HOW THEATER IS BUILDING BRIDGES IN DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Cornerstone Theater Company
Los Angeles, CA

"...the play led to a reconciliation; a healing of some sort."
Cornerstone Theater Member

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SUMMARY: For over 15 years, **Bill Rauch** and the Cornerstone Theater Company have been creating **theater productions** that explore **issues of race and prejudice**. Members of the ensemble travel to communities throughout the country. They engage community members from all walks of life to help create and perform plays that reflect their local experiences and build bridges. The Company produces commissioned and contemporary works as well as classics. They are intentionally, even **radically inclusive** in the following ways:

- **Maintain a Diverse Ensemble**: At least half of Cornerstone's members are people of color. This includes directors, writers, administrators, designers and artists.
- **Collaborate Throughout the Process**: The ensemble as a group chooses what plays to do. They also reach out to the community in which the plays will be produced and provide the resident playwright with stories from the community. Community members and professional actors work side-by-side on stage, as equals.
- **Reflect all Viewpoints**: The Company tries to reflect all viewpoints, even those its members disagree with, in order to honestly represent communities and their social and cultural divisions.

In the following case example, Bill Rauch and Cornerstone members offer examples of their productions and demonstrate how an arts organization can engage crucial community issues:

To Challenge and To Be Challenged

Cornerstone Theater Company

Writer: Jonathan Walters
Co-researchers: Bill Rauch (Award Recipient) and Bethany Godsoe (NYU/LCW)

If the image of street-hardened, white Los Angeles police officers in a theatrical kick line with street-hardened black and Latino kids—even an ex-convict—strikes some as absurd, that's just fine with Bill Rauch, co-founder of Cornerstone Theater Company. For more than 15 years he's been working to erase social and cultural divisions through just such theatrics. But doing things like tackling human prejudice through theater productions that bring unlikely community collaborators together with professional artists is no exercise in whimsy. It takes hard work to the point of exhaustion and an ability to at least understand—if not always embrace—all points of view. Yet for a decade and a half Cornerstone has been using theater to answer a question that stretches the boundaries of creativity and ambition: How can a radically inclusive approach to art build bridges within and between diverse communities?

Taking it on the road

Cornerstone has its roots in an idea hatched by Rauch as a Harvard undergraduate: a "truck theater" that would travel the country and work in and among various communities to put on plays using community members from all walks of life, both sides of the tracks. Underpinning the idea, says Rauch was his wish to explore—and he hoped, address—a fundamental truth he felt about U.S. culture and society: "The experiment that is the United States of America is full of glorious promise, but it is built on a legacy of bigotry and hatred and fear of the 'other.' I'm dismayed at how quickly lines get drawn, how positions harden and dialogue disappears into posturing."

With help of a Virginia Commission for the Arts grant and private donations, Rauch and co-founder Alison Carey in 1986 launched their quirky experiment in addressing the hardened lines and that fear of the "other," putting on community productions that took head-on issues of race and prejudice.

Deciding on diversity

Since then, the Cornerstone has put on dozens of productions in small towns and urban neighborhoods, from Mississippi to Oregon, sometimes commissioning new plays, sometimes adapting contemporary works or classics. In pursuing its work, Cornerstone uses a standing ensemble of professional actors who serve as the glue that brings a community-based play together.

But the diversity of the ensemble itself became an issue at one point early on, when the theater company made a presentation at a Virginia school that had a student population that was half black and half white. A black teacher questioned whether an all-white theater company—which Cornerstone was at the time—could legitimately represent the proposition that there is power in breaking down barriers and in embracing and celebrating diversity. Cornerstone took that

challenge seriously and when it made its permanent home in Los Angeles, the company began a long and cathartic process of making half of its ensemble of directors, writers, administrators, designers, and artists individuals of color.

One of the founding company members sees the decision as a crucial step in Cornerstone's evolution and its ability to work effectively in diverse communities. "We realized you can't dance around the issue of cultural or racial difference. You have to name it. I think it was partly the legacy of being an all-white company that made us afraid to do that. But now we don't shy away from it. We come right out and say, 'We need an African American actress in this ensemble.'"

It is the same approach that Cornerstone uses when it goes into the community to look for cast members, says a playwright and associate artist with Cornerstone. It's an exercise in inclusivity, he explains. "We say, 'We need civic leaders, students, teachers, business people, someone from government, someone from the police and we need to make sure we have Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos and people from all socio-economic levels."

Tapping into community

In choosing what plays to do and where to do them, Cornerstone purposely tackles tough issues of division and isolation, which means that every new production is a brand new exercise in breaking down and reaching across barriers...and discovering where the land mines are buried. In Oregon, Cornerstone worked in a small town on a play aimed at bridging the gap between the town's churchgoers and its non-religious population. "The community was basically divided between those who spent Saturday nights in a bar and those who spent Sunday morning in church," says another founding member of Cornerstone. "And there'd been a history of really awful conflict between the two groups."

As Cornerstone started working through the play, the production nearly floundered on the issue of a character who had had children out of wedlock. Members of Cornerstone found their own tolerance stretched in trying to accommodate the strong sentiments of churchgoers who believed that having children out of wedlock to be immoral. It was made doubly difficult by the fact that one of the cast members had children out of wedlock. "It can be very hairy," says one of the company's founding members, of working with diverse groups with strongly held beliefs about everything from race to religion.

In that case, Cornerstone came to an accommodation with the religious members of the play's cast, but sometimes the bending would simply defeat the purpose of the play. For example, when Cornerstone did *Romeo and Juliet* in a small Mississippi town they cast white and black teenagers in the lead roles. Some in the community cast didn't want to see them kissing. "We said, 'This is *Romeo and Juliet* and that's an integral part of the play, we can't put it away,'" says a company member.

Sometimes it works the other way, though: The community demands that Cornerstone be open-minded about something *it* might be uncomfortable with. In doing a production of *Prometheus Bound*—adapting it to the closing of Bethlehem Steel in Pennsylvania—Cornerstone players tended to see the story as a tragedy viewed from the eyes of workers. But the Cornerstone cast realized that to be true to its own ethic, it had to include the voice of management in that tragedy,

as well. "We really strive to be inclusive in who we listen to and in whose stories we tell," says a member of Cornerstone. "We try to have viewpoints that we might not agree with, represented; that's what you have to do to honestly represent a community." This member goes on to explain that instead of engendering hostility from the workers involved in the play, it actually proved cathartic. "They didn't hate Bethlehem Steel. In fact, they were proud of what they did there. Certainly they were sad. But it almost seems like the play led to a reconciliation; a healing of some sort."

Practicing inclusion

That sort of inclusion spills over into how Cornerstone itself operates and builds a production. The ensemble as a group chooses what play to do. "It seems as though everyone at Cornerstone is a leader," says a Cornerstone contributor who has been following their work in Los Angeles since Cornerstone opened there. At the same time there is an intensive effort to reach out into the community in which each play is being produced, both for cast members, but also to augment the resident playwright's thinking with stories from that community. Cornerstone's director of community partnerships will work on setting up initial contacts, says a company member, and then the director and playwright build on those initial contacts. "It just sort of blossoms out from there," she says. "And it's a wonderful introduction into a community just beginning this process of reaching out and gathering people's stories."

Even in doing the plays themselves, democracy tends to rule, says another member of Cornerstone. "There is a constant dialogue among the cast members. "One cast member might have an idea about how to address a particular moment in a play. Now you want the play to be dramatically compelling, but you also want it to be true to the community and members of the cast."

For that to work, though, the professional members of the ensemble have to be a special breed of artist: they have to be accepting of amateurs as equals, something that community actors say Cornerstone members do extremely well. "I never felt from them any sense of 'I am a professional and you're down here,'" says a community cast member who has gone on to start his own theater company in the Watts section of Los Angeles. "I mean, I certainly had that insecurity, but I never got it from the company and that really helped." In fact, what he got from the company was a lot of coaching and support. "They had total confidence in me," he recalls, and has since played in a number of Cornerstone productions. "And they worked with me." Not that just anybody can be part of a Cornerstone production. In order to maintain high production standards, Cornerstone holds auditions just like any acting company. "For example we might ask people to read a passage, first as though it's angry, then as if it's the funniest thing they ever read and then as gossip," says a founding member of Cornerstone and a set and costume designer. "And we find people who are extraordinarily good who've never done theater before."

It shows in the productions, says a Cornerstone supporter. "If I don't read the program, most of the time I can't distinguish between who is the pro and who isn't. They all seem so good. Also, the productions are so seamless and the stories so compelling, I'm usually looking at that."

As it turns out, the pros don't think about it much either, beyond the fact that they're doing some of the most satisfying work of their lives, they say. "This is a much richer environment in which

to be an artist," says a company member. "It gives me much more satisfaction than if I were doing conventional work."

Sowing seeds

Just what kind of impact a Cornerstone production has on a community is always difficult to quantify, but it's clear they can be powerful and long lasting. One of its early productions—in a small town in Maine—led to the first of a string of community theaters that would spring up in the wake of a Cornerstone play. In Port Gibson, Mississippi, where the controversial kiss in Romeo and Juliet was ultimately delivered, the effects were, as it turns out, profoundly positive. In the wake of the play, blacks and whites in town kept meeting. "A few years later we heard that the community had been honored for having the most racially integrated board out of hundreds of communities in a national program that helps small towns revitalize their main streets," says Rauch.

And Cornerstone has clearly had an impact on people's lives. Inner city kids have learned how to read, motivated by the necessity of memorizing a script. Others young players—with no prospects of college at all before being recruited by Cornerstone—have gone on to study drama at the graduate level.

"You just never know," says a Cornerstone company member. "I recently got an e-mail from a college student who said she'd been in show with us when she was five years old, and she'd been so impressed that we respected her, that we didn't dismiss her. And now she's decided to do a project at her small community college in Texas on gay marriage. Now that's an impact that I'd never have predicted; because of our company in one small town." Maybe it's not so surprising, though, given what Cornerstone has already proved when it comes to the power of including all "others."

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