



On the Table, Riverside
parking lot in Oregon
City, 2010. Photo:
Courtesy of Sojourn
Theatre

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ARTIST'S NOTEBOOK

Civic Participation

LANGUAGE

In a field like theater, in a sector like the arts, words can act as convener, but they can also act as divider, muddying waters when we try, as peers, to move experience through discovery toward innovation. Participation, of late, is a word of many definitions, being used for many purposes.

I. Measurement

The James Irvine Foundation's recent research and grant-making programs, advocacy efforts at Americans for the Arts, and conversations about creative placemaking convened by the National Endowment for the Arts and mayors around the country all use participation in the arts as a measurement tool through which they can determine and articulate the impact of the arts on culture, economy, and place. Sometimes the measurement refers to attendance, sometimes it refers to cocreation, and sometimes it refers to arts and education activity.

II. Experience

Productions like Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, American Repertory Theater's *Donkey Show*, Dog & Pony DC's *Beertown*, Rude Mechs' *The Method Gun*, and Big Art Group's *The People* all involve audience members in the action of a staged spectacle—sometimes as empowered voyeurs who might choose a viewing perspective, offer a moment of physical or textual material, or create a personalized experience; sometimes as agents of impact, affecting the actual dramaturgy and trajectory of the piece itself.

III. Assets

Artists and organizations such as Marty Pottenger in Portland, Maine; Albany Park Theatre Project and For Youth Inquiry in Chicago; Los Angeles Poverty Department

and Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles; Kathy Randels in New Orleans; and Michael Premo in New York City are all using theater-based participatory practice as a way to engage nonarts sectors and settings in meaningful collaborative work, often aimed at problem solving and coalition building.

JOURNEY

I'm a writer, director, deviser, and civic practitioner. I find measurement useful. I believe in creating experiences. I use my assets as a theater maker to build encounters. I make physical, participatory, site-based, playful processes that might culminate in a play, a workshop, public interviews, an art installation, a carnival, or a tour. I have founded and led two not-for-profit organizations, Hope Is Vital and Sojourn Theatre, in the last twenty years and have recently started a third organization, the Center for Performance and Civic Practice. Most often in my work, I am investigating social and civic content with artists and nonartists in theater and nontheater settings.

When I first began working consciously with less traditional approaches to participation within theater events, it was 1992. I was leading a theater workshop in Washington, DC, with men and women who were homeless and living with HIV and/or AIDS. My main interest was in aiming the power of performance and performance process at specific goals and social issues. I had discovered that nowhere in Washington were young people given space to have conversations about HIV, which was statistically the single greatest threat to their lives in that place and moment. So alongside the men and women I was collaborating with, I developed a program that combined theater activities and interactive performance to engage DC education and legislative leaders in dialogue about the bureaucracy of health education policy in the district. After successfully advocating for changing DC's restrictions on classroom dialogue, we used these same techniques to engage young people all over the metro area in problem-solving and skill-building sessions focused on health, sexuality, and peer culture. Soon after, I founded Hope Is Vital, a theater organization to promote civic dialogue, and spent the next seven years traveling the United States as an artist in residence helping communities design, implement, and sustain theater-based programs that could host local arts-based civic dialogue across health, legislative, and education sectors.

During these years, I built performance with people who had made their lives in the theater and with individuals who considered acts of creative expression completely foreign to their way of life. I experienced theater as a connective public activity, as a collective interrogation of complicated civic issues, as a remedy for our growing impulse and capacity to spend time only with those like ourselves. I experienced it as a model of democratic and aesthetic participation.

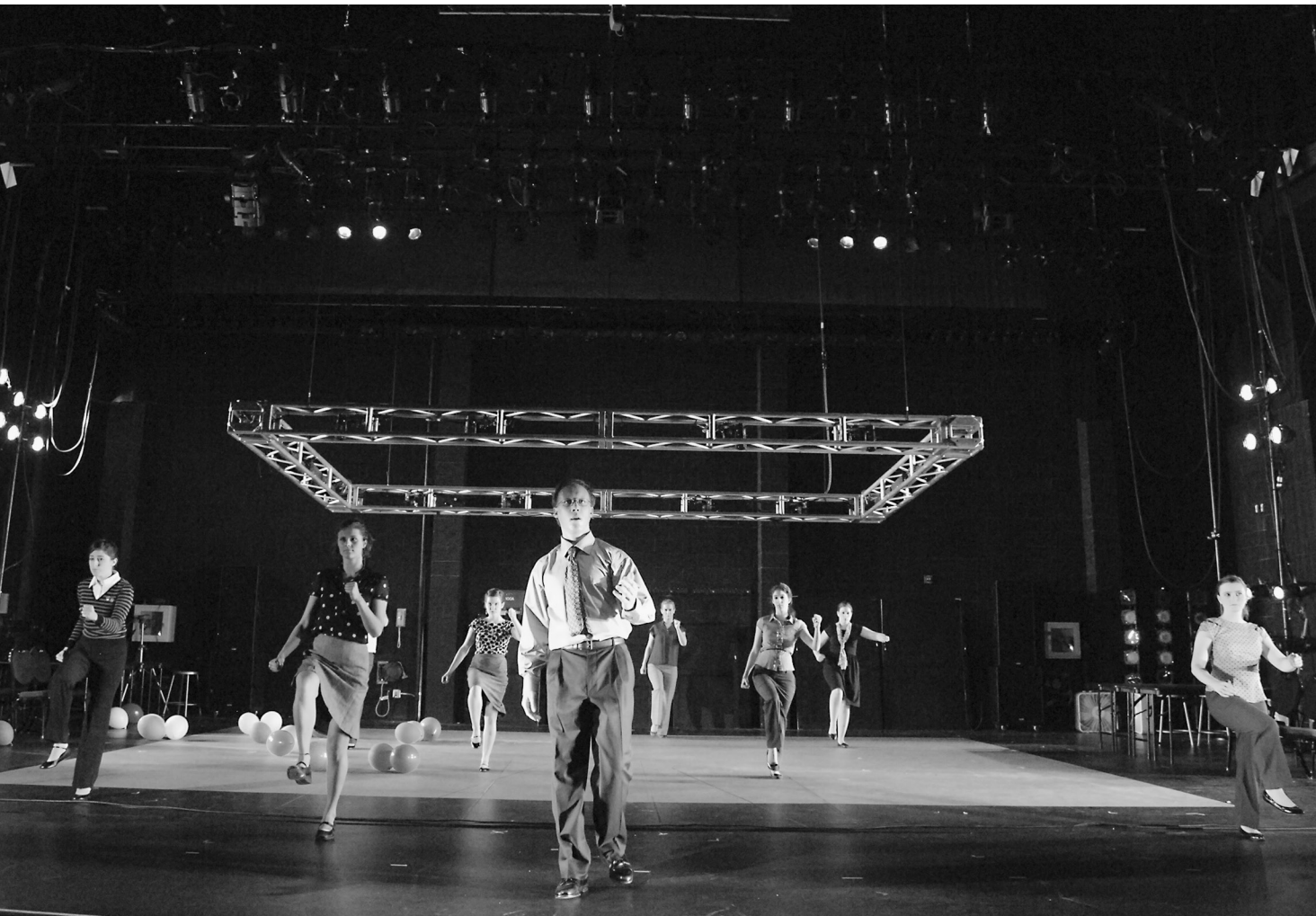
Before Hope Is Vital, I saw participatory theater activity as meaningful but of less intrinsic value than plays. I believed that sharing space and story in a darkened



room with strangers (a show) was the true, meaningful community-building activity at my disposal as a theater maker. I felt that my role as an artist was to find stories that needed telling, make dynamic context for the telling, and tell them well. By the time I cofounded Sojourn Theatre in 1999 (with seven other founding ensemble members), I was questioning that belief. Our lives are filled with opportunities to watch and listen to narrative surrounded by people we don't know and never will. I instead became deeply interested in work that builds the possibility of connection through participation. I wanted to further explore moments of deeper and more durational engagement between artists and audiences. The activity of theater, the line that separated my work on *Hope Is Vital* from production work, at least in my own mind, began to blur. Process and event became linked for me in new ways. Sojourn has been my journey to that discovery and my lab to devise those experiences.

In 2003, we led audiences of twenty through three floors and a rooftop of an old warehouse in our award-winning devised piece *7 Great Loves*. In 2007, we traveled audiences of sixty through an operating Subaru dealership as the landscape for a journey based on Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzwan* called *GOOD*. In 2008, we Skyped in an international chorus to talk about leadership in the United States for our Washington, DC, devised piece *The Race*. In 2009–10, we partnered with the community

GOOD, Wentworth Subaru Dealership, Portland, Oregon, 2007. Photo: Courtesy of Sojourn Theatre



The Race, Davis
Performing Arts
Center, Washington,
DC, 2008. Photo:
Phil Humnicky/
Georgetown
University

of Molalla, a town of 7,000 people fifty miles from Portland, Oregon, to explore the urban/rural conversation in *On the Table*. After eighteen months of preparation, audiences of fifty urban and fifty rural people came together each night for three weeks, traveling twenty-five miles on school buses toward each other to share a meal, see a performance, and, within the narrative of the piece, build relationships with strangers across place and values.

These Sojourn projects are examples of exploring participation through the lens of experience.

But Sojourn's most deeply examined practice developed around ideas of "assets," which I have come to call "civic practice" (CP), and I believe our work in this area is

making the largest impact. It started in 2001, when Sojourn Theatre, alongside the Council for the Arts in Lima, Ohio, was chosen to be one of thirty-two national Animating Democracy Lab projects. For two years, Sojourn worked with city, county, and state legislators to develop a countywide process that engaged community members and leaders in ongoing arts-based dialogue about Lima community-identified difficulties. Public forums. Touring performances. A large production in a civic center. The Lima project led me to intensify my investigations of how civic work and theater work could, together, make for more dynamic and effective practice in community than either could alone.

Between 2003 and 2005, in partnership with the Oregon Department of Education, universities around the state, high schools in four towns, and the Oregon Historical Society, Sojourn Theatre created *Witness Our Schools* to investigate the state of public education in America. For thirty-two weeks, free Sunday afternoon performances all over Oregon were followed by performance-based town hall meetings attended by audiences and local political leaders. In 2008, we created a show called *BUILT*. At its heart was a board game we invented for audiences to play, first alone, then in groups of six, then larger groups of twelve, and finally as a room of sixty. The game has evolved into an adaptable structure that uses a collaborative redesign process, resulting in a locally specific tool for public engagement by inviting participants to have meaningful, nuanced dialogue about how we live together and make choices about our communities. We now work with planners and communities around the nation to modify the physical objects of the game and the facilitation structure to be applicable in urban and rural environments. It recently won a national innovation award for planning and development in five counties in southwestern Virginia and is about to be deployed in Oregon and Kansas. The game's most useful quality is the space it creates for diverse perspectives to be seen and heard, reflected upon and analyzed, while retaining a playful, collaborative atmosphere.

In 2012, Sojourn began a multiyear partnership with Catholic Charities USA. Sojourn artists travel to Catholic Charities antipoverty regional gatherings in US cities offering theater-based workshops and performance/dialogue events that bring ideologically diverse people together for difficult conversations about issues of equity and "the public good." The project extends through 2014 and is a model of modular practice that can adapt by engaging locally in specific, participatory strategies created collaboratively with local partners. Our work at Sojourn has become a lab through which I investigate models that I then share in cross-sector settings; the skill I have found most important, most useful, and which I work on with consistency, is translation. How do I communicate with colleagues and within new relationships about assets and experiences? About possibilities? How do I extend the most useful and productive invitations?

IV. Invitations

ARTISTS

I am currently working on a project at Northwestern University, where I am on faculty, called *How to End Poverty in 90 Minutes (with 199 people you do or don't know)*. I wrote the following description for the season brochure:

This is not a play; it is not a lecture; it is not an interactive workshop; it is not a physical theater piece; it is not a public conversation. *How to End Poverty in 90 Minutes* is all of these things. Most significantly, it's an opportunity to challenge a different audience every show with the question: how do you attack the problem of poverty in America? Over the course of 90 minutes, the audience will listen, explore and ultimately choose how to spend \$1,000 from ticket sales that will be sitting onstage in cash. It is an experiment in dialogue, in collective decision-making, in shared responsibility and in the potential for art to help us make our world a better place. Spectacularly eclectic in form, often delightful and occasionally uncomfortable, *How to End Poverty* will engage student and Chicago-area audiences alongside community experts. Come spend with us.

Here is a note I recently sent the team of more than thirty collaborating artists on the project that addresses participation in this particular instance:

Dear Team—

I've been thinking a lot lately about what we are going to ask of our audience. We are asking them to participate. We need them to participate. Our actual plot is them making a decision as a group. So one of our primary needs is removing obstacles to them engaging actively. That's good. Identify an obstacle, and we have the beginning of action, of something to push against. I identify the primary obstacle we are facing, unsurprisingly, as resistance. Resistance born of fear of the unknown, born of discomfort, of taste, of habit. We are pushing against resistance. So we need strategies. Strategies to invite their generosity and curiosity before they have the opportunity to be skeptical and wary.

I have for almost a year been talking about how we would use the lobby as a display, an interactive entryway to the experience of the show. And how we would then have our audience pass through a portal into the main performance space where they would encounter a different world, the world where our main event would take place. We would move from the intimacy of the lobby to the epic nature of the theater, and then begin.



I had it wrong.

The idea shouldn't be to welcome them, and then say—now, here's the show! The idea should be to welcome them, engage them, and sneak the show up on them. So before they know it, the show/conversation has begun, and they, along with us, are it.

We are going to use the lobby *and* the whole theater as the pre-show. Yes, we will have actors in the lobby, some display, some interactivity—but the journey into the large thrust theater space will be more like walking into a lab set up for active participation. Audience, before the show, will test out the video stations and see themselves as large projections on stage. They will come visit a crate onstage and investigate a display inside it. They'll pick through boots, not knowing why, and load pennies into the container that will be raised and eventually dump mid

On the Table, Elk Barn at Rosse Posse Ranch, Molalla, Oregon, 2010. Photo: Courtesy of Sojourn Theatre

show. They'll be in conversation with actors around the space based on what stations they want to attend. Want to ask questions about poverty statistics? Go over there, and Brandon will take care of you. Want to hear more about what you'll be doing for the duration of the 90 minute show? Go over there, Daphne has a diorama you can check out, and she'll take you through the whole thing. What do you need to know, or do, to feel welcome? How can we help you begin these 90 minutes feeling you have chosen your way into this event?

This is only the beginning of this idea, but it's the right direction, and it is no longer just pre show—it's a 20–30 minute installation that segues into the delivery of the cash onto the stage, and the show's opening moments.

Its preparation; its invitation; it's a path to participation.

CITY LEADERS

In 2011, I founded the Center for Performance and Civic Practice (CPCP). I define it as an ongoing body of activity comprising research, programs, and projects that aim to make visible the power of the arts to demonstrably increase civic capacity. CP is a new frame within our field at the intersection of traditional audience engagement activity, current demand-building theory, and community-based art-making methodologies. By piloting CP initiatives around the nation, CPCP works to transform the relationship of artists and organizations to the communities in which they reside and, through that transformation, nurture greater participation in the activity of theater.

As an example, CPCP was recently contacted by a program director at the Chicago Park District's Department of Natural Resources. After some conversation, I was invited to make a proposal to be viewed by city and park district leaders and staff. What follows is the text of the proposal I submitted.

CENTER FOR PERFORMANCE AND CIVIC PRACTICE PROPOSAL

Introduction

NEED

The Park district has over 500 parks in the City of Chicago. Among other duties, the Park district is responsible for Sports, Recreation, Culture, Arts and Environmental programs in its parks. City and Park staff believe that our parks are hubs of community activity and civic health. They consider participation and usage as visible demonstrations of this belief. In some parks, the level of participation in community programming is not indicative of the potential our parks hold. Questions of community engagement, partnership, and communication are at the heart of exploring solutions for this challenge to increase participation, a priority for the Park District.

TOOL

CP, defined as the process of creating arts activity that originates in partnership between artists and non-arts-centered organizations in service to the needs of the non-arts partner. The activity is not necessarily aimed at an art product (such as a play), but rather uses arts-based process or techniques that engage non-artists in imaginative acts and expressive actions with the intent of leveraging creativity and collaboration to problem-solve in unique, effective ways.

RESPONSE

A three-stepped strategy for engaging communities city-wide through CP in the planning of Park programming with a goal of increasing local investment, growing neighborhood stakeholders and upping participation in Park activities. The CP tools for use in this project will be designed collaboratively with District staff. The tools listed below following each step are examples of potential approaches.

Step 1

GOAL: BUILD CAPACITY FOR LOCAL BUY-IN

Convene leadership staff at the City/District level and conduct a workshop on mapping neighborhood arts and culture assets, building collaborative relationships focused on collective problem-solving and developing skills for hosting local gatherings aimed at collaborative program design. Begin the process of mapping assets and identifying local core leaders to co-host community program planning forums.

CIVIC PRACTICE TOOLS: TRAINING

Training will be given in story and small group facilitation leadership tactics, in cultural mapping group activities, and in the use of improvisation to practice building core partnerships with local leaders.

Step 2

GOAL: ENGAGE LOCAL RESIDENTS IN BUILDING THE PROGRAMS THEY WILL

BE OFFERED

Host community forums at key neighborhood parks around the City that utilize local expertise in public conversation, facilitated dialogue and collective program planning, resulting in thoughtful, collaboratively conceived proposals for the programming that will be featured at that park.

CIVIC PRACTICE TOOLS: TRAINING IN A COMMUNITY FORUM

Training will be given in a structure that uses story, performative public interviews, and small group facilitated story circles and dialogue, leading the first of these public forums to model structure and training in the use group composition with graphic objects to develop the design process for implementation with community residents.

Step 3

GOAL: CREATE A CITY-WIDE GESTURE THAT UNIFIES PURPOSE AND POTENTIAL IN OUR PARKS

One City, One Park is a single day event that hosts an activity (or a set of activities) simultaneously in many if not all of the City's parks. One example is painting Ashe trees at 1 pm in 350 parks followed by food followed by music. It's a multi-place, and like One Book Chicago, the binding idea is the shared experience of the main cross community gesture. As the activity culminates, in each of ten geographically diverse parks, five residents engaged in the day's event will be invited to board a van and join a citywide cohort downtown at the Cultural Center. These 50 residents will engage in the final act of the day—a shared meal with neighbors from around the City and a presentation on programming ideas generated through the community forums of Step 2. The residents will be asked for feedback on the programming, and will engage with District staff in a conversation about the purpose and potential of our parks.

EMPLOY CIVIC PRACTICE TOOLS TO CREATE AND PRODUCE A CITY-WIDE PERFORMANCE EVENT

The CP tools here include helping conceptualize the specific event, its use of time and online connectivity; helping to shape the narrative it communicates throughout the City about our parks; helping to conceive the journey of the 50 residents coming together downtown; conceiving and facilitating the actual meal/event in which they engage. This event wants to be a rigorous blend of celebration and formal feedback on program design proposals, and would use story, small group work and large group participatory visual art tactics to gather and share out responses.

At the time of this writing, I am preparing for a third meeting with Chicago Park District leadership to explore how to move this CP proposal to implementation.

V. The What and the Why

Participation as a concept, as a practice in the arts, whether it's describing measurement, experience, or assets, is not new. I think the fact that it is currently enjoying so much attention in the arts community speaks of our recent awareness of the consumer as a cocreator and to our fascination with audience as self-curator. Today people are making choices about how, when, and what they engage in, in ways they never have before. Technology has a lot to do with it. But so does a growing desire for agency. I think we, as artists, have interesting choices ahead.

Do we harness our capacity to build unique participatory action as a way to design more effective commodities? Do we bring our assets to bear on the many public

and private sector systems around us that are in desperate need of collaborative, imaginative practice to become more functional and healthy? Who do we invite to participate in what we make, and why? And is our own sustainability at the heart of our reasoning, or something else, something harder to articulate?

One of the most difficult invitations I find in my attempt to make participatory work is the invitation to share goals that cannot always be easily named. But the partnership that shares intentionality and a willingness to explore, together, what it means to be on a journey that at times may risk uncertainty? That's the best kind of participation there is.