

# Reflection:WOS

A performance of process and practice  
exploring Sojourn Theatre's *Witness Our Schools*

Created for the 2005 NET Festival at Dell Arte in CA  
By Michael Rohd and Sojourn Theatre

While 5 performers get the space set up  
In half light

A DVD projected on a screen over the actors shows the opening 2 and a half  
minutes of *Witness Our Schools*-  
A Ritual, and voiceovers of quotes about public ed in OR

Then  
*Lights up*

Kimberly:  
That's how our piece started.

It was in the round.

It played in gyms, cafeterias, town halls, meeting rooms...occasionally, a theater.

September 2004-April 2005

Almost every Sunday in a different town in Oregon.

A free 2pm performance hosted by Sojourn  
and community partners followed by a community dialogue with audience  
and local leaders.

Here's what Michael said before each show-

*(Lights up on all)*

Michael:  
A year of interviews--

K:students,

James:teachers,

Hannah:parents,

Rebecca: principals,

J: secretarys,

R: school board members,

K: state legislators,

H: activists,

K: migrant farm workers,

J: recent immigrants,

R: business owners,

H: custodians,

K: professors,

J: community leaders,

M: and

R: people on the street.

K: Portland. Hermiston. Eugene.

H: Coos Bay. Ashland. Salem.

J: Woodburn. Pendleton. Manzanita.

R: Urban.

K: Rural.

H: Suburban.

M: We've listened to a variety of languages,  
in a variety of places,  
and tape recorded just about every word.

K: Then Michael would say

8 performers are about to play over 100 characters

H: Before we start, we need to ask for some permission-

M: To be more than the flesh, bone, and voices we present.

H: Let us be older and younger than we appear.

R: Let us be darker and lighter of skin.

K: Let us at times be men if we seem to be women, and at times women if we seem to be men.

J: Let us be strangers, and let us be your neighbor.

H: Every time our world up here shifts, sometimes over the course of minutes, sometimes in a second, we bring you new voice.

M: Each voice you hear,  
either in exact words  
or close spirit,  
is a voice we met.

K: Let us perhaps, in some moment,

All: be you.

M: Then, I would usually say-

H: The show is only part of today's event.

J: Following it, we'll be helping to host a dialogue.

R: We hope you'll stay.

K: Add to the voices we bring to this room by adding your own.

M: Help us take your voice on from here.

*Sound of bell*

*Dark stage, transition*

*Then, sound of a voiceover that was in the show  
Over Slides of text*

Woman's voice: My daughter's school, public school, just finished an auction that raised \$35,000 to save a program;

Man's voice: That's incredible.

WV: We've got powerful, wealthy parents that know how to come in and affect change.

MV: And that's a good thing, or-

WV: It is what it is- but I took it for granted that all schools were like my daughter's.

MV: Oh.

WV: That all parents responded when something was needed. That all parents had the time, the means-

MV: So when you started visiting other schools-

WV: When I saw, actually saw that it wasn't true, I was kind of devastated- not only had the system betrayed these other parents, but the kids. These kids are not getting the same deal as other kids.

MV: Do the parents-

WV: There need to be ways to engage parents in meaningful, productive ways that account for different circumstances. That has to happen.

*SLIDES (simultaneous with above pre-recorded text)*

Core Questions

What is the role of public education in our nation today?

What impact can a small theatre company have on a gigantic community issue?

How does a project like this impact our process of artmaking, and the art we make?

How do we represent these issues without bringing our own perspectives/biases to our individual performances?

How, as artists,

do we honorably and authentically engage people  
as resources and/or collaborators  
that are not normally a part of public policy conversation?

How can theatre and democracy intersect?

How we do define success in community-engaged issue based artmaking?

Visionquest (stays up thru next scene)

*Sound out*

(this next piece is a live excerpt from the show)

James: My name is Red Feathers

Hannah: My name is walking with wind

Kimberly: My name is flying arrow

Rebecca: Teachers would like people from the Indian education office, like myself, to come into their classrooms and provide insight on the culture.

M: That's great,kids. So when our special guest arrives, we're going to show her our naming ceremony, and then listen to her stories about Native American culture.

Rebecca: A teacher can be very well intentioned...but cultural competency is complicated.

M: I had no idea all of this was so- involved.

Rebecca: I think its great you're trying to teach about other cultures.

M: Its important. They really need to-

Rebecca: They do. But culture isn't just names and rituals.

M: I'm not following you.

Rebecca: Do you know anything about Catholicism?

M: Um, my brother married a Catholic woman.

Rebecca: Have you been to a confirmation?

M: Sure, my nephew. I was there when he was confirmed.

Rebecca: What you did with the naming, its like a confirmation service.

M: But its not a religion, it's a-

Rebecca: What you did is like a religion in that its considered sacred. You took on the role, in that room, of a Priest. Are you comfortable in that role with those kids?

M:

(to audience) Teacher tries to bring diversity into his classroom, but of course, being a white middle class man with no actual experience of Native American culture, he fails miserably. (To Rebecca) How am I supposed to teach students about cultures I don't know if I always have to worry about saying or doing the wrong thing? I got those kids interested in Native culture.

Rebecca: You got them interested in the stereotype. That's easy. But it's not enough.

M: Should I take the imaginary budget I have to do professional development, and my imaginary days off for training, and go take a diversity workshop? Should I use all my spare time to read books on cultural diversity, and make new lesson plans? I did that.

Rebecca: You can teach *about* naming- but there is a line you cross when you turn tradition into an experiential exercise.

(pause)

What if you have a Native child in that class, and she sees all the values, the sacred moments her family is teaching her, turned into a classroom activity with no greater meaning?

M: So the rest of the students lose an educational experience for the sake of a non-existent, potential student?

Rebecca: But what are you teaching the rest of those students?

*Breath*

James: My name is Red Feathers

Hannah: My name is walking with wind

Kimberly: My name is flying arrow

*Lights out*

*Sound (music from show)*

*Slide:*

Context

Or

Why we felt Oregon could maybe use a conversation about Public Ed

*Lights*

J: In the last 10 years, a combination of factors have made our state's public education system one of the nation's most troubled. Among them-

*(slide- Funding Cuts)*

M: Funding cuts.

H: Layoffs of teaching staff,  
larger class sizes,  
schools closing early  
and elimination of crucial programs in counseling, arts, athletics.

*(Slide- Changing Demographics)*

M: Changing Demographics

R: continued growth of populations of Latinos/Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders with no real change in the demographics of the teaching staff;  
A strong history of an achievement gap in Oregon with students of color consistently scoring lower,  
graduating at lower rates,  
dropping out at higher rates, and  
receiving more suspensions than their white counterparts

*( Slide- Increase in ELL learners)*

M: A tremendous increase in the numbers of English language learners – students for whom English is a second language.

K:

With no significant increase in funding for these students  
and  
many school districts, when receiving additional funding  
allocating it to general instruction costs

just to stay afloat  
and not using it for those needing special instruction.

M:  
And finally

(slide- State Lawmakers)

J:  
Most damaging,  
Most troubling  
A state legislature gridlocked in partisan, ideological -

H: you can't really call it debate-

M:  
In the 2003 Legislative session,  
Legislators  
Attempting to pass a budget that would enable schools to finish the academic year

K: Yelled at each other

R: Swore

H: broke down in tears

J: one State Rep threw a stapler at another.

M: No budget was passed  
The Body recessed  
Schools around the state closed 3-5 weeks early.

*Blackout*

*SOUND(Music)*

*& Slide shift, after sound*

*SLIDES*

Our Belief:

Ensemble as  
ongoing conversation  
amidst peers  
with shared values and goals



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Our Interest:

Democracy as  
ongoing conversation  
amidst citizenry  
with diverse values

and one shared goal-  
healthy  
functioning  
equitable communities

*Slides out*

K: (in dark) When we started, one of my big questions was-  
how do you make complex, dry, policy issues theatrical?

*(Lights up- Sound throughout the cabaret...)*

*this next sequence is a live excerpt from the show*

J: Welcome, everyone, to the tax cabaret. Where we tackle the biggest and boldest and  
thorniest dilemma in our fine state's history as it should be tackled-

H: respectfully, seriously, thoughtfully-

J: And if you believe that, I've got a highway construction project to sell you.

H: We've got thrills. We've got chills. We've got spills-

J: Hey, did you hear the one about the woman who went into the Capitol building in  
Salem saying she wouldn't come out until someone helped her understand what all this  
crazy tax stuff is about?

H: No- what happened?

J; I don't know- it was my mom- I was hoping you could tell me.

H: Ouch. How about that shift from local to state funding?

J: I'm serious.

H: In the mid nineties?

J: We haven't seen her for 12 years.

H: Doesn't anyone remember that ?

J: Are you my mommy?

H: Well, our next act sure does- Mixing danger, romance, and legislative turnarounds- it's the property tax/income tax slice and switch-

J: And awayyy we go!

H: Anything can happen when the sharp knives come out...

**J:** Ladies and gentlemen, first I would like to assure you, the blades being used here have been examined, and I'm happy to report- they're real. Any damage they do may be permanent. Otherwise, where's the fun. Right?. I'd like you to meet Ishmael and his assistant, the lovely Hecuba. A nice round of applause!!!

M: We'll need absolute quiet here, for Hecuba's sake.

J: (he shouts, slowly, applause ends) Absolute quiet!!

J: Please- continue.

**M:** This first toss is the change from mostly local funds supporting public schools in Oregon to the higher percentage being state dollars.

*(he tosses- we hear the sound cue of the knife striking wood)*

J: Great toss. Excellent toss! Is she ok?

M: She's ok.

J: Yes, she's ok.

Rebecca Thank you, folks.

(he prepares again)

**M:** This next toss is the fact that the majority of state funding for public education comes from personal income taxes.

*(he tosses- sound cue again)*

J: Great. Just great.

Rebecca: Thanks , folks. Thank you.

J: I think I need a glass of water.

M: Alright- a tougher toss here.

(he prepares)

R: Not the tougher one!

J: (stagewhispers to H, growing tension) He's really sweating this one.

M: Hey!

H: (to the audience)You should all know, as he prepares the big one here- before the shift from local to state, the local was paid for out of property taxes. So this whole toss hinges on the shift that our state went through- from local property taxes to state money which comes from your personal income tax.

M: (as he prepares)

OK. So in the later nineties, when the economy hit hard times in Oregon, people lost jobs. And if they were working, they made less money. Which means personal income tax went down. Which means the state had less money to put towards public education.

Rebecca: Wait a minute, I have a question.

J: Oh my gosh.

H: Wow.

J: This is unheard of. Just unheard of.

M: what?

Rebecca: When the personal income taxes went down, why couldn't local communities just pay higher property taxes and cover what was missing, like they used to, and get through the rough times like that?

J: Wow.

H: That's right. She asked it. She came right out and asked it.

J: And it's a doozy. Who says cabaret isn't still dangerous?

H: wait a minute- I think he's going to-

J: Yes. For the love of Damocles sword(or,...), he's taking it on.

M: Because-

J: I just heard a pin drop- did you hear that?

M: - a majority of the voting public felt that property taxes should not be used to bail out the state. That people worked hard for their homes, and shouldn't be penalized for owning property.

Rebecca: But what about-

M: Wealthy communities would be able to save schools, and poor communities wouldn't have the resources. If its up to the state, the state should deal with it.

(he tosses- sound cue)

J: Yes!

H: Folks, you've really seen something special here tonight.

J: Lets hear it for the slice and switch!

*LIGHTS*

*Sound (Music)*

Slide: Each time we start an interview-based project

Slide: which makes up about half our work as a company

Slide: we go through research and training

Slide: on our topic

Slide: and on interviewing.

Slide: Questions we asked this time included:

*Sound Out*

*Lights*

R: What's the best way to begin the interview?

K: How do I encourage someone to talk about this topic if they feel they have no place in the public conversation?

J: How do I let go of control, and let the conversation take me somewhere unexpected?

H: How do I make a student feel valuable as they share their story with me?

M: How do I sense how they need me to respond so they feel comfortable enough to speak what may seem an uncomfortable, or even ugly, perspective?

K: How do I affirm their part of the conversation without seeming like I agree, or disagree, with what they're saying?

J: How do I respond if someone says-'this part is off the record', and its by far the most interesting part of the interview?

R: How do I respond when someone tries to provoke me?

H: When a community partner in rural Oregon has brought me people to talk with who all sound the same, where do I start my investigation to find diversity?

M: How do I shake a politician out of sound bite city?

## Rebecca

I had done interviews before; with the company, and on my own. But this was different. It was exhausting. The travel around the state, the research - not just on the topic, but on the communities and how to be as determined as a bloodhound sniffing out good subjects, interesting leads...And on this one, because I'm one of the two Spanish speakers who were conducting interviews, I felt a real responsibility to connecting with migrant farm workers, Spanish speaking families, Spanish speaking students. It was a good kind of obligation, but also challenging.

These are folks who have to be extremely cautious when they speak with strangers. For a bunch of reasons. Yes, their status and their relationship with the law is sometimes part of the difficulty. But also, they're private. They come from communities that really have to rely on each other. Trusting outsiders does not come easy. Gaining trust from people who have to be wary, just to survive...its tricky.

Then, there is the responsibility of voicing those people. They will not be named in the show, and many of the characters in our pieces are composites- but still, you're portraying people who really gave of themselves ,and you want to do them, and their

ideas, justice. Not just as a performer- as a person with whom you built, even briefly, a relationship.

The other big challenge we give ourselves- if we find a point of view ,a story, an idea that we like-we have to go out and find the other side. Especially if it's a political point of view-passionate, clear, arguing for something. You might find a voice you really like, even agree with- but its not going in the show unless you find lots of perspectives that-well, basically, you have to complicate it. So you get prodded to search for something further, because you don't want to lose that first voice.

We really believe that to move any of these complex conversations forward, we have to humanize voices on all sides. Step into them. Own them.

It makes the research a quest for more than you thought you wanted to hear when you began.

*Sound cue, voices in different languages*

*this next sequence is a live excerpt from the show*

Kimberley:

Since the very inception of,of bi-lingual education as we know it now, it's had kind of two competing aims, one of which is to teach non-English speaking kids to speak and read English.

Hannah

Many kids are losing communication with their parents, and with their grandparents.

Rebecca

Muchos ninos tienen dificultades en comunicarse con sus padres o sus abuelos

Hannah

When they receive instruction only in English, they lose their Spanish.

Rebecca

Cuando estudian en ingles, pierden su espanol.

Hannah

Or, a moment arrives when they are embarrassed and they say:

Rebecca

O llega el momento cuando están avergonzados y dicen:

James

I don't want to speak Spanish.

K:

But one, another, which I think has been the, the more central focus has been to preserve the culture of the immigrant child. And so the classroom is being used as a way to keep that child's culture

Hannah

Parents tell me that when their children need to speak to a grandparent or an auntie, the parent has to translate for them. .

Rebecca

Padres me dicen que se tienen que traducir de parte de sus niños cuando quieren hablar con sus abuelos o sus tíos.

Kimberly

validate that child's culture

Hannah

This week, three families tell me they had this problem.

Rebecca

La semana pasada, tres familias me avisaron de este problema.

Kimberly

make sure that child doesn't lose his or her culture.

Hannah

Another very difficult thing-

Rebecca

Otra cosa muy difícil,

K: All right. Now in my view, that is a wonderful, wonderful thing to have happen-

Hannah

parents arrive from Mexico and they'll send their child to a school where only English is spoken.

Rebecca

los padres llegan de Mexico y mandan sus niños a una escuela donde solo hablen inglés.

Hannah

Then the child arrives home from school crying and saying

Rebecca  
Luego el niño llega a la casa llorando, diciendo

James  
Mama! Yo no quiero ir a la escuela!

K: but the home is the appropriate place for that to be done. And the school is the appropriate place for the child to learn to read and write and speak English

Hannah  
Why?

Rebecca  
Por Que no?

James  
Porque yo no entiendo nada.

Hannah  
And then, the parent can't help the child, because many of them don't speak English either.

But we see through this bi-lingual education almost a separatist movement that's taking root in our public schools and saying "No, we are an Hispanic community. And we are going to teach in Spanish, and we are going to keep our culture in our school. And we are going to be a little bit separatist."

Rebecca (suddenly as the mother):  
Como voy a ayudar a mi hijo? Yo no habla ingles, y no se como leer ni escribir en espanol, ni ingles.

Hannah  
The child feels isolated, and the parent-

Rebecca  
Los padres sienten desesperados

Kimberly  
I think it's a problem. That's not what our public schools are here for.

Hannah  
The parent feels helpless



Kimberly

I'm sorry, but that is not what our public schools are here for.

*Sound(music)*

M: Notes for the cast

on day one of the rehearsal/devising period leading up to the show's tour.

K: It was the final page of a 10 page packet we got.

J: It was called

R: Challenges of this particular production.

H: One- The sheer volume of material we're starting with.

M: Hundreds of interviews with individuals and groups had been conducted by 10 of us-I had the transcripts on my laptop, and for months, had been working on selecting material to explore in process with the company.

R: Two- The political nature of the material in our state.

J: Three- Balancing the political perspectives in the piece.

M: Core to the project's mission- more on that later.

K: Four- Creating a code for the ethnic/cultural read of the performer as negotiable.

H: Five- Staging the show in the round.

J: Six- The poetic, collage nature of the piece will be a new form for much of our audience.

M: We knew the work would have a physical thread, but that its dramaturgy would be one of event, not plot. Different from how most audiences experience the delivery of narrative these days, especially in smaller rural communities with little live performance in their area. We wanted to be aware of this-not condescend, and not lessen the demands we place on our own imaginations- just stay aware of it.

R: Seven- We want to make an excellent piece of theatre-but, we will define success by how well the show sets up the space for a meaningful dialogue afterwards. That is key.

M: And-

K: Eight- There will no theatrical lighting. The show will play all sorts of spaces- its got to be ambient light. The performer must glow from within.

H: Number eight was our favorite.

*Sound- school bell, again*

Slide:

Oregon Department of Education  
Oregon Historical Society  
Lewis & Clark College Graduate School of Education

M: Those three- they represent the state government bureaucracy, the state's web of museums and its central site in downtown Portland, and the state's top training program for new teachers. They represent credibility. We started, at the very beginning, seeking partnerships with these 3 bodies. We already had relationships. We just had to get them to sign on. Once they did, we could call just about any school or government agency or activist/advocacy organization statewide, and at least they would talk to us. Which led to interviews, research material, a growing network of touring possibilities, and more partners. Partnerbuilding was crucial to another aspect of credibility on this project as well. If you're going to make a show that opens a space for dialogue, you don't want homogeneous audiences at all those dialogues. Which means you want people from all over the political and ideological spectrum involved from the beginning, so this type of diversity knows its not only wanted, not only welcome, but respected. Which is tricky. You have to find groups, and individuals, who are coming from a strong, sometimes extreme point of view maybe different from your own.

J: Lets call me –Bob.

M: Bob is well known in Oregon. Beloved by many, and hated by many. Bob has strong opinions on taxes-

J: Don't want them.

M: government-

J: Don't like them.

M: and a variety of subjects. He's passionate. And persuasive. Bob has a radio show, a newsletter, a website, an advocacy group, and political aspirations. He invited me out to his home for a half day visit and interview. I thought I was going to Bob for a deeper version of what he spoke about on air every day. And he gave me that. He got me seriously thinking about some of my own liberal assumptions. But I didn't expect the interview to lead where it eventually led.

J: If a person is serious about tackling public education-

M: Yes?

J: If they really want to be a part of doing something about this, and being honest?

M: Yes?

J: You've got to go after the Teachers Unions.

M: Right. Tell me more about that.

J: No, see right there, you think I'm talking about what teachers can and cannot do, curriculums, standards-

M: No, I'm not saying-

J: Now hold on!

M: Ok.

J: Teachers union own school boards. They own them. How can any meaningful change happen when unions have got the bosses in their pockets? Do you see where I'm going with this?

M: No.

J: Private sector, it's a bribe. Public sector, business as usual.

M: I didn't understand. He explained it to me. As I drove away, certain he was wrong, I called one of our Department of Education partners for clarification.

R: Well, yes, its true. Unions can put money into school board candidate campaigns.

M: And then the union negotiates with the person it helped elect?

R: It happens.

M: So now I'm confused, and on my way to rehearsal, where by coincidence, I've been trying to crack a way into union material from a few unsatisfying interviews-

K: I'm not clear on what you want me to do.

M: I just want to try and improvise the other side of Bob's side- how can someone think unions operating like that is ok?

K: You want the argument?

M: How do we get at that argument? Because I feel like what he's saying has a lot of validity, but I don't- well, I don't want to believe it, I guess, so-

K: So you want me to have a better argument to counter it.

M: I don't know- ok, I'm him. And you're a –

K: A union person?

M: Yes, but that doesn't seem –its just an argument, then.

K: I'm a teacher?

M: Yes! You're a teacher. Yes! And he is-

K: Coming into my classroom to yell at me-

M: Yes. I don't know, lets just do it!

H: What followed was about 10 minutes of improvisation that grew more and more heated.

R: Partly due to the scene, partly due to a growing frustration that we were stuck-

M: I was yelling things at Bob had told me about the union-

K: I don't know what to say to you!

H: Kimberly did not have enough information on the union perspective to create a point of view.

K: I feel like I'm just trying to, to make an opposite! I've got nothing!

J: Finally, I entered, just to lighten things up-  
Hi honey, how was your day at school?

M: Kimberly grabbed James like a life preserver.

K: Ugh! There was this crazy man yelling at me about the teacher's union-

J: What was he saying?

M: Stop! OK. Now we've got something going.

J: What if I actually agree with the union guy?

M: heh?

J: I could agree with the union guy.

K: That's what we're missing. The relationship. That would give me stakes- otherwise, its just a guy yelling at me- who cares.

M: Right. Ok. So-

*Lights to center monologue look...?*

K: And this is the crux of the challenge for me, working on material in shows like this as a creator/performer. The creator part understands the mission of the project, the goals- But it can be frustrating. The performer part of me, well- sometimes I miss, in our documentary pieces, the behavioral, action-driven underpinnings of a good old fashioned plot. What I have come to recognize is that I can have a strong inner life- I just have to create it in our devising process, fast, and that can lead the way to the material itself. Its backwards, but freeing.

Instead of waiting to get a life for me to explore onstage, if I work quick at the right moment, the writing follows me. I make the life that breathes and expresses a certain perspective.

The interviews start as people, right? Then they become words representing people. Then, they get boiled down to opinions, stories- ideas. In the process of making the work as a company, in seeking truth from so much collected voice, we try and complete the cycle. As a performer in this type of work, it becomes my job, finally, to make an idea-human.

Pre-unions sound

Slides:

The next day, a new interview  
with a local union leader.

And the story started to create itself...

Lights

*this next sequence is a live excerpt from the show*

**Unions**

Kimberly: I fell in love with a man. A good man. And he loves me. But, there's a problem-

James: Sometimes unions do more harm than good.

K: We didn't always see- eye to eye.

Hannah: You have to stop taking this so personally.

K: How do I do that? Can you do that?

H: Honey, my last husband believed a lot of things I disagreed with. But when it came down to important matters, we were in synch.

K: You mean...?

H: He cooked. He was a great cook. I told him he could have all the opinions he wanted, so long as he kept the pasta kept coming.

K: But that marriage ended.

H: He stopped cooking.

K: This is different. This is very different.

H: What did he say?

K: I was telling him a story-

J: Calm down- just calm down, and tell me what happened.

K: He yelled at me! This parent just- he just yelled at me, in front of a bunch of kids.

J: Ok, slow down.

K: He has no right, in my own classroom-

J: About what? What was he shouting about?

M: Let me tell you something about how your union works! Alright?

K: Sir- if you could keep your voice down a little-

M: Alright. The teacher's union is the most powerful union in this nation. OK? We know that. Largest contributor to the Democratic party in the nation. We know that. Did you know that?

K: Yes, I know that-

M: Their agenda is about teachers, not about kids.

K: Sir-

M: Teacher's union elects school board officials. Actually contributes to the campaign of specific school board candidates. So when that school board member wins, and is sitting across the table from the union rep, negotiating your new contract-

J: Is that true? The union elects officials to the school board, and then negotiates with that same person?

K: Yes, its true, but-

M: This is true, what I'm telling you.

K: I understand, sir- but what's your point?

J: What was his point?

M: My point is that you taught a social studies class about unions the other day to my son Remy, and he came home singing the union's praises.

K: Yes?

M: Teach the whole story! You can't just teach him your side, so he only sees what you want him to see! Unions are not all good. Your own union is not all good. TEACH the whole story.

(M leaves)

J: Alright, so that's reasonable- he's frustrated. Sometimes unions do more harm than good.

H: Uh oh. Somebody just stopped cooking.

K: Oh, it gets better.

J: The teacher's union isn't perfect, right? You didn't even understand how you joined- it was like they signed you up at teacher orientation without even asking.

K: You're right, the union isn't perfect. But I am tired of this argument that because unions look out for teachers, they're not kids first.

J: Well, they're not. They're teachers first.

K: No- they are schools first. Because if you have no teachers, you have no school. If you have no school, you have no place for the kids.

J: Sure, but the union's responsibility-

K: -is to the teacher. Average teacher in Portland last year paid 500\$ out of pocket to supply their classroom. Teachers all over the state took days without pay to keep kids in school. Who is that benefiting?

J: What about the campaigns, and the union helping school board candidates-

K: That argument is ludicrous! You know what I make. You know we don't have a contract we want. If we had school boards in our pockets, wouldn't we be getting what we want in negotiations? Yes, the teacher's union is an interest group. They're interested in me. Good! Somebody has to be, or I'm all alone in the classroom when I need help.

Hannah: That's a pretty good argument. He got it then, right?

Kimberly: You'd think.

James: Baby-

K: Watch out with the babies right here, ok, Mister.

J: Alright. You know I'm on your side. But-

R: I don't believe that they're highly paid, but I don't think they're taken advantage of either.

M: Teachers feel really put upon when they're asked to do what other people are asked to do. They have a *job*, just like everybody else.

R: They went to school, they went to more school, and now they're back in school. They've never really got their hands dirty.

J: people don't necessarily see teachers as downtrodden, you know? Summers off, 8-3:30.

K: What do you say, when you hear people talk that way?

H: Ooh- good question!

K: What do you say?

J: I don't say anything, I just-



K: You don't say- excuse me, my wife is a teacher. She works pretty damn hard. Her job means the world to her, and she's trying to make your child's life better!

J: No...I'm not looking to argue with strangers.

K: No, you're just looking to argue with me.

H: Wow.

K: With cuts and transfers, I'm teaching freshmen algebra. I spend all my prep time managing freshmen who can barely survive High School. They need pencil, paper, books- have you talked to your parents about this? When are you going to do this? I'm overwhelmed. You see me each night trying to keep my head above water.

J: Somebody thinking the union isn't the best thing for schools does not mean they don't appreciate teachers.

Pause

H: Ok, I'm exhausted. What did you say to that?

K: I don't remember. He had to leave- bowling night, or cards, or some other ridiculously male evening activity...

H: That's the last thing he said?

K: No- before he left, he said-

J: I'm sorry that a parent was such a jerk to you. And I'm sorry if I made it any worse. If anyone badmouths teachers tonight, they've got trouble. Big trouble.

H; So sweet.

K: I fell in love with a man. A good man. Just...

H: Not fully trained.

K: Exactly.

Sound ( music)

Slide

The Chart

(below is the text represented in this slide here called the chart)

## **Quality**

## **Accountability**

## **Funding**

### **Mission of public ed**

**Taxes, equity, waste**

**Cuts**

**NCLB, standards, tests**

**Experiences of:  
students  
parents  
teachers**

**special needs Ed/  
"normal" ed**

**cultural competency**

**Educ. Philosophies**

**agendas vs. kids 1st**

**charter schools/privatization**

### **Mission of public ed**

Hannah:

So those subjects, those are the core themes that came out of the research and interviews.

(pause, give them a moment to look at it)

They're structured in a way that Michael used as a dramaturgical frame for himself, as we worked on material, to prioritize and then actually put the structure of the piece itself together. By posting it in the rehearsal space- a bulletin board with 3 by 5 cards tacked up- we all had access to it. A sort of guiding map.

Slide:

Map of OR

I had a different kind of map to think about. As well as being an interviewer on the project, and a creator/performer, I managed the statewide tour. Which meant I had find and develop partners all over the state. We weren't looking to get booked- we weren't selling the tour, in a traditional sense. We had worked for almost 2 years to fund it so we didn't have to charge a penny to communities. It was free. No fee, no ticket price. Now, one of the things I learned was how, in today's world, if there's not a money value attached, it can be hard for people to think something will have value, period. So although free worked in our favor, at times it worked against audience development within actual communities.

I started with school districts around the state. We needed a space that was 40 feet by 40 feet, which could hold the show and an audience of 30 on each of the 4 sides. Then I worked to find host partners- individuals who would put legwork into getting diverse audiences at that specific site. Our most successful sites were those where someone was really invested- they knew something about the project, and got people in based on their passion.

The trick was – this project isn't the sexiest thing to ever come down the pike...public education, community dialogues...Sunday afternoons. If we didn't have someone who was really excited about getting us an audience, some Sunday, we'd have some empty seats.

Things started to take on a life of their own after several events got the word traveling: newspaper and NPR stories appeared; we performed at the state school board association conference; and, word got out that we would be performing the show at the Capitol Building for the state House and Senate. Mayors, School Superintendents, town council, state Reps-not to mention families, activists, teachers, and senior citizens – all started showing up. By the New Year, suddenly there weren't enough Sundays in the scheduled months to get to all the interested communities.

And we were finding that people were identifying with certain parts of the show based on what was going on in their part of the state. Makes sense- rural issues came up in the East- urban issues came up in Portland and Salem. But it wasn't all geography. Some issues resonated around beliefs. Around priorities. Around values.

*Sound (music)*

*this next sequence is a live excerpt from the show*

**Rebecca**  
Shawn.

**Michael**  
Diana, how are you?

R

Good, good...So...haven't been to the big school in awhile huh?

M

Right, off in my own little world. How's your day been ?

R

Day's going good. Busy. Busy. Phone calls. Emails. How are you?

M

Surviving. Little worn out. No different from any other day.

R

The kids? How are the kids?

M

My kids, or the kids in the program?

R

Yours. No, your kids.

M

They're great.

R

Great.

M

Yours?

R

Great. Everyone's good.

M

Good.

So...

R

So.

What I wanted to talk to you about...we got the mid-year numbers for our Oregon Report Card, and how on track we are for making adequate yearly progress- No ChildLeft Behind, you know....and good news. We're passing in most areas. Bad news is - we're still failing as a school. The problem is attendance. See, specifically your attendance.

M  
Hmmm.

R:  
Your attendance is bringing down our attendance.

M  
Ok.

R  
Now, you're hovering around sixty percent. Our benchmark is ninety. So what I need you to do, because we can't afford to fail a third year, for a lot of reasons-

M  
Ok.

R  
I need you to get the kids into class.

M  
We both want that. But -

R  
Shawn- I need you to get these kids into class.

M  
Or else...?

R  
Or else we have to end the alternative Program. I'm not closing it right now, I'm just saying -

M  
It sounds like you might as well. It sounds like you've pretty much given up hope on these kids.

R  
The people who look at this report card are not giving us points for hope. Look- my hands are tied, Shawn. It is the way it is.

M  
I have been making progress with these kids. When we started, the seniors now, were freshman. Do you know what the attendance numbers were back then?

R  
No, but I can-

M

They were around forty-five percent! Right? Now these same freshman, are sixty percent attendance rate as seniors. That's progress!

R

Fifteen percent?

M

We just can't change this overnight!

R

Sixty percent of kids showing up is not enough, ok? The game is different now- this is not my rule. But it's a rule nonetheless. OK?

M

These kids are special- they need-

R

It doesn't matter.

M

Isn't that why we set this up, because these kids are different?

R

I let you set up this program because you wanted to have more face time with the students who were not succeeding in the main building.

M

You let me set it up because these kids need more attention than your teachers are willing to give them.

R

Lets not paint you as a hero, Shawn. That is the environment where you are most comfortable teaching- its not a reflection on the quality of the teachers here.

M

If we shut the program down, what happens to these kids?

R:

We mainstream them back up here into the building.

M

They won't make it- they'll drop out, and the school will fail because of those numbers.

R:

We'll keep them in class.

M

Do you really think putting these 63 kids in this building is the best thing for them?

R

Shawn - if you want to argue about my intentions with these kids, I'm talking about 950 up here- you're asking about 63.

M

These kids aren't just going to come to class if I tell them to. It's more complicated than that.

R

Our school failed the last 2 years- we have lost students as a result of that. The community is losing faith in this school. Possible reconstitution, job loss... We cannot be labeled a failing school again.

M

(long pause) I um...I have a class to teach.

(He leaves)

R

How many students are going to be there

SOUND (of a crowded school hallway)

*SLIDES*

6 Photos of the show

*Slide:*

Activism as Engagement

M: We believe that polarization and ideological stalemate, nurtured for political gain, are central to our nation's inability to move forward on important social justice and economic justice and human rights issues.

H: One form of activism is the creation of spaces for civic dialogue

R: We seek diverse presence and participation throughout the process

J: We put the heat of ideology onstage, so the dialogue that follows does not start with extremes shouting to be heard-they've already been heard.

H: Our shows ask questions. Lots of questions. The dialogues give people a chance to dive into those questions with a framework, and a starting point.

K: We believe policy can be affected by collaboration. By building bridges. And, the building of new surprising relationships;

M: Theatre, in process and in event, offers the potential for collaboration again and again.

*Sound*

*Slides*

*3 photos of dialogue*

James:

I'm not a company member at Sojourn. I auditioned for them a little over a year ago. I got cast in this project, and worked with them on *The Visit* as well.

Its been a looong year.

Thrilling, actually.

I spent the last several years as an actor at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. So there, I was a guy hired to play parts. I was a part of the community, but your creative contribution in that world- its spelled out pretty clear.

*Slide- dialogue(D)*

As soon as I entered this group, I was immediately trusted as an equal. It was assumed that I would create this show with the other artists. I've made new work before, but its been a while since I had the same sense of freedom, of excitement. I was sure that it would be the best part of the experience- in the middle of devising the show, I was certain. I'll look back on this phase (last summer), as my favorite part.

Nope.

*Slide- dialogue*

Because once we went out on tour and the dialogues started, after the shows- that was it. Almost every Sunday, I would watch a stranger make some new connection- with an idea, with a person, with a perspective. I'd see the delight in someone's eyes.

*Slide- dialogue*



The dialogues were split between whole group work- anywhere from 30-100 audience members-and small group work. Each of us, each performer would lead a small group thru parts of the process, with Michael and a facilitator sort of leading the whole thing. So each week, I spent at least 30, 40 minutes working with a group of strangers who often didn't even know each other.

*Slide- dialogue*

I got to watch people. It was emotional for them, not just because of the passion running thru these issues- I think it was the experience of spending quality moments with fellow citizens struggling with things that mattered in respectful ways- you could often feel the charge of that, the joy, even amid the tension.

And you know

When we started, it was hard for me to connect to the issues we were dealing with. Democrat, Republican, Conservative, Liberal...I wasn't that interested. I was pretty clear on my politics... and the issues- they didn't really affect me.

*Slide- dialogue*

But after getting into the skin of different characters, and then meeting their real life counterparts on the road- it forced me to take the voices of others more seriously. I had to question myself, my beliefs. It forced me to rethink some ideas, some stands...some simplifying I used to do when I thought about people who believed different than I did.

There's a lot of grey. And that touched me.

Towards the end of the tour, my partner and I- well, we are with child.

Ok, really, she's with child.

But one day, we're probably going to have a kid in Oregon Public Schools.

*Slide- dialogue*

Suddenly, the matters of the show mattered to me quite a bit more.

Which was a lesson in itself.

*Slides out*

*Sound (sound effect into café)*

*this next sequence is a live excerpt from the show*

## **Cafe**

James:

The first boom happened around '39 with the construction of the army depot. The town grew from 500 to 4,000 people.

H:

There wasn't even a main street—

Kimberly:

There was a Main street—

H:

Well, it wasn't much of a street, just dirt and tumbleweeds blowing through.

Kimberly:

We went to school in church basements—

H:

And libraries—

Kimberly:

Yes, church basements and libraries.

H:

Well, there was the old sandstone school, it was the only one—

Kimberly:

Kids were crowded, 30 to 40 in a class.

H:

Some would go to school 'til noon, then they'd go home and the rest would go to school in the afternoon.

Kimberly:

Schools are better now, I think. There's not as much discipline as there was, that's a problem, there's no discipline—

H:

That Mr. Holt, be put in jail nowadays, he was strict.

Kimberly:

Yeah.

H:  
Oh, yeah.

James:  
I came from Adrian 50 years ago. I was the principal, a teaching principal in Adrian, and I found out that I was one of the lowest paid principals in the state...so I left and I came here.

Kimberly:  
Three or four years ago there wasn't a problem with funding. But now, the funding amounts are the same as in 1999- with more kids.

James:  
You all gotta get outta Portland more-

H:  
Almost no one gives me the finger here. I get the finger in Portland everytime—

Kimberly:  
I drive 4 miles every day to coffee here, and no one passes me and I don't pass anybody.

H:  
Look around at this table, I don't think a single one of us has even tried marijuana—

James:  
We didn't have any!

Kimberly:  
My son's 50 years old, I think he tried it once.

James:  
Yeah, there's a drug problem here. You believe it, small town like this, some kind of hub for bringing the drugs through.

H:  
I've been here for 50, 60 years.

James:  
It's a good place, good people.

Kimberly:  
Not that rat-race, hustle-bustle that Portland is.

H:  
Nobody rushes anywhere.

James:

There's still a lot of people movin' in. It's diversified, we're getting pretty diversified—

H:

Yeah, and there's a bus coming straight from Tijuana, non-stop—

Kimberly:

Always full—

James:

Damn lucky- who'd be working all the jobs our grandkids don't wanna do, right?

Kimberly:

Yup.

H:

Yeah, we solve all the world's problems right here.

James:

Right here.

*Sound- (music)*

*3 Slides of show and dialogue*

*this next sequence is a live excerpt from the show*

H:

Allright. So schools closed early last year. How did that happen?

Kimberly:

At my school, there are 26 languages spoken. My family speaks Ukrainian. There's a lot of talk about translation and interpreters.... If you don't include all 26 languages, and I don't know how you do that- a lot of people get left out of important conversations.

H:

There were people within the state capitol-staffers, media, Dept of ed- that truly felt that there was no way that our state legislature would just let schools close early. They were going to figure something out. The Legislature tried to protect schools - they borrowed money, they shifted money around. They were trying to do anything so they didn't have to take a vote on taxes.

James:

Just because the Hispanic population of Oregon is increasing, I don't want to be forced to learn Spanish. If I choose to learn it, that's different.

H:

On top of this, you're in a Legislative body where leaders don't get along, parties are bitterly divided- you had a Governor who, by his own admission, didn't really work well with people. It was completely dysfunctional

James:

My goal is to get in the military. Take the enlistment bonus. Get loans. Go to school. Own my own business. If it doesn't work out, I can always re-enlist...it's a pretty versatile option for somebody who doesn't really have a lot of direction or financial freedom.

H:

Essentially, if the public had paid attention to the press, followed the session, really kept a close eye... there was lot of stuff going on. But there was this kind of hope that something would come together, that the legislature would realize they have to work together.

Kimberly:

Schools should challenge you because when you're challenged, you could be more readyyyyyyy for the world. If you're not challenged, you're not never goin' to reach your potential. If it's easy, you're going to be like "oh, whole world is easy." Life is not easy.

H:

I mean, how could our legislators not realize they have to work together- right?

*Sound (music)*

*Slide*

How do we define success?  
What happens next?

M:

So what were we hoping to accomplish, in addition to making strong art?

*Slide-photo*

Relationships, moments of individuals having new experiences with people different from themselves and outside their normal sphere of contact. Leaders in our state hearing from people they usually don't hear from, and having conversations with them.

*Slide - photo*

The show played at the Capitol; but, only 17 out of 89 Reps and Senators came. Republican and Democratic leadership applauded the piece, its balance, its statewide dialogues. But of course they're still struggling with working together, and coming up with a new budget for our schools.

*Slide- photo*

Chalkboard Project, a statewide partner of ours, just made highly publicized findings to the state about how to get through the crisis; our work, our script, our dialogues are reflected throughout the findings...we were actually given the chance to read and rewrite parts of them before they went to lawmakers. But, the press is skeptical of any legislative progress before summer recess.

*Slide- photo*

We now have new partners around the state. Schools, businesses, lawmakers, advocates, families, teachers...We'll tour a new, smaller small version of the show, and the dialogues, this Fall, even as we continue with other projects. The Portland School Superintendent has asked us to be on a new advisory committee that will define a policy for arts in education, and the Mayor of Portland's office has invited us to be part of a new visioning process for the city's 5 year plan. They say they don't know how to listen to people, and reflect what they hear back to community in a coherent, useful way...so they are wondering how the arts can be a part of that...

*Slide- photo*

We put so much energy into the whole thing-it nearly swallowed us whole at a few points...how do we gauge what we, and those we worked with, got out of it...

This last piece of text

Its composed from an interview with a famously conservative Mayor of a famously liberal Oregon town. It came near the end of the show, almost a starting place for the dialogue that followed

Blank screen

H: Think about your personal beliefs, your deepest convictions, your values-

R: Think about what they bring to this conversation-

K: Would it be true to say that if I understood your values, I might better understand your ideas, and opinions on matters such as these?

J: In a conversation, will you treat your values as a sword, and try to beat me into agreement?

H: Will you hold them as a shield to keep my beliefs at a safe distance?

K: Are your convictions strong enough to allow my perspective room to breathe without yours feeling threatened?

R: Can you hear me without having to defeat me before I finish speaking?

H: We come from different backgrounds  
And different places.  
We speak different words  
And work different jobs.

J: What do we bring here alike?  
Where are the bridges to be built?

M: If we fault our leaders for division,  
Is it only  
Fair  
That we offer to lead the way?

*Blackout...*

Slides for the pot-presentation dialogue at NET

*Slide 1*

## The Process

Partnerbuilding

Research & Interviews

Devising and Structuring & Rehearsing

Touring

Dialogue

*Slide 2*

## The questions

How does a project like this impact our process of artmaking, and the art we make?

How, as artists,  
do we honorably and authentically engage people  
as resources and/or collaborators  
that are not normally a part of public policy conversation?

*Slide 3*

How can theatre and democracy intersect?

How we do define success in community-engaged issue based artmaking?