Staging the City with the Good People of New Haven

Sonja Kuftinec

Do I err on the side of excessive ambition when I say that if New Haven can be captured onstage, we will have created a theatrical document which may have much to say about the future of the American city?
—Doug Hughes, Artistic Director Long Wharf Theatre

In 1997 Long Wharf Theatre’s newly appointed Artistic Director, Doug Hughes, arrived in New Haven, Connecticut, driven to discover his adopted city’s “center of civic energy.” This energy seemed absent from a site whose diverse neighborhoods appeared disconnected from each other and from a cohesive sense of urban identity. Theatre, he believed, could draw together the urban community and allow the city to look at itself. Yet, Hughes understood that the historical relationship between New Haven and its professional resident theatres had been as fraught and disconnected as the urban terrain seemed to be. Both the Yale Repertory and the Long Wharf theatres focused their energies on producing classical texts and new works, unreflective of New Haven, and cast mainly with New York actors. In order to begin revising the relationship between the theatre and the city, Hughes decided he needed not only to reflect New Haven via a representational narrative and semiotically resonant production, but also by inviting the city onstage, casting local residents alongside professional actors. And he knew just the company to work with: Cornerstone Theater.

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2 Ibid.

3 Hughes, Doug. Interview with author, 7 June 2000. All subsequent quotations from this interview unless otherwise indicated.
Since 1986 Cornerstone Theater has been producing plays adapted and cast to represent local communities, variously defined by geography, age, ethnicity, workplace, and birthday, to name only a few. From 1986–1991 the company traveled the United States working mainly with small rural towns. Illustrative productions include a wild west Hamlet in Marmarth, North Dakota, a mixed race Romeo and Juliet in Port Gibson, Mississippi, and an adaptation of the Oresteia with a Native American reservation in Schurz, Nevada.4 Cornerstone’s urban work in Los Angeles, from 1992 to the present, includes residencies with Arab Americans citywide (Ghurba), a multilingual senior center (The Toy Truck), and urban postal workers, librarians, and police officers (Candude).5 In 1993, Cornerstone collaborated with the Arena Stage and the

4 Productions include Hamlet adapted by Cornerstone Theater from William Shakespeare, 1986; Romeo and Juliet adapted by Cornerstone Theater from William Shakespeare, 1988; The House on Walker River adapted by Cornerstone Theater from The Oresteia by Aeschylus.

5 Productions respectively include Ghurba, by Shishir Kurup, 1993; The Toy Truck, adapted by Cornerstone Theater from The Clay Cart Sanskrit epic, 1992; and Candide, adapted by Tracy Young from Candide, by Voltaire, 1997.
East of the Anacostia River residents of Washington D.C. to adapt Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, retitled *A Community Carol*. Hughes had seen and admired a number of Cornerstone’s rural projects, and had heard of the Arena project. Based on these experiences, or “pilgrimages” as he referred to them, Hughes contacted co-founders Alison Carey, the company’s most prolific play adapter, and Bill Rauch, Cornerstone’s Artistic Director. Intermittently between the summer of 1997 and June 2000, Long Wharf, Cornerstone, various civic organizations, neighborhoods, and residents of New Haven worked together to produce *The Good Person of New Haven*. This adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechuan*, set in New Haven and cast with local residents, manifested, celebrated, and critiqued the city. At the same time, the production process raises questions about what it means to bring together and stage the city, while helping to reassess the function of contemporary regional theatre, and the role of the critic in community-based theatre-making.

With roots in early twentieth-century pageantry, the Little Theatre Movement, and grassroots performance, community-based theatre has emerged over the past several decades as a vital aesthetic and social practice. Many of the scholars associated with the field are, like myself, also practitioners. While some practitioners ask important questions about the relationship of academia to the field, and some scholars remain critical of the work’s radical potential, moving between the experiential and the analytic can enhance both the practice and process(ing) of community-based theatre. The scholar-practitioner can work in partnership with artists to investigate more deeply the meaning-making potential of the community-based production process. I began working with Cornerstone Theater in 1994 as a dramaturg and ethnographic observer in Watts, Los Angeles. My field work resulted in a dissertation, several articles, and a forthcoming book, as well as initiating my practical work in former Yugoslavia, creating theatre with youth across ethno-religious borders. It is with this

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6 *The Good Person of New Haven*, adapted by Alison Carey from *The Good Person of Szechwan* by Bertolt Brecht and translated by Ralph Manheim. All textual references refer to 21 March 2000 script. Subsequent textual references will be included parenthetically in the text. [There is a performance review of *The Good Person of New Haven* in this issue of *Theatre Journal*. See 318–20—Ed.]


8 In “A Hyphenated Field,” Jan Cohen-Cruz details conversations with a variety of community-based theatre practitioners, some of whom feel that outside critics “appropriate or skew the field’s internal values,” (373) as well as potentially competing for scarce arts funding.

9 See in particular Sara Brady’s recent article, “Welded to the Ladle: Steelbound and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre,” *TDR* 44.3 (2000): 51–74, which critiques *Steelbound*, Cornerstone and Touchstone theatres’ 1999 collaboration with Bethlehem Steel and the citizens of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, adapted from *Prometheus Bound*.

experiential and scholarly background that I begin to investigate the production process of *The Good Person of New Haven*. This saga of institutions, ideals, and individuals requires both the more distanced stance of the analytic observer and the subjective involvement of the community-based practitioner. To explore the performance-making process in terms of location, representation, and reception, this essay borrows from urban geography, sociology, and performance studies, examining how the city is staged and not staged in *The Good Person of New Haven*. I begin, in the spirit of Michel De Certeau, with a walk through the city.\(^\text{11}\)

**Walking Through New Haven: The City and Cultural Geography**

My understanding of New Haven had been defined through memory and mediation before I arrived in March 2000 to observe the first read through of the newly revised *Good Person of New Haven* script. As a college student at Dartmouth, and later as a graduate theatre student at Stanford, I had traveled occasionally through the Yale campus and its perimeters, careful not to stray too far into what was reported to be a dangerous and poverty-stricken city. My experience of New Haven was thus restricted by my perceptions. Urban geographers Leslie King and Reginald Golledge propose that perceptions, or cognitive structures, directly influence the individual’s understanding of the city.\(^\text{12}\) A mental map of a place overlays its physical layout, so that we “see” a city through mediated accounts. I therefore saw New Haven from the point of view of the Yale campus as a vaguely undefined surrounding space of potential danger. But subjective reorientation to the urban terrain can alter perceptions, shift cognitive structures, and redraw the mental map.

Years after my initial encounter with the city, having worked with Cornerstone and written of how memory (re)constructs space,\(^\text{13}\) I arrive at the New Haven train station and decide to walk to the Long Wharf Theatre. I feel my way haptically, without a map, becoming a somewhat purposeful flâneur.\(^\text{14}\) I get lost in the city. I wander under a highway bridge, through a junkyard, past weathered convenience stores, newly built corporate structures and an area post-office, before arriving finally at the theatre, flanked by a vast parking lot and wedged between a meat-packing plant and an Italian take-out diner. This spatial isolation seems to visibly challenge Hughes’ hope for the theatre as urban center. The geography of this urban landscape, so different from the Yale campus, from Hughes’ vision, and from the terrain of my imaginings, begins to reconstruct the city. One layer of New Haven’s genealogy unearths itself: the city as urban space.

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\(^{11}\) See Michel De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).


Cultural geographers such as Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja have argued that space is not neutral. The city is a social space inscribed by individual relationships, determined by and determining the most basic unit of the urban panorama, the neighborhood—an area that maintains both a physical and psychological presence among residents. Negotiation among neighborhoods and community organizations marked the Long Wharf/Cornerstone collaboration almost from its inception. Although initiated by Hughes’ desire to stage the city, the New Haven Project developed through a grant encouraging cooperation among arts and neighborhood social organizations.

In 1997 Long Wharf’s Development Director, Pamela Tatge, came across the Arts Partnership for Stronger Communities Program, established by the Connecticut Commission on the Arts. The New Haven Project or The City Comes Onstage (working project titles from 1997) evolved through the grant-writing process. An early grant narrative summarizes basic tenets of the proposed project, as well as situating some of the challenges that would arise in attempting to spatially and psychically locate New Haven’s civic center: “While New Haven can justifiably define itself as Connecticut’s cultural capital, it has had great difficulty in defining itself as a community, one united in celebration of its history, its diversity, and its considerable cultural treasures.”

Perhaps one of the reasons New Haven had such difficulties “defining itself as a community” might be the inherent difficulty of defining anything as a community. Raymond Williams identifies the term as a keyword, noting both its importance to cultural studies, and its problematic, positively-inflected, connotative vagueness. In a well-known study in the 1950s, which has continued to frustrate sociologists, George A. Hillery Jr. described ninety-four use definitions of “community” with very little in common among them. In the Arts Partnerships proposal, Long Wharf’s use of “community” suggests the connotative vagueness articulated by Williams, while illuminating the inherent paradox of attempting to establish this community across difference. According to the grant narrative, a New Haven community established through the Arts Partnerships project would include both commonality (celebration of history and culture) and diversity. The conundrum of how to both celebrate commonality and pay homage to difference and cultural exchange recurred throughout the process of planning, audition, adaptation, and performance of the New Haven/City Comes Onstage Project. Throughout the project’s development, Long Wharf relied on Cornerstone’s experience to balance inclusion and celebration with selection (and implicit erasure).

15 For further explication of social aspects of space, see Edward Soja’s Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Culture and Social Theory (New York: Verso, 1989) and Henri Lefebvre’s The Production of Space (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991).
16 Hughes had actually initiated conversations with Alison Carey and Bill Rauch prior to learning of the Arts Partnership Grant. The Grant did, however, provide incentive and structure for the project’s development.
17 1998 Arts Partnerships Grant proposal narrative, 6.
18 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (London: Fontana, 1976), 66.
Cornerstone seemed an ideal partner for an enterprise of the scope Hughes had begun to imagine. Backed by fifteen years of experience producing community-based plays, including the Arena Stage co-production, Cornerstone identified the need to establish local advisory boards and partnerships and to set up a process that remained open—inviting ongoing commentary from participants (a process that had deeply frustrated some Arena Stage staff).\(^{20}\) Cornerstone also had a reputation for creating imaginative, well-received, community-specific adaptations. Critical reception to *Community Carol* was generally positive and Arena Stage had sold-out houses for almost the entire run of the show. Cornerstone also believed in follow-through. *Community Carol* participant Toni White-Richardson served on Cornerstone’s board and now sits on the company’s National Advisory Circle, while another *Community Carol* participant, Teeko Parran, is a Cornerstone ensemble member.

Thus, following initial conversations with Carey and Rauch, and spurred on by the Arts Partnerships grant, Long Wharf established relationships with various community organizations. Eventually renewed over the three years of the project’s development, the grant included the Ethnic Heritage Center, Project LEAP [Leadership, Education and Athletics], and Centro San Jose (later transferred to Pequenas Ligas de New Haven when Executive Director, Peter Noble, left the first organization for the second). The community partners believed that the New Haven Project would further their various missions of cultural expression, dialogue, and opportunity. The selection of these partners also established an ethnically and somewhat geographically diverse representation of New Haven. Centro San Jose and Pequenas focus their attention on New Haven’s Hispanic population, Project LEAP works mainly with African Americans, and the Ethnic Heritage Center brings together African American, Italian, Jewish, Ukranian, Polish, and Irish residents.

Early in the process, the project moved from a mainly ethnic representation of the city’s differences, marked by the collaborating partnerships, to a representation based in the more physical and psychologically grounded terrain of the neighborhood. During the summer of 1998, the participating partners determined that to be more inclusive, the workshops should be held in five sites embracing a range of geographic, demographic and ethnic differences. The sites chosen—The Hill, Newhallville, Westville/Beaver Hills, Wooster Square and Fair Haven—did indeed represent a diverse cross-section of New Haven. According to several media reports, and Long Wharf and Cornerstone records, ongoing workshops at the five sites and sixteen additional “one shot” workshops held in the fall of 1998 included New Haven residents embodying a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and residence locations within the city. That diversity, according to participants, was in itself exciting. Dana Fripp, who appeared in both the workshop and final productions of *Good Person*, comments on her spring 1999 audition, “I got a call from [site coordinator] Michelle Sepulveda, who was worried about getting enough auditioners to the school. Well,

\(^{20}\) Bill Rauch related several incidents to me in a personal interview (17 January 1996). Alison Carey had encouraged community members to add their voice to the adaptation at an early script read through. Arena Literary Manager Laurence Maslon exploded, feeling that this invitation violated the rigors of theatrical writing. Maslon later asserted to me in a personal interview (2 February 1996) that the politics of inclusiveness ran up against the practicalities of producing theatre: “Trying to include the community contributed to personal pains.”
they had nothing to worry about. When I got there it looked like about 75–80 people at one junior high. There was such a buzz! All ages and races, fantastic!"\(^{21}\) The workshops resulted in a Fall 1998 presentation, focused on oral history and storytelling representing a wide variety of experiences in the city.

Yet, the foregrounding of diversity in age and race, and the assumption that a geographic cross-section of the city’s neighborhoods would result in an accurately embodied representation of the city, elides some of the complexities of urban representation, particularly when the project moved from oral history to adaptation. Fripp further illuminates some of these complications:

> It’s interesting for me where I live in Westville, you’re so close to the Hill [a lower income area], where it looks so different. When black people started moving in here, you got a different sense of the city just by crossing the street. That would have been a very interesting thing to address [in the play]. Just by waiting for the light to change you leave an area that was predominantly Jewish, that became a Jewish African American mix . . . then right across the street you see boarded up buildings.

Fripp’s commentary points towards the relationship between neighborhood and culture as more than a simple mapping of race and ethnicity onto space. Fluid borders and migration patterns impact the physical and psychological character of the neighborhood.

King and Golledge cite studies that conservatively estimate intra-urban mobility at 15%–20% of the city population.\(^ {22}\) Migration factors often center on available housing and economic opportunity, and are perceived differently dependent upon class and race. This perceptual difference became a point of contention in the adaptation process. In an early scene in *The Good Person of New Haven*, angels who have come to earth in search of a good person discover New Haven history books in the local library. They read from them throughout the first half of the play, providing a selective historical context for New Haven’s present enunciation of itself in performance.

Angel 2: [reading from book] “Richard Lee, then mayor of our fair city, went into the tenements on Oak Street in the 1950’s. He was so horrified by what he saw—no heat, no running water, no electricity—that he went outside, sat down on the curb and put his head in his hands. He promised himself then and there he’d do something about it, and thus was Urban Renewal born.”

Angel 3: Except I met some lovely older ladies who lived here when he came. Those tenements were their homes. They scrubbed them spotless every Saturday. They loved their homes on Oak Street, and Dick Lee tore them down. It’s been 30 years, and they still HATE him. They HATE him.

\(^ {33–34}\)

The third angel’s response complicates the mythology of urban renewal and migration patterns. Dialectic engagement between the angels illuminates how subjective perceptions impact interpretation of an event through its historical and experientially mediated context. Space is not neutral.

Varying perceptual understandings of migration patterns and living conditions were also expressed at the first read through of the revised *Good Person* script, which I

\(^ {21}\) Interview with author, 7 June 2000. All subsequent Fripp quotations from this interview.

\(^ {22}\) King and Golledge, *Cities, Space and Behavior*, 313.
attended following my initial wanderings. In a discussion following the read-through, Michael Gaetano, a fourteen-year-old from Hamden (a suburb adjoining New Haven), commented on the difference between his town and the depressed Newhallville neighborhood he passed each day in his mother’s car on the way to school. A photo of Gaetano in front of his mother’s house in the *Hamden Journal* depicts a comfortable two-story Colonial structure with a manicured lawn.23 “It’s just down the hill,” he explained about Newhallville, “but there’s trash on the lawns, and nothing seems taken care of. How could they let life slip away like that?” At the read-through, an older African American cast member, Horace Little, responded to Gaetano somewhat shortly: “People don’t always let themselves slip away. A lot of times they started there.” Little repeats the story, with a more conciliatory tone, in an article in New Haven’s *Advocate*, “He hadn’t lived there, so he didn’t know.”24

The performance-making process, with numerous opportunities for input from participants throughout script selection, adaptation, and performance, encouraged this kind of exchange: an exchange that enabled relationships across neighborhoods, ethnicity, and class, and expanded perceptions about the relationship between space and culture. At the same time, the process revealed complications that were not represented in performance—migration patterns in Westville and the Hill, and the more structural socio-economic factors impacting the aesthetic differences between Hamden and Newhallville. Negotiations between individual relationships, social roles, and structural circumstances grounds ongoing discourse in social theory.

**The City as Socio-structural and Interpersonal Landscape**

In his 1985 book, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, sociologist Anthony Cohen summarizes an understanding of the city in terms of social roles and urban infrastructure. According to Cohen, early twentieth-century urban theorists depicted society as constituted by individuals whose differences become the foundation for urban integration and solidarity.25 This understanding of society manifests itself in mediated accounts of the New Haven Project, and assumptions expressed by both Cornerstone and Long Wharf. Cornerstone states as its mission to “build bridges between and within diverse communities [believing that] society can flourish only when its members know and respect one another.” In accordance with early twentieth-century social theory, the company believes that a healthy society progresses through a coming together of diverse individuals. In Cornerstone’s specific articulation, theatre can facilitate this social mediation, offering a site in which social roles can be reimagined and differences bridged, while individuals retain cultural distinctions. It is a delicate balancing act, at once echoed and troubled by an article in the *New Haven Register*.

“‘A Little Melting Pot’” (the title is based on a quote from cast member Adelaida Nuñez) begins by defining several community participants via their ethnic identity, age, and social roles: “A 20-something African-American drama teacher who does his own one-man show. A 30-year-old Puerto Rican mother of two who once did a

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Metropolitan Transit Authority commercial. An 82-year-old Italian American great-grandfather and GOP leader who has been Santa Claus for 55 Christmases.  

26 Like Cornerstone, the article celebrates distinctions among cast members, implying that the New Haven Project allows for interaction across difference. Yet, instead of maintaining these distinctions, the article later elides individual differences in an almost utopic narrative of community: “[The show’s] cast members look and sound a lot like you and me. That’s because they are our friends and relatives, our neighbors and teachers.”  

27 On their own, the statements only simplify the negotiation of difference and unity in the performance process. The statements are further complicated, however, by the fact that the writer had perceived a distinction that did not actually exist. Aaron Jafferis, the “African American drama teacher,” looks and defines himself as white. While it is difficult to establish why the writer misperceived Jafferis’ racial identity, one factor could be that Jafferis, a hip-hop poet, better fit the racial category of “black” than “white” in terms of the practice of his social role. The rehearsal process, in contrast, offers a site for a more subtle negotiation and reconception of individuals beyond their typed social roles.

As cited in Long Wharf’s publicity literature—a format which does not generally invite complex critical discourse—comments from participants involved in the process can seem simple and selective. The History of the New Haven Project pamphlet quotes several cast members’ response to the project, including those of Michael Gaetano (“It’s been a great opportunity to get to know other people in this area!”) and Gloria Richardson (“We’ve become a family”). The process of theatre-making as a medium for individual exchange, and the renegotiation of social perceptions, is more complexly related by Dana Fripp. I quote at length her account of perceptual shifts in her relationship with two cast members, Michelle Masa and Adelaida Nuñez, to indicate the subtlety of social transactions that can arise through the rehearsal process:

One of the most important things [about the process] was being up in the [dressing room] trailer with the other women. I remember the first time I saw Michele Masa, who played Mrs. Cash. I told her this week, “I looked at you and I said, that is a beautiful woman, she will never talk to me.” I had all these preconceived notions about who people are, what they were going to be like to work with, and all of that just melted away. Michele and I got so close, I feel like it’s just been orchestrated by God.

I didn’t know what to make of Addy [Adelaida Nuñez] the first time through. I blame myself in part—maybe you’re not always meant to jive with everybody—but being in that trailer with her and watching her with her daughters and watching her work so hard on every line and everything, her level of commitment, how beautiful her daughters are, it’s a credit to her, that she’s here every single day, covering another role [Eddie’s Mother]. Just sitting with her and hearing about her life and what she has been through, and in the midst of this she graduates with her GED. I can not tell you the level of respect I have for this girl—this woman now.

You know something, I could have missed this, I could have been left with this one-time assessment of her . . . . It’s a small picture of what it should be like out there beyond the trailer, as far as the way we support one another in the city. We don’t all grow up in the same way, but if you are a stranger with animosity trying to pick on one of us in this very diverse trailer, you’d be better off in an alley with junk yard dogs. It was just a—a lot of people describe it as spiritual. It became more than just a project.

27 Ibid., D1.
Fripp’s comments illustrate how the day to day interactions engaged within the performance process remapped her initial perceptions of individuals. Her assessment of the situation illuminates both the potential for the performance-making process as a model for inclusive relationships in the city (“it’s a small picture of what it should be like out there”), and a suggestion of how new symbolic boundaries in fact depend upon exclusion (“if you are a stranger with animosity trying to pick on one of us . . . you’d be better off in an alley with junk yard dogs”). The complexity of perceptual negotiations of belonging and boundaries is reflected not only in the relationships among project participants, but also in the relationship between participants and the Long Wharf Theatre. As the process developed, the theatre became situated variously as an elitist institution, a central mediator, and a catalyst for staging the city.

Theatre and Urban Mediation

After making my way to the Long Wharf’s lobby, the most striking spatial aspect of the theatre to me was the familiarity of its interior design. The blown-up black and white production photographs, posted media previews, headshots of the acting company, and encouragements to become a subscribing member, reminded me of any number of professional regional theatres. These familiar signs can be stabilizing to some, while off-putting and unreadable to others. Whatever the reception, the intention of the regional or resident theatre movement had always been to develop an inviting local performance space. In working on the New Haven project to strengthen its urban connection, the Long Wharf discovered that certain marketing strategies and cultural perceptions of theatre tended to privilege a non-local audience base.

In part, this audience base derives from the Long Wharf’s regional theatre origins. Jon Jory and Harlan Kleiman founded the company in 1965, at a time of theatrical decentralization, when newly formed resident and regional theatres were burgeoning. Many of these theatres were established initially to present a more local and aesthetically experimental alternative to New York’s Broadway theatres. The Long Wharf still defines itself as “cultivating audiences that reflect the state of Connecticut and the diversity of its cities as well as its rural and suburban areas.” Like many regional theatres, however, the Long Wharf depends upon a subscriber base that does not match this inclusive and diversified, yet locally selective description. According to the company’s own statistics, 20% of its 11,000 member subscriber base resides outside Connecticut, and 40% resides outside of New Haven county. Doug Hughes himself observed to me that the Long Wharf’s 125,000 member seasonal audience includes mainly older white suburban viewers with an income base between $50,000–$75,000.

Long Wharf understands the difficulty of serving its more local audience constituency. The 1997 Arts Partnerships grant narrative indicates that in contrast to what is reflected in its subscriber base, New Haven ranks 167th of 169 Connecticut towns in terms of wealth, and that 21.3% of New Haven’s population resides below the poverty line, compared with 6.8% of Connecticut as a whole. Former Development Director, Pamela Tatge, acknowledges that “the perception of Long Wharf is that it is a theatre

28 Good Person of New Haven Program Notes, 11.
29 Long Wharf Theatre Business Circle pamphlet.
30 Arts Partnerships 1997 grant narrative, 4.
for New York. The prior administration [before Doug Hughes’ tenure] didn’t know or care much about the [New Haven] community.”

Bronx-born Adelaida Nuñez affirms Tatge’s assumptions, noting that she felt initially put off by Long Wharf, and theatre in general: “I was not raised to like the theatre . . . . It’s kind of like the division of class. There’s a certain kind of person who goes to the theatre. There’s a certain kind of person who doesn’t go to the theatre. Then there’s a person who doesn’t even know about the theatre. I was the one who didn’t even know.”

The Long Wharf is certainly not alone in reflecting perceptions that regional theatres serve mainly middle-class audiences. *Community Carol* participant Toni White-Richardson had expressed a similar vision of the Arena Stage prior to Cornerstone’s collaborative project there with the East of the Anacostia River communities. In a January 1996 phone interview, White-Richardson commented that “the Arena is not some place [Anacostia residents] visit often.” She cited as reasons “cost and the nature of the place . . . . It’s not universal enough. Sometimes the plays seem geared towards—uh, how can I say this—an audience that is not from Anacostia.” While White-Richardson cited the benefits of Arena’s school outreach programs, conceding, “I don’t want to take anything from them,” she also definitively stated that, prior to the *Community Carol* project, Southeast Washington residents did not perceive of Arena as reaching out to or including the adults in the community. Adelaida Nuñez suggests one possible reason for the improved relationship between Long Wharf and New Haven participants: “It’s not just another show about a bunch of white people. It’s about all kinds of people.”

White-Richardson and Nuñez both articulate the importance of initial perceptions—that regional theatre is culturally elite—as well as suggesting that inclusion and involvement can, at least temporarily, redefine the relationship between a more local audience constituency and a regional theatre. Arena project coordinator, Tamara Sibley, suggests that this representational inclusion became a deciding factor in shifting the relationship between the Arena and the Anacostia community: “Everywhere people wanted to be involved, the response was overwhelming. People want an outlet. They were excited about the idea that they could perform things that they recognized, their own community, at the Arena. It was a coming together, a bridge to the community and people were willing to cross that bridge.” At the Long Wharf, Doug Hughes also understood and acknowledged that inclusive storytelling and mutual involvement could improve the relationship between the theatre and New Haven residents. In his November 1998 letter to Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, John Ostrout, Hughes references the diverse, local audience in attendance at the Fall 1998 neighborhood workshops presentation at Long Wharf: “New Haven citizens who would never have looked to Long Wharf as a community center were inside the building responding favorably to a project defined by the hopes and dreams, disappointments and defeats of their daily lives.”

31 Interview with author, 31 May 2000. All subsequent quotations from this interview.
33 31 January 1996.
35 Interview with author, 31 January 1996.
36 Doug Hughes, Letter to John Ostrout.
The process of inviting the community to represent themselves, rather than to receive what many regional theatres term “outreach performances,” allowed for increased engagement with the local constituency. Yet, improved relationships also required a spatial and perceptual shift on the part of Long Wharf and its staff. While Doug Hughes initially hoped to make Long Wharf the city’s civic center, two years later this notion changed. Long Wharf now referenced the company’s efforts to reverse the traditional flow of the public-theatre relationship, forming transactual bonds with the community, rather than serving as the central agent of cultural engagement. According to Pamela Tatge, one key moment that shifted the relationship between Long Wharf and the New Haven Project participants from suspicion, to mediation, to catalyzation, occurred in October 1999 when the Arts Partnerships grant awarded $100,000 to the Project: “At that point, the [New Haven] Project didn’t belong to the Long Wharf. It belonged to the community.”

Who is the Community?: Representation and Revision in The Good Person of New Haven

Tatge’s sentiments, and others I have elected to cite, offer evidence for the relative success of the New Haven Project in engaging a diverse group of community participants in a project that reflected and ultimately staged the city. But the performance-making process, textual adaptation, and production reception, as well as my own documentation, all depend as crucially upon selection as inclusion, upon forgetting as much as remembering, and upon symbolic agreement as much as acknowledged dissent.

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner offers the most oft-cited explications of how a community reflects or expresses itself through performance. In The Ritual Process, Turner suggests that this expression is achieved through polyphonic coding including language, gesture and social gathering that culminates with a moment of communitas, in which the audience experiences a sense of togetherness through communal witnessing. Such an understanding of theatre’s function is evident in how Doug Hughes contrasts the community-specific New Haven project with the Long Wharf’s recent Broadway transfer of Wit: “This piece could never transfer anywhere; it is not work for export, but for the polis to look at itself.” Hughes had expanded on the notion of the city staging itself in a letter written several years earlier to the Connecticut Commission on the Arts where he commented on the need for the city to “come together to witness a theatrical work which grew from research and from interviews.” Yet, this reliance upon interviews, diverse participation and social transactions perhaps elides another essential aspect of performance: forgetting. In Cities of the Dead, Joe Roach complicates the meaning-making process established through performance, noting that the process is marked as much by reinvention as transmission, “memory is a process that depends crucially on forgetting.” In order to stage the city—to invite the city onstage, to provide the opportunity for the polis to look at itself, to create relationships with diverse populations—selections had to be made. The representation of certain aspects of the city required the forgetting of others.

37 Arts Partnerships Grant Narrative 1999, 4.
39 Ibid., 2.
I raise questions here not about the possibility of forging relationships and building bridges in the theatre-making process, but about the ease with which the process is sometimes implied to proceed. Dissent is often forgotten in order to remember a more enclosed understanding of “community.” This dissent emerges within undefined symbolic discourse, such as the notion of goodness. Community participant Aaron Jafferis explains that the notion of a “good neighborhood” shifts depending on the individual. Cohen proposes that this disagreement about symbolic terms such as “good,” more accurately represents how communities are imagined. Symbols are effective in forging this understanding of community because they are imprecise.

While the performance-making process can indeed bring people together, and engage individual relationships, the process of community formation remains dependent upon not defining the symbols that bring together the community.

In Long Creek, Oregon, a logging town where Cornerstone had previously produced The Good Person of Long Creek in 1988, residents of the small town, with a population of 230 residents, had also disagreed about the notion of “goodness.” Half the town believed that the lead character of Brecht’s play, and Cornerstone’s adaptation, could not be “good” because, in one version of the play, she has a child out of wedlock. The tension between the need to elide differences in symbolic understandings, and the production of a Brecht play which seems to depend upon dialectical engagement, forms yet another terrain for the complex investigation of urban representation.

As with most phases of the New Haven Project, community participants were invited to contribute their input in choosing the source text to be adapted for eventual production on Long Wharf’s main stage. In August 1998, New Haven Project Coordinator Shana Waterman, working with Arts Partners, Centro San Jose, Project LEAP, and the Ethnic Heritage Center, brought together a group of 150 community respondents. The participants heard summaries of five plays and read aloud lengthy excerpts. They commented on whether the concerns of the plays seemed to reflect for them the concerns of the city, assuming that a production would be adapted and set in contemporary New Haven. According to Cornerstone adapter Alison Carey, the results of the reading were clear: “I’ve never had the experience where people from all over the city, from all walks of life, felt so overwhelmingly connected to a play.” Participants responded to the difficulty of negotiating goodness, to the resemblance of the central characters’ concerns with their own, and to the tensions between idealism and materialism expressed in Brecht’s story. They felt that these concerns and tensions could be easily adapted to resonate within a specifically New Haven context, particularly with ongoing representation and commentary from residents.

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40 “For many people, a ‘bad’ neighborhood could be a neighborhood where a white person driving through, for whatever reason, feels unsafe,” said Jafferis, who is black [sic]. But for many others, a ‘bad’ neighborhood is Yale, where everything is locked down” Jafferis quoted in Zaretsky, “‘A Little Melting Pot,’” D4.

41 Cohen, Symbolic Construction, 21.

42 The Good Person of Long Creek. Adapted by Cornerstone Theatre Company from The Good Person of Szechuan by Bertolt Brecht (translated by Ralph Manheim) and directed by Bill Rauch, Long Creek, Oregon, 1988.

The goal of the New Haven Project’s initial workshop phase was to give theatrical voice to New Haven’s daily lives and to allow the experiences of the workshop participants to shape the final results. In the fall of 1998, Carey, Rauch and community artist, Gracy Brown, conducted a series of workshops in the five neighborhood communities selected for the project. The workshops, culminating in a November presentation at Long Wharf, provided Carey with direct community input that she mediated through the adapted text.

Over the winter, Carey drafted a script that became the basis for a June 1999 workshop presentation, part of New Haven’s International Festival of Arts & Ideas. The eventual goal would be to “greet the millenium with a celebration of New Haven, its people, and its history.” But this focus on celebration and inclusion challenged the representational process at the levels of both textual adaptation and casting. Many responses did affirm the goals of the project, “I like the diversity of the cast, it reflects the city.” Yet, other responses suggested gaps in the representational strategies at work. Bill Rauch explained that some white audience members felt underrepresented: “I think they imagined that the play would be a more historical focus on the ‘city proper’. I remember one asking ‘Where are the Italians?’” Cornerstone actor Christopher Moore recalls a few audience members stating emphatically, “ ‘That’s not my New Haven, it’s not about us.’” According to Rauch, the cast itself was split between reflecting the city’s diversity and reflecting Brecht’s story, set in a poor neighborhood that would be mostly black and Latino. Rauch and Carey also struggled with the depiction of the Angels who come to earth in search of a good person. In the initial workshop, Rauch had cast the three angels to reflect the multicultural diversity of New Haven, with Latino, deaf African American, and Italian American actors. For Rauch, this casting seemed vital to the project of placing “the city onstage.” But in discussions with Doug Hughes, Rauch and Carey realized that the casting did not effectively help to tell the story, which depended finally on the angels as “clueless white tourists, which better represented the somewhat exaggerated version of patriarchal control in the adaptation.”

The difficulty of resituating Brecht’s story, adequately representing the concerns of New Haven Project participants, and including symbolic aspects of New Haven that would locally ground the text and the production, proved challenging to say the least. In a press release announcing the production in 1998, Doug Hughes had spoken of Brecht’s original play as “realistically harsh and hopeful, both serious and funny” and of its potential to represent the “specific hopes and concerns of New Haven.” Carey’s adaptation did offer numerous specific references to the hopes and concerns of New Haven as well as to its architecture, history, folklore and political structure.

44 Arts Partnerships Grant Narrative 1998, 4.
46 Interview with author, 29 March 2000.
49 Interview with author, 29 March 2000.
In Brecht’s original play, a waterseller narrates the tale of three gods who visit Szechuan in search of a good person. The prostitute Shen Te harbors the gods, and in return they offer her money which she uses to purchase a tobacco shop. Shen Te soon discovers that the city’s residents, including the former owner of the shop and a Family of Nine, take advantage of her goodness and endanger her ownership of the shop. So Shen Te invents a cousin, Shui Ta, a hard-nosed businessman who maintains the shop through his lack of generosity. Meanwhile, Shen Te meets a would-be pilot, Sun, who seduces and impregnates her. Worried that Sun will reject her if he knows of the baby, and hoping to gain financial stability for the safety of the child, Shen Te takes on the character of Shui Ta, who increases the profitability of the shop through exploitative labor practices. With growing suspicion at Shen Te’s absence, Sun accuses Shui Ta of doing away with Shen Te. The play ends with Shen Te’s revelation of her necessary deception implying the ambiguities and tensions of balancing goodness with social survival.

In the New Haven adaptation, a homeless can collector, Quinn (played by Cornerstone actor Christopher Moore) narrates the tale. Shen Te becomes Tyesha Shore, portrayed by the African American actor, Patrice Johnson, who purchases a mini-mart with her gift from the angels. The Family of Nine transforms into an ever-growing multi-cultural mix of in-laws, portrayed by various New Haven community participants. The aspiring train engineer, Eddie, replaces Sun, and Tyesha’s invented cousin becomes Taiwo Highwater, a businessman from Greenwich who transforms the Mini Mart into a factory producing “New Haven Goods” driven by the slogan “New Haven’s Good!” Other characters include a slightly sleazy but good-natured urban black minister, the Korean former Mini-Mart owner, and a couple who owns a furniture store (with one member of the couple, Pat, played on alternate nights as male or female by New Haven performers William Graustein and Edi Jackson).

The adaptation and production resounded with New Haven participants on a number of levels. “The homeless people, the prostitution, and people constantly struggling,” explains Gracy Brown, “that hit home with a lot of people in the New Haven area.” The text also referenced the problems of single motherhood, lack of job opportunities, and working conditions for the urban poor. “It has little bits of . . . no it has everything of New Haven!” exclaimed sixteen-year old cast member, Leididiana Castro. Like most Cornerstone productions, The Good Person of New Haven also included original songs and choreography, additionally resonating with its New Haven locality. Aaron Jafferis notes enthusiastically, “The more the play has developed the more it’s become like New Haven, particularly in the music.”

Yet, for all its inclusions, adaptations, and references, the play could not embrace or fully represent the city. “New Haven is hard to catch in two hours and thirty minutes,” explains Dana Fripp. She continues, “I think we may have missed some of the things we struggled with. At the workshop I thought, ‘I’m missing my city, where’s my city?’ It’s more than about a mention of organizations and local landmarks, you know,

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52 Ibid., G7.
53 Ibid., G7.
there’s so much more that we’re dealing with. It’s never going to get it so balanced that everybody’s satisfied, it’s just not possible." The inherent lack of balance in the city’s representation, actually enlivened the rehearsal process, particularly in the read through I attended in late March 2000. Bill Rauch asked the cast to comment on the textual revisions added in response to audience feedback from the 1999 workshop production. Stephen Papa, an eighty-three year old who represented some more conservative aspects of the city, said he was worried about how the adaptation erased “the true New Haven.” Rauch asked whether he could identify specific concerns, and Papa immediately responded, “pages 8, 14, 20, 24, and 25.” Papa found particularly offensive negative references to Mayor Dick Lee (quoted above). The cast exchanged a variety of opinions about the Mayor, his intentions, and the results of those intentions. Cast member William Graustein reflects positively on the experience: “What I heard was not only the connection between the town and the play but also people from all different parts of New Haven talking about politics in a way that was really respectful of one another.”

54 Ibid., G6.
The staging of this dissent would seem to reflect some of the Brechtian dialectical strategies of the play, as well as the community’s expressed interest in a text that was both “realistically harsh and hopeful,” or “kind of deep and ugly as well as entertaining.” However, the difficulty in representing dissent lay in the tendency to view and represent this dissent as even-handed. At a symposium in May, featuring Henry Fernandez of the Livable City Initiative, Fernandez praised the production for its “balance.” He summed up the message of the play as, “There are so many good people and they come in all shapes and sizes.”

Brecht’s play and Carey’s textual adaptation both suggest more complexity. Towards the end of the adaptation, a Godlike Woman In White character, played by Dana Fripp, appears. The advice she offers to the young prostitute, Tyesha, seems knowingly problematic. “You’ll manage, just be good and everything will turn out all right!” Yet, the notion of “goodness” is foundationally at stake in The Good Person of New Haven. As in Brecht’s original, the main character, a prostitute, must divide herself by inventing a harsh male cousin, Taiwo, better at surviving in the context of capitalism. At the end of the play, after receiving the troubling advice of the Woman in White, Tyesha reprimands the angels.

Your order to me
To be good and to live
Tore me into two halves.
I couldn’t be good at the same time
To others and to myself
It was too hard.

In an earlier segment of the play, the homeless can collector, Quinn, tries to explain to the naive angels the challenge of progressing towards goodness. He had been reminiscing with the angels about his youth on the Yale green attending a Black Panther rally with his mother. The angel responds enthusiastically:

Angel 2: Yale and Black Panthers (to the other ANGELS) See? Not just good people, but good groups of people working together to make the world a better place . . . When’s the next rally for Yale and the Black Panthers? I want to be there!

Baffled, Quinn tries to explain, “They don’t . . . . Well, they never really . . . . It was such a time, all of it. Sometimes good intentions don’t work out the way you want them to . . . . Things aren’t always that simple” (47–48). While the text thus tries to establish the complexity of goodness, and the tension between ethics and capitalism, Carey also foregrounds the organizations that are striving to do good in New Haven, in response to audience feedback.

As outsiders to the city, Cornerstone members felt a particular responsibility to create a responsive representation of New Haven. The high point of the show for

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55 Aaron Jafferis quoted in Zaretsky, “’A Little Melting Pot,’” D4.
57 Christopher Arnott, writing in the New Haven Advocate during the rehearsal process (“Streets on Stage,” 11 May 2000, 2–3), took particular pains to point towards the problematic notion of “outsiders” mediating a representation of New Haven. The producers felt vindicated when Arnott’s review of Good Person (“The People Triumph,” The New Haven Advocate, 18 May 2000), led him to assert the
local audience members arrived with Quinn’s monologue naming over fifty New Haven organizations working to improve the city, including, of course, Long Wharf’s Arts Partners. In local reception to this piece, the adaptation became less of a dialectic about the nature of goodness, and more of a reflective recognition, again complicated by the disparities between onstage and offstage manifestations of the city.

The play’s epilogue, spoken by Cornerstone actor Christopher Moore, evokes this tension between the representative and the real, and of conceptions of goodness complicated in the play:

Our New Haven, as we hope you understand
In which one can’t survive and still be good,
Was just a play, and it will disappear.
But something else remains extremely clear:
The real New Haven, the one outside that exit,
Might be too much like this one that reflects it.
Dear audience, if you care about this town,
Make sure it’s changed before it gets you down.
Earth has no happiness that can compare
With freedom to do good while you are there.

Spoken by Moore (who resides in Los Angeles), the “Our” in the opening phrase slips into the “our” of the ensemble which had created the play, including, but not exclusive to the residents of New Haven. The epilogue additionally evokes the staged New Haven city “in which one can’t survive and still be good,” in relation to the “real,” a space of potential freedom to do good. The realm of the utopic is rhetorically reversed, from the staged city to its external counterpart. At the same time, the notion of “goodness,” complicated throughout the play, and the rehearsal process, becomes potentially simplified in the play’s final line, as something knowable, that requires only effort.

The potential collapse of the Brechtian dialectic in the play’s final line, and expressed friction between the representational and the real, is situated in relation to the embodied representations of New Haven. Twenty-four New Haven residents acted in the production with ten equity actors. Participant Aaron Jafferis comments, “I think the most special thing about the play is the people who are in it. The individuals who are in the play bring New Haven with them.”58 The “realness” of these actors’ presence seems to defy the more distanced character quotations Brecht advocated by provoking intellectual rather than seductive emotional engagement. Defamiliarizing the familiar became less essential in this production than familiarizing the unfamiliar. Small moments of conscious estrangement—Mrs. Shin, the former shop owner, drops her Asian accent to underline a point about putting on an act to achieve various ends, and Moore removes his homeless character wig before speaking the epilogue—pale next to the familiarized presence of the amateur actors on stage. Yet, Brecht himself

importance and effectiveness of Cornerstone’s mediation. “Does New Haven need a Cornerstone Theater Co.? OK, I’ll shut up now. I wasn’t alone in being apprehensive about this project . . . . Well, I was wrong . . . The Good Person of New Haven is a show that is grander, deeper and richer for this exchange of views,” 6.

58 Quoted in Rizzo, “Cornerstone,” G7.
suggests that this presence may in fact contribute to a more politically aware rendering of events.

In “One or Two Points About Proletarian Actors,” Brecht proposes that non-professional actors tend to play “from a specific outlook and a specific context . . . shedding a surprising light on the complex and baffling relationships between the people of our time.” By remaining simple in their performance, by not trying too hard to not be themselves, community actors draw attention to their specific concerns, to the context of contemporary New Haven. The bodies of the actors, a mix of African American, Latino/a, European American and Asian American, also draw attention to the ethnic make-up of the New Haven community. Yet, this very presence, along with specific strategies of depicting New Haven’s “hopes and concerns,” the aesthetic enactment of “joyful” musical theatre that Cornerstone strives to engage (mission), and the fact that this production was, as Adelaida Nuñez put it, “not just another show about a bunch of white people,” did not quite reach a number of Long Wharf’s non-local subscribers.

The Good Person’s Reception

For a theatre whose older, white and suburban audience is accustomed to seeing its own lives reflected onstage, [The Good Person of New Haven] is a serious, and quite conscious, deviation from business as usual.
—Laura Collins-Hughes

We have not yet established adequate modes of questioning for the definition of different theatre audiences.
—Roland Barthes

Pre-production coverage of the New Haven Project in local newspapers maintained a high profile for the event, contextualizing the process, and creating what reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss terms a “horizon of expectations.” These expectations, presented through media coverage, program notes, and advertising, oriented audience members with reading strategies for performance. Media coverage from initial city workshops through final performance provided a reading of the Project as staging the city. Program notes emphasized “the creation of the elusive and desirable phenomenon of ‘community,’” and offered a vividly illustrated history of the Project over its three years of development. Program biographies emphasized the personal

64 Good Person of New Haven Program Notes, 9.
concerns of New Haven performers. In interviews, Doug Hughes framed the hoped-for critical reception to the production: “I would ask those [who question the aesthetic standards of the work] to remember that there are times when aesthetic standards are not the only standards—that there are other standards, standards of citizenship, standards of hospitality.”

But Long Wharf’s subscriber audience, 40% of whom were not local to New Haven and were therefore unlikely to have read these media accounts, carried with them their own horizon of expectations, determined in part by their subscription to the Long Wharf.

Long Wharf’s subscriber brochure for the 2001 season emphasizes aesthetic standards, and the comfortable context of theatrical experience, rather than standards of either, what Doug Hughes had termed, “citizenship or hospitality.” Quotations from the New York Times, the New Haven Register, and the Hartford Courant praise the “mastery,” “daringness,” and “entertainment” values of Long Wharf productions, while also signaling by their selection the targeted suburban subscriber audience base. Doug Hughes’ note to subscribers stresses the “rediscovery of timeless classics” and

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66 In Theatre Audiences, Susan Bennett offers a complex analysis of reception to the theatrical event. In discussing the subscriber audience, she notes that while the subscriber may be able to plan ahead for the performance by reading reviews and articles, “the remoteness of the decision to attend from the actual experience of the event might well add an element of unresponsiveness,” 124.
new works. The brochure also touts the benefits of free parking, flexible ticket exchange policies, ticket access prior to public sale (emphasis brochure’s), and restaurant discounts. The subscriber is thus figured as a commuter, out for a night of relaxed entertainment supplemented by a fine dining experience, and an individual privileged over the public. Like many audience members for The Good Person of New Haven, I drove to the performance from New York City on Highway 95. In low traffic the drive takes just over two hours. About 20% of Long Wharf’s subscriber audience enters the theatrical space along this route from New York. With an exit located only a few hundred yards from the theatre, one could have attended The Good Person of New Haven without ever passing through the city of New Haven.

“Before Doug Hughes arrived,” remarked Alison Carey in an interview, “the Long Wharf didn’t take its identity from New Haven. The Theatre took its identity from being two hours from New York. But the subscriber base doesn’t change that quickly, and they were not fully prepared for the show. They came in with a set of expectations more appropriate for [Long Wharf’s second stage production of] Hedda Gabler.” As Carey elucidates, while Long Wharf’s collaboration on the New Haven Project changed “business as usual,” the subscribers were not necessarily prepared for this shift. “I could assess the audience by the first minute of the play,” comments Dana Fripp, “depending on whether they got the New Haven-esque jokes. If they laughed when [model] churches [on the Green] came down, then we’ve got them, if they didn’t, they’re from out of town.” “Most of the response was positive,” observes Long Wharf General Manager Deb Clapp, “but a few people didn’t feel represented. Some of the more middle-class audience members saw only black people on stage [despite the fact that the Carpenter, the Husband, and Furniture Store Owner were played by white actors], and found the prostitute’s story uninteresting.” Bill Rauch adds, “a lot of people felt like ‘It’s not about us. We can’t relate to this.’ I overheard one woman on opening night say, ‘my Grandmother struggled like that, but not me. And everyone knows socialism doesn’t work.’ Some audience members were also offended by a show about people of color, and saw this as a personal affront. They disliked the cartoonish aesthetics and what they termed the ‘pageantry’ of the show.” Dana Fripp builds on Rauch’s statement, critiquing this kind of audience response:

One lady said it was a “pageant,” which I don’t quite understand how she makes the distinction of what is theatre. But she had her little cheering section saying, “yeah, we want to see theatre for theatre’s sake.” I heard a lot of the subscribers say that. I thought, “I hope you don’t like opera because Mozart never wrote something just to write something, because the Marriage of Figaro ticked people off.” It’s as though, “Because I lay my dollars down, I can say what’s theatre and what’s not.”

Fripp’s comments suggest ideological expectations maintained by some audience members, and promoted in part by Long Wharf’s subscriber brochure. This “art for art’s sake” mentality resists Doug Hughes’ call for standards of citizenship as opposed to aesthetics. But subscriber audiences cannot be homogenized. While some subscribers resisted the production, others responded with standing ovations. “It’s easy to talk

67 Interview with author, 30 May 2000.
68 Interview with author, 14 June 2000.
69 Interview with author, 31 May 2000.
about the subscription base, but I think that’s too pat,” critiques Christopher Moore.\(^{70}\)
Still, local “Pay What You Can” audiences tended to be more receptive to the production. “They make house management crazy, but those audiences are our best nights,” remarks Stage Manager Alison Lee. She further notes, “I used to think they were too difficult, they don’t behave the way an audience should. Now they’re our favorites.”\(^{71}\) While many audience members were not prepared to transform their expectations and aesthetic standards, Lee’s comments illustrate a transformation of expectations about audiences. Her standards of appropriate audience behavior and response shifted in part due to the contrast between well-behaved but less receptive audiences.

The audience difference can feel palpable. On May 21, 2000, I returned for a second showing of *The Good Person of New Haven*. I planned to see the evening performance, but arrived early for a symposium following that day’s matinee. I stood at the door before the audience let out, and heard tepid applause before a more traditional, older, white theatre audience began streaming out to the lobby. About fifty audience members remained for the symposium. Before beginning the discussion, Henry Fernandez asked how many resided in New Haven. Three people raised their hands. He opened up the question to include the surrounding suburbs. One additional person added her hand. Ninety percent of the remaining audience members resided in other counties, many in New York. Fernandez and Connecticut State Senator, Martin Loomis, proceeded to urge suburban residents to “look beyond their narrow self-interest and embrace the city.” At this, many of the audience members around me noisily departed, with barely concealed murmurs of “this is awful.”

Despite Hughes’ urging, it was not so easy to change some audience members’ expectations and standards. Future community-based collaborations with regional theatres may need to think further about orienting audience members to the experience. Long Wharf staff initially had a difficult time as well, with early resistance to the project’s size and perceived “invasion” by community participants. Over time, however, and with attention, this pattern was disrupted. “Cornerstone doesn’t do theatre the way that many regional professional theatres do. And maybe we need to rethink our assumptions about professionalism,” proposes Alison Lee. She adds, “This production reminded me what theatre is supposed to be about. I’ve done a lot of big commercial stuff, now I’m not sure whether I can go back.” “We are stronger as an institution,” comments Long Wharf Production Manager Jean Routt. “We have learned to do theatre better—in many senses of the word.”\(^{72}\)

\(^{70}\) Interview with author, 31 May 2000.
\(^{71}\) Interview with author, 3 June 2000. All subsequent quotations from this interview unless otherwise indicated.
\(^{72}\) Interview with author, 14 June 2000.
What Remains

If we can only do this city-wide, statewide, nationwide—this is the way you get rid of the racial tension, with things like this. We have black and white and Spanish-speaking people and they’re all friends and we get along wonderfully. Maybe it’s a small example, but you start small.
—Stephen J. Papa, resident of New Haven and cast member

Good Person of New Haven

What remains from this collaboration? Thousands of ticket stubs, a sense of exhaustion, exhilaration, loss, and hope among participants, the Legacy of New Haven Project, New Haven graffiti artist B*Wak’s temporary hiring at Long Wharf, and later work as a paid fellow at Cornerstone, community actor Gracy Brown’s hiring at Cornerstone as an ensemble member, utopic fantasies of togetherness from cast participants, skepticism about those fantasies, and seven single-spaced pages of unused notes. To write this article, to create the Good Person of New Haven, an enormous amount of information and numerous people’s experiences had to be at least temporarily forgotten.

While documenting and assessing the New Haven Project, this essay’s own selective erasure illuminates essential questions about the relationship between the scholar and community-based performance. How should the engaged critic appraise the process and performance? Which creative and structural elements should be foregrounded (and which forgotten)? How is success to be measured? The deeply intertwined mix of the social and aesthetic in community-based performance requires ongoing re-assessment of its evaluative paradigm—assessment dependent upon raising questions as well as establishing principles. Evaluation of the production in and of itself has not been a focus of this essay. I propose instead an assessment that examines theatrical collaboration, social (re)formation, and production reception, with additional queries about the ethical relationship between the critic and the artistic process.

Since community-based performance has often arisen in reaction to the perceptively narrower concerns of regional theatre, a collaboration between these two distinct performance-making conventions and the local “community” raises questions about the artistic and social changes affected by the process. According to accounts from numerous staff members, the Long Wharf has at least temporarily reimagined what it means to do “good” theatre. Among community members, relationships have been forged across racial, ethnic and class borders. Between the Long Wharf and New Haven residents, issues of access have been understood as a combination of cultural and material factors. Long Wharf has recognized that New Haven residents need to feel welcomed, while often requiring transportation. Additionally, the Long Wharf

74 As Jan Cohen-Cruz pointed out, tensions between Doug Hughes’ efforts to be a “good” citizen of New Haven, and to succeed financially as a theatrical producer, parallel some of the dilemmas in Brecht’s play (Personal E-mail 15 January 2001).
75 In our personal interview, Jean Routt noted that the Long Wharf learned to ask of local residents and groups, “What do we need to do to help you to come?” If transportation was an issue, they were able to respond, “We’re coming to get you,” 14 June 2000.
has reexamined its position as the “center of civic culture,” and understood mediation as an ongoing, mutually engaged social transaction. The Legacy of New Haven Project, mentioned above, offers a site for these engagements between the theatre and its local constituency to continue. Other aspects of the collaboration suggest that some civic structures and theatrical strategies remain as challenges to the Project.

The economic and racial factors contributing to the maintenance of ghettoized neighborhoods in New Haven require transformation at a deeper socio-structural level than the New Haven Project is able to offer. At the same time, Long Wharf’s commitment to produce “vigorous classics” may be perceived as more shows “about a bunch of white people” by its local constituency. A mentality among some subscribers that community-based theatre is not for them or about them, and represents a kind of social service pageantry that is destroying the experience of “theatre for theatre’s sake” also complicates the relationship between Long Wharf and its expanding audience constituency.

It remains difficult to discern the success of the New Haven Project at the socio-structural and aesthetic level. Yet, while challenging to both practitioners and critics, efforts to evaluate and situate the process within cultural theory remain vital to the field’s growth. Essential questions about the role of the scholar in relation to community-based performance arise in Jan Cohen-Cruz’s recent articles, while an essay by Sara Brady in TDR raises evaluative as well as ethical questions through its critical strategies. Brady’s “Welded to the Ladle: Steelbound and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre” critiques the process of collaboration between Cornerstone, Touchstone, and the community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania—a process in which she participated. In her detailed assessment, Brady questions the inclusion of Bethlehem Steel in the performance-making process and the resultant censorship of voices and issues. She suggests that an evaluative approach of community-based work should center on the admission of “failed radicality of the work without sentimental discussion” (67), proposing a thorough abandonment of the conflation of community-based theatre with theatre for social change (52). Yet, Brady assumes this conflation in order to refute it, while concurrently critiquing the process for its failed radicality.

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76 The Legacy Project focuses on ways of continuing relationships established among participating partners in the New Haven Project. Focus groups set the agenda for future initiatives, such as play readings, community festivals, and ongoing orientation and transportation for community members to Long Wharf’s mainstage productions.


78 “When the Gown Goes to Town: The Reciprocal Rewards of Fieldwork for Artists” forthcoming in Theatre Topics 11.1, and “A Hyphenated Field.”

79 Sara Brady, “Welded to the Ladle,” 51–74. All subsequent references to this article will be indicated in parentheses within the body of the essay.

80 While Brady does not explicitly define “radicality,” the article expresses concerns about the influence of the corporate institution on the production narrative, positing that “community-based companies and big-budget projects of late have operated less by the principles of the company and more by the demands of governmental funding agendas” (52). In an as yet unpublished letter to the
The impact of funding and ideology on the community-based production narrative remains a rich terrain to explore in future analysis of the field. While provocative in relation to its evaluative strategies, Brady’s essay also raises important ethical concerns. As a participant in the process, who for various reasons voiced most of her criticism after the fact, Brady seriously undermines the article’s effectiveness as community-based scholarship.81

As a scholar, I feel called upon to question, to authorize, to critically summarize and situate gaps, to theoretically contextualize the performance-making process, to expertly document this moment in theatre history. As a community-based practitioner, however, I feel a responsibility to express my less cynical responses to the project participants’ expressed hopes, to evoke what participant Brian Olivieri termed “the beauty and dignity and passion” of the process, as well as its gaps and contradictions.82 The performance process and my documentation are marked by remains and indeterminacy, and do not adequately address the cultural and economic structures within which the work exists. Yet, throughout my investigation and witnessing, I have been struck by the capacity of New Haven cast members to celebrate and critique their own experience. While these expressions often remain within the realm of the utopic and imaginative, they are essential to the twin projects of asserting the importance of individual experiences as complements to critiques of structural change, and of allowing those voices to be heard along with those of the critic. I conclude this essay then with Dana Fripp’s thoughts about the individual possibilities of changing the city, which she has only been able to provisionally represent, in concert with Cornerstone, Long Wharf, numerous New Haven residents, organizations, and journalists. While The Good Person of New Haven may not document the future of the American city, as Doug Hughes had hoped, the process may say something to us about the future of American theatre, community-based criticism, and the possibilities of social interaction and change through the process of theatre making:

81 Brady’s article critiques the Cornerstone/Touchstone collaboration in a way that has provoked bemused responses from both theatres. In a personal e-mail to me (6 November 2000), Bill Rauch expressed his point of view about the article: “There’s so much inaccuracy, and such a narrow point of view, that it’s hard not to want to sit down with every reader of TDR and give the other side of the story. Mostly, I am angry and sad that Sara [a former Touchstone intern and performer in the production] didn’t feel the safety and the responsibility to share these views during the process, never mind the safety and responsibility to get my perspectives on the issues while writing the article.” Brady responds that early efforts to voice concerns about ticket prices to Touchstone were rebuffed. She felt that she and others in the process were not treated as major players, and therefore not given the opportunity to voice concerns, despite rhetorical encouragement to do so. “I did not feel integral to (or effective upon) the decision-making process, and this lesson was learned early on (during the argument over ticket prices). Part of my frustration here is that I think it’s one of Cornerstone’s flaws—they make explicit that ‘everyone is part of the process,’ and, as you cited in your dissertation, and as I found out for myself while making Steelbound, this is not always the reality” (Personal E-mail 15 January 2001).

If something is going to change in this city, it’s up to us. We have to be the hands, feet, mouth of God in this community. We have to hear each other out. We have to respect differences, but sit down and realize our agendas are the same, though semantically they may sound different. We have to fight for our children. Look at the legacy that we want to leave our kids and fight so that we can give birth to the good things in this community, every day. But there’s going to be some labor pains, I know that.

Perhaps as critics, we too must hear each other out, respect our differences, and fight for ongoing change in the evaluation of community-based performance. And there’s going to be some labor pains. I know that.