comic relief. In act 1, there's a section of several calls about adultery in a trailer park, with tidbits about the affair and advice to the injured party.

Act 2 is made up of contemporary letters: about unions and workers; a plea from a teenage mother that girls not let themselves be pressured into sexual relations; a dispute over

whether the town's farmers' market provides a service or is just a traffic obstruction; an antifeminist view of the woman's role; a town/gown controversy stirred up by Earth Day activities; a treatise on the changing position of the sunset; an account of childhood sexual abuse. In this act too one theme is emphasized in a major section. Titled "Hate," it is framed by a letter written by a black woman about the discrimination against blacks in Bloomsburg. This section includes additional letters about racism, religious and ethnic prejudice, homosexuality, and on a lighter note, the number of fat people in Pennsylvania. Act 2's 30 Seconds again provides comic relief with a teenage marijuana user who wants to party; a karaoke contestant who came in fifth and insists the contest was rigged; a woman who offers operating instructions to the thief who stole the grill from her back porch.

The set for the mainstage production was divided into distinct areas with set pieces that suggested different spaces of a home, as well as a generalized outdoors place: a kitchen table and chairs, a desk and a chair, a living room couch with an end table and a lamp, and an all-purpose bench. The name of the newspaper and the date of the letter were projected on a screen before the recitation (for the most part, signatures were included in the recitation), as were pictures of the streets of Bloomsburg and its inhabitants.

Four actors[17] (three men and one woman) played all the

[17] There were only three actors in the '94 workshop production.

roles; period songs and original music were performed by a singer/guitarist.[18] Actors wore representative costume pieces and used props to delineate character: a frilly cape and straw hat, army fatigues, a musket, a wheelchair. Most of the letters (about fifty, along with excerpts of some fifty others) were performed out front, but every effort was made to push the staging beyond monologue delivery directed to the audience. The director's notes for the 1998 production call for a creation of moods and moments: "Bring us to Main Street in 1895. To Khe Sahn in 1970 or Manila in 1899. Let us feel what it is like in Mollie's kitchen one afternoon. Or in Daniel's student apartment."[19]

Actors invented activities for their letter writers: hanging up or folding laundry, munching on crackers, transforming a tie into a pendulum as the writer denies working as a hypnotist—as well as typing, handwriting and dictating the letters. The 30 Seconds pieces were done as phone-ins, some from a pay phone, with the actors lined up to take their turn; another from an actor lying on a couch, "stoned" as he rhapsodized about marijuana use. The hate section was transformed into a kind of soapbox arena in which

---

[18] Stropnicky considers the musician, who was a woman, another actor in the piece. He stressed this when I questioned him about the uneven cast in terms of three men and one woman. He said he cast the actors who were available at that point in the season, but adds that the letters columns were apparently dominated by male voices. Gerard Stropnicky to author, 16 January 2002, via e-mail.

[19] Gerard Stropnicky, "Notes from Third Preview, Thursday, 8 October 1998," director's private collection.

actors brought chairs on stage and stood on them to deliver their diatribes and complaints. The staging of the sunset letter, titled "Catawissa Galileo," caught the particular attention of Geoff Gehman, arts writer for the *Morning Call* (Allentown, Pa), and contributor to *American Theatre*, who wrote that the letter as performed was "a lightning rod of an affectionate homage to Robert Wilson, complete with an eerie John Cageian score and a suspended slow-motion chair."[20] And the audience on the 1996 tape reveled in the hilarity of an upside-down chair traveling a path along a hanging wire as the letter writer speculated that the changing position of the sunsets is connected to the launching of rockets to the moon. That the letter writer turns out to be a retired English professor elicited even more laughter from the audience.

The 1994 workshop involved Strimbeck, actors Rand Whipple and Tom Byrn, a relative newcomer at that time to BTE.[21] Director Stropnicky set up a schedule dividing the day into three parts: library research, reconvening to read aloud the letters they had found and then performing the letters for one another. (This process was repeated when the play was expanded two years later.) Calling himself the editor from the very beginning, Stropnicky proposed to have the company find funny letters, letters about dogs, issues letters on

---

[20] Geoff Gehman, "Every Letter Is a Soapbox," *American Theatre*, September 1996, 69.

[21] Due to illness, actress Sharon Pabst filled in for Strimbeck in the final performance of the five-show run in August 1994.

racism.[22] He also intended to shape the piece, and he did so early on. Strimbeck says that BTE was unaccustomed to presenting a work-in-progress, so the effort in the workshop was toward developing a product. Indeed a complaint at a post-workshop company critique had to do with the product orientation, suggesting that a reading of unedited letters might have been more interesting—without having "set stuff to do."[23]

At post-production company critiques, a tradition at BTE, the artists involved in the work and the rest of the ensemble have a chance to question one another about the choices made for the show as well as affirm and criticize aspects of the production. Despite the criticism, in subsequent productions of *Letters* in 1996 and 1998, although material was added to lengthen the play, only one or two sections were actually reworked. In addition, when an actor stepped into another actor's roles, for the most part s/he assumed the interpretation of the original actor. Stropnicky says he didn't insist on this, but did ask for some consistency in limited rehearsal periods for the two-person letters, while being willing to allow actors to reinterpret monologues.[24] However, when I interviewed two of the "replacement" actors, Jim Goode and Laurie McCants, they

---

[22] Gerard Stropnicky, "Director's Proposal: *Letters to the Editor,*" 15 May 1994, director's private collection.

[23] "*Letters to the Editor* Critique," from 1994, theatre's collection.

[24] Gerard Stropnicky to author, 16 January 2002, via e-mail.

spoke of assuming the previous actor's interpretation as a given. Stropnicky suggests this could have been due to an element of the BTE philosophy, which is to be guided by the text, to "search into the text for the heart that it offers, and to express that."[25] This attitude echoes an actor-training system that assumes authorial intentionality and favors a fixed interpretation of the text. But it misses an opportunity to explore the possibilities in the multiplicity of viewpoints that a play based the voices of the townspeople offers.

Jim Sachetti, editor of the *Press Enterprise* since 1986, is a presence throughout the piece. His name caps off an opening recitation of the names of various editors; his voiceover introduces the 30 Seconds column, designed, he says, to stimulate debate among area residents on "all kinds of topics and issues."[26] Sachetti told me that he considers the paper the only soapbox in a town that has no radio station with any type of free form. Thus the newspaper, he says, has a special role in terms of the community dialogue. With an eye on keeping "the door to dialogue as open as possible," he runs letters he disagrees with, that might be poorly written, that he thinks are ridiculous, that might be considered hate letters—in hopes, he says, that "good" people

---

[25] Stropnicky to author, 16 January 2002, via e-mail.

[26] *Letters to the Editor,* 11.

will come forward and object to those letters.[27] Indeed that point is echoed in the play when a particularly offensive anti-feminist stance by resident Bill Spahr generates a cacophony of reactions until a voiceover, again recorded by Sachetti, says: "No further communications in response to Spahr's letter will be published."[28]

Sachetti was enthusiastic but skeptical about the company's mounting a production based on the letters. Still he cooperated fully with BTE, starting the group off with a pile of letters and agreeing to their use in the play. When he saw the play, he "was just blown away. They actually mined this material and found some humor in it, they found some drama, not a lot of drama ... some emotion."[29] Yet he sees the *Letters* play as filtered through the theatre company's interests. Some of the themes, he says, reflect the town, but a number of issues representative of the community, he thinks, were excluded, one of which is religiosity. "In a town like this, which may be a little closer [than more urban communities] to what are generally considered bedrock conservative American values, religion ... still plays a significant role."[30] Sachetti says he receives many letters that lament the loss of religiosity in public life,

---

[27] Jim Sachetti, interview by author, tape recording, Bloomsburg, Pa., 10 October 2001.

[28] *Letters to the Editor*, 44.

[29] Sachetti, interview.

[30] Ibid.

especially in terms of prayer in the public schools, as well as letters about hunting and gun control. In Stropnicky's view, though, "I wasn't interested in saying 20 percent of our letters are about gun control, therefore 20 percent of the letters in the play have to be about gun control. ... For one thing, if the letter didn't have a character or a drama to it, it wasn't interesting to me. ... We had a file on gun-control letters, and all of them were boring from a theatrical standpoint."[31] However Stropnicky's exclusion of such letters and his selection of material based on theatrical and entertainment values conflicted with BTE's goal of finding the "voice of the community"—a goal stated by the director in his program notes.[32]

Stropnicky also decided not to include a series of letters about a sexual-harassment case involving a local attorney convicted of molesting his female clients. There were letters to the *Press Enterprise*, says Stropnicky, from the accused, his wife (the head of a women's center who insisted her husband was innocent), and his victims. The company rehearsed the letters, but when Stropnicky determined

---

[31] Stropnicky, interview, 9 October 2001. In the foreword to the book version of *Letters to the Editor*, Stropnicky says: "Some burning controversies of today, such as abortion and gun control, don't appear here because the local letters on these topics, though often thoughtful, seem to express the opinions of interest groups, not individuals." Gerard Stropnicky, foreword to *Letters to the Editor*, ed. Gerard Stropnicky, Tom Byrn, James Goode, and Jerry Matheny (New York, N.Y.: Touchstone, 1998), 17.

[32] Gerard Stropnicky, "Director's Note," *Letters to the Editor* program, 15 March through 6 April 1996.

that the section would take at least twenty minutes, that "it was impossible to edit the statements without coloring their intent," he wasn't willing to include them, "with all the other things I wanted to touch on, and also make it flavorful and fun enough so people wouldn't feel preached at, as well as touching on topics which were important, which I thought the most important sequence in the play was the sequence on race and hate."[33] In a two-hour play, choices have to be made. The play does include serious letters about domestic and sexual abuse. Arguably including letters on a controversial topic that the town might still be talking about and wrestling with might have offended some of the theatregoers. However, this was a missed opportunity to use theatre as a forum for questioning townspeople's attitudes, to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the community, which is part of BTE's mission.

That the selection of letters skewed the play toward a less than accurate political picture of Bloomsburg was raised at a company meeting. Actor David Moreland said he felt the show was left of center and was disappointed that a particular right-wing letter didn't make it into the show.[34] Stropnicky explained: "It was from a very conservative reverand [*sic*], and it was very interesting indeed. And I cut it, as I did many things. Why? Because it covered some of the

---

[33] Gerard Stropnicky, interview by author, tape recording, Bloomsburg, Pa., 12 March 2001.

[34] "*Letters* Critique," 29 June 1996, theatre's collection.

same ground as Ruth Gonzalez [a letter performed under the title 'Occult in the Curriculum,' which cites Deuteronomy 28:32 and warns against subversive materials in school textbooks], and "when both were in the run order it was clear that one or the other had to go."[35] While Moreland and Sachetti felt the play didn't fully represent the religious concerns of the community, another company member, Seth Reichgott, speaking at a BTE critique session, decided that BTE was entitled to take a point of view.[36] But whose point of view is it?

The Baker's Plays script reads: adapted for the stage by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. Page 3 of the script elaborates on the development of the project, ending with: "It was conceived, arranged and directed by Gerard Stropnicky."[37] *Letters* has been referred to in the press as a group-generated piece, but actor Tom Byrn objects to that characterization. Although Byrn pursued his interests in the research phase, which were the historical letters from the time of the town's founding, he says the piece is a reflection of Stropnicky's taste and vision. Byrn says he would have liked a less set-in-stone piece, but also admits that "in the end Jerry was incredible about maintaining order, because I think if we were all allowed to just pull

---

[35] Stropnicky to author, 16 January 2002, via e-mail.

[36] "Letters Critique," 29 June 1996, theatre's collection.

[37] *Letters to the Editor* cover, 3.

whatever it would be a lot mushier sort of piece."[38] Yet Jim Goode, who helped with research for the workshop and acted in the subsequent versions, says he felt very much like a collaborator. In fact he told me about a rehearsal in which the director was absent and the actors came up with the idea of the soapbox section. The different perceptions about the collaboration could be part of what Byrn refers to as a generational divide in the company—those who founded BTE and those who joined it later.

Just before the premiere of the 1996 mainstage version of *Letters*, the collaboration was sorely tested. One of the younger members, Sharon Pabst, became enraged when Stropnicky, in the interest, he says, of tightening the show, decided to cut a couple of letters in which she was featured. Byrn says some of the letters "became sort of pride issues. ... I think that in our portrayal of some of these people that we had never even met, we just came to love our idea of who they were ... When Sharon would do this certain person, I felt like I was seeing the person and not Sharon, and to lose that person for what at the time seemed pretty arbitrary was ... hurtful." Byrn adds that it was only his work on the book version, providing an opportunity to include a greater variety of letters, that made him feel better about the whole project.[39]

In Stropnicky's view he had clearly stated in his

---

[38] Tom Byrn, interview by author, tape recording, Bloomsburg, Pa., 14 March 2001.

[39] Byrn, interview.

proposal that he would make the final editorial decision. David Moreland, quoted in an unedited version of an article written for *American Theatre* magazine, says of collaboration: "It takes a lot of trust ... sometimes it can be strain, when for instance, the director has to finally say, 'I can't accept any more ideas now.' I think it's something you can only do in a veteran ensemble."[40] The cutting of the aforementioned letters, however, was a catalyst for a blowup that caused such bad feelings that the company visited a counselor for an intervention session. It is a testament to the ensemble that the members cared enough to try to iron out their problems. Pabst, however, eventually left the company. Although cutting actors' lines can cause conflicts in any type of production, the resulting resentments are particularly intense in a collaboration of this kind, in which actors participate in the research and development of the project and are heavily invested in the material on many levels.

The letter writers can also be considered as collaborators on this project. Because the newspapers owned the rights to the letters, BTE was not obligated to get the writers' permission for the stage production.[41] The contemporary letter writers were, however, invited to the workshop and to the 1996 opening night. Byrn says he

---

[40] Quoted in Geoff Gehman, unedited manuscript for *American Theatre* article, director's private collection.

[41] The theatre did approach the living writers for releases to publish the letters in the book version.

idealized the writers, "putting them up on a pedestal."[42] And he told the *Danville News* that knowing the letter writers might be in the audience, "you have this hidden ally who had put down this thought."[43] Goode is quoted in the *Times Leader* as saying: "I know one of the men who wrote one of the letters I do a sentence from," adding that "the danger of offending or being influenced by a living writer is part of the attraction" for the actor.[44] But that attraction did not extend to seeking out the letter writers during the development and rehearsal process.

The company made a point of not meeting them, and when I asked the actors about that, various members spoke about not wanting to be mimics. There were many writers they couldn't have met even if they wanted to: not just the historical letter writers but also the anonymous callers to the 30 Seconds column. Stropnicky suggests that the company was creating an impression of the town rather than a replica of it. Byrn, recognizing the mediation by the actors, says, "Actually we were fictionalizing ... [i.e., the] teenage marijuana user, the situation in which he would call 30 Seconds." He adds: "That brings into question taking real-life things and turning them into something that is, I don't

---

[42] Quoted in Geoff Gehman, "Every Letter Is a Soapbox," *American Theatre*, September 1996, 69.

[43] Lisa Barnes, "BTE 'Letters' a line to community pulse," *Danville News*, 18 March 1996, 1.

[44] Quoted in Joe Butkiewicz, *Times Leader* (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.), 10 March 1996, sec. E.

know if artistic is the right word, but certainly fictional." And because Stropnicky wanted to create the portrait of the town from the letters themselves, from what people were willing to reveal in the newspapers, the actors decided to focus on the images the writers' words evoked as well as draw on their knowledge of their neighbors in their adopted town.

Despite Byrn's stance that the characterizations were fictional, the appeal of the piece was that it is a compilation of actual letters written by real people. Further, the play benefited from the actors' and the Bloomsburg audience's shared knowledge of some of the 1990s letter writers. Stropnicky says that in Bloomsburg as soon as the name of letter writer Charlie Karns, a well-known resident, was projected on the screen, "over at the theatre, people [went], Whoa,"[45] in reaction to a town character. Addressing possible concern about the ethics of a project involving representation of real people, Goode said at a company meeting, "We were clear that we weren't going to re-enact people. So that lets us off an ethical hook."[46] Laurie McCants, who acted in the 1998 production, agrees that the writers' representation was "meant to be [the actor's] response"[47] to the material and that meeting the writers wasn't crucial for interpretation; yet she admits that when the actors met them and learned more about them (after the

---

[45] Stropnicky, interview, 12 March 2001.

[46] "Company Critique," 1994, director's private collection.

[47] Laurie McCants, interview by author, tape recording, Bloomsburg, Pa., 11 October 2001.

production was in progress), the characters became richer because of that.

It's clear in the production that the actors are creating portraits as well as sending up the letter writers, as in Byrn's rendition of a woman chastising an underwear thief—for which he wears a robe, fuzzy slippers, and ill-fitting blond wig, and is stretched out on the couch smoking a cigarette—as well as his portrayal of a puppy chained to a bench, who talks about needing a rug to sleep on when he's left outside in the cold. Then there are characters too that the actors embody with obvious earnestness, assuming a common humanism and disapproval of antisocial behavior: a high school student begs an arsonist to turn himself in; a woman who has observed a mother shaking her child at the Tasty Freeze rebukes her. So despite the stance of "fictionalizing" characters, the actors were using the words of actual townspeople to connect with their community members: to share a laugh about the kooky characters among them and to affirm the rightness of the townspeople's morals and ethics.

While each actor plays multiple roles, none represent themselves, though the actors are indeed a presence in the town.[48] Stropnicky says: "We kept ourselves invisible,"[49] but that's an impossibility. Certainly audience members who regularly attend the theatre in Bloomsburg know the BTE actors and have seen them in many roles. The "ghosts" of

---

[48] The exception is a line from a letter that Stropnicky sent to the *Press Enterprise*: "The arts are not a frill."

[49] Stropnicky, interview, 9 October 2001.

those characters, says Marvin Carlson, in "Invisible Presence—Performance Intertextuality," "will inevitably remain as a part of ... future experiences of audiences in theatre."[50] Moreover, associations with the BTE actors extend beyond the theatre: as committee members of civic organizations, as neighbors who shop at the same supermarket, or frequent the local coffee shops. In addition the actors were visible in the interpretative choices they made. Stropnicky says: "It's as much about how we ... receive the text as it is about the intent of the writer."[51] Yet if *Letters* had included the actors as townspeople, either as characters or via their own letters to the editor, the piece would have presented a fuller picture of what Bloomsburg was like in the last quarter of the twentieth century—a small town that helps support a resident theatre ensemble.

Letters may be BTE's "impression" of the town, but especially as performed in Bloomsburg (evident on both tapes and remarked on by the actors), much of the enjoyment comes not just from recognition of the names but also from knowledge of the place (its Fair, its factory, the trailer court in nearby Danville)—as well as the play's inclusion of the editor of the town's paper. The slides that accompany the letters are all of real town locations: images of the streets and buildings of Bloomsburg, the university, the carpet

---

[50] Marvin Carlson, "Invisible Presences—Performance Intertextuality," *Theatre Research International* 19 (Summer 1994), 113.

[51] Stropnicky, interview, 12 March 2001.

factory, and the hospital. The titles of the newspapers and dates of the letters, the recitation of the signature at the end of each letter, all reinforce the actuality of the material. This is no fictional Grover's Corners or Spoon River, though more than one reviewer made such comparisons to the fictional works. This is Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, and these are the words of the citizens of that town and surrounding towns. Presumably the specificity, the names of real towns and the recognizable letter writers were some of the factors that turned the piece into what Goode calls BTE's "real good cash cow."[52]

For some of the letter writers, the inclusion of their words in the play was meaningful to them. Two of the 1990s letter writers were interviewed for a Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, newspaper, the *Morning Call*. Isabel Tarr, whose letter frames the section that deals with prejudice, is quoted as saying: "When I wrote my letter I was furious, but they gave me a dignity I didn't have. I'm very grateful for that."[53] Her letter, sent to the *Press Enterprise* in March 1992, was a response to a caller to 30 Seconds who "feels qualified to judge the level of racism in Bloomsburg."[54] Tarr, whose family has lived in Bloomsburg for some 200 years,

---

[52] Goode, interview.

[53] Quoted in Geoff Gehman, review of *Letters to the Editor*, adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, as performed by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, Bethlehem, Pa., *Morning Call*, 6 September 1996, 7 (D).

[54] *Letters to the Editor*, 51.

talks in her letter about the history of exclusion of African Americans in Bloomsburg: from the fire department, from the local cemetery, from buying shares in the Bloomsburg Fair, from white churches. The letter was performed by a white male. Stropnicky says he "made a choice of having a white male perform her letter, partially because I don't think people listen to black females."[55] Not only does that comment disregard that there are myriad respected black women with powerful voices in popular culture, the arts, government, and academia (Oprah Winfrey, Toni Morrison, Anna Deavere Smith, Shirley Chisholm, to name just a few), but by assigning Tarr's voice to a member of the dominant culture, it also undercuts that aspect of oral history that makes room for marginalized voices. However, the fact is, there was no black actor, male or female, in the cast of any of the productions of *Letters*. According to Tarr, who has been a member of the University Community Task Force for Racial Equity since 1993 (she was invited to join the task force after her letter appeared in the paper), there are only a small number of people of color in Bloomsburg,[56] although there is greater diversity at the university. In a telephone interview, Tarr told me she wasn't bothered by who played her in *Letters* because the message got across. After the play, people

---

[55] Stropnicky, interview, 12 March 2001.

[56] According to the Bloomsburg Chamber of Commerce, the 1990 census listed 1.4 percent of Bloomsburg residents as people of color. (Information was taken from the Pennsylvania County Data Book of Columbia County, 2001.)

congratulated her and told her that before they read her letter they didn't know these things happened. Thus she feels there was a positive outcome. Another positive outcome is that actor Tom Byrn is now a member of the task force. But Tarr says that she continues to receive hate mail, especially when something happens in the town that relates to a person of color.[57]

Lori Halteman was also interviewed for the *Morning Call*: "What the play taught me is that, wow, little things that I do that I totally forget about affect other people's lives ... that I did something that may be seen by millions of people."[58] Halteman wrote her letter to the editor in the early 1990s when she was seventeen and had just given birth to a son. She pleaded with other girls her age to be more careful than she had been and objected that while she was the "talk of the town," nobody even knew her boyfriend's name.[59] When I asked Halteman in a telephone interview if she minded that BTE had not asked her permission to include her letter in the play, she said she had put it out there, was very glad it was used, and was happy to be invited to see the play. People approached her afterward and expressed their

---

[57] Isabel Tarr, telephone conversation with author, 16 January 2002.

[58] Quoted in Geoff Gehman, review of *Letters to the Editor*, adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, as performed by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, Bethlehem, Pa., *Morning Call*, 6 September 1996, 7 (D).

[59] *Letters to the Editor*, 40.

gratitude that she had addressed the problem of unwed teenage mothers. According to Halteman, the publicity helped build her confidence and empowered her to continue to use her voice, which she does, writing poetry, songs, and the occasional letter to the editor.[60]

In her letter, Halteman wrote: "Unlike most teenage fathers, my boyfriend stayed with me."[61] By the time the play was mounted, however, that was no longer the case; her boyfriend had abandoned her and her son. She might have liked to have rewritten a section of her letter, but the play had captured that moment in her life. In another case, the play preserved the memory of someone else's life through a friend's contribution to the newspaper column. *Letters* includes the following excerpt from a letter written by Frank Davis, a teacher at Bloomsburg University, which was sent to the *Press Enterprise* in January 1991 just before Desert Storm: "In 1970 my friend David, a West Point graduate, earned the right in Vietnam to have his name etched into a long black granite wall."[62] Writing to David's father in 1998, Davis tells the father about the success of the play and encloses a script of *Letters*, given to him by BTE, with the section marked relating to David, adding that it "comes at a time in the play that is rather emotional ... That line in

---

[60] Lori Halteman, telephone conversation with author, 15 January 2002.

[61] *Letters to the Editor,* 40.

[62] Ibid., 34.

the play stands as another memorial to the life of your son."[63]

Although these letter writers were gratified by their inclusion in the play, a danger inherent in portraying real people is exploitation and injured feelings. There were concerns expressed at a BTE board meeting that *Letters* poked too much fun at the town.[64] Editor Sachetti agrees that there was just a little bit of looking down their nose and laughing at the local yokels. But Tom Byrn says that although people complained about the play's making fun of the town, "at the same time we're kind of roasting ourselves too in a way because we're living here"[65]—yet that's not explicit in the play because the actors do not portray themselves. Still, in appreciation of BTE's choice of comedic material, a reviewer for Bloomsburg's *Press Enterprise* notes that "in the papers there has always been attempted public debate that is loopy, quirky and just plain funny. As they combed through 180 years of letters to 17 papers, BTE has also glommed onto those memorable, off-the-wall letters and been able to bring their odd authors to life on stage."[66]

---

[63] Frank S. Davis to Hubert U. Alexander, 27 October 1998, Tom Byrn's private collection.

[64] Byrn, interview.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Susan Brook, review of *Letters to the Editor* , adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, as performed by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, Bloomsburg, *Press Enterprise,* 15 March 1996, 5.

The actors admit that especially with regard to 30 Seconds, they felt comfortable playing up the humorous aspects. While the rest of the letters were permanently set, some of the 30 Seconds sections gave the actors an opportunity to introduce new material in performance. The directions in the published script show where "actor's choice" was allowed. So interestingly, while most of the actors privately disparaged 30 Seconds, calling the column a town joke or saying it loses real meaning because of the anonymity of the contributors, 30 Seconds afforded freedom of expression to both contributors and actors. Jim Goode says: "They pretty much became ... comic relief ... so you looked for something that was kind of off the wall, or something where you could ... pretty much make fun of the person."[67] One of Goode's 30 Seconds pieces was about a guy who was trying to figure out how a guest on the David Letterman show was able to "drink milk up his nose and it came out his eye."[68] Actors' choice, then, further contributed to sending up their fellow citizens and to getting laughs.

But a number of the townspeople even appreciated poking fun, especially when they knew the letter writers. Former BTE administrative director Steve Bevans says that audiences for *Letters* were bigger than for anything else besides the Christmas show. Bevans told me about the family of letter writer John Q. Timbrell (whose three griping missives were delivered consecutively by three different actors, complete

---

[67] James Goode, interview.

[68] *Letters to the Editor,* 46.

with typewriter sound effects). Timbrell's family felt as if they were seeing their relative, that the actors had captured his spirit. Neighbors of the retired English professor who was dubbed "Catawissa Galileo" said the portrayal was very much like him.[69] Townspeople sharing a laugh with the BTE actors about the quirks of their friends and neighbors added to the appeal of the piece.

The company was open to hearing criticism of their interpretations. After a workshop performance, the teacher of two boys (who had written a letter to the editor in the 1960s, for a class assignment, about wanting the town movie theatre to show films for their age group) spoke with the actors who played them and objected that the boys were being portrayed as snooty when that wasn't what they were like at all. Thereafter the actors adjusted their performance. Indeed one of the grown boys who saw the show told the actors how tickled he was that the letter had been immortalized.

But not everyone was pleased about Bloomsburg being featured onstage. Byrn told me of someone suggesting to him that BTE not do too many productions in which it held up a magnifying glass to the town. Another objection was from the head of the chamber of commerce, who felt that the piece was not positive enough for the community, although Stropnicky reacted to that complaint by saying, "That's his job."[70]

---

[69] Steve Bevans, telephone conversation with author, 4 November 2001.

[70] Stropnicky, interview, 9 October 2001.

Stropnicky's Director's Note for the 1996 production says the company members' idea was to "compose a sort of portrait for our community,"[71] and on BTE's Web site, Stropnicky claims that in *Letters* "we tapped into a vox populi, a true voice of the people."[72] These claims raise a number of questions. First, What happens to the voices of those people who don't write letters to the newspaper? Who don't feel passionate or interested enough about a matter to weigh in with their ideas? Editor Sachetti characterizes the ethic in Bloomsburg as "mind your own business, keep your nose down,"[73] so presumably many of the citizens would not be letter writers. Of those who do write letters, there are a number who raise their voice with frequency—although Sachetti limits them to one letter a month. (A number of these frequent writers are included in the play.) Second, if the letters span 200 years, do the voices of 200 years ago echo or replicate those of contemporary residents? Is it a good thing to underline the universal nature of situations and people's behavior as unchanging over time so that the incidents in the play become what Brecht calls "just one enormous cue ...

---

[71] Gerard Stropnicky, "Director's Note," *Letters to the Editor* program, 15 March through 6 April,1996.

[72] "The Unexpected Journey of *Letters to the Editor*," *www.bte.org*.

[73] Sachetti, interview.

followed by the 'eternal' response"[74]—rather than specific responses to the time, the place, and the social conditions. And if there are recurring themes and voices, what kind of distinctions or connections are being drawn in the play?

Stropnicky has called the material in the play "history collected by actors"[75]—possibly a disclaimer suggesting the piece not be judged based on scholarly or scientific rigor. The actors' history engages with the town's historical forebears. The opening sequence includes a recitation of newspaper dates going back to 1813, signaling the historic intent. The nineteenth century letters include a look at a couple of scam artists and a treatise on the benefits of the locust. These are played for laughs, and a contemporary audience can lovingly chuckle at its ancestors. But patterns of human behavior are also traced. Two letters, dated 1813, detail domestic abuse, echoing a subject that had been played for its comic effect in the 30 Seconds trailer-park scenario of a husband who was violent toward his wife and who moved next door to be with his girlfriend. In 1813, a husband had written to the *Sunbury Times*, stating that his wife had abandoned him and therefore he was no longer responsible for any of her debts. The wife wrote to the same paper, trying to justify herself, charging her husband with violence and attempted murder. Unfortunately, the audience is not given

---

[74] Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 97.

[75] Gerard Stropnicky, "Director's Note," *Letters to the Editor* program, 9 October to 1 November 1998, theatre's collection.

much time to reflect on the letters, on the economics of the situation, or even to marvel that in the early nineteenth century a newspaper provided a woman a public forum for her problems—because the *Sunbury Times* letters are quickly followed by a 30 Seconds one-liner. The same undercutting of a serious issue occurs in act 2, when a contemporary letter about sexual abuse is again followed by a 30 Seconds comedic segment. History in this sense, then, means not just choice of material (meaty acting roles) but also a sequence in which priority is given to pacing and getting laughs over uncovering social or economic causes behind human behavior.

A third question: Given that the letters were often edited, is there a voice (or voices) that emerge(s) as dominant in the play? Of the letters that are submitted to the *Press Enterprise,* 90 percent of them are published as written, Sachetti says, although 30 Seconds is carefully vetted and edited because "people will say things on that line that they would never put in print and sign their name to."[76] The letters in the play were further edited for the theatre piece—but Stropnicky says he tried not to edit, or if he did, he was careful not to change what the writer was saying. He did contemporize some words in the very old letters to facilitate understanding by a modern audience. Stropnicky was responsible for the final choice of material. Although making choices and editing the letters might be seen as misrepresenting the people's voice, in an essay on the poetics of documentary films, Michael Renov, professor of

---

[76] Sachetti, interview.

critical studies at U.S.C. and editor of a volume on documentary theory, validates the editorial choice when he discusses oral history vis-à-vis voice in documentary film: "These oral histories remain valuable for their ability to bring to public notice the submerged accounts of people and social movements, but their favoring of preservation over interrogation detracts from their power as vehicles of understanding. Delegating the enunciative function to a series of interview subjects cannot, in the end, bolster a truth claim for historical discourse; the enunciator, the one who 'voices' the text, is the film or videomaker functioning as historiographer."[77] In *Letters to the Editor*, Stropnicky has embraced the role of editor/enunciator.

Stropnicky calls the act of mounting a piece like this "an intensely political act,"[78] implying that such a play has the power to affect the social conditions of the town. Yet the response of reviewers suggests that the piece is a celebration of the status quo rather than a call for reflection or change. A reviewer for the *Daily Item* called *Letters* a "loving production that holds an accurate mirror up to life in the Susquehanna Valley."[79] Another in the *Times*

---

[77] Michael Renov, "Toward a Poetics of the Documentary," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 27.

[78] "*Letters* Critique," 29 June 1996, theatre's collection.

[79] Rick Kerstetter, review of *Letters to the Editor*, adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, as performed by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, Bloomsburg, *Daily Item*, 15 October 1998, 4 (D).

Leader wrote that *Letters* was "a living love letter to the spirit of community."[80] "What sets dramadocumentary apart from the mass of public plays," writes British playwright David Edgar, in an essay titled "Theater of Fact," "is not the employment of facts but the theatrical use to which those facts are put."[81] In the case of *Letters,* Stropnicky and the BTE troupe have chosen to create a warm, tender portrait of the town—which suggests that the troupe members who have relocated to this place want to justify their faith in the town and the life choice they each have made. Yet the letters themselves are a political act, of citizens being moved to participate in the conversation of the community, to raise their voices. With the inclusion of the letters in the play, their voices have been given an additional forum, one that's more lasting and has the potential to be heard by many more people than the circulation of the local newspaper—a point noted and appreciated by Tarr, Halteman and Davis.

BTE identifies itself as an organization with a social conscience, "encouraging a larger recognition of theatre as a force for positive action."[82] The "hate" section of *Letters*

---

[80] Paul Gallagher, review of *Letters to the Editor,* adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, as performed by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, Bloomsburg, *Times Leader,* 22 March 1996, 6 (C).

[81] David Edgar, "Theater of Fact: A Dramatist's Viewpoint," in *Why Docudrama: Fact-Fiction on Film and TV,* ed. Alan Rosenthal (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 177.

[82] "Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble Mission Statement," *The Rose Tattoo* program, 5 October to 28 October 2001.

was an attempt to take a hard look at community and personal relations in Bloomsburg. It was originally conceived to be only about racial relations, but actor Jim Goode pressed for a revision of that section in 1996, arguing that there is little racial diversity in Bloomsburg. So the section came to include an array of prejudices.

On one particular evening a theme of the hate section resonated on the streets of Bloomsburg. The director's archive includes an e-mail from the leader of a group that had traveled to Bloomsburg to see the show on a Friday night. The message describes an unpleasant incident outside the theatre right after the show in which one person in the group, a black woman, overheard a young Bloomsburg girl calling her by a pejorative name; the black woman had to stare down the girl and her friends before they moved on.[83] While this incident could happen anywhere, anytime, I mention it because there's a kind of simplistic stance in the piece of superiority over hate, as if to say, we here in the theatre know better than to be prejudiced—and by extension that attitude is going to resolve the problems of hate and prejudice in Bloomsburg. Jonathan Kalb in a discussion of documentary solo performance talks about American social-protest drama, of which he notes that Brecht says "it allows spectators to congratulate themselves on their sympathetic feelings without seriously questioning their behavior or

---

[83] Chuck PCU1 to Jerry, 31 March 1996, via e-mail, director's private collection.

beliefs."[84] As is evident in its mission statement, the theatre group has good intentions, and perhaps a number of people are questioning their attitudes after seeing the play, as contributor Isabel Tarr suggests when she relates that some people had told her that the play and her letter were a revelation to them. But Tarr has also said that acceptance of people of color in Bloomsburg is only slowly occurring.

While such issues as racial prejudice and the ramifications of war are addressed in *Letters*, the play is filled with the foibles and personal concerns of the townspeople. As Stropnicky wrote in a post-production report to the National Endowment, the group was aware when it began the project that "we'd have to address the tensions that shape a community: racism, gender bias, economics, and power. In the end we found that the strongest connecting threads concerned road repair and how we raise our children."[85] Stropnicky's focus is on connection and finding a bridge to the community. He continued in his report to the NEA, writing, "We came to a deeper understanding of the crosscurrents that define this (or any) community, and established deep new bonds with people within it." In fact, a number of the BTE actors, including Stropnicky, see themselves as outsiders in Bloomsburg, though the core of original members have lived there since 1978. Byrn says he

---

[84] Jonathan Kalb, "Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self," *Theater* 31 (2001), 15.

[85] "Final Descriptive Report, National Endowment for the Arts/Expansion Arts, Number 93-5321-0258"; director's private collection.

began to feel part of the town during work on *Letters*. But McCants characterizes Bloomsburg as a place where you have insider status only if your ancestors are buried on the hill. In Strimbeck's view, the actors' integration into the community has more to do with their participation as members of the community than with their work at the theatre.

How can a theatre forge bonds with its community? Strimbeck says that BTE usually plays to only 50 percent capacity.[86] In editor Sachetti's estimation only 15 percent to 20 percent of the townspeople have ever been inside the theatre. "It's a class thing. It's perceived as something for the college type ... upper middle class."[87] He claims the high school play is more of an experience that unites members of the community than is BTE; parents are willing to participate in all aspects of production because their children are involved. But BTE includes members of the community in some of its productions, in particular the Christmas holiday show and the summer production. And in 1999 BTE mounted *Hard Coal: Life in the Region,* a play created by Goode and McCants, about immigrants who worked in Pennsylvania's anthracite mines and based on oral histories, journal articles, folk songs, and dances from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With the help of a grant,[88] the theatre bused

---

[86] Strimbeck,telephone conversation.

[87] Sachetti, interview.

[88] The grant was awarded for post-show discussions with experts in the field.

people in from neighboring towns to see the show. But Goode doesn't know whether those people will return to the theatre to see other shows. He says, "And you don't want them to think, oh, you're kind of using my family story to do a play and then you're not interested in me ... So you want to create an ongoing relationship, and it's hard to maintain that once the project's over."[89] Goode says BTE's school touring show is a bridge to the schools, and the theatre is considering starting story circles with different groups in the area—another indication of BTE's commitment to continuing its presence in Bloomsburg and to engaging with its citizens.

The company "ended up looking at tens of thousands of newspapers covering two centuries"[90] while doing research for *Letters*. Presumably, then, it was possible to construct different views of the town, depending upon which letters they chose to include in the two-hour presentation. For theatre to be good, says playwright/director John McGrath in *A Good Night Out*, "plays ... must ruthlessly question their ideological bases, the set of assumptions about life on which they are built, and should have a questioning, critical relationship with their audience, based on trust, cultural identification and political solidarity."[91] In *Letters*, BTE opted to create a nostalgic portrait of a charming, though

---

[89] Goode, interview.

[90] "The Unexpected Journey of *Letters to the Editor*," *www.bte.org*.

[91] John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1981, 1996), 98-99.

flawed small rural town.

The epilogue is a letter from a Bloomsburg woman who thanks the police department for taking the time to return her stolen chair (an inexpensive one, she says), despite the fact that she had never reported the theft. There's a double message in that: yes, Bloomsburg has crime, but it's not that bothersome. McCants says about the affection and bias in the play: "I think we are very proud of Bloomsburg because of their acceptance of us and that signals to us that there's something special about this town ... [that] we celebrated in *Letters*."[92]

Members of the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble have based themselves in a rural region, they say, because they "need to be in a place where genuine interaction with a community is possible."[93] Todd London writes in an afterword to the book version of *Letters to the Editor* that BTE is part of a trend called "theatre of place ... a phenomenon of America's nonprofit art theatre that has emerged especially over the past two decades." Theatre of place, he continues, "makes a mission of what's always been true: Theatre works best when it reflects or challenges a specific community's ideas about itself."[94] While BTE was inspired to reflect its community, it

---

[92] McCants, interview.

[93] "Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble Mission Statement," *The Rose Tattoo* program, 5 October to 28 October 2001.

[94] Todd London, afterword to *Letters to the Editor*, ed. Gerard Stropnicky, Tom Byrn, James Goode and Jerry Matheny (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 262-3.

shrank from challenging it, and used authentic materials to construct its conception of Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania: an idealized version of an American town. And so the representation of Bloomsburg onstage documents the words of Bloomsburg's citizens as well as the company's desire to aggrandize its home.

For this production BTE researched newspaper columns to create a theatre piece; its source materials, though twice mediated (first by the newspaper, then by the theatre artists), were initiated by the writers. In the next chapter I will discuss the complex relationships that developed when members of the Tectonic Theater Project sought out sources to gather material for their production, which they called *The Laramie Project*.

Chapter Four: Tectonic Theater Project's *The Laramie Project*

In this chapter I study the work of the Tectonic Theater Project, a group of New York City–based theatre artists who traveled West and set out to explore local attitudes toward homosexuality in the wake of a highly publicized hate crime. The artists assumed the role of theatre journalists interviewing the townspeople of Laramie, Wyoming, where a homosexual male college student had been brutally murdered. By constructing a piece based on those interviews, the Tectonic Theater Project sought to contribute to a national dialogue about "how we think and talk about homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence ... and the difference between tolerance and acceptance."[1] In making return trips to Laramie and getting to know a number of its residents, the company developed its version of how the people of Laramie think and talk about those topics. The specific reactions of the Laramie townspeople as voiced in the play were presented and received as universal responses—suggested by the "we" in the quote above—and the play has been widely performed. I will look at how the Tectonic Theater Project came up with its humanistic view of Laramie. And I will discuss the methods the company used to create the play, including the tensions that arose in a

---

[1] Moisés Kaufman, introduction to *The Laramie Project*, by Moisés Kaufman and the Members of the Tectonic Theater Project (New York: Vintage, 2001), vi.

collaborative project based on gathered materials and developed in workshops by members of the company.

On October 7, 1998, a mountain biker came upon the body of a 21-year-old student from the University of Wyoming who had been brutally beaten, tied to a fence and abandoned there. When the story broke, the local and national media swooped down on the town of Laramie, which was in shock and unprepared for the onslaught. Within a week of his assault, Matthew Shepard was dead, and the media circus intensified. Because Shepard was a gay man, the local and national press zeroed in on what was now being viewed as a hate crime.[2]

A month after the murder of Matthew Shepard, members of the New York City-based Tectonic Theater Project followed on the heels of the media. The Tectonic Theater Project under the stewardship of playwright/director Moisés Kaufman had already explored calamity in the life of a gay man in *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde,* via documents from Victorian England. This time the group was to get a

---

[2] Beth Loffreda, in *Losing Matt Shepard,* says press reports indicated that friends of Matt's, Walt Boulden and Alex Trout, were concerned that the attack might go unnoticed and had alerted the media. Beth Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 6. Howard Chua-Eoan, *Time* magazine assistant managing editor, wrote the initial piece on the crime (*Time*, 19 October 1998). The following week, *Time* ran a cover story package about hate crimes and related legislation. The cover photograph was of the fence where Shepard had been tied and abandoned, with an inset headshot of Shepard. Chua-Eoan says there was a push for hate-crime legislation in Washington at that time, thus the editors realized there were national implications to the Shepard story (interview by author, New York, N.Y. 26 February 2001).

firsthand account of the event and its aftermath from members of the community in which the victim and his killers lived. In numerous published interviews, Moisés Kaufman has said he was inspired to chronicle what he calls "a watershed event." Critic Jonathan Kalb in a review of the New York production suggests that it was opportunistic for the troupe to hurry out to Laramie to get the story.[3] But this was a turning point in American history, says Kaufman, and that's why the group traveled to Wyoming—to follow up on the event. Going after a story is what journalists do: Kaufman says the group's response to this turning point was to become journalists,[4] and a feature story in the *New York Times* claims the play is not so much documentary as it is theatrical journalism,[5] by which I believe is meant that the group acted as investigators and reporters. Kaufman has also said that he is interested in theatre's participation in a "national dialogue on current events."[6]

Following the initial trip in November 1998, the group participated in workshops in New York City in which pieces

---

[3] Jonathan Kalb, review of *The Laramie Project,* by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project, as performed by the Tectonic Theater Project, New York, *New York Press,* 24-30 May 2000, 39.

[4] *In the Life* , PBS, 15 June 2000.

[5] Michael Janofsky, "A Death in Laramie, Reimagined as Drama," *New York Times,* 27 February 2000, sec. 2, p. 28.

[6] Moisés Kaufman, "Into the West: An Exploration in Form," *American Theatre,* May/June 2000, 17.

of the interview material were acted out. The play was beginning to be sculpted from the experimentation in the workshops, as well as in sessions with a writers' group that included Leigh Fondakowski, Stephen Belber, and Greg Pierotti. That initial go-round yielded a rough draft of the first two acts, but Kaufman "decided that we would continue returning to Laramie until the trial of the last perpetrator had occurred."[7] Indeed this was in line with the project of looking at the life of the town over the course of the year.[8] Some members traveled to Wyoming six times over a period of fifteen months. The follow-up trips not only enabled the Tectonic people to attend the trials, but they also helped the group fill in some gaps in the play (it needed more townspeople's voices to balance those of the university people). The repeated trips and the members' persistence yielded at least one story that the Tectonic Theater Project was able to scoop. The deputy sheriff, Reggie Fluty, who had cut a very bloody Matthew Shepard down off the fence, had been exposed to HIV. Fluty had to undergo AZT treatment. Because she was concerned that her children might be harassed at school if her situation were known, Fluty withheld her story until she got a clean bill of health.

As more material was gathered, additional workshops were conducted. In July 1999, the Tectonic group was invited to participate in the Sundance Theatre Laboratory. In August

---

[7] Kaufman, "Into the West," 18.

[8] Moisés Kaufman, telephone conversation with author, 29 August 2000.

1999, the New York Theatre Workshop sponsored a workshop at Dartmouth (N.H.). And in February 2000, *The Laramie Project* premiered at the Denver Center Theatre Company. Articles appeared in the Denver press touting the play, quoting Kaufman on his interest in inventing theatrical methods and forms. The reviews covered the process, making much of the fact that the play was taken from interviews of real people—and that Denver was an excellent choice for the premiere because it is only a ninety-minute drive from Laramie.[9] A contingent of Laramie people who were portrayed in the play traveled to Denver for opening night. A story in the *Denver Post* recounts how Matt Galloway (the bartender in the piece) cried at his depiction on stage "because he was—again—living the truth."[10] In time for the New York City opening, *American Theatre* ran a cover story on the play, which was accompanied by a piece written by Kaufman. The showed opened at the Union Square Theatre in downtown Manhattan in May 2000. Some of the Laramie people were able to attend opening night in New York, and Kaufman asked them up to the stage, where they received a standing ovation. Ben Brantley in the *New York Times* called the play an "enormously good-willed, very earnest and often deeply moving work of

---

[9] The Denver Center Theatre Company also has a Publicity and Public Relations Manager, Chris Wiger, who sent me a thick package of pre-show articles from regional newspapers, reviews and a Sunday *New York Times* piece by the Denver bureau chief who had covered the Matthew Shepard murder.

[10] Andrew Guy Jr., "Matthew Shepard's story brought to Denver stage," *Denver Post*, Feb. 27, 2000, 1 (b).

theatrical journalism."[11] Many praised the company for its sincerity, its in-depth examination, its unique staging. Others were concerned that the town of Laramie emerged as too wholesome and the company itself perhaps self-congratulatory. And there were additional reservations. Jonathan Kalb in the *New York Press* said, "Again and again, the piece leaves the impression of not fulfilling the promise of its company's much-vaunted search for complex character and richly conflicting views and questions."[12] And there were outright negative reviews. *Time Out New York* critic Sam Whitehead called the piece a "slick, self-important, choreographed production that delivers the facts while all too obviously tugging at the heartstrings."[13] Although the New York run ended earlier than expected, HBO signed on to a filmed version (recast with stars). Soon theatres across the United States, as well as companies overseas, in Australia and

---

[11] Ben Brantley, review of *The Laramie Project*, by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project, as performed by the Tectonic Theater Project, New York, *New York Times*, 19 May 2000, 1 (E).

[12] Kalb, *New York Press*, 24-30 May 2000, 39.

[13] Sam Whitehead, review of *The Laramie Project*, by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project, as performed by the Tectonic Theater Project, New York, *Time Out New York*, 25 May-1 June 2000, 145.

Japan, were mounting or planning to mount the play.[14] *American Theatre* ranked *The Laramie Project* as number two in the top-ten most-produced plays in the 2000-1 season, with fourteen professional productions in the United States.[15] In November 2000, the original company performed the piece in Laramie in a sold-out, one-week run sponsored mostly by the university at a university theatre and attended primarily by students and university people.[16] The company was contracted to perform the piece at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in San Francisco[17] and at La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego in the summer of 2001.

Comparisons were being made to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* in articles and reviews. Advertisements for the play claimed it is the "story of an American town. A true story."[18]

---

[14] Among those theatres are: Stages Repertory Theatre (Houston, Texas); Philadelphia Theatre Company; Artists Repertory Theatre (Portland, Oregon); Caldwell Theatre Company (Boca Raton, Florida); Illusion Theater (Minneapolis, Minnesota); Unicorn Theatre (Kansas City); Buffalo United Artists (Buffalo, New York); Empty Space (Seattle, Washington); Suzunari Theater (Tokyo); Company B Belvoir (Sydney, Australia).

[15] "The Season's Top 10," *American Theatre,* October 2001, 86.

[16] Tickets prices were $25 for the general public, $20 for university people and $5 for students. House capacity: 401. Laramie people and actors I interviewed told me the admission for non-university people would be considered high. Further, because of the small house, tickets were hard to come by.

[17] A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (25 May 2001) called it "an extraordinary picture of an American community." The run at the Berkeley Repertory was extended two weeks.

[18] *New York Times,* 14 April 2000, 2 (E).

With its connection to a high-profile contemporary hate crime and because it gave a voice to citizens of a small U.S. town, the play attracted national attention. PBS featured the Tectonic group on its show *In the Life* (15 June 2000). *Time* magazine chose *Laramie Project* as number five of the top ten plays of 2000, calling it a "pioneering work of theatrical reportage."[19] *Entertainment Weekly* named Moisés Kaufman the "It" playwright.[20] Unfortunately the latter two magazines neglected to credit the "members" of the Tectonic Theater Project for their contribution to the pioneering work.

According to its Web site, the Tectonic Theater Project is a "non-profit theater company dedicated to exploring theatrical language and forms."[21] It was established in 1991, with Moisés Kaufman as its artistic director and Jeffrey LaHoste its managing director. An e-mail that I sent to the Web site asking who the members of the company are, got this response: "The members are artists in a variety of fields who come together primarily on a per-project basis." A number of the *Laramie Project* people had also worked on *Gross Indecency*, including actors Greg Pierotti, Andy Paris, John McAdams; Sarah Lambert (set designer for *Gross Indecency* and credited as a dramaturg for *Laramie Project*); lighting designer Betsy Adam, and Stephen Wangh (dramaturg for *Gross*

---

[19] "The Best and the Worst," *Time*, 18 December 2000, 86.

[20] *Entertainment Weekly* , 30 June/7 July 2000.

[21] *www.tectonictheaterproject.org.* 8 March 2001.

Indecency and associate writer for *Laramie Project*).[22]

The Laramie Project was said to be a collective effort from its genesis. In his *American Theater* article, Don Shewey called it "an unusual experiment in collective creation."[23] A number of the actors conducted the interviews, transcribed them, helped edit the material and participated in the series of workshops, where they presented the material as monologues and scenes. Because of the nature of their contributions, the actors and the original set designer are all credited as dramaturgs.

By presenting the material, with costume pieces and props, the members were engaged in what Kaufman calls "writing from the stage."[24] Stressing the ensemble work and the collaborative nature of the process, Don Shewey in his article invokes the British collective Joint Stock, which was active in the 1970s and 1980s, as an example of unleashing "actors to do the original research that culminated in such

---

[22] A letter in the Matthew Shepard archive, which the university created because of the high-profile nature of the crime, includes actor Michael Emerson and actress Maude Mitchell as members of the Tectonic Theater Project who made that first trip to Laramie in November 1998. Both actors left the project. (Matthew Shepard Collection, Accession Number 300014, Box 3, Folder 8, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY.)

[23] Don Shewey, "Town in a Mirror," *American Theatre*, May/June 2000, 15.

[24] Andy Paris, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 28 February 2001.

plays as David Hare's *Fanshen* and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*."[25] While the Joint Stock members participated in workshops on all their productions and did research for many of them as background, *Fanshen* was actually adapted from a book by William Hinton and *Cloud 9* was written after the group participated in workshops that revolved around sexual politics.[26] For the most part, Joint Stock's workshops—as described by members of the company in *The Joint Stock Book*—were exploratory. During what was termed a gap, a playwright would go away and write a play, not necessarily with material culled from the workshops. The expectations of the Tectonic workshop participants, however, were that they were going to generate the material for the play and that they were going to participate in the selection of which material made it to the final product. In more than one interview, Kaufman refers to the *Laramie* process as a revolutionary way to make theatre. But actress Barbara Pitts says the group members worked on and presented "all these moments, and only a few of them are actually in the play."[27] And a member who left the project midway also felt the actor/dramaturgs were spinning their wheels at the workshops,

---

[25] Shewey, 67.

[26] A play called *Yesterday's News*, as described by Rob Ritchie in *The Joint Stock Book*, involved actors doing what would be closer to *Laramie Project*. (Rob Ritchie, ed., *The Joint Stock Book: The Making of a Theatre Collective* , [London: Methuen, 1987], 19.

[27] Barbara Pitts, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 28 March 2001.

working on moments that never made it to the final product: "The rhetoric of ... this is a way of developing material didn't ultimately pan out in the way the actual piece was developed."[28] Yet actor/associate writer Stephen Belber says that the company may have felt their contributions were being undermined because out of a thousand moments the members created, perhaps Moisés "picked [only] five."[29] Still, there is a gap between the perception that the press promoted through numerous articles about the process and the perception of some of the participants about what really happened. All agree that the project began with Kaufman's vision and that he was the one who had the power of selection.

Kaufman has said that from the very first workshop, actors had formed attachments to the people they had interviewed and so would argue passionately for their inclusion and their points of view.[30] Associate writer Stephen Wangh says the actors who had done the interviews knew their material better than anyone else—although only head writer Leigh Fondakowski knew all of it.[31] Yet because of the scope

---

[28] Sarah Lambert, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 11 April 2001.

[29] Stephen Belber, telephone conversation with author, 26 June 2001.

[30] Kaufman, "Into the West," 18.

[31] Unfortunately despite several e-mail communications, I was not able to interview Fondakowski, who was writing the script for the HBO movie and directing the California productions with the original company.

of the project—it grew out of some 400 hours of interviews—someone necessarily had to make the decision as to what would be staged and what would be cut. As Barbara Pitts says, the actors would perform their pieces, but "ultimately people still went away and wrote this play"[32]—referring to the writers group that came to include Stephen Wangh, who was asked to consult in winter 1999 and who worked with the writers' group intermittently until he joined the group full time in January and February 2000 to prepare the script for the Denver opening. Kaufman talks about the writers' group as assisting him in "going through the growing volume of material and organizing it."[33] Two of the associate writers I spoke with acknowledged that Kaufman was the "boss" but felt their participation went beyond "helping" put the script together. Crediting people's contributions eventually became a matter of contention, partly worked out through the elaborate billing of head writer, associate writers, dramaturgs, actors.[34]

The play was eventually shaped out of "moments," and it was through those moments that the actors lobbied for the inclusion of material. Actors tried to come up with interesting ways to stage a moment. Dramaturg Shirley

---

[32] Barbara Pitts, interview.

[33] Kaufman, "Into the West," 18.

[34] Along with the crediting problem went the problem of remuneration. Members worked to renegotiate their contracts to get a better share after they realized the extent of their participation.

Fishman, who worked with the group at Sundance, recalls a moment she was moved by (which didn't make the cut): an actress placed candles all over the stage and spoke the words of Judy Shepard (Matthew's mother) almost as an incantation.[35] Actors told me about their frustration when their moments were rejected, but also admitted that Kaufman was open to looking at whatever they had worked on. If a scene didn't generate enough interest, the actors could reconfigure the material and re-present the characters.

In the Dramatists Play Service manuscript and the Vintage Books edition, the breakdown is not by scene but instead by the word "moment," which introduces a monologue or a sequence. Some moments are labeled with the character's name ("Rebecca Hilliker"); some with the event of the section ("Medical Update"); some with the theme of the section ("It Happened Here").[36] "Moment: *Angels in America*" is the heading for the monologue delivered by student actor Jedadiah Schultz, who talks about his conflict with his parents over his desire to audition for a scholarship with a piece from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. "Moment: Alison and Marge" introduces actor Greg Pierotti's conversation with Alison Mears and Marge Murray, who are identified as social-service workers. (They work at Interfaith Good Samaritans, an organization that gives aid to the poor.) In this moment, among other things, there's some background on Laramie and

---

[35] Shirley Fishman, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 20 February 2001.

[36] Some of the moments in the Dramatists Play Service manuscript have different names.

its town/gown split. But it also is an introduction to a couple of feisty local women who use humorous expressions like "all togethers" (meaning in the nude).

Despite the avoidance of the word "scene," there are three discrete acts. Act 1 introduces the project and some of the townspeople, gives background on Laramie, voices attitudes on homosexuality, begins the story of the attack and the discovery of the body and ends with the emergency-room doctor who treated both the victim and one of the perpetrators. Act 2 deals with people learning about the crime, the arraignment of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, the descent of the media to cover the crime, the story of Reggie Fluty's exposure to HIV, medical updates on the condition of Shepard, the vigils, more attitudes about homosexuality, and the homecoming parade with the tag-end group of marchers that honored Shepard. Act 2 concludes with the medical update in which the CEO of the hospital breaks down on national TV as he announces the death of Shepard, a hate e-mail response to that display and final words from the limousine driver, Doc O'Connor, who claims that Shepard would not wish the death penalty for his murderers but instead would want them to have hope, which he spells out twice: h-o-p-e. Act 3 leads off with Shepard's funeral and its disruption by a hate-mongering clergyman from Kansas. It covers the hearings, a confession, and the trials. An epilogue, set during the group's final trip, voices reflections from a few of the running characters and allows the actors to bid farewell to Laramie and its "sparkling

lights."

The production keeps Shepard offstage and resists using his name in the title of the piece, but he is still the central figure, even though Kaufman has said the play is about theatre artists going to Laramie.[37] Matthew Shepard is the fulcrum. We meet his friends, his parents, his doctor, his college adviser, his cabdriver, his bartender, his assailants. There are some 60 characters in the play,[38] some of whom return repeatedly, with their stories developed throughout the arc of the play.

Kaufman likes to stress that the primary concerns of the Tectonic Theater Project are structure (tectonic means the art of science and structure) and the search for new forms. In *Laramie* the experiment in form is not just the composition by moments but also the inclusion of the company as a character in the play. In fact, Kaufman calls the writing itself Brechtian because he wrote the actor's presence into the piece, alongside and outside the characters. In more than one interview, including the one I conducted, Kaufman refers to Brecht's description of the street-corner demonstration. He is taken with Brecht's statements about "an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic

---

[37] Shepard, who was from Casper and who had spent time overseas, was in his freshman year at the university and had only been on campus about two months when the attack occurred.

[38] Even after the submission of the script to the Dramatists Play Service, the company was engaged in rewrites. Actor Stephen Belber told me there were characters added during the production at the Berkeley Repertory, June to July 2001 (telephone conversation with author, 26 June 2001).

accident took place" and says that the essay provided the inspiration for how to deal with *Laramie* "both in terms of its creation and its aesthetic vocabulary."[39]

In this essay titled "Street Scene," Brecht lays out a model for epic theatre. And in production, *Laramie* uses strategies that serve to distance or alienate the spectator: titles and actors going in and out of character in full view of the audience. Titles are projected against the back wall such as "JOURNAL ENTRIES" or "MATTHEW" to set off sections of the piece. The first title simply echoes what's happening onstage, and is not a commentary on the action. The MATTHEW title appears when the limousine driver, Doc O'Connor, gives an amusing account of Shepard's asking to be driven to a gay bar in Fort Collins, Colorado, because there are none in Laramie, and, so Doc says, none in the rest of Wyoming. The actor playing Doc is entertaining, the audience chuckles, yet the placement of a speech about Shepard's going to gay bars along with a title that represents him is provocative. Matthew met his murderers in a heterosexual bar. Is this how we're to think of him—as a barfly?[40] Yet this monologue is

---

[39] Kaufman, "Into the West," 18.

[40] A *Time* magazine article reported that Shepard had "made a pass at a bartender in Cody last summer, got punched in the face and falsely reported to police that he'd been raped. (No charges were filed.)" (Steve Lopez, "To Be Young and Gay in Wyoming," *Time*, 26 October 1998, 39.) This is not addressed in the play. But in a later scene, a "politically uncorrect" Sherry Johnson, wife of a highway patrolman, says: "There's just so many things about him that I found out that I just, it's scary. You know about his character and spreading AIDS ... He was, he was just a barfly. ... I think he flaunted it." (*Laramie Project*, 47.)

quickly followed by a fond reminiscence by a friend of Matthew's, invoking his nickname, Choo Choo, and talking about "his incredible beaming smile." Finally the title "THE WORD" introduces a section in which the attitudes of the city's religious leaders are presented, and we hear some hardened views against homosexuality. Wangh suggests the titles were meant to give the audience the feeling that this was a documentary.[41] Thus the titles might be seen to be less a Brechtian technique than a way to underline the play's claim of authenticity. A major selling point of *The Laramie Project*, one mentioned in ads, press pieces, and Web sites for the many companies producing the piece, has been that it is not just *about* real people; the words spoken are actually *from* interviews conducted by these actors.

Some of this process is described in the play because *Laramie* is also supposed to be about the group of actors traveling to the town and talking to its people. The company portrays the people who had been interviewed, as well as material from transcripts in the public record, and the actors are said to portray themselves, in addition to members of the Tectonic Theater Project who don't act in the piece, i.e., Moisés Kaufman. The intent of the play's construction, says Kaufman, is Brechtian in that it says these are actors showing us not just what the people of Laramie said but also

---

[41] Stephen Wangh, interview with author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 1 February 2001.

how the actors responded to what they heard.[42] But there are various constructs in this play. Four people, two actors along with Kaufman and Fondakowski, did the bulk of the interviews. Some actors met with characters only as background for their portrayal of them. At least one character, Alison Mears, says she did not meet the actress who played her until after she saw the show in Laramie. In terms of the actors playing themselves, the four actors I spoke with claim they don't feel those characters represent them; they are simply a dramaturgical device. In fact, one actress's journal entries are not hers at all but rather those of the set designer who left the project midway. Again, this has relevance because of the truth claims that are repeatedly made with respect to the play, including its opening lines: "On November 14, 1998, the members of Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie, Wyoming, and conducted interviews with the people of the town. During the next year, we would return to Laramie several times and conduct over two hundred interviews. The play you are about to see is edited from those interviews, as well as from journal entries by members of the company and other found texts."[43]

While the play apparently provoked discussion, especially in Laramie, it also played on the audience's emotions. Actor Greg Pierotti and Rebecca Hilliker, chair of the University of Wyoming's department of theatre and dance,

---

[42] Kaufman, telephone conversation with author, 29 August 2000.

[43] *Laramie Project*, 5.

each told me about a particular performance for high school students in Laramie, in which the audience broke down sobbing after hearing the speech of the Poudre Valley hospital CEO in which he announces that Matthew Shepard has died. Both used the word catharsis to describe the effect on the audience.[44] In fact a rather terrible MTV movie about Shepard titled *Anatomy of a Hate Crime*, which aired on January 10, 2001, also left its New York City studio audience in tears. Because the play is based on a real murder and because the victim was portrayed in most of the media as well as the play as a physically and emotionally vulnerable young man, the audience is bound to respond to the pathos of the event itself. Yet if Kaufman intended to emulate Brecht's "street corner demonstration," then the audience would be expected to stand outside the experience as opposed to getting overwhelmed by the emotions of the event.

Shewey says in his article that "Kaufman's gift as a director lies in his ability to create a structure that allows multiple, potentially conflicting points of view to stay afloat at the same time," inviting the audience "to synthesize the material themselves—a classic Brechtian strategy."[45] And what emerges from the many moments, admirably edited, is a collage of voices. Because theatre is a collaborative art form, by its very nature it opens the way to a range of expression. Marvin Carlson, laying out the

---

[44] Greg Pierotti, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 21 February 2001. Rebecca Hilliker, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 24 April 2001.

[45] Shewey, 17.

dialogism in theatre, says that a playwright creates characters that are only partly his because they will "be embodied by persons whose views of reality will be necessarily different," along with the production apparatus that includes "a whole range of contributing artists working on scenery, lighting, sound, costumes."[46] And contradictions of viewpoint may arise when a theatre piece is based on real voices. To preserve those contradictions, says British theatre director Peter Cheeseman of the Victoria Theatre Company (which staged documentary plays in Stoke-on-Trent), it is important to use primary source materials and to create the piece via the collective process.[47] But though we hear many real voices in Laramie, they are arranged in categories: the well-meaning townspeople, some struggling with their prejudices against homosexuals, the narrow-minded church leaders (particularly the Baptist minister who won't return the phone call of cast member Amanda Gronich), the exceptional voices who object to homosexuals. In terms of Brecht's theatre of multiple choices, as Jonathan Kalb points out, however, the effect is possibly too fair-minded. The array of opinions quoted do not constitute "strongly opposed views and irreconcilable realities," he writes, and do not

---

[46] Marvin Carlson, "Theater and Dialogism," in *Critical Theory and Performance,* ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 319.

[47] Peter Cheeseman, introduction to *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* by the Victoria Theatre Company (London: Methuen, 1970), xiv-xv.

make people "feel that, in the end, they have to decide."[48] Because the Tectonic theatre people made numerous trips to Laramie, including visits to people's homes, they got to know the interviewees and formed relationships with a number of them. Thus their closeness to the subjects affected the editing of the material and the portrayal of the subjects in the final product.

While we see the actors assume their roles by putting on a vest, or a knit cap, or a cowboy hat, what follows is an identification with those characters, almost as if each actor were making a case for the person he/she is representing—just as the company did as dramaturgs—but this time to the audience, asking for sympathy, or at least understanding. In addition, the choice of much of the material, especially in the opening section, emphasizes that the members of the community are good-natured, "just-plain folks," complete with twangy accents and quaint expressions that elicit laughter from the audience. These choices are in line with Kaufman's interest in showing our common humanity[49]—one of the features that might have made the project so attractive to the other companies who have decided to present the piece.

Yet not all the members of the company were inclined to present a softened view. A number of the actors I spoke with, as well as Stephen Wangh, said that if they had had more power in writing the play, they would have made different

---

[48] Kalb, *New York Press*, 39.

[49] Kaufman, telephone conversation with author, 29 August 2001.

choices. Wangh talks about including material that would have shown contradictions and unpleasant sides of some characters. He says there were lines "that would have left at least New York audiences having other thoughts about a certain character."[50]

Teresa Rowe, for example, is a character who didn't make the final cut. She works for a safe house and according to Pitts and Pierotti had interesting things to say about domestic violence in the community. But, says Pitts, Kaufman was concerned that her text would brutalize the audience.[51] Yet some of the darker side of Laramie eventually made it into the script. Pierotti says he had to fight to include the section at the end of the play in which Jonas Slonaker, a gay man, complains that Laramie ceased to be concerned about change now that "Justice has been served. The OK corral. We shot down the villains ... it's been a year since Matthew Shepard died, and they haven't passed shit [legislation] in Wyoming."[52] Pierotti also lobbied to include the line by Rulon Stacey, the CEO of the Poudre Valley hospital, that homosexuality is "not a lifestyle with which I agree." While that line is in the play, it's quickly followed by the CEO's realization of the "magnitude with which some people hate."[53] The contrast of the sentiments actually shows how the murder

---

[50] Wangh, interview.

[51] Pitts, interview.

[52] *The Laramie Project,* 99.

[53] Ibid., 71.

and other people's hate response raised his consciousness, softening his stance against homosexuality and allowing the Tectonic group to include a prejudicial statement without compromising the character.

Some material that spoke of prejudice was added to the script and then deleted. Kaufman told me he has been praised for his balanced point of view. Yet by the end of the New York City run he was adding material that addressed anti-gay sentiment. Just four days before the show closed in New York, I happened to be in the theatre for a pre-show rehearsal of the new material. An important addition was a speech delivered by the boy[54] who discovered Shepard's body tied to the fence. Aaron Kreifels is initially presented as a young innocent who says he thought at first that Matthew was a scarecrow, and then when he saw his hair realized he was a human being. "God wanted me to find him,"[55] Kreifels says. But in the additional material, Kreifels steps forward and states that he condemns the homosexual lifestyle and is "scared" of gays. He feels bad about what happened to Matthew Shepard but doesn't feel more sympathetic to the gay community.[56] This was a powerful addition, undercutting Kreifels' wide-eyed innocence. However it was cut and is not in the Dramatists

---

[54] He was actually a university student, but the actress who portrayed him played the character as if he were an adolescent.

[55] *Laramie Project*, 97.

[56] From my shorthand notes taken at the performance. (*The Laramie Project*, Union Square Theatre, New York, New York, 30 August 2000.

Play Service manuscript or the Vintage Books edition. Belber says that Kaufman decided to stay with Kreifels' innocence.[57]

When troubling sentiments and contradictions are added to characters, says Pierotti, "it's a little more difficult to walk away from [the play], going, Oh, I feel so great."[58] He's concerned that people not leave the theatre with an uncomplicated experience, congratulating themselves and Laramie. Indeed a central figure, Father Roger, told Greg that he didn't want closure, and he didn't want to put away his feelings about the tragedy. In fact, in association with the university, Father Roger, who is the pastor of Saint Paul's Newman Center, a Roman Catholic church near the university, has been responsible for campus vigils, memorial programs and an ongoing educational program about homosexuality at his church. Pierotti tells me that Father Roger's line about no closure wasn't considered for the script. Instead *The Laramie Project* used a congratulatory sentiment of Father Roger's as the penultimate speech of the play: "And I will speak with you, I will trust that if you write a play of this, that you say it right. You need to do your best to say it correct."[59]

Dramaturgs, actors, and writers either blame Kaufman for or credit him with the favorable portrait of Laramie. There was interview material, however, that might have broadened

---

[57] Belber, telephone conversation with author, 26 June 2001.

[58] Greg Pierotti, interview.

[59] *The Laramie Project*, 100.

the representation of Laramie's population, says Stephen Belber. Those interviews came out of Belber's interest in "the masculine mind-set in which homophobia is very pervasive ... that young male culture that these guys [the murderers] came from." Belber wanted to find out more about Aaron McKinney and his accomplice Russell Henderson, and spent time interviewing people who were from their world: roofers and methamphetamine users. Among other things, he discovered there were contradictions within the murderers themselves in terms of their attitudes toward homosexuality. Belber met a young lesbian woman who claimed McKinney was the first person she came out to and who said she "did drugs with McKinney and Henderson." Her character was not included in the Denver and New York runs, and is not in the Dramatists Play Service manuscript. But she does appear in the Vintage Books edition as a methamphetamine user who talks about McKinney's drug abuse and his forbearance of gays if they "don't hit on him."[60]

At the beginning of the New York run, although it was difficult to understand how this crime had occurred in Laramie as the likable and thoughtful characters appeared onstage, it wasn't entirely a mystery. In the section about religious attitudes, while there are liberal-minded religious leaders, congregants receive reinforcement for prejudices from other leaders, particularly a Baptist minister. There is the young acting student whose parents don't want him to appear in a scene from *Angels in America* at a competition and

---

[60] *Laramie Project,* 60-61.

don't attend when he performs in it. Life is not problem-free for homosexual people in Laramie: a gay man says it's difficult to live in Laramie and wishes other gays would stay so that it could be different there. And when McKinney confesses that he decided to attack Shepard because he assumed Shepard was making a pass at him and McKinney is "not a fucking faggot,"[61] a character expresses relief that the "truth" was coming out, that this crime couldn't be called just a robbery.[62]

In the Dramatists Play Service manuscript and the Vintage edition, some of the anti-gay material that was added at the end of the New York run is sandwiched between a medical update on Shepard's condition and the Muslim student asserting the town's need to "own" the crime. One person says he'd tell his children that what gay people do is similar to what animals do. Another makes Shepard partly responsible for the attack, saying Shepard stepped out of line by trying to pick up a straight person. But two other characters in this "Moment: Live and Let Live" are a lesbian and Jonas Slonaker, the gay Laramie resident, who concludes the moment with a condemnation of the Western attitudes, which purports to be "live and let live": "If I don't tell you I'm a fag, you won't beat the crap out of me. I mean, what's so great about

---

[61] *The Laramie Project,* 90.

[62] There was another reported homophobic incident in Laramie that fall. According to the *Time* magazine story about the Shepard murder, in the month before Shepard was killed, the head of the university's gay-activities club was attacked (Lopez, 39).

that? That's a great philosophy?"[63]

The characters in this moment who voice the virulent anti-homosexual statements are not recurring figures, and they are almost isolated voices among the "folk." The major anti-gay statements in the play are expressed in terms of religious beliefs and in sermons. The Baptist minister is further "exposed" in a phone call in which he says he hopes Shepard had time to reflect on his lifestyle as he lay there tied to a fence. The most offensive character is an out of towner, a hate-mongering Baptist reverend from Topeka, Kansas, who led anti-gay demonstrations at Shepard's funeral and at Russell Henderson's trial. But targeting religious fanatics and religious institutions might be a way to avoid targeting the town—and to glorify small-town U.S.A.

Shewey tells the *American Theatre* reader to think of the play as *Our Town 2000*.[64] Indeed Kaufman and company quote the graveyard scene of *Our Town* through what the director likes to call a line of discourse: at the scene of Shepard's funeral, cast members sat in chairs holding black umbrellas. But Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, in the words of its author, "is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village."[65] The play is allegorical, and the folksy expressions of the characters are generalizations. What's

---

[63] *The Laramie Project*, 59. In the Dramatists Play Service Manuscript, the moment is titled "Homosexuality," p. 43.

[64] Shewey, 15.

[65] Thornton Wilder, preface to *Three Plays* by Thornton Wilder (U.S.A.: Harper & Row, 1957), xii.

special about *Laramie* is that we are given glimpses of real people. What's special is its specificity. Grover's Corners is a homogeneous place—the Polish people are confined to their ghetto—and it's virtually crime-free. In *Laramie*, a gay man was murdered because he was gay, and people are asked to examine their attitudes toward difference. Yet the analogy to *Our Town* persists in newspaper and magazine reviews. In addition, La Jolla Playhouse produced Wilder's *Our Town* and *Laramie Project*, back to back, calling *Laramie* "the *Our Town* of our times."[66]

In April 2001, I traveled to Laramie to speak with a number of people who were represented in the play. Two people of sixteen[67] that I contacted never responded; Catherine Connolly, "the first 'out' lesbian or gay faculty member on campus"[68] decided against speaking with me when I arrived there; Matt Galloway, the bartender at the Fireside and a student at the university, never made it to our appointment; and Sergeant Hing of the police department was out each time I called (although he did try to return my call once). I spoke with several of the characters who study and work at the University of Wyoming (including the president), the

---

[66] *www.lajollaplayhouse.com*, 15 February 2003.

[67] I contacted those who addresses I could get from the University of Wyoming Web site and a Web site with addresses of city government agencies and businesses. I used Doc O'Connor's taxi service and was advised by his driver not to contact him. While in Laramie I also interviewed Professor Sadrul Ula and his family, as well as Professor Beth Loffreda.

[68] *The Laramie Project*, 21.

deputy sheriff, the lead investigator from the sheriff's office, two women who work at the Interfaith Good Samaritans, the Catholic priest, a former shop owner, as well as the parents and sister of the Muslim student. Upon returning to New York, I spoke via phone with the "waitress" who was Russell Henderson's former landlady; the Muslim student who now lives in Wisconsin; and the young lesbian woman, sister of the former shop owner and a friend of Matthew's, who was part of the Angel Action protest.

While I could have expected that people who agreed to speak with me probably had positive feelings about the play, I was surprised by the wholehearted approval of the piece, of the cast and most of all of the admiration for Moisés Kaufman. I asked people why they had participated in the project and why they had trusted Kaufman and company. Professor Rebecca Hilliker was responsible for introducing the group to a number of their subjects, and the play acknowledges her as one of their initial contacts. The people in her department said they were willing to participate because they knew Kaufman's play *Gross Indecency* and were impressed that Kaufman was spearheading this project. All the people I spoke with said they were grateful that the Tectonic people spent time with them, kept returning to Laramie, went to some of their homes, and got to know them. People needed to talk. Laramie is a town in which murder is rare. They were shaken by the crime and its aftermath. I think that's why people agreed to speak with me as well—they still need to talk about what happened and how they feel about it.

It is impressive that the people of Laramie trusted the New York company after they had been bombarded by the media, who many felt had misrepresented Laramie. A number of people said they were eager to correct the representation of them by the media as yahoos and hicks. Lieutenant Rob DeBree says the "media were just looking for a story. And if they couldn't find one ... they were making it up."[69] Marge Murray, who was raised in west Laramie, "the other side of the tracks," said she felt really bad that the media kept characterizing "it as a bunch of back-woodsy people, kind of like on dirt floors, almost living in shacks, and there are some damn nice houses over there ... I raised five kids over there. ... They're all professional people. ... I think a lot of people over there did well."[70] University of Wyoming president Philip Dubois told me that outsiders were coming in to the "cowboy state" and going to the bars to talk to people: "A lot of people came in with some preconceptions that they were looking for a way to validate."[71] And though he had some objections to *The Laramie Project*, in terms of the " 'marginalization' of the role that the University played in structuring the

---

[69] Rob DeBree, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

[70] Marge Murray, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 26 April 2001.

[71] Philip Dubois, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

community's response to the tragedy,"[72] he was appreciative that the Tectonic Theater members were respectful and cognizant that they were outsiders.

A frequently expressed sentiment was how sincere and sensitive the Tectonic members were and continue to be. Most of the people I interviewed said they felt they were accurately represented, that the script included what they wanted to express. More than one person, though, including Lieutenant Rob DeBree, admitted to a fear of appearing foolish. Most felt that they didn't appear so. Yet Shewey reported in his *American Theatre* article that Matt Galloway, the bartender, after seeing himself portrayed onstage in Denver, said he hoped he wasn't as "bad" as the depiction.[73] Indeed Jed Schultz, the acting student whose education and evolution are charted in the play, was deeply disturbed when, at a rehearsal in Denver, he first heard his speeches in the play about not believing in homosexuality: "That was a year and a half later, and I just couldn't take it. I completely forgot that I had said that stuff. I had changed so much. And it was horrible. It was so hard for me to watch. And I just broke down." But he added that it was more than just painful: "It was just a great reminder of where I used to be."[74]

---

[72] Philip Dubois to Moisés Kaufman, 3 April 2000. Matthew Shepard Collection, Accession Number 300014, Box 3, Folder 8, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY.

[73] Shewey, 69.

[74] Jedadiah Schultz, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

After listening to a number of actors talk about how angry they were with Moisés Kaufman because of their diminished involvement with the HBO film, I went to Laramie almost hoping to hear from the subjects that they felt used and exploited. Indeed one of my questions dealt with the fact that the Tectonic Theater Project—with its multitude of productions, its future script and book sales, and its HBO film—would be profiting from the calamity. The subjects who provided the text would not be profiting. I got a range of reactions to this issue: "I've never felt exploited"[75] (university staff member Harry Woods) to "I don't want to profit from somebody's death"[76] (lead investigator on the Matthew Shepard case, lieutenant Rob DeBree) to "I think it's great that it's making money, just for them"[77] (deputy sheriff Reggie Fluty, who admired the group's dedication) to "I feel like I profited from it. I feel guilty about that a lot of times ... I've had a lot of opportunities open ... a lot of good things have happened to me because a young man was murdered"[78] (student actor Jedadiah Schultz).

Company members were mindful of moral issues that arose in this project. Actress Barbara Pitts says that actor Andy Paris "got the high moral barometer going: 'We need to check

---

[75] Woods, interview.

[76] DeBree, interview.

[77] Reggie Fluty, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

[78] Schultz, interview.

[with] the Shepards. We need their approval.' "[79] But Kaufman disagreed, and indeed the Shepards did not attend the Denver opening. Paris also had qualms about "using" people's stories: "I had a lot of problems toward the beginning of the project ... The feelings of intrusion at one point were almost too much."[80] In fact he said that he wouldn't be interested in doing another such project. An essay by the Popular Memory Group, based on its collective work from October 1979 to June 1980 at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the University of Birmingham, takes up the "difficulties" that come with the practice of oral history, one of which is that the "practice of research actually conforms to ... social divisions which are also relations of power and inequality." The source, a living person, gives up information while the historian "provides the dominant interpretation" and constructs the study that will profit him via royalties and career advancement.[81]

The truth is, *The Laramie Project* has also been helpful to some of its characters. As Jed Schultz admitted, he has been offered opportunities that have boosted his budding acting career. In the summer of 2001, he performed in *The Laramie Project* at the Plan B Theatre Company (working in

---

[79] Pitts, interview.

[80] Paris, interview.

[81] Popular Memory Group, "Popular memory: theory, politics, method," in *Making Histories: Studies in history-writing and politics*, ed. Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, David Sutton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 219-220.

association with Salt Lake City Acting Company), playing, among other characters, himself. Other characters have gained a certain fame, being sought out by media and theatre companies for interviews. The character Harry Woods is quoted in an article in *The Advocate* that contrasts attitudes in *Boys in the Band* with those in *The Laramie Project*.[82] Romaine Patterson, Shepard's friend, who has a central role in the play, was inspired by the event itself to become an activist—and she became a high-profile one, photographed for a *New York Times Magazine* item in her Angel Action wings.[83] Patterson, who now lives in Washington D.C. and works for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation as a media manager, says, "The play is the best thing my name is attached to."[84]

Another positive outcome were friendships that were formed between the company and the subjects. Some of the Tectonic actors developed a genuine affection for the people they were playing and were able to extend those relationships after the play opened. When *Laramie Project* went to New York City, a couple of characters who traveled there for the opening, Jed Schultz and Zubaida Ula, stayed with the actors who played them. Ula, an enthusiast for the play, told me she

---

[82] Anne Stockwell, "Changing the Script," *The Advocate*, 15 August 2000, 103-104.

[83] Amy M. Spindler, "Hark! This herald angel avenges hate," *New York Times Magazine*, 24 December 2000, 48-49.

[84] Romaine Patterson, telephone conversation with author, 16 May 2001.

loves Barbara Pitts, who not only acted as her host in New York but also presented her with a bound copy of her transcript.[85] Others still keep in touch via phone calls and e-mail. Thus it's not an exaggeration for Leigh Fondakowski to talk to the press about one degree of separation[86] in regard to actor and character.

As mentioned earlier, that closeness and affection can have its downside in the construction of the piece—not to mention journalistic objectivity. Trish Steger, the shop owner in the play, who has lived in Laramie for the past twenty years, told me that when she first saw *Laramie Project* in Denver, her comment to Fondakowski was: "You were way too nice."[87] Head writer Fondakowski's explanation for the Tectonic's kindness to Laramie is quoted in the book *Losing Matt Shepard:* "We forged relationships, [so] we feel this incredible sense of responsibility. We were so worried about betraying anyone's trust."[88] The cost of that apparent closeness was the missed opportunity to present a critical view of the Western town, one that would ask people to question how the attitudes of the townspeople might have helped make this brutal hate crime possible.

---

[85] Zubaida Ula, telephone conversation.

[86] Robert Hurwitt, "The 'Laramie' Process: Moisés Kaufman Explores Form in Play About Matthew Shepard Murder," *San Francisco Chronicle. www.sfgate.com,* 20 May 2001.

[87] Trish Steger, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 28 April 2001.

[88] Leigh Fondakowski, quoted in *Losing Matt Shepard,* 127.

Anna Deavere Smith's early work in *On the Road: A Search for American Character* was geared to representing the members of a community to themselves, which writer Carol Martin calls "Smith's virtual realities" that "give to those watching a view of themselves that otherwise they could not purchase: a view that might empower them to make changes" because Smith's "sharp socially critical mind" was at work in the editing and selection of material.[89] Doug Paterson of the Dakota Theatre Caravan approaches representation of a community from a different angle. Its play *Welcome Home*, about life in a small, Great Plains town, was developed out of interviews with the townspeople, and research was done by living in Miller and getting to know its people and the town's issues. But the resulting piece, while performed in Miller, as well as other towns, was set in a fictional place, and no character was patterned directly on an individual in Miller because Paterson says his company's objective "was to protect the town and its people from being used and displayed."[90] *Laramie* acknowledges its problems of representation and includes characters' concerns about the intentions of the company: in an intertextual reference, a character asks, Where are you going with this story? In another, a character uses the word shit and says, You got that on your tape. But the people who gave interviews were willing to be represented

---

[89] Carol Martin, "Bearing Witness: Anna Deavere Smith," in *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance*, ed. Carol Martin (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 84.

[90] Doug Paterson, "Theatre for a People: The Dakota Theatre Caravan," *TDR* 27 (Summer 1983): 12.

as themselves onstage (although some asked that their names not be used) and signed the Tectonic Theater Project's releases.

The Laramie people who contributed their stories are collaborators on this project, and, like the company, they too had a stake in a sweetened view of Laramie. They wanted to redress the media representation and restore the good name of Laramie. Reggie Fluty agrees that for the most part, the play stayed away from exploring the seamier sides of Laramie: "I don't know if they did that purposely or if they just ran out of time, so they took what they could to be most important. For whatever reason it was left out, I was extremely thankful."[91]

When I was in Laramie I heard numerous people use the word community to describe all of Laramie, even those people who agree that there are divisions within the town of 27,000 people[92], especially with regard to the university and "townies" split. Professor Rebecca Hilliker says about the play: "This story is about what happens when the media descends on a community and accuses that community of being responsible for that action, and does so without ever trying to understand what's at the heart and soul of the community. ... I think Moisés really did want to try and tell the other

---

[91] Fluty, interview.

[92] As in any university town, a percentage of that population (almost half according to the university's information guide) are students, many of whom will move on after graduation.

side of the story ... the more human one."[93] But is a cross section of the whole community onstage? In Laramie, there's a university community and there are people who have nothing to do with the university. About ten percent of the residents of Laramie County are Hispanic[94] (one Latino appears in the play, an ex-prisoner). Laramie is a not a wealthy town (the median income is $27,000), and there is class stratification.

The play touches briefly on the issue of class in an introductory moment: Alison and Marge, the social-services workers, talk about class distinction: "Wyoming is bad in terms of jobs. I mean, the university has the big high whoop-de-doo jobs. But Wyoming, unless you're a professional, well, the bulk of the people are working minimum-wage jobs."[95] Bartender Matt Galloway tells the story of how McKinney and Henderson paid for a pitcher of beer with dimes and quarters, a detail that was underlined by journalists reporting the story and critics reviewing the play.

The majority of the Laramie voices in *Laramie Project,* however, are university students and employees, religious and community leaders, and government employees. Scott Jones, the student responsible for the fund raising that brought the play to Laramie, thinks a lot of viewpoints were not expressed in the play. The voices onstage are those who were

---

[93] Hilliker, interview.

[94] Figures are for 1999. "State and County QuickFacts," U.S. Census Bureau (*http://quickfacts.census.gov/cgi-bin/county?cnty=56021*), 15 February 2001.

[95] *Laramie Project,* 16.

contacted, agreed to be interviewed and gave the Tectonic people permission to use their words—and among these only those that were dramaturgically useful or dramatically interesting were kept in. What was left out, Jones thinks, are more "everyday students and townspeople," people whose personalities might not have been that "interesting," who spoke in quiet voices. Even so he appreciated the sense one got of the town, especially the voices of the different religious leaders.[96]

In any documentary play, voices will necessarily be left out. Yet oral-history studies have been used to give voice to those who have been marginalized, i.e., Henry Mayhew's landmark series on *London Labour and the London Poor*. Paul Thompson in *The Voice of the Past* says that oral history "makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past."[97] Stephen Belber had tapes of interviews that might have delved into the culture of the boys who committed the crime, but, he says, that they ultimately didn't explore that world, that they didn't fit into Kaufman's agenda: "What Moisés admirably latched onto in this play was, How is this town dealing? How is the town going to be affected—in good ways? Will we learn? ... as a

---

[96] Scott Jones, telephone conversation with author, 29 May 2001.

[97] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 5.

metaphor for the nation, this town was forced to talk about these issues for the first time, and for the most part they are becoming better people. And that's a very seductive and theatrical and pleasant way to do things."[98]

Because the Laramie team came in behind the media, a number of the characters had been already been quoted in the press. In fact Elizabeth Pochoda reviewing the New York production in the *Nation* complained that "you do get the sense that many of these citizens were talked out well before they were interviewed by the Tectonic players. Some, like the bartender who served both Shepard and his killers on the fateful night, deliver a media-worn routine."[99] And Doc O'Connor, the limousine driver, developed his own routine, with quotes in a March 1999 *Vanity Fair* article that echo those in the *Laramie Project.*[100] Yet Jed Schultz, who also gave press interviews, told me it was the company's questions and getting to know the members of the company that helped raise his consciousness.

For some the event itself forced them to examine attitudes they hadn't questioned before. Lieutenant DeBree says his personal transition began in his interview with then suspect Aaron McKinney: "I had not really given the issue of

---

[98] Stephen Belber, interview.

[99] Elizabeth Pochoda, review of *The Laramie Project,* by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project, as performed by the Tectonic Theater Project, New York, *The Nation,* 19 June 2000, 34-35.

[100] Melanie Thernstrom, "The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard," *Vanity Fair,* March 1999, 210.

homosexuality that much thought. ... For some reason it touched my nerve. I didn't appreciate that he was referring to this individual as a something, just like it's not Matt Shepard, it was a fag."[101] Trish Steger agrees that after the murder people began to look at their views on homosexuality. "It became the issue that was being discussed. ... Then all of the talk in the community revolved around that. So it became the issue that you focused on."[102] But there were other members of that community like Nafisah Ula, the sister of the Muslim student and in seventh grade at the time of the murder, who paid the event minimal attention. She says beyond the students' wearing armbands one day, "it wasn't very publicized" at school. Her mother, Shaheda Ula, agrees that people weren't discussing the murder at K-mart. But her father, a professor at the university, says the play did stimulate discussion[103]—thus supporting Kaufman's claim in the *Village Voice* that "unbeknownst to us, we were providing a forum for the community to listen to itself."[104] Kaufman's statement might be disingenuous, however, considering the example of Anna Deavere Smith's work, which Kaufman himself refers to.

---

[101] DeBree, interview.

[102] Steger, interview.

[103] Nafisah, Shaheda and Sadrul Ula, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo.,26 April 2001.

[104] Moisés Kaufman, quoted in James Hannaham, "The Tectonic Theater Project Captures Matthew Shepard's Laramie," *Village Voice,* 16 May 2000, 71.

Though *Laramie* is unlike Smith's *On the Road* series, in that Smith was commissioned to reflect a community back to itself, while the Tectonic Theater Project did so on its own accord, the play points out that the very attention the Tectonic people paid to the community asked the people to confront the event. Zubaida Ula, the Muslim university student, says in the play that the media attention forced the people of Laramie to look at their problems—and the play continued that exploration. Kaufman told me he distinguishes art from political action, but he also acknowledges that because of the play people were forced to talk about gay rights and education.[105] According to James Hannaham in the *Village Voice*, a week after the Denver opening of the play there was a hearing about hate-crime legislation in Laramie. Kaufman related the following to him: "Somebody from the town stood up at the hearing and said, 'I just saw *The Laramie Project*, and in this play it says that over the past year, nothing has happened on the political level. The play's going to New York. Is that how this council wants to be known?" A modest hate-crime law was eventually passed.[106]

The struggle continues, however. Beth Loffreda, professor at the University of Wyoming who authored *Losing Matt Shepard* and is the faculty adviser to the university's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association, says that she is concerned about the rhetoric of being healed by the play. "And that is certainly the way that Moisés will present it.

---

[105] *In the Life.*

[106] Quoted in Hannaham, 71.

That's how he talked about it here in Laramie ... I don't believe in that kind of language. ... I don't understand why we should ever feel better about what happened here. I'm not saying we should be suspended in the trauma of what happened permanently, but I don't see why we should feel ... better as a community or as individuals about what happened to Matt Shepard."[107]

I asked Kaufman about his interest in the true story and his decision to create two theatre pieces that are documentary in nature. Kaufman says he doesn't like that term because he believes documentaries are works of fiction. Instead, he refers to *The Laramie Project,* in which more than 200 interviews were pared down to a performance of some two hours and forty-five minutes, as a piece that encompasses personal stories. In using only one paragraph of text from a two-hour interview (in some cases several two-hour interviews), he and the company's actors were editing the interviewee's ideas and thus creating a fiction. All his work, Kaufman says, points to the fact that it's not possible to recount reality, that there are as many versions of a story as there are people involved. He was made very aware of this in his research for *Gross Indecency* because he discovered multiple accounts of the same event in the life of Oscar Wilde.[108]

---

[107] Beth Loffreda, interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 27 April 2001. Amendment of quotation from Beth Loffreda to author, 24 July 2001, via e-mail.

[108] Kaufman, telephone conversation with author, 29 August 2000.

Yet after having become famous for a play that was constructed via documents, Kaufman launched a second project that would document an event via oral history. Why bother taping and transcribing hundreds of hours of interviews if the piece was going to be a fiction? And as mentioned earlier, why was the marketing for the play geared to the truth claim, saying that these were the words of real people whom real actors talked to: based[109] on more than 200 interviews, conducted by the members of the company.

Still, perhaps echoing Kaufman's statements, associate writer Wangh says that *Laramie Project* is a documentary play only in the loosest sense. He talks about sticky-tape sentences, meaning phrases were sometimes strung together to come up with what worked dramatically.[110] But associate writer Pierotti says, "Some of the text was cleaned up to clarify what the person was saying, which, though it comes across in the interview context, is hard to grasp in the text alone." And he says in some cases tenses were changed. "But ... to say the text was rewritten gives the impression that we were changing people's meaning to suit our needs. I do not believe we did that."[111] Indeed all the characters I spoke with corroborated that they had said what was in the text. And

---

[109] Michael Janofsky in his *Times* piece says the use of the word based implies that these words are what the actors heard rather than what the people said (sec. 2, p. 28). But the opening lines of the play cited earlier in this dissertation claim that it is constructed of edited interviews, journal entries and found materials.

[110] Wangh, interview.

[111] Greg Pierotti to author, 19 April 2000, via e-mail.

although neither Reggie Fluty nor her mother, Marge Murray, thinks she is misrepresented, both told me that the "scene" between them was put together from separately conducted interviews. In the editing, Marge came to address her daughter as "you."[112]

As to the portrayal of the actors themselves, the Tectonic people told me they took liberties with those portrayals—one actress was a "catchall" for others' journal entries; a statement about an actor having had breakfast with an interviewee was invented to facilitate a segue to a new scene.[113] The actors are the dramaturgical "machine" that moves the story along. They set up the piece, narrate at times, and provide closure. And by interspersing journal entries, the play lays out the arc of their journey: they arrive in Laramie, feeling cautious and apprehensive, instructed to travel in twos and carry cell phones; then they leave as a group of actors who have bonded with the people whose stories they had been following for a year and a half. "Now, you take care. I love you, honey," character Marge Murray is quoted as saying to actor Greg Pierotti; the Moisés Kaufman character tells the audience that "Jedadiah cried when he said good-bye."[114] The play underlines the culture clash and misunderstandings that are overcome by getting to know people and advancing beyond assumptions. As I shall

---

[112] Without having access to the transcripts, I don't know whether pronouns were changed here for direct address.

[113] Pitts, interview.

[114] *Laramie Project*, 100.

discuss later, part of the play's popularity has to do with its "messages" about politically correct behavior.

Much of the editing is skillful, weaving sections of people's speeches that make sense consecutively. The Marge and Reggie scenes are made to sound lively and spontaneous despite their separate sources. Other times, however, tag lines seem contrived to conclude moments with a punch. A Zubaida Ula moment, in which she derides the speaker at Shepard's candlelight vigil who says he wants the world to have a better impression of Laramie, ends with: "We are like this. We ARE like this. WE are LIKE this."[115] The Harry Woods/Homecoming moment in which he talks about supporters of Shepard's marching behind the homecoming parade ends with: "I started to cry. Tears were streaming down my face. And I thought, 'Thank God that I got to see this in my lifetime.' And my second thought was, 'Thank you, Matthew.' "[116] These neat wrap-ups broadcast the editing and tie up people's speeches in tidy packages.

Editorial and dramaturgical choices also led to the omission of information that would have more fully represented who these characters really are. Harry Woods, for instance, is the coordinator of fine arts programs in the university's theatre and dance department, although that is not referred to in the play. Nor does the play mention that he directed the production of *Angels in America* that Jed Schultz appeared in. Trish Steger is identified as a shop

---

[115] *Laramie Project,* 60.

[116] Ibid., 63-64.

owner and the sister of Romaine Patterson, but the play does not mention that she is also married to a professor in the theatre and dance department. Zackie Salmon, introduced only as a Laramie resident who moved there from rural Texas, works as a project coordinator in the university's student educational opportunity department.[117] Matt Galloway, the bartender, is also a student at the university. Father Roger's congregation is mostly from the university. Aaron Kreifels, the biker who discovered Shepard's body, was a university student.[118] That the university people were deeply affected by the murder is not surprising considering that Matthew Shepard was a university student. It does seem, however, that the university affiliation of a number of the characters was either downplayed or omitted because the play would then have seem to be weighted too heavily with university types and might not have been perceived to be about the "townspeople."

Dramaturgical exigencies resulted in other kinds of misrepresentation. When President Dubois complained about the play's marginalization of the university's role, one of the

---

[117] The Vintage Books cast description addresses some of the omissions and identifies Salmon as working for the university. *The Laramie Project* [New York: Vintage Books, 2001], xiii.

[118] In his first line he says "Well I, uh, I took off on my bicycle about five p.m. on Wednesday from my dorm," (*Laramie Project,* 35), but he was played as a much younger person and that is the only reference to his being a university student in the script. The cast description for the Vintage Books publication, however, says: "University student, nineteen years old" (xii).

things he was referring to was the involvement of students in the Angel Action demonstrations as a response to the hate-mongering Reverend Phelps. According to Beth Loffreda in *Losing Matt Shepard*, among the angels were students from the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association and Denver activists. Romaine Patterson was one of the activists,[119] who, Loffreda writes, was "primarily responsible for providing the angels' impressive wings."[120] But Loffreda says that the play initially downplayed the LGBTA's participation, which created "a few hurt feelings among students" because the play made it seem "that an outsider had to come in and make it all happen."[121] She adds that the Tectonic people tried to fix that between the Denver and New York runs, so that Romaine says, "So our idea is to dress up like angels."[122] However, the audience didn't know who "our" referred to—and Patterson was a central character in the piece. The position of "the voices of a new generation at the heart of the story"[123] impressed David Román, who writes in *Theatre Journal* about Patterson's depiction in the play, as the young woman who

---

[119] According to *Vanity Fair*, Patterson met Shepard at Casper College, then she moved to Denver where she worked as a waitress in a coffee shop (267-268).

[120] *Losing Matt Shepard*, 95.

[121] Loffreda, interview.

[122] *Laramie Project*, 79.

[123] David Román, "Comment—The Details of Difference," *Theatre Journal* 52 (October 2000), unnumbered page.

becomes a queer activist. He says it is "surprising, and gratifying, to see her own very local performance embedded in this one, *The Laramie Project*."[124] But Patterson is also a stand-in for other figures who aren't given a voice in the play. She didn't live in Laramie, Belber says, but she became a composite of the young gay culture there.[125]

Actress Barbara Pitts regrets theatrical shortcuts that featured Sherry Aanenson as a waitress at a truck stop. Aanenson has a degree in Women's Studies and Sociology, and when the group met up with her on a subsequent trip she had changed jobs and was working at the Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. Pitts says Aanenson "had a million incredible things to say. But ... I feel like she's got this little snippet in the play that serves the dramatic action. But it's not a representation of who she is."[126] Aanenson herself says that because she was Henderson's landlady and still a waitress at the time of the murder, she isn't bothered by the representation. A pragmatist, she says she's "used to seeing a [sound] bite, a monologue bit ... Of course that's not who I am."[127] The problem throughout, as Kaufman attests, was extracting comments from interviews and then presenting those extracts onstage as representative of

---

[124] Román.

[125] Belber, telephone conversation with author, 26 June 2001.

[126] Pitts, interview.

[127] Sherry Aanenson, telephone conversation with author, 24 July 2001.

the whole person. Furthermore these interviews took place at different times over a year and a half during which Laramie was coping with the aftereffects of the murder.

Doc O'Connor takes center stage as a colorful character. He has a funny response to Shepard's assertion that he's gay and wants to be driven to a gay bar. Doc says: "And I said, 'How're you payin'?"[128] Doc was attracted to the media but was also somewhat cautious, and explains his approach in the play. He says that while he was being taped for *Hard Copy*, he turned his tape on so that he would have a record of what he said and could hold the reporters accountable. Unfortunately, *The Laramie Project* omits information that might have given a fuller picture of who Doc is. In the *Vanity Fair* piece mentioned earlier, in which he tells the same gay-bar story, writer Melanie Thernstrom reports that at the time of the murder, Aaron McKinney and his girlfriend "had recently moved out of an apartment attached to one of Doc's buildings."[129] Belber, who interviewed Doc and played him, says that a number of company members had wanted to include that information, thus allowing audience members to draw their own connections and conclusions. Doc lives in Bosler, outside Laramie, and has a reputation for being more than just a kooky character. An officer at the sheriff's department said: "Doc's a criminal, as a matter of fact. ... He kind of forced himself into the limelight by approaching media. ... [the

---

[128] *Laramie Project,* 19.

[129] Thernstrom, 210.

play] portrayed him as being comical, but the guy is a fool, and he's dangerous."[130] While Belber says he heard the rumors about Doc, he also says he felt Doc was genuinely moved by his experiences with Shepard. (Doc says he met Shepard on October 2, which was only five days before the attack.) Belber adds that in performance he tried to make Doc more quirky and fun.[131] Of course, the play need not mention Doc's alleged criminal activities and his relationship to Matthew's murderer, but if the Tectonic members are operating as journalists (I refer back to the many suggestions that they were in reviews, articles and Kaufman's own statement), the omissions amount to negligence.

Kaufman has made a range of statements about *Laramie Project:* that the play is about the intersection of theatre artists and townspeople; that it's a theatrical dialogue about current events; that by recording "people talking at this moment in history, we will create a document that a hundred years from now people will be able to look at and say this is where these people were at this moment in time"[132]; that he is not concerned with inspiring immediate political action, but instead is concerned with art.[133] Yet I suspect

---

[130] Interview by author, tape recording, Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

[131] Belber, telephone conversation with author, 26 June 2001.

[132] Moisés Kaufman, quoted in *"The Laramie Project:* Chronicling impressions of a town and a murder," by Laura C. Kelley, *Dramatics*, May 2000, 20.

[133] Kaufman, telephone conversation with author, 29 August 2000.

that the popularity of the piece has a lot to do with its subject matter and its social message. In a conversation with me, James Christy, a professor of theatre at Villanova University who directed *The Laramie Project* for the Philadelphia Theatre Company (June 2001), talked about the number of educators who approached him, asking where they could get the script. He says he thinks the play's future is as a teaching tool: it's appealing because of its political correctness and because it talks about homophobia in a way that might be palatable. The piece is peopled with reassuring types, he adds, like the decent law-enforcement officer who acknowledges his own prejudices and expresses the desire to change.[134] And indeed, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, the play, with its noncontroversial, heartfelt message, has become a popular vehicle in the American school system.

The Tectonic Theater Project stirred up tremendous buzz with its attempt to engage in a conversation about current events, due in large part to the high profile of the crime and to a resurgence of interest in documentary-style theatre. Assistant managing editor Howard Chua-Eoan of *Time* magazine suggests that theatre might participate in journalism by laying out the stories for the audience members, turning them into journalists and allowing them to set one story against another, to hold one version up to another, thereby leading to a consideration of which stories stand up to scrutiny and

---

[134] James Christy, telephone conversation with author, 18 July 2001.

where the truth lies.[135] But considerations of aesthetics and the blurring of the lines between observer and participant led the Tectonic Theater Project to create a *Laramie Project* with its own quite distinct version of the "truth."

[135] Howard Chua-Eoan, interview by author, New York, N.Y., 26 February 2001. Chua-Eoan wrote the original *Time* piece about Matthew Shepard (October 19, 1998) and edited the following week's cover package on hate crimes.

Conclusion

I have set out to explore what happens when artists shape personal testimony, both oral and written, into theatrical forms. The process of staging local and oral history—from collecting and selecting the documents and interviews, to crafting the script, to producing the play—involves a series of relationships. One relationship is between the "historian" and the material. E.H. Carr writes that the historian, the interpreter of facts, is engaged in an "unending dialogue between the present and the past."[1] For the oral historian, the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee means they engage in a dialogue in the present. Another relationship develops when a theatre company is introduced into the mix, and the conversation is extended to include the members of the company, who help collect and shape the material. As the number of collaborators in this process from research to production increases, the range of possibilities for interpretation of the "facts" becomes greater. And that can lead to an interesting multivocality in the final product. While acknowledging that interpretation of the source material is both inevitable and desirable in a work of art, I have elected to explore the complications that arise from these relationships.

In each of the projects discussed in this dissertation,

---

[1] Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 35.

the artists' relationships with their subjects, their personal investments in the individuals of the town and in the town itself, interfered with their ability to keep an objective distance and skewed their interpretation toward a less than critical view. Indeed *The Laramie Project's* head writer Leigh Fondakowski talked about the company's unwillingness to "betray" the Laramie townspeople's trust. While EcoTheater's Maryat Lee was committed to the empowerment of her indigenous players, she rewrote the townspeople's stories, saying the material was meant to be more symbolic than actual. The *Letters to the Editor* company members talked about their affection for Bloomsburg's townspeople and about wanting to celebrate their special town.

Yet despite the "partial truths" in these productions, to use James Clifford's term, much of the marketing and the critical response emphasized that the plays drew on the experiences and the words of actual people, suggesting that the appeal of the work was indeed related to what Richard Schechner calls "believed-in theatre." And while I may have misgivings about misrepresentations in the individual productions, I recognize the value of the audiences' connecting to and identifying with the people represented onstage. Further, from my conversations with the subjects whose stories were retold onstage, I learned that they were grateful for the theatrical forum for their voices.

Each of the productions joined oral history and documents with theatre to create a purposeful artwork that

addresses social issues and community concerns: the grassroots company EcoTheater used art to empower the citizens of a small American town; the professional resident ensemble Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble used art to preserve and celebrate the history of its small American town; the New York City troupe the Tectonic Theatre project used art to look at attitudes toward homosexuality in another small American town.

The local plays of EcoTheater and the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble remained local in their scope and appeal. *The Laramie Project* has been widely performed by both professionals and nonprofessionals. Indeed the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble included the play in its 2002-2003 season. What has made this piece so popular? The script is skillful and polished, but that alone does not account for its popularity. It's about a hot-button issue, but while that might have propelled the success of the play at first, now, as I posited earlier, its success has much to do with its dealing with this issue in a non-threatening way and with its message that Laramie is not that different from other towns, that all people share a common humanity.

Derek Paget in *True Stories?* suggests that documentary implies a promise that "it offers instruction or information on some matter, and it offers to instruct and inform in the best possible 'artistic' taste."[2] Because *The Laramie Project*

---

[2] Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 55.

offers tasteful instruction on how a town responds to and copes with a horrific crime, it has achieved what Don Shewey calls "an extended life" in American schools. According to Shewey, between January 2002 and June 2003 about 440 productions of *Laramie Project* were planned by American high schools, colleges, and amateur theatre groups.[3] With its mostly loving portrait of Laramie, the play hardly uncovers the underlying conditions and attitudes that fostered such hatred for homosexuals. Yet the productions profiled in the article have mounted the play with a didactic aim. High school teachers and college professors have used the play as a way to begin discussions with their students about prejudice, homophobia, and about hate crimes.

There is much potential for theatre based on local and oral history to serve as a socially committed art form. It can provide insight into how people respond to public and private events, giving voice to those who might otherwise not have been heard. Playwright David Edgar suggests that while the creators of docudrama are not historians, these artists have a knowledge of human behavior as well as the skills to communicate that knowledge and to show how events occurred.[4] Oral-history plays can offer a confirmation of people's lives by privileging their voices and experiences. Moreover they

---

[3] Don Shewey, "A Play Has a Second Life as a Stage for Discussion," *New York Times*, 1 December 2002, 7.

[4] David Edgar, "Theater of Fact: A Dramatist's Viewpoint," in *Why Docudrama: Fact-Fiction on Film and TV*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 182.

can help create bonds within communities, as expressed by Bruce McConachie in his interpretation of "structures of feeling." These plays can also help the members of a community step back and look at the contrasting viewpoints within that community, particularly in the hands of a solo performer like Anna Deavere Smith, who possesses, writes Jonathan Kalb, a "discerning editorial eye and selective framing hand."[5]

As I discussed earlier, a popular notion among grassroots practitioners is that oral history plays can be healing. This is a motif that is taken up by Gary Fisher Dawson in his survey of documentary theatre in the United States. Playwright Athol Fugard has also invoked the same theme. Writing in response to a production of Emily Mann's *Greensboro,* Fugard expresses his belief that theatre has an important role to play in the "psychic well-being and sanity of a society": beyond the anger aroused by the events that the play documented, he writes, "there was an even deeper process at work. The word that came immediately to mind was 'healing.' " This healing occurs, he continues, after one is able to face and come to terms with past events.[6] Grassroots practitioners take the notion of healing through theatre even further. For them, the process of developing and mounting the

---

[5] Jonathan Kalb, "Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self," *Theater* 31 (2001): 18.

[6] Athol Fugard, introduction to *Testimonies: Four Plays by Emily Mann* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), xi.

production, which includes participation by the people whose stories are being staged, promotes healing—pointing to theatre as a therapeutic art.

As I read about projects under way that are based on oral history—revolving around communities of gender, profession, common experience—I am struck by the purposeful nature of the work, whether that means education, community building, political action—or therapeutic intent. Indeed, a new project, *Children of War,* has been designed as a vehicle for victims of trauma. Commissioned by the Center for Multicultural Human Services in Falls Church, Virginia, which provides mental health services for immigrants and refugees, it is part of a larger project called "Undesirable Elements." Written and directed by Ping Chong, the play is based on oral history and performed by young refugees originally from such places as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Sierra Leone, but who now live in Washington.[7] The teens along with one adult (a trauma expert) tell their own stories about the traumas of their past as well as their new life in the United States. Talking about the production, Ping Chong stresses the palliative nature of the project: "I know, being a veteran of this process, that it is incredibly healing to access your past and bear witness with your own testimonial."[8] And there

---

[7] *Children of War,* presented at the Center for the Arts at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, 5-15 December 2002

[8] Quoted in Randy Gener, "A Nation of Outcasts," *American Theatre,* December 2002, 29.

are plans to disseminate this piece. According to the *New York Times,* "[The creators] are considering creating a video version of the production for educational and therapeutic use."[9] This project would be interesting to study not just because of the therapeutic nature of the work, but also to investigate what it means to the participants to perform their stories for the public and to see their therapy commercialized.

Another theatre currently attempting to forge bonds in a community by privileging its histories is the Portland Stage Company, a professional theatre in Maine, which is in the process of mounting its first oral-history project. Portland Stage hired playwright Shelley Berc to develop a piece titled *Women and the Sea,* which encompasses stories of women whose livelihood comes from the fishing industry. Artistic director Anita Stewart says that the fishing industry is historically important to Maine and is a mainstay in the area, but it is now dying out. Members of the fishing industry, she adds, live alongside the rest of the community, but are not integrated with it.[10] She sees the project as a way to attempt an integration. Some of the women whom Berc had interviewed for the piece attended staged readings of the work in progress in spring 2002, and, according to Stewart, felt satisfied that their views had been fairly presented. A

---

[9] Lynette Clemetson, "How Children Experience War and Its Consequences," *New York Times,* 7 December 2002, B13.

[10] Anita Stewart, telephone conversation with author, 14 November 2000; 5 March 2003.

central issue in the play is the tension between environmentalists and individual fishermen who have small businesses. Stewart says that there were a number of women who had to be coaxed to participate—and one refused—because they confused a sponsor of the project, Pew Charitable Trusts, with a Pew organization that is environmentally friendly.[11] The women see the environmentalist cause as detrimental to their livelihood. It would be interesting to examine the effects of the funding sources on this project.

An example of theatre that promotes social justice, *The Exonerated*[12] is a play that gives voice to the unimaginable. Based on interviews with sixty people who had spent from two to twenty-two years on death row and were eventually released, the play incorporates six of those interviews with court testimony, police interrogation, and personal correspondence. This piece is a powerful indictment of the criminal-justice system and capital punishment, with its stories of conviction based on inconclusive evidence and police coercion that resulted in false confessions; indignities suffered in prison; and the struggle to readapt to the outside world upon release. It has been presented as a staged reading in New York City[13] with a rotating cast of

---

[11] Anita Stewart to author, 5 May 2003, via e-mail.

[12] *The Exonerated* by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, presented at the Culture Project, New York City, opened 12 October 2002..

[13] See also my review of *The Exonerated* in *Theatre Journal* (May 2003).

celebrity actors. The past roles and public personas of the celebrity cast "haunt" the stage, to use Marvin Carlson's term. Though they are conduits of the testimony, the audience never loses sight of the fact that these are actors reading other people's words. With the distancing of the performer from the material, the words of the testimony take on even more weight. Yet it is rather disturbing that producers assume audiences would be interested in hearing the words of "ordinary" people only when they are interpreted by famous people. Of course the casting strategy is good for business and was also used successfully by the producers of the *Vagina Monologues*. Still it would be interesting to study the practice of pairing of celebrities with populist oral history.

I began this dissertation with a list of contemporary American productions based on the words of actual people, to demonstrate the appetite for local and oral history plays. The evidence suggests that the interest in staging such works continues. In Raymond Williams's view, the artist has an important role "in relation to the structure of feeling ... not an unformed flux of new responses, interests and perceptions, but a formation of these into a new way of seeing ourselves and our world."[14] Staging individual voices, memories, perceptions, and testimony represents a potential contribution to understanding ourselves and our place in the world.

---

[14] Raymond Williams, introduction to *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 19.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Barba, Eugenio. *Beyond the Floating Islands*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986.

Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. *Letters to the Editor*. Quincy, Mass.: Baker's Plays, 1999.

Broyles-Gonzàlez, Yolanda. *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

_____. "Theater and Dialogism." In *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992.

_____. *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present*. Expanded edition. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Carr, Edward Hallett. *What Is History?* New York: Vintage Books, 1961.

Cheeseman, Peter. Introduction to *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary*. London: Methuen, 1970.

Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, ed. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986.

Cohen-Cruz, Jan, ed. *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Cocke, Dudley, Harry Newman, and Janet Salmons-Rue, ed. *From the Ground Up: Grassroots Theater in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*. Cornell University, 1993.

Dawson, Gary Fisher. *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft*. Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1999

DeNobriga, Kathie and Valetta Anderson, ed. *Alternate Roots: Plays from the Southern Theater*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994.

Favorini, Attilio, ed. *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater*. Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1995.

French, William. *Maryat Lee's EcoTheater: A Theater for the Twenty-First Century*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1998.

Gerould, Daniel, ed. *Theatre/Theory/Theatre*. New York and London: Applause, 2000.

Glassberg, David. *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

Haedicke, Susan C. and Tobin Nellhaus, ed. *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Huerta, Jorge. *Necessary Theatre: Six Plays About the Chicano Experience.* Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1989.

Jellicoe, Ann. *Community Plays: How to Put Them On.* London and New York: Methuen, 1987.

Johnson, Richard, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, David and Sutton, ed. *Making Histories: Studies in history-writing and politics.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

Justice, Betty and Renate Pore, ed. *Toward the Second Decade: The Impact of the Women's Movement on American Institutions.* Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1981.

Kaufman, Moisés and Members of the Tectonic Theater Project. *The Laramie Project.* Dramatists Play Service, photocopy, 2001.

Kershaw, Baz. *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention.* London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

Lee, Maryat. "Legitimate Theater is Illegitimate." In *Toward the Second Decade: The Impact of the Women's Movement on American Institutions,* ed. Betty Justice and Renate Pore. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1981.

Loffreda, Beth. *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

MacKaye, Percy. *Community Drama*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917.

_____. *The Playhouse and the Play*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968.

Martin, Carol, ed. *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Mason, Jeffrey D. and J. Ellen Gainor, ed. *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

McGrath, John. *A Good Night Out*. London: Nick Hern Books, 1981, 1996.

Montoya, Richard, Ricardo Salinas and Herbert Siguenza. *Culture Clash: Life, Death and Revolutionary Comedy*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998.

Moreno Vega, Marta and Cheryll Y. Greene, ed. *Voices from the Battlefront: Achieving Cultural Equity*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, Inc., 1993.

O'Connor, John and Lorraine Brown. *The Federal Theatre Project: "Free, Adult, Uncensored."* London: Eyre Methuen, 1980.

Paget, Derek. *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990.

Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson, ed. *The Oral History Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Prevots, Naima. *American Pageantry: A Movement for Art & Democracy*. Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1990.

Ritchie, Rob, ed. *The Joint Stock Book: The Making of a Theatre Collective.* London: Methuen, 1987.

Renov, Michael, ed. *Theorizing Documentary.* New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

Rosenthal, Alan, ed. *Why Docudrama: Fact-Fiction on Film and TV.* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.

Samuel, Raphael, ed. *People's History and Socialist Theory.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981.

Shank, Theodore. *American Alternative Theatre.* London: Macmillan Modern Dramatists, 1982.

Stropnicky, Gerard, Tom Byrn, James Goode and Jerry Matheny, ed. *Letters to the Editor.* New York: Touchstone, 1998.

Testimonies: Four Plays by Emily Mann. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997.

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History.* Oxford, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Weinberg, Mark S. *Challenging the Hierarchy: Collective Theatre in the United States.* Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1992.

Whisnant, David E. *All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983.

Wilder, Thornton. Preface to *Three Plays* by Thornton Wilder. U.S.A.: Harper & Row, 1957.

Willett, John, ed. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1994.

JOURNAL AND NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Barnes, Lisa. "BTE 'Letters' a line to community pulse," *Danville News*, 18 March 1996, 1.

Berson, Misha. "Take This Job and Show It." *American Theatre*, December 2002, 32.

Brady, Sara. "Welded to the Ladle: *Steelbound* and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre." *TDR* 44 (Fall 2000): 51-74.

Burnham, Linda Frye. "A More Perfect Union." *American Theatre* December 2002, 34-36.

Butkiewicz, Joe. *Times Leader* (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.), 10 March 1996, sec. E.

Carson, Jo. "Some Thoughts on Direct Address and Oral Histories in Performance." *TDR* 40 (Summer 1996): 115-117.

Carlson, Marvin. "Invisible Presences—Performance Intertextuality." *Theatre Research International* 19 (Summer 1994): 111-117.

Clemetson, Lynette. "How Children Experience War and Its Consequences," *New York Times*, 7 December 2002, B13

Cohen-Cruz, Jan. "A Hyphenated Field: Community-Based Theatre in the USA," *New Theatre Quarterly* 64 (November 2000): 364-378.

_____. "Motion of the Ocean." *Theater* 31 (2001): 95-107.

_____. "The Stars of Bethlehem." *American Theatre*, March 2000, 1-19, 69-70.

Cocke, Dudley. "Only Connect." *Theater* 31 (2001): 82-84.

Conquergood, Dwight. "Ethnography, Rhetoric, and Performance." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (May 1992): 80-97.

_____. "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics." *Communication Monographs* 58 (June 1991): 179-194.

Donaghy, Tom. "Only Theater Stirs the Soul of Audiences," *New York Times,* 29 October 2000, sec. 2., p. 5, 22-23.

French, William. "A Double Threaded Life: Maryat Lee's Ecotheatre." *TDR* 27 (Summer 1983): 26-35.

Geer, Richard Owen. "Out of Control in Colquitt: Swamp Gravy Makes Stone Soup." *TDR* 40 (Summer 1996): 103-130.

_____. "Swamp Gravy." *High Performance* 16 (Fall 1993): 32-37.

Gener, Randy. "A Nation of Outcasts." *American Theatre,* December 2002, 29.

Gehman, Geoff. "Every Letter Is a Soapbox." *American Theatre,* September 1996, 69.

Glenn, Antonia Grace. "Comedy for These Urgent Times: Culture Clash as Chroniclers in America." *TheatreForum* 20 (Winter/Spring 2002): 62-68.

Guy Jr., Andrew. "Matthew Shepard's story brought to Denver stage," *Denver Post,* 27 Feb. 2000, 1(b).

Goldbard, Arlene. "Memory, Money, and Persistence: Theater of Social Change in Context." *Theater* 31 (2001): 127-137.

Hammer, Kate. "John O'Neal, Actor and Activist: The Praxis of Storytelling." *TDR* 36 (Winter 1992: 12-27.

Hannaham, James. "The Tectonic Theater Project Captures Matthew Shepard's Laramie." *Village Voice,* 16 May 2000, 71.

Huerta, Jorge. "When Sleeping Giants Awaken: Chicano Theatre in the 1960s." *Theatre Survey* 43 (May 2002): 23-35.

Hurwitt, Robert. "The 'Laramie' Process: Moisés Kaufman Explores Form in Play About Matthew Shepard Murder," *San Francisco Chronicle. www.sfgate.com,* 20 May 2001.

Janofsky, Michael. "A Death in Laramie, Reimagined as Drama," *New York Times,* 27 February 2000, sec. 2, p. 10, 28.

Kalb, Jonathan. "Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self." *Theater* 31 (2001): 13-29.

Kaufman, Moisés. "Into the West: An Exploration in Form." *American Theatre,* May/June 2000, 17-18.

Kelley, Laura C. "*The Laramie Project:* Chronicling impressions of a town and a murder." *Dramatics,* May 2000, 18-27.

Kondo, Dorinne. "(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre." *Theatre Journal* 52 (March 2000): 81-107.

Kuftinec, Sonja. "A Cornerstone for Rethinking Community Theatre." *Theatre Topics* 6 (March 1996): 91-104.

Lee, Maryat. "To Will One Thing." *TDR* 27 (Winter 1983): 47-53.

Levy, Daniel S. "Our Town." *People,* 19 August 2002, 105-106.

Lewis, Ferdinand. "In Sync?" *American Theatre,* May/June 2000, 22-26, 70-71.

Lopez, Steve. "To Be Young and Gay in Wyoming." *Time*, 26 October 1998, 38-40.

MacDermott, Douglas. "The Living Newspaper as a Dramatic Form." *Modern Drama* 8 (Summer 1965): 82-94.

Marowitz, Charles. "Let's Not Forgo Imagination for Voyeurism," *New York Times*, 29 October 2000, sec. 2, p. 5, 22.

McKenna, Mark. "Letters, Etc.: Touchstone—How Radical Is Radical?" *TDR* 45 (Fall 2001): 8.

O'Neal, John. "Letters, Etc.: Announcements." *TDR* 38 (Summer 1994): 12.

Rauch, Bill. "Letters, Etc.: Touchstone—How Radical Is Radical?" *TDR* 45 (Fall 2001): 17-19.

Román, David. "Comment—The Details of Difference." *Theatre Journal* 52 (October 2000): unnumbered pages.

Paterson, Doug. "The TASC Is: Theatre and Social Change." *Theater* 31 (2001): 65-67.

_____. "Theatre for a People: The Dakota Theatre Caravan." *TDR* 27 (Summer 1983): 3-14.

Schechner, Richard. "Believed-in Theatre." *Performance Research* 2 (Summer 1997): 77-91.

Shewey, Don. "Town in a Mirror." *American Theatre*, May/June 2000, 14-17, 68-69.

_____. "A Play Has a Second Life as a Stage for Discussion," *New York Times*, 1 December 2002, 7.

Spindler, Amy M. "Hark! This herald angel avenges hate," *New York Times Magazine*, 24 December 2000, 48-49.

Stockwell, Anne. "Changing the Script." *The Advocate,* 15 August 2000, 103-104.

Thernstrom, Melanie. "The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard." *Vanity Fair,* March 1999, 209-214, 267-275.

REVIEWS

Brook, Susan. Review of *Letters to the Editor,* adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, Bloomsburg. *Press Enterprise,* 15 March 1996, 5.

Brantley, Ben. Review of *The Laramie Project,* by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project. The Tectonic Theater Project, New York. *New York Times,* 19 May 2000, 1 (E).

Gallagher, Paul. Review of *Letters to the Editor,* adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, Bloomsburg. *Times Leader,* 22 March 1996, 6(C).

Gehman, Geoff. Review of *Letters to the Editor,* adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. Bethlehem, Pa., *Morning Call,* 6 September 1996, 7 (D).

Kalb, Jonathan. Review of *The Laramie Project,* by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project. The Tectonic Theater Project, New York. *New York Press,* 24-30 May 2000, 39.

Kerstetter, Rick. Review of *Letters to the Editor*, adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, Bloomsburg. *Daily Item,* 15 October 1998, 4 (D).

Pochoda, Elizabeth. Review of *The Laramie Project,* by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project. The Tectonic Theater Project, New York. *The Nation,* 19 June 2000, 34-35.

Whitehead, Sam. Review of *The Laramie Project,* by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project. The Tectonic Theater Project, New York. *Time Out New York,* 25 May -1 June 2000, 145.

Winer, Laurie. Review of *Letters to the Editor*, adapted by the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, California. *Los Angeles Times,* 26 June 1998, 26 (F).

UNPUBLISHED WORKS

Geer, Richard Owen. "Community Performance: Efficacious Theater and Community Animation in the Performance Cycle of 'Swamp Gravy Sketches.' " Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1993.

Kalb, Jonathan. "Requiem for Maryat Lee." Photocopy from author.

Landro, Vincent Anthony. "Theatres That Work: A Study of Successful Growth in Small Regional Theatres in America." Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1997.

Maxwell, Brian. "The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, 1978-1998: Searching for a Community's Voice." Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2000.

INTERVIEWS

Aanenson, Sherry. Telephone conversation with author, 24 July 2001.

Asbury, Martha. Telephone conversation with author, 24 April 2002.

Belber, Stephen. Interview by author. Tape recording. New York, N.Y., 9 March 2001; telephone conversation with author, 26 June 2001.

Belin, Fran. Telephone conversation with author, 5 June 2002.

Bevans, Steve. Telephone conversation with author, 4 November 2001.

Bigony, Joe. Telephone conversation with author, 7 April 2002.

Byrn, Tom. Interview by author. Tape recording. Bloomsburg, Pa., 14 March 2001; 11 October 2001.

Christy, James. Telephone conversation with author, 18 July 2001.

Chua-Eoan, Howard. Interview by author. New York, N.Y., 26 February 2001.

DeBree, Rob. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001,

Dubois, Philip. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

Fishman, Shirley. Interview by author. Tape recording. New York, N.Y., 20 February 2001.

Fluty, Reggie. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

French, William. Interview by author. Tape recording. Morgantown, W.Va., 9 April 2002.

French, William. Interview by Jonathan Kalb. Transcript, June 1991.

Goode, James. Interview by author. Tape recording. Bloomsburg, Pa., 12 October 2001; telephone conversation with author, 20 November 2000.

Halteman, Lori. Telephone conversation with author, 15 January 2002.

Hilliker, Rebecca. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 24 April 2001.

Jones, Scott. Telephone conversation with author, 29 May 2001.

Kaufman, Moisés. Telephone conversation with author, 29 August 2000.

Lambert, Sarah. Interview by author. Tape recording. New York, N.Y., 11 April 2001.

Loffreda, Beth. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 27 April 2001.

McCants, Laurie. Interview by author. Tape recording. Bloomsburg, Pa., 11 October 2001.

Miller, David. Telephone conversation with author, 3 June 2002.

Murray, Marge. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 26 April 2001.

Paris, Andy. Interview by author. Tape recording. New York, N.Y., 28 February 2001.

Patterson, Romaine. Telephone conversation with author, 16 May 2001.

Pierotti, Greg. Interview by author. Tape recording. New York, N.Y., 21 February 2001.

Pitts, Barbara. Interview by author. Tape recording. New York, N.Y., 28 March 2001.

Sachetti, Jim. Interview by author. Tape recording. Bloomsburg, Pa., 10 October 2001.

Schultz, Jedadiah. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

Steger, Trish. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 28 April 2001.

Strimbeck, Leigh. Telephone conversation with author, 31 October 2001.

Stropnicky, Gerard. Interview by author. Tape recording. Bloomsburg, Pa., 12 March 2001; 9 October 2001.

Tarr, Isabel. Telephone conversation with author, 16 January 2002.

Ula, Nafisah, Shaheda and Sadrul. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 26 April 2001.

Walker, Judith. Telephone conversation with author, 19 June 2002.

Wangh, Stephen. Interview with author. Tape recording. New York, N.Y., 1 February 2001.

Woods, Harry. Interview by author. Tape recording. Laramie, Wyo., 25 April 2001.

WEB SITES

http://quickfacts.census.gov/cgi-bin/county?cnty=56021

www.bte.org

www.communityarts.net

www.comperf.com

www.cornerstonetheater.org

www.gnofn.org/87Ejunebug/thestorynetwork.html

www.lajollaplayhouse.com.

www.roadside.org

www.swampgravy.com

www.tectonictheaterproject.org.

VIDEORECORDINGS AND TV

Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, *Letters to the Editor.* Directed by Gerard Stropnicky, Corey Productions, 1996. Videocassette.

Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. *Letters to the Editor.* Produced and directed by Richard E. Briggs. WVIA, 1998. Videocassette.

The Hinton Play, 7 August 1985. Videocassette. Martha J. Asbury private collection.

In the Life. PBS. 15 June 2000.

COLLECTIONS

Maryat Lee Collection, Accession Number 3300, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown.

Matthew Shepard Collection, Accession Number 300014, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

Private collection of Tom Byrn.

Private collection of Jonathan Kalb.

Private collection of Gerard Stropnicky.

Private collection of the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble.