

THE JUSTICE THEATER PROJECT:
DEVELOPING A COMPANY AND A CONVERSATION

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ABSTRACT

Deborah Anne Royals: The Justice Theater Project: Developing a Company and a Conversation
(Under the direction of Lawrence Grossberg)

This dissertation is a critical ethnographic study of The Justice Theater Project (JTP), an “advocacy activist” theater company in central North Carolina in the Southern United States. It shares the story of how JTP began, identifying the steps the company took, the theoretical perspectives and models it was guided by, and circumstances that allowed the company to engage a community in important conversations concerning life, dignity, embodied participation, choice, solidarity, care and justice for all people. It is intended to serve as a resource for similar efforts.

JTP’s mission is to use the performing arts to “call to the fore of public attention the needs of the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed.” Each year, the company selects a pressing issue of social concern, identifies individuals and organizations engaged with that issue, and partners with them to create original performance projects and theater productions to spark and maintain a season-long discussion of the issue.

The company emerged out of the faith, life, and education of its founding Artistic Director, her experiences in traditional theater, her education in performance studies, and what she made of the example of one of her teachers, Dwight Conquergood. JTP grew in the shelter and support of a Franciscan community inspired by liberation theology and Catholic Social Teaching. Kismet seems to have also played a part.

The Introduction catalogs and discusses practices, ideas, and models that the company has integrated. Chapter Two traces how the threads came together in one person's life and led to the company's birth. Chapter Three explains how JTP organized itself despite setbacks. Chapter Four shows how the company developed practices it uses to this day.

Chapters Three and Four also describe how the company creates original performance pieces. Its first, *Still ... Life*, was based on two years of field research with North Carolinians affected by the death penalty. The next two, *!Exprésate!* and *¡Exprésate!—The Price You Pay!*, engaged Latina teenagers from urban Durham's West End and from migrant farm working families throughout eastern North Carolina to develop and perform "Forum" theater using the methods of Augusto Boal.

Keywords: Conquergood, Boal, Freire, Liberation Theology, Catholic Social Teaching, Critical Ethnography, Performance Studies, Performance Projects, Social Concern

To people doing justice work in whatever form.

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There is a wide range of ways to respond to human need and to issues of social concern. When the goal is to seek justice and make a way toward the common good, all of us have something to contribute. Our unique experiences, knowledge, skill sets, and love, when blended, can create a home where justice might live.

As Dwight used to say, “The meaning is always in the performance.”

We must seek the meaning...

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Community theater is often identified with the practice of community members getting together to put on shows for the people who live there. There are alternatives. Berthold Brecht drew people in and invited them to participate by thinking. Augusto Boal, inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire, created theater that would help a community understand itself and change in ways it felt desirable. Dwight Conquergood demanded of the practitioner a work ethic that is both a rigorous analysis of text and an embodied practice. This dissertation traces the emergence, establishment, and growth of a regional theater company that pursues these ideals in combination with the traditional practices and goals of community theater.

The Justice Theater Project is a local nonprofit theater company that the author co-founded with Megan Nerz in central North Carolina. Its mission is to address issues of social concern through the use of performance and theater in ways that move communities to conversation, commitment, and action. The makeup of the company integrates traditional theater, children's theater, theater as an educational tool, dialogic performance, critical performance ethnography, Catholic social teaching, and liberation theology. Its eclectic nature grew out of the author's undergraduate and postgraduate training and professional experiences in traditional theater, her graduate education in performance studies, and a decade of prior attempts to apply those concepts and practices in community theater and in teaching adults and children. It was also inspired, supported, and shaped by the convictions, individuals, and community of the Franciscan church where it was born. In twelve years of

operations, JTP has demonstrated some mastery of the tools the author struggled for so many years to integrate. It has grown by creating kinship and maintaining connections with each season's new and returning audiences, cast members, and volunteers, and through continuous efforts to integrate new ideas and engage new partners from many sources, not least through the author's further graduate education.

The Justice Theater Project combines traditional community theater and innovative performance projects into theatrical, educational, and ethnographic work that draws audiences and prompts conversations. It builds on the ideas and examples of Brecht, Boal and Conquergood, and by imitating the theater companies its founders looked to as models in its first year, including, among others, Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, Ted Gilliam's Dashiki Project, and R.G. Davis and Joan Holden's San Francisco Mime Troupe. It is supported by the church that is its home, a Franciscan spiritual community that encourages all members to be good stewards and put their time, talents, and treasure to good use. It addresses a different social issue each season by pursuing connection with and developing performances with different communities of stakeholders, thus extending its network and providing an expanding forum for conversation across social boundaries.

This dissertation is a critical ethnographic study of the early development of the Justice Theater Project. It traces the company's gestation as it emerged through the journey of one of its founders and as it discovered its purpose and evolved its practices in its first years of operation.

It will be helpful beforehand to introduce, briefly, the examples and ideas that inspired the Justice Theater Project and served as its models for theater and performance, the theologies that provide it with a mission, and spiritual community that is its home.

JTP's Models: Thinkers, Dramatists, other Companies, an Ethnographer

Political theater has historically been used to propagandize theories and ideals. For example, in Soviet Russia, political agitprop theater was used to construct Marxist social ethics. But it has also been used to encourage people to think for themselves; this concept was appealing to the co-founders of the JTP. In Weimar Germany, Piscator and Brecht developed the elaborate aesthetic “epic theater” to address the spectator in a rational way. Epic theater’s goal was to force people to observe reality and inspire action, because it “understood that the radical transformation of the theatre can’t be the result of the artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time” (*Brecht on Theatre* 23).

Playwright and director Bertolt Brecht explained his intent by distinguishing the goal of epic theater from the goal Aristotle ascribed to classical Greek tragedy: the “catharsis of which Aristotle writes—cleansing by fear and pity, or from fear and pity—is a purification which is performed not only in a pleasurable way, but precisely for the purpose of pleasure.” Brecht sought to see the audience respond to performance intellectually, not emotionally; he intended to create experiences that did more than amuse, that made people think, and that made for the spectator a place “to criticize constructively from a social point of view.” This necessary element of Brecht’s epic theater became known as the alienation effect. Its intent is “purely to show the world in such a way that it becomes manageable, is precisely its quality of being natural and earthly, its humor and its renunciation of all the mystical elements that have stuck to the orthodox theatre from the old days ” (*Brecht on Theatre* 181, 71, 125–126, 140).

“For Brecht,” as Alan Lovell has explained,

works of art were effectively experiments. They offered models of the world for critical testing on the part of their audiences. ... [T]he audience is analogous to the scientist, who judges whether the experiment is a success or not. ... [H]owever, the audience and the scientist differ in a crucial respect. A scientist comes to the experiment with a critical attitude already built in. Brecht made the opposite assumption about the theatre audience. The task of Epic Theatre is to encourage a critical attitude in the audience. ... [So] a principal concern was to create the right *conditions for learning*.

The audience (the scientist) observes a performance (conducts a scientific experiment), considers what it has seen (collects results), and judges it (draws a conclusion), generating new knowledge. Like an experiment, a performance is not a set of instructions that only generates new knowledge once. It evolves over time as many audiences engage critically with it. What different audiences learn from multiple performances is communicated in socially concerned conversations.

Brecht wanted to create understanding through dialogue. To this end, his *Lehrstücke* or “learning plays” were a series of short experimental works which he did not intend to necessarily culminate in a finished, final product that would be replicated exactly the same way during each performance. The ideal *Lehrstücke* performance was something of an ongoing rehearsal, one continuous master class. The objective of *Lehrstücke* was the end result, where the “political, moral and aesthetic influences all radiate from the theatre” (*Brecht on Theatre* 152).

Since 2005, when Justice Theater Project began developing its first original performance piece, its artistic director has encouraged its actors (and everyone involved in its productions) to treat each project and each season as an ongoing experiment. The result is an experience that highlights different choices and suggests unexpected actions. It reveals

opportunities for performers and audience to confront problems together within the framework of its productions and performance work.

In Brazil, and later across Europe and the Americas, beginning in the 1960s, director Augusto Boal also produced short pieces that seek to make audience members non-passive and to call them to action. He developed Brecht's *Lehrstücke* into his Theatre of the Oppressed, with its techniques of "forum theatre," which he designed to be of, by, and for marginalized people and to help them learn ways of resisting oppression in their daily lives (*Legislative Theatre* 8–9). Boal believed this style of theater could be used to politically and socially engage participants and then to transform personal and social realities.

Boal was also deeply affected by his fellow Brazilian Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; he incorporated into his methods of teaching, directing, and performing Freire's approach of radical "conscientization," a process of developing critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action, where non-action is not an option. He drew on the ideas of Brecht and Freire, to create a setting for the disenfranchised to conduct their own analysis of reality, to stage performances where social problems could be uncovered and addressed with the possibility for political activism. Boal believed that Aristotle's was a system "for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the 'bad' or illegal tendencies of the audience" (*Theatre of the Oppressed* xiv). In other words, in Aristotle's model, the audience is disenfranchised. Boal believed in theater as an instrument of education, and in moving the passive spectator to participation as the "spect-actor." In Boal's forum, the audience is given the chance to intervene, to step into the drama and play out different outcomes and in the process of doing this they are empowered to think and embody understanding and explore alternatives to issues of social concern.

As JTP worked to develop an atmosphere of family and fellowship for its company of artists, its founders were attracted to the efforts of another person influenced by Brecht. British director, playwright, and producer Joan Littlewood worked fiercely to engage people in constructive political discourses. The vibrant and ingenious approaches she found to develop an ensemble of actors felt similar to the organic acting development methods JTP's two female leaders were using for the same purpose. Littlewood started the Workshop Project in London in 1959; in 1963, she and her Theatre Workshop created *Oh What A Lovely War*, a play that was innovative for its blatant denunciation of the incompetence of political leaders during World War I, for its unusual theatrical style, and for how the script and its performance were developed. Littlewood created the piece spontaneously through a process of improvisation with its artists, which she then scripted (Holdsworth). JTP has used a similar process to develop several of its original scripts.¹

Organizing a company that seeks to shift communities toward social change is far from being a marginal effort, especially when it is a grassroots, community-based theater looking to its immediate community for purpose. Another theater company served JTP's founders as an example of a community theater based in a church. Ted Gilliam founded the Dashiki Project in 1965 in the Central City community of New Orleans.² Its home was St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church, which provided rehearsal and performance space for all its early productions. Dashiki opened itself to all races, even as it sought to "project the truth of the black experience; to foster new works by local writers; and to relate to people from all

¹ The scripts JTP has developed through improvisation with performers and community members include three that will be discussed in this dissertation: *Still ... Life* (see Chapter 3), *j'Exprésate!*, and *j'Exprésate!—The Price You Pay!* (see Chapter 4).

² Stanley R. Coleman has documented how The Dashiki Project grew out of the Black Arts Movement, its inclusive nature with a goal to include all races, its desire to make good art, and the particular reasons that ultimately led it to dissolve.

walks of life although addressed to a segment of the population still considered ‘invisible’ despite a history written in blood, sweat and tears but now without laughter.” Artists working with the project sought to make “sophisticated theatre” that grew out of and was open to non-racially exclusive audiences in an effort to make the work visible (Coleman 68, 63, 97).

The ways in which the Dashiki Project worked to make productions for its audiences both aesthetically sophisticated and familiar found resonance with the JTP founders. Dashiki was the only black theater to grow out of New Orleans in the 1960s and the company fought to make theater of high quality that was not racially exclusive. Ted Gilliam, the company’s driving vision and its Artistic Director, wanted to create a place, a company where his Dillard University theater students would be able to work at their craft before and after graduation. His company embraced anyone who believed in the work.

Justice Theater Project chose the word “Project” as part of its name for the same reason Dashiki did: because this word suggests “a work in progress” (Coleman 61). And the JTP family, like Gilliam and his colleagues, has worked diligently to create an atmosphere of family where no one is turned away from being a part of the company’s productions or operations.

Another productive model for Justice Theater Project’s founders was the San Francisco Mime Troupe; originally a street theater that sprang up in the 1960s, founded by R.G. Davis, a trained mime and dancer. The company began by creating and performing original non-speaking movement pieces that included visual art elements and music. Later it explored the use of spoken word and of masks reminiscent of Renaissance *commedia dell’arte* (Shank Chapters 3 and 4). The Justice Theater Project borrowed from these approaches to serve as jumping-off points when writing some of its original scripts.

The Troupe had a much more direct influence on JTP. Shortly following its first production in 2004, JTP invited one of the Troupe's original members to be a part of JTP's second production. Joan Holden had been the Troupe's principal playwright from 1967 to 2000, creating, as author or head writer, a new satire every year for the Troupe's annual summer season in the parks. She and JTP's co-founders created the educational programming and town hall forum events for a production of *Nickel and Dimed, on Not Getting By In America*, which Holden had adapted from Barbara Ehrenreich's book. That experience with her has continued to inform the ways in which educational programming is planned and presented for every production of each JTP season.

Littlewood, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Brecht, and Boal provided explicitly political examples. The Dashiki Project had a more traditional flavor. This blend of influences made sense to us as we continued to shape and grow into our company. Every year the company focuses on one issue of social concern and pushes all that participate with its work to get down into the weeds of that particular social justice issue through thorough research, scholarship, critical ethnography, original performance work and traditional theater pieces that will be familiar to our audience with relevance to the social justice theme being addressed. These ingredients provide multiple opportunities to make audience and performers alike critically conscious thinkers by seeking education and discourse opportunities that might shift ways of thinking and provide a way toward justice.

The dramatists and companies discussed thus far have provided the Justice Theater Project with methods and models for creating theater, harnessing a sense of informed activism, binding people together around a common goal, and remaining mindful of Freire's philosophical grasp of compassion, knowledge and hope. There is one more major influence

to discuss, the glue that led us to create a community theater informed by critical ethnography and performance studies.

I was a student of Dwight Conquergood from 1994 to 1996, while a graduate student at Northwestern University. Dwight taught and practiced an alternative way of knowing and learning. He encouraged his students to practice transgression and in the act of transgressing we began to “travel between two different domains of knowledge: one official, objective, and abstract—‘the map’; the other one practical, embodied, and popular—‘the story.’” In his process, this way of knowing “carries the most radical promise of performance studies research... cut[ting] to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy.” We moved from being above or detached from the work to being with the work in a visceral practice of “hands-on participation and personal connection: ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing who’” (“Performance Studies” 33).

We can gain corporeal knowledge by taking our bodies into situations and participating. We may only become conscious of what was learned later. So, it was only as I completed this research that I came to understand that the example Dwight embodied by placing himself inside what he was researching—at Big Red, or in the Hmong refugee camp—is one The Justice Theater Project emulated by developing original performances alongside actual people deeply affected by social issues. We were separated by half a continent, yet in some sense I was working alongside Dwight in the late 1990s and early 2000s, placing myself inside prisons and interviewing people affected by the death penalty just when he was witnessing Timothy McVeigh’s execution and reflecting on Velma Barfield’s. (His article “Lethal Theater” was first published in 2002, but I only read it years later.)

At one of The Justice Theater Project's earliest board retreats, when members of the board were seeking a language to discuss the mission of the company, I struggled to find a way to explain my original intent, what I felt the company's work should be about if I was artistic director, and why we could teach through performance. I presented them with this quote:

One path to genuine understanding of others, and out of this moral morass and ethical minefield of performative plunder, superficial silliness, curiosity seeking, and nihilism, is dialogical performance. This performative stance struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so they can question, debate, and challenge one another. It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions, it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing. Dialogical understanding does not end with empathy. There is always enough appreciation for difference so that the text can interrogate, rather than dissolve into, the performer. ... More than a definite position, the dialogical stance is situated in the space *between* competing ideologies. It brings self and other together even while it holds them apart. It is more like a hyphen than a period (Conquergood, "Performing" 75).

"Could you please break this down?" one board member responded. The road that led me to present this set of words to a group of suburban Southern Catholics who had never read anything like this, but who accepted it once we discussed it, and who have worked with me to pursue it, was not straightforward at all. This dissertation seeks to trace it.

The experience of being in Dwight's classes and working with him planted the idea in my head that I could work in the field with people, create performance pieces, write about these with a theoretical slant, and perhaps create new perceptions that open paths to social justice. The JTP has continued to draw on the influences made on my work to inform the research methods connecting the theater and performance studies in ways that matter. Drawing on my background in theater and on Conquergood's practices, we conduct and

document embodied fieldwork, create out of it performance pieces that recreate the experiences we documented, and then present those original pieces, often performed by the actual people who are the subjects of the research.

JTP's Mission and its Base: Catholic teaching, liberation theology, and St. Francis

Ideas and examples are not sufficient to explain how this community theater company happened. Before it began its work of informing and calling out to communities in central North Carolina, the Justice Theater Project was first called into existence itself by an existing community that recognized an opportunity and a need.

JTP was encouraged by, and evolved within, the environment of a progressive Franciscan Catholic community, first as the Arts for Justice Ministry and later as the Justice Theater Project. Its home, Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, has a long history of involvement in matters of social justice. In this, it continues the Franciscan tradition, which values love of all creation, generosity of spirit, simplicity of nature, and the detachment from the “things” that prevent us from loving and forgiving. Franciscans have a tradition of inspiring communities toward peace and the common good. Franciscan contemplation “opens the heart and mind to take in more of the world, its beauty and suffering” (Delio, Warner, and Wood 130). In this spirit and practice, each year, JTP’s artistic committee, its education and action committee, and its artistic director come together to contemplate current issues of social concern, before choosing one which seems most urgently to demand discussion. Then we plan a season of original performance work, traditional productions, and educational programming devoted to that issue.

Liberation theology and Catholic Social Teaching have also helped focus the work of JTP. These two ways of thinking about the Catholic church, of being in a faithful practice, or

of constituting what Freire articulates as a “climate of hope,” have each played out in the Franciscan tradition. (They are, for example, taught in organized faith formation classes for adults at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church.)

The roots of liberation theology can be found in the religious and social movements that swept across Latin America beginning in the late 1950s. During this same time, the Vatican II documents were completed, the Civil Rights movement in the United States was in full swing, and Paolo Freire was developing his dialogical pedagogy as a tool for teaching and raising consciousness with regard to extreme poverty, poor education, and oppressive political machines.

The Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff recalls, “at the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, held at Medellín, Columbia, in 1968, the Church made a historic choice. It opted for the people—for the poor, for the base church communities” (11). He explains that this hermeneutic shift within Catholic doctrine asserts that “The Christian faith is not primarily a theory. It is primarily a praxis. The praxis has its theory, yes, but that theory must never, under penalty of desiccation, be developed without reference to praxis—or, in classic terms, without practicing faith, hope and love” (19).

Just before the Medellín Conference, Gustavo Gutierrez defined liberation theology as a “critical reflection on praxis in the light of the word of God” (*A Theology of Liberation* xxix).³ After Medellín, Gutierrez and others insisted that the historical practice of theology

³ Gutiérrez explained more clearly in a talk the month before the Medellín conference:

The classic meaning of theology is an intellectual understanding of the faith—that is, the effort of human intelligence to comprehend revelation and the vision of faith. But faith means not only truths to be affirmed, but also an existential stance, an attitude, a commitment to God and to human beings. Thus faith understands the whole of life theologically as faith, hope, and charity.

was secondary to a commitment of work among the poor and that it is among the poor that one finds faith. The clergy went on to develop a model for connecting and being with the people, a preferential option for the poor and against their poverty, based on the pedagogical work of Paulo Freire. That praxis is what became known as liberation theology. It acknowledges “the powerful and almost irresistible aspiration that persons have for liberation [as] one of the principal signs of the times that the church has to examine in the light of the gospel,” and that “among those who bear the burden of misery and in the heart of the disinherited classes ... this aspiration expresses itself with the greatest force” (xx-xxi, quoting *Libertatis nuntius* I, 1).

Since the second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Catholic Social Teaching has upheld seven principles:

- Dignity of the Human Person
- Call to Family, Community and Participation
- Rights and Responsibilities
- Preferential Option for and with People who are Poor
- Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
- Solidarity
- Care for God’s Creation

Each principle of Catholic social teaching is designed to analyze economic, political and societal influences and offers a synthesis of the issues with an eye towards creating a society that is more fair and equal. The hope is that by living by these principles people can

If, then, we say that faith is a commitment to God and human beings, we affirm that theology is the intellectual understanding of this commitment. It is an understanding of this existential stance, which includes the affirmation of truths, but from a broader perspective.

Faith is not limited to affirming the existence of God. No, faith tells us that God loves us and demands a loving response. This response is given through love for human beings, and that is what we mean by a commitment to God and to our neighbor.

Consequently, when we speak about theology, we are not talking about an abstract and timeless truth, but rather about an existential stance, which tries to understand and see this commitment in the light of revelation. (*Essential Writings* 24; Cf. “Notes”).

build a society that resembles God's kingdom on earth or, as Freire states, "a learning process might appear whereby the powerful would learn that their privileges, such as that of exploiting the weak, prohibit[ing] the weak from being, denying them hope, are immoral, and as such need to be eradicated" ("Liberation Theology").

Modern Catholic catechesis addresses the foundational aspects of the Catholic tradition, which includes "scripture" and its relationship to the culture of today. "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet, for I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13.1-17).

Catholic social teaching is built on the foundations of a church of mystery, mission and doctrine; a challenge to respond to God in gratitude for gifts received; manifestation and living out the sacraments; worship, liturgical life, and virtue and a moral life; seeking the common good and perpetuating a message of human dignity. Post Vatican II practices made great strides in incorporating, as a part of this expression of faith, the arts including music, dance, drama, and the visual. Many contemporary Catholics place an emphasis on the ecumenical importance of finding relationships between intellectual learning and learning on the level of faith. "The mysterious encounter with Christ is 'grace'" and this "ultimate gift opens the eye of the soul, placing Christians in touch with God at the deepest level" (McConville). "Small yet strong in the love of God, like Saint Francis of Assisi, all of us, [...] are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and its peoples" (Francis §216).

Catholic Social Teaching and liberation theology are related to “ministerial” efforts like that of The Justice Theater Project where moral and social action is a part of the dialogic because it provides a liminal place within which to engage, perpetuating wisdom and guidance on dealing with the social issues of our day. Each principle of social teaching is designed to analyze economic, political, and societal influences and offers a synthesis of the issues with an eye towards creating a society that is more fair and equal. Within the realm of faithful action the hope is that the work calls for a society that most resembles God’s kingdom on earth.

One way that Catholic Social Teaching was foundational for Justice Theater Project was that from early on, the company established its “Social Justice Objectives” “to create programs and design productions with a critical connection to the seven key themes of Catholic Social teaching” and “through a unique theater experience, to build the community’s understanding of the need to build a just society despite the challenges of modern society” (Royals and Nerz *Board Presentation December 11, 2004*).

This dissertation traces the early development of a distinctive southern community theater in three stages. In the next chapter, we will first witness the moment that gave birth to the company and then go back in time to follow the gestation of the ideas, practices, and base community that became integral to The Justice Theater Project as they appeared in the life of one of its co founders. In chapter three, we will examine how the infant company toddled its way through incorporation, finding financing, and creating its first original work of dialogic performance. In chapter four, we will watch the company begin to mature as it struggles to manage the demands of its social ministry in the midst of developing its second and third

original productions with adolescent youth, providing a forum for their voices to be heard in the immediate community and beyond its borders.

CHAPTER 2. GESTATION: FROM CHILDREN'S THEATER TO DEATH ROW

Intervening in *A Lesson Before Dying*, 2004

Inside the theater, Alan Gell sat quietly on the front row with his mother. Their bodies were very still and they looked straight ahead, not turning around to watch as people began to fill the theater. Alan's mother, a small blonde woman laid her right hand on his left arm and they continued to look forward. A sea of people finding their seats moved in and around Alan and his mother and all the time their volume levels continued to grow as more and more of them pushed into the theater and found a place.

Outside, Time Warner Cable, ABC 11 and WRAL news vans were parked along the sidewalk leading into the auditorium of Cardinal Gibbons High School. Lines of people were making their way along this sidewalk and toward the theater doors. All the while the theater buzzed: chattering voices, squeaking seats, footsteps, laughter, coats, purses ... the sound of people. Finally every seat was taken, a brief announcement was made welcoming everyone to the theater and to the production, and then the lights began to dim. The voices simmered down and the people who had made their way into the space now sat in hushed darkness. A light began to spread out over the stage and over the set, revealing a space designed to look like an old storeroom off the back of a courthouse that was being used as a makeshift jail. As the light continued to grow, there emerged in the space the sound of chains, clanging and clanking first from a distance and then getting closer and closer. As this character enrobed in chains came closer to the stage, the clanging and the clanking grew painfully loud. The

character—a prisoner—was walking in through the audience escorted by two actors portraying a sheriff and a deputy. They ushered the shackled man into the storeroom and then the deputy rearranged the shackles so that the prisoner was now chained to a chair. The prisoner sat there looking at the floor and then he moved his gaze from the floor to the room around him and then he looked right out to the people sitting there in the theater. A voice from off stage began to speak.

Earnest J. Gaines' book, *A Lesson Before Dying*, is a historical fiction. As this story started to unfold in front of the audience that afternoon, the words from the story filled the room. Based on the book and adapted by Romulus Linney, the play provides a unique insight into the history of and the ways in which the death penalty affects people. The goal of the performance that afternoon was to create an experience where people could pause and bear witness to what North Carolinians affected by the death penalty had to say and then join in a discussion after the performance with recently exonerated death row inmate, Alan Gell. The hope was that through this performance and discussion experience, people would reflect on the use of the death penalty and the ways in which it had touched the lives of many living in North Carolina.

During intermission Alan approached the show's director and Megan Nerz, who had done the marketing for the production. A soft-spoken man, he was visibly shaken. In earnest he asked if he could please speak to the people at intermission rather than waiting for the end. He explained that he knew the outcome of this story. He knew that the young black man portraying the convicted murderer was facing certain death and this certain outcome was a reality for many of his friends still living on North Carolina's death row.

His request to speak in the middle of the performance was not what had originally been planned, but sensing his urgency and trusting his instinct they agreed that he would speak during the intermission after everyone had returned to their seats and before the second act began.

At the end of the intermission Alan stood with the Artistic Director on the stage inside the set of the makeshift jail cell constructed for the performance. There was a scatter of applause. She introduced Alan and sat down on the front row ready to facilitate. The theater was silent as Alan began to share his personal story, embodying for the audience an understanding of death and death row. His gentle voice was clear in the stillness. As he spoke, he wove in his personal response to *A Lesson Before Dying*, pointing out the ways this experience connected to his own. In unscripted testimony, he recounted how he had come to be on death row, how forensic science had cleared him, and how he now felt about being freed from death row while others were still there. Their absence from his life outside the prison burdened his conscience. He felt compelled to share not only his story but theirs as well.

Alan explained to the audience that the play had provoked his emotions so much that, by intermission, he feared he would not be able to speak if he waited longer, and there was something crucial that he wanted each person present to understand. He said, “I need to make you feel the dignity I have for these men who live on death row here in North Carolina, now before you watch the end of this show.” He paused. People shifted. He asked if anyone would like to ask a question or comment. A man stood up further down the front row, but fairly close to Alan. There was a faint sense of fear for a moment as Alan acknowledged him. The man asked, “You expect me to dignify a murderer, an animal that has brutalized and

taken the life of another human being—why?” Without missing a beat Alan answered, “Because, the convicted murderer is human too, the convicted murderer was once a child and for whatever reason things unfolded in that child’s life that created this path toward prison. Many of the men I know on death row are the most peaceful, gentle men I’ve ever known. Now that they are in prison, they are receiving food, they are no longer addicted to mind altering drugs, and they have a bed to sleep in when they lay down at night.”

Alan Gell was both audience member and actor that afternoon. His request to speak in the middle of “A Lesson Before Dying” was an unexpected surprise. When the performance of Gaines’ story as adapted by Linney evoked his memories and emotions, he interrupted a scripted drama, stepped into it with real-life context that prompted others to discussion, disagreement, fear, anger, empathy, and reflection. The founders of what would become The Justice Theater Project were among those so moved.

What led to Gell’s testimony? Why were the play’s director and producer prepared and willing to postpone the second act and yield the stage at intermission, and facilitate a discussion before the play was even over? What kind of theater goes off-script like this? And what kind of theater company traces its origin to a spontaneous interruption and plans its work to invite more of the same?

Justice Theater Project was born in the weeks surrounding Alan Gell’s intervention. This chapter chronicles parts of the company’s prehistory. It poses the questions we need to answer before we can seek to understand the decisions and actions taken later to make this sort of theater a reality, to create an institution that employs performance to promote conversation and provide a forum for social change. Later chapters will examine the

company's productions and their reception, discuss the composition of its membership, leaders, and audiences, examine intentions and plans and grant proposals and budgets.

But first, before there was a company dependent on conscious choices and individual and collective commitment, the stage had to be set, and necessary elements had to gestate. The people who would make the first commitments to the company discovered and nurtured the gifts and character traits they would contribute, came together through common experiences and shared concerns, developed the relationships and institutions that would provide support, and glimpsed and articulated the ideas and principles and rules of thumb that still guide it. We can trace how things came together by following one participant's journey.

From a Briar Patch to *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, 1960–2004

A series of events in another person's life led to Gell's testimony. In 1985, an undergraduate fine arts student from rural North Carolina hoped to star in the big show her senior year; instead she reluctantly accepted a supporting role in a children's Christmas play. Over the next ten years, she wandered, settled in Chicago, auditioned, performed, worked day jobs, and met the man she married. When their first child was two, she felt she had to re-commit to theater, and in 1994 she enrolled in graduate school. At Northwestern, her ideals and her understanding of performance were challenged by the lives and concrete realities revealed by her studies, invigorated by the ideas she and her classmates discussed, redirected by the examples her teachers set, upended in confrontations with one particular mentor, grounded in the experience of playing theater games with children, and found expression in a production about the orphan trains which placed almost 200,000 children into homes during

the mid 19th century. Graduation in 1996 led to more wandering: her husband took a job back in North Carolina, and they found a spiritual home in a church whose friar's openness and militant empathy resembled that of her mentor in graduate school. In Raleigh, over the next seven years she found opportunities to act, direct, provide support, and teach performance as she was coming to understand it at local theater companies, through ministries within her church, in teaching jobs at local prisons and homeless shelters, and by offering children's theater classes in homeless shelters, in rich suburbs, and at churches.

One thing led to another, and through successes and failures, births and miscarriages, exonerations and executions, somehow a theater that invited its community to intervene emerged.

She was born in late 1960, into a time of immense challenge and change, the oldest of seven children, thirteen and a half years older than her baby sister. The five girls and two boys grew up on the family's farm on Knight Road in Kernersville, North Carolina. Her mother was a community organizer, an archeologist and an antique collector. (She still runs Goat Feathers, an antique store in Winston Salem.) Her dad was a former executive in advertising and marketing at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in Winston Salem. Theirs was one of the five original families to start Holy Cross Catholic Church in Kernersville.

Their mother chose the name Briar Patch Farm because of the black berry bushes that grew all around the lake. Often she would send her kids down to the lake with pails when they were ripe and ready to be picked. When the children returned with brimming buckets and blackberry stained lips, she would work to freeze some of the berries and the rest she would make into cobbler. The family lived off of their land, eating fresh vegetables out of the garden and freezing or canning the rest. They had chickens, cows, pigs, miniature goats and

sheep. The children participated in the local 4-H group and the oldest daughter raised Dutch rabbits that she sold at Easter time as a part of her 4-H project. The children swam in the lake almost everyday during the summer—swimming until they couldn't stand up and then they would go up to their house and eat fresh tomato sandwiches and fall asleep on the screened porch under an old ceiling fan. In the evenings they would fish for bass and brim out of the lake; if they were lucky enough to catch a couple, their father would help them clean the fish, showing the children how to remove the scales, tail and head. Then they would bake the fish in the oven with butter and lemon for dinner.

The people who lived at the end of the road—the Knight family—were intrigued by all these children and the way in which they hung together in a pack, swimming, weeding the garden, climbing trees, fishing and playing in their barn. When the first four children, all girls, were old enough, the Knights asked if they needed jobs, and invited them to work with them to prime tobacco in their family fields. They agreed. When the plants were ready for pulling, the girls would wake up at 5 in the morning and meet in the Knights' tobacco field to pull the dew heavy leaves starting at the bottom of the stalk and load them on to the open trailers, or work with the older Knight women to string the plants onto sticks that then were hung in the old, well seasoned tobacco barns.

The Vietnam War was playing out on the family's first television. Her father looked each night to see if his friends showed up on the news covering the war. The Civil Rights movement in the United States was in full swing. On Saturdays, she would go with her mom to the Experiment in Self Reliance (ESR) located in Winston Salem. ESR was a grassroots organization in Winston Salem and Forsyth County. Community advocates and activists worked together there and still do to this day. The purpose of ESR was to bring people

together, empower, educate, help get housing and jobs and be together in solidarity. One of the leaders, a friend of her mom's, was accused in the late 1960s of being a communist.

She and her sisters were encouraged to take singing, dance and piano lessons. She began ballet when she was three, piano at six, voice at seven. She continued to sing into high school. She auditioned as a voice major for several universities and colleges when she was in her junior year of high school. Among the schools that accepted her were North Carolina School of the Arts and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). She decided to attend UNCG because she really loved the voice teachers there.

Her freshman year, the voice major often sat on the ledge of the practice rooms in the Music School and watched the theater majors coming and going. She met a group of them one day coming out of the music building and they remembered seeing her. They became friends. Her second year, she changed her major to theater. She auditioned for and was accepted into the BFA acting/directing program and continued to study voice privately with one of her voice professors in the music school.

The ideas and practices from the program's traditional theater training that resonated most with her were Stanislavski's Method Acting, Viola Spolin's use of improvisation, and mask work. The curriculum was comprised of classical instruction in acting, movement, voice, and speech, practice in the special techniques of stage combat and mime, and training in the design of sets, lighting, and props.

Stanislavski's tools of observation and emotion memory recall fascinated her. In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski writes the "most necessary, important and living emotional material on which your creativeness is based" is the impression "which you get from the direct, personal intercourse with other human beings." It is grasping the "spiritual

experience” of a “facial expression” or the shift of the eyes, the sound of the voice, the speech or a specific gesture that might allow the acting observer to enter into the inner world of the person being observed and internally ask the questions: “Why did he do this or that? What did he have in mind?” (91–94)

She started using careful observation as a tool to develop characters, noticing the ways in which people express themselves through the shift of their eyes, a gesture of the hand, the way in which they breath or the pause between words learning how to get a sense of personalities. Emotion memory recall was of great benefit for here as she began to develop roles for performance, rendering authentic emotions that felt genuine.

The methods of Viola Spolin, and especially the “Theater Games” system she created for actors, were accessible and fun. They encourage a spontaneity that frees up the body and elicits physical work that grows organically. This type of training felt honest and often produced insights into ways of thinking about specific roles that she had been cast in, and even into how to develop scenes when directing.

Mask work breaks down barriers. It helps the actor explore physical and vocal choices and to understand biography in a visceral way. Her first encounter with the practice was in a semester-long undergraduate required course focusing on mask and its history, reaching back to the time of Greek Theatre, with a special emphasis on *commedia dell’ arte* and its physically demanding stock-based characters. She and her peers began by becoming aware of their own faces. Peering into mirrors and taking time to see the face, making note of the distinct colors of the eyes, the ways the brows were shaped, the lines on the face, the way the nose turned up or down and the lips. They explored how the muscles in the face moved and how this movement altered various expressions. They massaged the face, letting the

fingers feel the tissue, muscles and hollow spaces underneath, and were encouraged to think about the skeletal aspects under the skin while touching the eye sockets, the hollow area under the chin, and the temples.

Following this they began to make masks, step by step. First, greasing the face with Vaseline. Then layering it with strips of plaster of Paris, avoiding the lips and eyes. After allowing the resulting mask to dry briefly in place, they gently removed the newly formed mask from the face and carefully placed it on a flat surface to finish drying. When it was dry, they sanded the mask until it was smooth. When the mask was dry they were painted and then each student added props to fit with the mask. Through a series of movement oriented exercises they began to explore how to express sadness, joy, or fear while in the mask.

Each semester she was required to audition for the main stage shows as a part of her program. Her senior year, she expected to be cast in one of the big musicals but instead she was cast in the Theater For Young People show. She was not happy about this but she accepted the supporting role of Alice Wendleken in Barbara Robinson's play, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. In the play, the infamous Herdman children take over the small town Christmas pageant. The Herdman children fight, swear, steal, drink, light things on fire and look at dirty pictures in magazines. Everyone is afraid of them. When they hear about the show, they bully their way into the lead roles. It looks like the whole production is going to be a completely chaotic disaster as a result. But what happens instead is that the Herdmans become interested in the story they become a part of and reveal their hearts. Everyone in town and everyone is touched in a fresh new way by the story of the birth of Jesus.

Alice Wendleken's character was "always Mary in the Christmas pageant." Alice learns that no one is entitled to privilege. Audiences of children laughed and cheered the

Herdman children's exploits. They were particularly ecstatic when the prim and always proper character Alice is ousted from her role as Mary and the lead is given to loud, bossy, very crafty Imogene, the oldest of the Herdman girls. Those same audiences of excitable children listened quietly when characters in the play shared moments of epiphany.

**Wandering,
1986–1993**

She spent the next several years wandering, as far as her life in the theater went. Because she had switched her major from music to theater, she was a semester and a half behind. Instead of the traditional June commencement she graduated in December 1986 graduate. Shortly after graduation she began to attend regional auditions hoping to be cast into companies throughout the southeast. In between she waited on tables, stayed up late drinking with friends who also worked with her in the restaurants where she worked. At the South Eastern Theater Conference auditions that were held in the spring of 1987, she was called back to 26 companies. She decided to take the job at the Southern Theater Festival that was held each year at Ole Miss. During that summer she and her sister decided that they were going to move to Chicago to live and work. While she was driving from Ole Miss to Chicago she stopped her truck at the intersection of I-55 and I-40 right below Memphis, lingering there pondering whether to turn right and head east back home or continue north to Chicago. After a couple of hours, she continued north.

Several weeks later her sister joined her there in Chicago and they got an apartment in Rogers Park, a northern suburb. She found a bartending and waitressing job right away and began the business of auditioning for shows in the city. One night after returning home from waiting tables someone followed her truck into the parking area under her building and, after

she got on the elevator and went up, they broke out the window on the passenger side of her truck, spraying glass all over the seat and the ground below. Every thing that she had in the truck was stolen: toll money, boom box, clothes, books and backpack. Shortly after this happened they moved out of the city to Schaumburg.

She continued to work for restaurants but started putting her resumes out for customer service jobs or entry-level positions close to her apartment because she needed benefits. She got a job at Landis and Gyr Powers, a HVAC company where she started working as a customer service rep in August 1989. The second day she was there met Joe Mizerk. They became very good friends and after some discussion at lunch they realized that they lived close enough to each other to carpool—and so they became carpool buddies. He would make peanut butter toast and coffee for her when she drove and she did the same for him on the days that he drove. The second year at the company, she invited him to come down to North Carolina with her to visit her family at Briar Patch Farm. Shortly after they returned from her trip to Kernersville, North Carolina, she and Joe became more than carpool buddies. After dating for about two years, they were married in Buffalo Grove, Illinois. Their first son, Daniel, was born in October 1991. She continued to work for Landis and Gyr until Daniel was two. She moved into the marketing department with a higher salary in 1992.

During all of this she continued to audition for and work in shows for companies close to home. Finally, she told Joe that she just couldn't do the corporate work anymore and she needed to go back to theater. She studied for three months for the GRE, applied to Northwestern University, and was accepted. She enrolled in the Fall of 1994, in pursuit of a Master's degree in Theater and Performance Studies.

Meeting Dwight, Reading Boal, Doing Children's Theater, 1994–1996

The people, ideas, and practices she encountered in graduate school over the next two years changed her understanding of the purpose, setting, and scope of theater. She met Dwight Conquergood for the first time at the welcome reception. He was a slight man with greying hair, intense eyes and an incredible energy force. She knew that she would study with him. She also met Frank Galati, Dominic Missimi, Mary Zimmerman and Rives Collins that evening. She took classes with all of them during her time at Northwestern.

In addition to the acting, directing and performance studies courses, she registered for a Children's Theater course and a Storytelling course; Professor Rives Collins taught these two courses. They became fast friends and shortly thereafter he brought her on to a team of folks that were working on a grant from Kraft that would hopefully fund "drama specialists" that would be responsible for working with inner city Chicago youths to prep them for theater experiences. The grant was awarded successfully to the group and she became one of the drama specialists that worked with children in the inner city and throughout the Chicago land area to prep children for theatre experiences. These preparatory workshops included creative drama exercises, discussions about the history of theatre, costumes, sets and prop designs.

In the summer of 1995 she took Dwight Conquergood's Urban Festivities class. During this course Dwight introduced the class to ethnography, dialogic performance and an examination into how our bodies are can be a very important site of knowledge. She was taken with the power of ethnographic research, performance and the body with and in the work "committed to action in the world" ("Ethnography" 95).

Dwight guided the students in the course to become aware of the ways in which performance can underpin viable scholarship. He challenged them to think about the impacts that can be realized with social performance. His course was designed to provide time and opportunity for each student to create a performance to find ways of connecting that performance work to deep research and contemplative writing with moral outcomes. Dwight invited the students to “imagine, inquire and intervene” (Conquergood, “Performance Studies” 41).

With Dwight’s encouragement, she began to understand the integral importance of her history and the connections that these experiences would have to her own work. He told her to always be on the lookout for a shaman who would be there to “shake” her and guide the way.

A product of her work in his course was a new relationship with the families she worked with at Cabrini Green, in particular with the children. One afternoon following her time there, she shared with Dwight the frustrations she had with the ways in which the reality of life played out there and how she wanted deeply to bring something to the children. She told him about bringing her guitar, teaching them songs and playing theater games with them. Still there must be something more that she could do? Dwight answered her question with a challenge: “Who the hell do you think you are, Maria from the Sound of Music? You show up with your guitar and your music and things are going to get all better?”

Critical Ethnographic field research and witnessing the importance of cultural performance through the experience of the Urban Festivities class with Dwight provided insight into how fieldwork, social drama and theater could work together to make deeper meaning regarding issues of social concern.

She had never been involved with ethnographic fieldwork before the course with Dwight, where she came to understand ways of conducting, collecting and documenting research as well as the importance of placing it within theoretical frameworks. The course included reading and responding to scholarly texts using our experiences in the field as a lens. A large portion of the assigned reading in the course was from Dwight's own fieldwork, including interviews and research he had collected while working with the Hmong refugees, his time at Big Red and his work with Almighty Latin Kings gang members and their families. Additionally, they read excerpts from the writings of Michael Taussig, bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa.

Later when she started doing her own work in the field and began conducting interviews and collecting historical information with the people at Cabrini Green interviewing and documenting the experience, she learned quickly that more than interviews were needed to satisfy her need to develop a concrete understanding of the community and its world as part of her work for the course. She supplemented the interviews and observations with research about the historical context surrounding Cabrini Green. She began to learn that complete critical ethnography required a corporeal relationship and she began to move from the people to research to attending services at St Luke's Church, which was situated in the midst of the Cabrini Green neighborhood and attended by many of its older residents. She set up meetings and discussed her work with those people who were already working with residents. It was at one of these meetings that she was given permission by the department of child and family services representative who was working there in one of the buildings to work with the young people.

Another key aspect of Dwight's class was the option to create a performance piece as a final project. Hers provided her with an epiphany about her position as ethnographer/outsider meshing with the people living at Cabrini Green, illuminating differences while also performing the ways in which she had come to be an insider. The audience was able to enter and feel Cabrini Green with her: performance allowed her to share the results of her research work, to bear witness as interlocutor, and to experience what Dwight's student, Soyini Madison, describes as the "intersubjectivity" that occurs for the ethnographer who moves into the role of performer (175).

Dwight told the students early on that the course could provide a kind of humility in the midst of doing the work. She experienced humility when Dwight challenged her preconceived notions of idealism and moral superiority by pointing out that this was not a Hollywood movie and that she was not "Maria" from *The Sound of Music* who would make things better with a song. She came to understand that she was projecting what she thought the world was onto them instead of meeting and being with them in their reality.

Ethnographic fieldwork, experiencing the social and cultural performance, documenting these in notes, research and performance was making her honest and forcing her to engage. When she did so, she found she also sought to grasp her informant's "spiritual experience" from their "facial expression," asking herself Stanislavski's questions, "Why did he do this or that? What did he have in mind?" just as she had been taught to do as an actor developing a character. Taking the time to ask herself these questions and to observe as well as listen became her habit when conducting interviews (91–94).

She took two additional courses with Dwight at Northwestern. One provided the best character development experience of her life. In order to be admitted, each student was

required to choose, before class began, an historical figure to delve into, to come to know, and then to perform a one-person show based on that person's life. She chose Mary Wigman, a German dancer and choreographer, one of the most important figures in the history of modern dance, an iconic figure of Weimar German culture, who had been hailed in her lifetime for bringing a deep existential experience to the stage. Wigman's conflicted political views drew her in. Wigman was part of the German Expressionism movement; her style spread through Europe and America; the effect of her choreography is visible in the work of Martha Graham. Yet after Hitler came to power her reputation suffered, because she did not publically speak out against his regime and because she continued to perform and teach in Germany.⁴

A key component of the course included the adaptation of texts. She also learned that adaptation does not have to be confined to texts but could include dance and music. The course included a blend of projects and theoretical writings about Wigman her thoughts, her writings, her politics and actual footage of her most famous dance pieces. Very specific performance projects were assigned over the course of the semester to help further a deeper more corporeal understanding of the person. Many of these smaller project pieces found a way into the final performance. The experience was a blend of adapting texts and choreography, writing about the work with a theoretical slant and multiple small performance projects that would ultimately result in public performances for students, faculty and community.

Throughout the semester the class was assigned thoughtful writing and performance experiences that deepened each student's understanding of the "one person." She learned

⁴ The Nazis distrusted Wigman as a leftist. They closed her famous school in Dresden, and its affiliates all over Germany. She was allowed to perform and teach dance only in Leipzig.

how Mary ate, how she slept, how she smoked, how she thought about politics. Mary became a part of her dreams. Rigorous performance work and research became the pathway to understanding, embodying and knowing Mary. Her body became the site of pedagogy both for herself and for the audience.

The course concretized clearly for her that theater and performance studies could live together, side by side producing important research and insight along with performance work that communicates and explores, bringing people into conversation and sometimes to confrontation.

Dwight said to her, “you have learned that your theater background can live in relationship with this performance studies work.” She was standing there in her Mary Wigman costume trying to figure it all out. She continued to work with Dwight outside the classroom, including going with him to the juvenile detention facility in Blue Island Illinois, where she witnessed the ways the young men there were making performance as a way to talk about their lives.

In her last semester at Northwestern, she and other performance studies scholars in the graduate program worked with Dwight to host the second annual Performance Studies Conference (March 21–24, 1996). It was there that she first met Soyini Madison and Della Pollock. She also attended a presentation by New York University’s Richard Schechner, where she was introduced to the idea of the liminal space of possibility made possible by performance. His presentation provided an understanding of how performance studies can inform the way in which people think and analyze the world within which they live. The “liminal space” where performance happens is a magical place where one’s guard comes down and the magic of confronting truths and realities can happen. Working alongside

Dwight at this conference, meeting Della and Soyini, and then attending Richard's presentation solidified her desire to dig deeper into performance studies.

In addition to the course work, events and projects with Dwight, during this time she was also introduced to the writings and work of Augusto Boal, Paolo Freire and Bert O. States. Several of her peers in the program had begun to read about Boal and spoke about the innovative nature of his performance pedagogy. She was intrigued by the fresh, appealing nature of this work. She purchased Boal's *Games for Actors and Non Actors* and Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz's *Playing Boal, Theatre, Therapy, Activism*.

In it she encountered descriptions of games somewhat similar to Spolin's, but Boal explained their use in a way that was new, by contrasting "games" and "exercises":

I use the word 'exercise' to designate all physical, muscular movement (respiratory, motor, vocal) which helps the doer to a better knowledge or recognition of his or her body, its muscles, its nerves, its relationships to other bodies, to gravity, to objects Each exercise is a 'physical reflection' on oneself. A monologue. An introversion.

The games, on the other hand, deal with the expressivity of the body as emitter and receiver of messages. The games are a dialogue, they require an interlocutor. They are extroversion. (*Games* 48).

She immediately started to incorporate the Boalian "arsenal" of tools into the work that she did with children at Cabrini Green as well as with children that she was working with as a Drama Specialist throughout Chicago and the Chicagoland area. One of the older children's favorite games from the Boal canon was "Glass Cobra." In this game, the children would start walking around the space without talking or making contact with anyone else. Then after a few minutes everyone was encouraged to stand in a circle and blindfold their eyes. Then they all got rearranged and placed into a new circle, so that they didn't know who they were beside. Then everyone had to turn to the right and put their hands on the shoulders

of the person in front of them. They had about twenty seconds to memorize those shoulders, including hairline, shirt, jewelry and so on. After they had the opportunity to do this then they broke away and moved themselves around the room mixing themselves up. Then they had to put the “cobra” back together by finding the shoulders of the person they had memorized.

The conversations that followed the exercise were enlightening including discussion about how hard it was to stay blindfolded or how it was easy to remember the details of what they had been encouraged to memorize about each other. Most illuminating was the way in which this game and others like it created a place for the children to explore their interaction with one another and to discover that they had to figure out ways of working together as a community to find solutions. On multiple occasions, the children playing Glass Cobra seemed to instinctively know when one player was completely lost and needed help. They would work together to bring that person into the circle, sometimes moving the entire circle to that lost person, sometimes helping her find the shoulders of the person she had memorized. How caring these children could be in the community of the game was astounding given how harsh the environment was that some of the children lived in.

Learning of the connection between Boal and Freire, she read Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and his *Pedagogy of Hope*. These texts confirmed her belief that performance, pedagogy and praxis could be linked directly to ways that practitioners create aesthetic work that is linked to theory. This connection represents the power of performance work (practice) when contextualized within a theoretical framework. What she realized was that the result could be a creative “form” that challenged the imagination of people and in the process

create a mindset that is more attuned to issues of social concern eager to learn ways of creating a more just society.

She began to use the games and exercises as a spring board into short skits that the children at Cabrini Green would act out with minimal props. During the presentation of some of these skits with the children she was sitting on the floor one day watching as they traveled around the space with different colored balloons in front of their faces. They had decided together to work with the balloons, using them like masks holding them in front of their face and talking to each other through the balloon. At one point in the conversation they would pop the balloon and make a remark about the face they now saw without the lens of the balloon mask. One of the girls in the group stopped in front of her during the development of the skit and began to speak through her blue balloon like she was also one of the characters involved with them and then the girl popped the balloon and looked into her face and said, “and now your face is white.”

It was while at Northwestern that she also began to work in the areas of creative drama and story telling with Rives Collins. Creative Drama is the place where young people can experience an understanding about behavior, themselves, community and the world in ways that make meaning through social imaginative play. This active work allows students to take on imagined roles and situations and explore issues and relationships. When children are encouraged to explore specific themes, stories, histories or people through facilitated theater games and exercises, make believe and role play they are able to develop deeper and long lasting cognitive connections. In the midst of being a part of his creative drama and storytelling classes she was able to create a professional working relationship with Rives

Collins when she became one of the drama specialists hired to teach in schools in the Chicagoland area.

In addition to her other studies, she continued to take dance courses during graduate school. During her final semester she registered for a dance class entitled: “Improvisation for Music, Dance and Theater.” Robin Lakes taught the class. The course was designed to move the student into the corporeal spectrums of human experience. Lakes also emphasized the importance of returning again and again to the performance work produced throughout the semester, reexamining and reimagining the pieces that they created together.

In her writing and production work, others recognized that she was integrating the ideas and practices of theater and of performance studies. In her second year, Rives Collins approached her and asked her if she would be interested in directing Aurand Harris’s play *The Orphan Train*. The play is based on one of the most famous episodes of adoption history in the United States. Harris conducted ethnographic field research with long-lived survivors of the roughly quarter million children sent by train from New York and other Eastern cities to towns throughout the Midwest and western United States, Canada and Mexico between 1854 and 1929, as proposed by Charles Loring Brace, the founder of The Children’s Aid Society, in order to “change the futures of orphaned, abandoned and homeless children living on city streets in the mid 1800s by removing them from poverty and placing them in farm families.”(Children’s Aid Society).

The production of *The Orphan Train* was a world premiere. The night before it opened, the playwright, Aurand Harris passed away from cancer in his home in New York. She spoke to him two days before his passing, sharing the work of the show and the ways in which the piece was coming to life.

A part of the production included research to track down original orphan train riders and invite them to come and speak at the production. She was able to contact around 30 surviving riders; 23 were able to attend the performances. She worked with these folks to create pre- and post-show discussions and audiences stayed to meet and talk to them, intrigued by the journey their lives had taken since their time on the trains; most often audiences wanted to know how their lives had turned out and if they ever got back in touch with their biological parents.

When she graduated in June 1996, she received the Winfred Ward award for her work on *The Orphan Train* project including the study guide materials that she created for children, teachers and audience members attending the show and for planning the post show experiences that brought the audience together with the original orphan train riders.

Shopping for a Church, Hearing Father Dan Kenna, 1996

That same month, her husband finished his CPA and was offered a job as a financial analyst with Quintiles in Raleigh, North Carolina. He moved down to Raleigh in late June, while Daniel and she stayed in Chicago until their duplex was sold. She also continued to work at Northwestern as a house manager for the summerfest theater series.

The duplex sold in early August. Her mother flew up to meet her. Together they packed up the final bags, and loaded the boxes that were left after the movers had finished. She buckled her son into his seat for the drive south and her mother got into the car. The moving truck left. The little duplex was completely empty. She stood at the front door for a moment and just looked into the tiny home with four rooms, feeling the sense of passing

time, nostalgia and memories. She closed the door and joined her son and her mother in the car.

When they reached Raleigh, North Carolina, she met her husband at one of her sister's homes where they would be living until they could find a home. She started looking for a place to work and continue research. She also started looking for a church.

She visited several local churches before attending Sunday mass at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. One of its friars, Dan Kenna, gave the sermon that day. He spoke about abortion, but not from the traditional perspective. He asked the congregation to consider a different way of thinking about this divisive subject. He didn't use the typical Catholic rhetoric pushing the pro-life agenda; instead he encouraged the people assembled there to think about how hard the decision to have an abortion must be and, instead of judging, to open their arms and hearts to women in this predicament. Instead of pushing the women away, he encouraged everyone present to open their hearts to the human being in the midst of this pain. Dan, like Dwight, challenged her to seek beyond the typical vantage points when discussing moral decisions and issues of social concern.

Before that Sunday, she was strongly considering leaving the Catholic faith behind because of the ways in which it felt empty and conflicted. Now, she had found a church.

She learned about Father Dan Kenna. His family was part of the wave of Catholics who had migrated from other parts of the country to the south in the 1950s and he had grown up in the heart of the Southern Baptist Bible belt. He shared his feelings of what it felt like when he moved to the south as a young boy in a profile on the Holy Name Province website:

I remember "Whites Only" water fountains and black people always sitting in the back of the city buses. ... I found myself identifying with those folks because I too felt like a minority. ... I didn't suffer the horrors of discrimination that my African-American brothers and sisters did back then,

but I often felt excluded. I recall frequently being taunted because I went to parochial school, couldn't eat hot dogs at Friday night baseball games, wasn't allowed to attend Vacation Bible School with my friends at the Baptist church up the street. One time I remember everyone in the neighborhood getting together for a huge picnic on Independence Day. Only my family and the McCauley's from next door weren't invited. A buddy of mine apologized with embarrassment, "Sorry, it's not for Catholics."

He believed that his "vocation as a Franciscan was rooted in that growing-up experience of feeling like a minority," recalling that in fourth grade,

after school one day, my teacher said she wanted to visit my Mom and asked if she could walk home with me. She was a nun, and wore the traditional long black dress and veil. As we walked toward my house, we had to pass a playground adjoining a public school. A group of guys there notices us and began quickly run along behind us.

"It's a Catholic witch!" one of them yelled. Another picked up a handful of gravel from beside the street and hurled it over our heads. I was scared stiff. But Sister said softly, "Danny, just keep walking and don't say a word. Hold your head high and be proud of who you are."

Shortly after that, Dan met his first Franciscan:

He was visiting in my parish and spoke at an altar boy outing about how St. Francis had dedicated his life to standing on the side of the poor and marginalized. He told the story of Francis going out with several of his brothers "to preach."

[In the story, the brothers] spent the whole day walking through the streets of a village, and said not a word. At the end of the day, as they were returning home, one of the friars asked disappointedly, "When are we going to preach?" [St. Francis] answered, "We just did."

Meeting Dan Kenna and coming to understand the Franciscan tradition had a profound effect on the ways in which she thought about her Catholic faith. If she had not found him or St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Raleigh, she would have probably let go of those Catholic roots and opted for an alternative place to worship. She had grown increasingly frustrated with the rigidity of the church, but he helped to find a place within her familiar faith that allowed for expression and growth.

Teaching and Learning at Polk Youth Prison, 1996–1998

We can see the kernel of the theatrical work she now hungered to do in a writing assignment she received in Dwight's Urban Festivities class, entitled *You Are What You Eat: Microethnography of a Meal*. At a loss for what to say, she detailed the simple meal shared by her husband and young son. The meal was simply baked potatoes filled with ingredients available in the fridge that evening and glasses of diet coke. When she turned the paper in she was concerned that the modest meal was not enough to satisfy the assignment. A week after the paper was turned in, Dwight handed out three papers for the class to read together from the assignment. Her paper was one of them. His remarks got her to see the beauty of a simple meal and to realize after she wrote about it that "being present with, experiencing, small things and every person" is integral to ethnographic research as it intersects with performance pedagogy. He saw her story in the baked potatoes meal, where the raw, crunchy, buttery, cheesy and the bland blended together to make meaning. He awakened her senses to the awareness of the bonds that exist between simple textured moments and precise descriptions. That awareness and attention to detail crops up in her teaching a year and half later at a youth prison, and again and again in work with other inmates and other institutions, and, eventually, in the theater she would found (Conquergood, Personal Communication).

Her academic and work objective after finishing graduate school and moving back to North Carolina was to continue the kind of work that she had begun with Dwight. She did not know exactly what or where the research was going to take place. She knew that at some point she wanted to return to school to finish her doctoral work, but felt she get out into the world and practice what she had learned while in school.

During her time with Dwight, she had created a way of collecting research into handwritten journals. She often would sketch out the landscape of the places or places where the research was happening, and include the color, smell and sound of the place. Her field notes describing the people she confronted were very detailed, including among other things physical descriptions of people, the sound of their voices, the way they moved, and how they responded to different situations both physically and verbally. Because she had a background in music she would frequently note a style of music or song that she thought fit the person or place where she found herself and would listen to that music as a way to open up a connection between her intuition and their character. She kept an ongoing list of the type of games and activities that she thought might fit each circumstance as she encountered it. The journal also became a place where she considered the ways the activities and games might be altered to do something more, depending on whom she was with or the circumstances of their situation. If she had epiphanies about the subject or if she found information that added a perspective to her work, she would go back to the journal and note it for future reference. The journals were dated and stored in her desk at home. Additionally, if she received permission, she would sometimes record an interview or take pictures, which she then labeled, and stored in chronological order in a separate box in her desk.

What she knew from her time with Dwight was that if she ever reached a point where she could begin to write about her research, she would need the documented details. She began this documentation collection early on while she was still in Dwight's classes, and kept not only papers he returned to her but also notes from his lectures and their personal conversations. Dwight's comments highlighted and validated ways of doing the research and capturing details and she often referred back to them for help.

While she was still living at her sister's house, she started spending Sundays going through the classified ads, searching for jobs. She came across an ad looking for someone to teach writing and language arts sections of the GED (General Education Development test preparation) at the Old Polk Prison. The teaching position at Polk was an opportunity to both work and "be" in research, much as Dwight had done at the Hmong Refugee Camps early in his career. She called the contact number and spoke to a man who told her his name was "Moose." He asked for her resume, college transcripts and said he would get back to her to set up a time to meet. About a week later, Moose called back and asked her to come to his office.

She found out that she would be working for Wake Tech Community College as a part of its GED curriculum. Moose's primary job was to provide educators for the prison and work with them to sustain the numbers of the GED program offered by Wake Tech by collecting data on the number of inmates who took courses and passed tests. GED testing is not considered official unless it is programmed and administrated by certified institutions. It was, for Moose, a numbers-driven program. Wake Tech received funding based on the number of students it successfully enrolled into its GED programs as well as the number of those who passed all the sections of the GED, receiving the equivalent of a high school diploma.

At the interview with Moose she shared some of the work that she had done with Dwight while in graduate school. At one point during the interview, he stopped and looking directly into her face and asked, "are you familiar with Old Polk?" He continued, "it is a maximum security prison for 18–20 year old male offenders ... maximum security ... rape, murder, drug/gun trafficking." She looked right back into his face and told him that this was

fine. He offered her the job. The next step was to run a background check and set up a meeting with the school staff at Polk.

The morning of the Polk meeting began with plenty of warm fall sun. The day appeared to be one of those fall days that surround everything in complete color and comfort. She took her four-year-old son to preschool. They both decided that they didn't need a coat or even a jacket because the weather was so nice. After dropping him off she ran a couple of errands, including going to the DMV to update the address on her license. By the time she had left the DMV, it was obvious that the day that had begun in sunny warmth had flipped. The sun was veiled by a grey-clouded sky, the air had chilled and a light rain was falling. She knew that she would be late to the meeting if she tried to return home for a coat, so she made the decision to just go like she was, and she drove her Mighty Max Mitsubishi truck into the gravel parking lot at the prison with about five minutes to spare. She grabbed her old graduate school backpack, her keys and her license, locked up and headed to the gate.

The pathway that led to the prison was a distressed sidewalk—cracked and stained from years of use. The sidewalk was lined on either side by a chain link fence and at the top it was crowned with razor wire. Woven into the top of the fence, the razor wire created circular waves; the entire compound was framed with this fence and razor wire—a biting metal barrier that rose from the ground to a height of about ten feet. The sidewalk was sectioned off by a series of gates. These strategically placed gates were spread throughout the compound. The sharpshooter guards inside the towers ruled these gates of control, and their eyes were hidden. At every corner of the compound these guard towers rose up above the fence and in each of these perches, the hidden face of the trained sharp shooter watched the movement within the barrier: inmates, administration, visitors and a small group hired to

“educate” the inmates. Every member of the Polk Prison population was required to travel through these gates.

She waved to the guard tower closest to the parking lot and with a jarring jerk the gate slid open; once she passed through the gate, it jumped again and closed behind her back. She turned around and looked at the gate and at the fence and at the wire and then at her hands. The temperature had really begun to drop and she began to shiver a little. She kept thinking she couldn't go in here; these folks were going to know that she was afraid—and on top of that, stupid for being out in this kind of weather without a coat. She needed to breathe. She clasped her hands together and blew into them. Her nose began to run and so she wiped it with the back of her hand and then she did something strange—she reached over to touch the fence. The guard yelled from the tower—“are you coming in or what?” She pulled her hand away from the fence, looked up at the guard and waved. She watched the traffic traveling down Blue Ridge Road, which ran parallel with the front of the old prison, listening to the sound of the motors and music coming from inside the vehicles. Here she was inside the gates and the world was happening right on the other side of the fence, audible and visible.

She went through the next set of gates, pausing while they slid back into place behind her. After the series of gates she arrived at a little guard stand. The guard inside asked for identification. She presented him with the freshly updated license. Then he asked her to sign in. She was working hard to control the shiver and her fear. The guard told her that she would be meeting with Mr. McCoy and Ms. Upperman. He asked her to wait while he called the school office and let them know that she had arrived. She waited inside the little building trying to edge closer to a little space heater on the floor.

Several moments went by and then a tall older black man with a baseball cap entered the booth. His speech was rugged but precise. He reached his hand out to her and introduced himself as Mr. McCoy. She took his hands, warm hands, and started to tell him her name. He got there first: “Yes I know—you’re Royals.” Then they left the stand and Royals followed him to the school office. They said very little to each other on the way over. He did ask Royals where her coat was.

They passed through a series of prison administrative buildings and trailers. Mr. McCoy pointed out the trailers indicating specifically the one in which Royals would be teaching. Turning the corner of the administrative buildings they moved into an area that he called the quad. On one side of the quad, new and transferring inmates were processed. The side they were on was for school staff and classrooms. Far down on the end of the quad was the superintendent’s and administration office, and opposite from this was the horticulture building. In the middle were sidewalks connecting the buildings with brief grassy patches. There were small birch trees by the horticulture building and a picnic table with a picnic bench sitting up against its outside wall.

Mr. McCoy opened up a door on the near side of the administration building. They went in past one of the two guard offices in the school area. It was right beside the principal’s office. McCoy introduced the two school guards who were busy having coffee and smoking cigarettes. “Officer Howard” or “Pops” (as he was called) was an older white man with a stoop, and “Officer Kenan” was a middle aged black man with large pockmarks on his face. They were both very friendly. Then the two entered the principal’s office. Moose was there talking to a woman behind a desk. She was perhaps one of the largest women Royals had ever seen. She had on heavy make up and her hair was drawn up into a style that set high on

her head. She had very long and flamboyantly painted fingernails. Ms. Upperman stared at Royals for a moment and then said, “so you’re Ms. Royals.” She looked at Moose and laughed. She then told Royals that Mr. McCoy would take her through a tour of the entire prison compound. She gave Royals several forms to fill out, told Royals she’d see her on Monday. Then she turned to Moose and said that she had other things that she needed to address and that the meeting was over. Moose told Royals to call him after the tour of the prison and left. Mr. McCoy replaced his cap and they went outside and headed down toward the superintendent’s office. Mr. McCoy knocked on a door and, after a shout out from inside; they entered the office of Mr. Currie. Mr. Currie was a fair skinned black man with freckles. He was impeccably dressed. Mr. McCoy introduced him and he shook her hand, welcoming her to Polk Youth Prison. Mr. McCoy and Mr. Currie chatted briefly about a couple of things that Royals didn’t understand. When they finished, he thanked her for being a part of the school and Mr. McCoy and Royals left to continue the tour. They went through the administrative building to a back exit and came out on the side of the prison bunks, library, cafeteria, health, canteen and segregation/solitary confinement buildings. They went to the prison bunks first.

On the way to the dorms, Mr. McCoy told her about how Polk Prison was the last North Carolina prison to end the practice of triple bunking. He told her that they would be going into the Main building where there were two dorms. Once inside Royals saw that the dorms were really one long room that had been divided in two by a desk and a cage. In each dorm there was a row of beds crammed claustrophobically beside each other and lining the walls on one side. The long wall opposite the beds was completely lined with windows, big huge barred windows, stained nicotine yellow from years of cigarette smoke, obscuring a

view of traffic on the busy road beyond the towers, gates, and fences. In between the two dorms were an officer desk and an open cage where they kept young men, most often, men who had been in a fight or mouthed off to the guards. If the altercation had been bad enough, they would be taken from the cage and sent to segregation. On that day there was one very young looking man in the cage.

The entire dorm area was so loud. The inmates and the guards immediately focused on Royals. She was the only woman at that moment in the presence of over a hundred men. They made sexual comments about her to each other, to the guards, and to Mr. McCoy. She tried to ignore them.

Mr. McCoy opened another door and Royals followed him. They went to the cafeteria next. Mr. McCoy called it the mess hall. Inmates were working in the kitchen cleaning, mopping, emptying garbage and stacking chairs. Mr. McCoy introduced Royals to the cook staff.

From the mess hall they went into the next adjoining building. Its first floor was dedicated to offices where psychiatric counselors met with the men and upstairs there was a tiny room that Mr. McCoy called the library. On one wall of the library was a place for men to listen to music/books on headset. The books available on the limited shelves were simple. There was a collection of comic books on one side of the room and, based on the number of young men who were reading these, it appeared that they were the most popular source of reading. On the other side of the room was a collection of outdated schoolbooks for various grade levels. Not a single man was reading these books.

She and Mr. McCoy went back downstairs and outside and headed to the segregation/solitary confinement building. When they arrived each had to sign in at the front

desk. Then they went in. There were 21 cells in solitary confinement. It was very dark inside this building. The cinder-blocked walls were white. There was fluorescent lighting, but again, because of years of smoke, the plastic covering over the lights was stained yellow and shed a dull dismal sort of light over everything. They went around the entire block of 21 cells. Every cell was occupied. The men inside were clothed only in plain white underwear and some wore white t-shirts. The cells were about six feet by eight feet. Inside young men were lying on beds sleeping, pacing, screaming, reading, and smoking.

At the back of the building was a door to the outside. Mr. McCoy and Royals walked over to this door and looked out. Mr. McCoy explained to her that this was the “segregation exercise” area. It was a totally fenced in area of about twenty feet by twenty feet. Mr. McCoy told her that the men were allowed to come here for one hour out of every twenty-four during their time in “seg” and they would walk around still shackled until the hour was over. On the ground was a circle worn into the ground from the years of walking. Royals thought of the ponies at the state fair taking children for rides on their backs around and around in a circle while tied to each other.

They left this “exercise area” and went back through the cells and to the front door and left. They walked to another sidewalk area that traveled the inner part of the prison buildings. Young men waited by the canteen or crossed the sidewalks between dorms as Mr. McCoy and Royals headed over to the sidewalk to the gates that led back to the quad. As they walked, Mr. McCoy told her that Polk was the first North Carolina prison in 1991 to implement a cashless canteen system. Royals pulled her bag close as possible for warmth and crossed her arms over her chest, tucking her hands up under her armpits. To get to the

processing area they had to go back through a series of jarring gates, fences and guard towers.

They got back to the quad and went into the processing building. Royals watched some young men just arriving on the prison buses. They were lining up to go in and have their pictures taken. Mr. McCoy told her that all the records were in this building. He told her that if she ever really needed to know anything about an inmate, his history, or his crimes, it would be here.

Finally, they went to the classrooms. There were two classrooms in the main school building that included the principal's office. One was for history, and one for math. Mr. McCoy told her that the teachers who taught in these classrooms had these rooms because of their seniority. He told her that she would be in a trailer.

She met the teachers who got to be in these inside classrooms. They were two white women. The history teacher, Schmidt, didn't have time to talk. She was probably in her mid to late forties, her face ravaged from years of cigarette smoking, her hair wispy and dry, with dark circles under her eyes. She wore a cream turtleneck under a dark sweatshirt and her pants were dark blue. She wore hose with walking shoes. The math teacher, Ms. Betty, was probably around sixty years old with curly short hair, deep blue eyes and red cheeks. She smiled and warmly said "hello." She was very talkative. She chatted about herself and her grandchildren, her dog and her new sports utility vehicle. She asked Royals why she was teaching here. Royals explained that she had recently moved back to North Carolina and had been in search of a job so as to contribute financially to her family. She told Ms. Betty that the work here was perfect for her continued education. Ms. Betty nodded. Mr. McCoy and Royals left her room and went to the Science classroom. It was a room off to one side of the

Horticulture Building. Mr. Thomas, the science teacher, was a little scrawny man with thinning grey hair, wrinkly skin, nicotine stained teeth and bulging black eyes behind outdated eyeglasses. He wore a three-piece suit. Royals glanced down at his computer as they were introduced. He had been playing solitaire. They left Mr. Thomas's room and went through another guardroom. It was empty. Royals asked if there were only two guards at the school. There were only two. They then went into the Horticulture Classroom, where she met Joe, the horticulture teacher. He was a middle-aged man with light brown hair and brown eyes. He was crumpled from head to toe. His hair, his shirt, his pants and his shoes, all of him seemed to be straight out of the laundry basket. He had a gentle voice and a kind demeanor and told her he was happy to meet her. They left there and went to her classroom, a trailer on the outside of the quad. It seemed so far away from everyone.

There was a dividing wall with another room beside hers. Her little room, where she naively thought the "great reckonings" would happen, was disgusting, with dirty brown carpeting and old books in short bookcases lining the wall, one huge oak desk, an old chair and about 24 desks lined up in rows. The lighting was poor. Through one of the windows in the trailer Royals could see one of the guard towers. She asked Mr. McCoy about the room on the other side of the glass. He told her that twice a week a special education teacher would be there to work with students who could not read.

Mr. McCoy sat down on the old oak desk in her classroom, placed his hands on his knees and said, "so Royals, are you going to be back on Monday?" She nodded yes. McCoy replied, "See you here at 7:30 am, the inmates arrive down at the school at 8 am. Be here early, so that you are here and prepared when they come in." McCoy replaced his cap, walked over to the door, opened it and said, "I will walk you back up to the guard stand."

They left the trailer and walked back to the stand. Again, there was really no conversation. When they got to the guard stand, he took her hand again and then he smiled at her and said, “Remember to wear a coat.”

She walked in a daze back down the maze of fences and barbed wire and squeezed her eyes shut each time they slapped open and slapped back. She reached the gravel parking lot and her truck. It was time to pick up her son. She wiped her face and nose with her shirt, backed out of the parking spot and left.

She was terrified to return that first Monday. But she made up her mind that she would be there, that she could teach these men and that she would learn from this experience. She arrived at Polk precisely at 7:30 am, locked up the truck, waved at the guard in the tower and walked through the series of gates, checked in at the guard stand and followed the sidewalk around to the school administration room. Mr. McCoy, Pops and Officer Kenan were in the office. She checked in and Mr. McCoy told her that the teacher she would be replacing was in her trailer for a couple of hours to go over information she needed with regard to the class. This new information relieved her a bit, knowing that she wouldn’t be by herself.

Mr. McCoy walked her to her trailer, where, once inside, he introduced Ms. Harvey. She was a short, young black woman with heavy thick braids bound up on top of her head. Then he left. Ms. Harvey told Royals a little about herself, explaining that she was going to be leaving to teach at another Wake Tech GED location closer to her home in Garner. She told Royals that she was Muslim. She spoke about the tension her Muslim faith had caused for her while she had been here at the prison. This tension had primarily been a result of staff who felt uncomfortable working with a Muslim woman. In addition to a general

misunderstanding of her Muslim faith, there was also a negative association because of inmates who had become Muslim as a part of the gang affiliations they were making in the prison. She said that Royals would understand these types of tensions better after she had been here for a while. She showed Royals the GED books for Language Arts and Writing sections. She explained and showed by example how to fill out the Wake Tech forms for Moose so that Wake Tech could account for the number of Polk students taught with the GED books and tested for the GED high school equivalency exam. She explained that it was most important to get the numbers correct so that Wake Tech would continue to receive funding for this programming.

She explained to Royals that most students had an easy time passing the Science, History and Math sections. It was the writing section of the test that was preventing many students from passing the GED. The language arts section became a stumbling block as well when students had to answer questions about grammar. The GED textbooks reminded Royals of grade school workbooks. They were very elementary and it became clear that the objective was to learn how to pass the test.

Royals was at her desk when the inmates arrived from their dorms. They came into the classroom in a single file line; the school guards—Pops and Mr. Kenan ushered them into the room, young men barely out of their teens. It was clear that they weren't thrilled to be at the school at this time of the morning but it was also clear that being here gave them something to do and having this new person—Royals—as a part of that something to do was worth the walk.

Inmates have a very specific smell. It is a distinct smell of industrial strength cleaners and soaps, of cigarette smoke, fear, depression, and desperation—it is the smell of

institutionalized living. The smell came into the room with the inmates. It wafted with them into the little room with yellowed windows and ugly brown stained carpets. Everyone looked at each other and no one spoke for a moment. Then Pops and Mr. Kenan left the trailer, the door shut tight behind them, and she listened to them going down the steps away from the trailer. She had no idea when they were coming back.

Ms. Harvey introduced Royals to the class and they stared at her while Ms. Harvey spoke. In particular one student in the back row stared hard at her throughout the next hour of painful attempts to engage them in discussion about how and what they were doing as far as the writing and language arts sections of the GED. Several of the men laid their heads down on the desk.

Royals began by telling them about herself, who she was, how she had recently moved from Chicago, and how excited she was to be here with them. Ms. Harvey let out a little laugh after this and Royals remembered “Maria and Dwight and the sound of music.” When she finished introducing herself, Ms. Harvey told them all to come and get their folders with their study books and get started on the prep tests in the book. Most of them got up to do this; those with their heads down on the desks stayed that way. The others started going through the tests, reading the sections and answering the questions. Ms. Harvey explained to Royals that this was the way that they worked. She told her that the days alternated between the language arts section and the writing section. Today was a language arts section day.

Royals watched them leaf through the books, close the books, play with the practice tests, talk to each other, check out, watch her and put their heads on the desks and sleep. One or two of them pulled old books off of the short bookshelves behind the desks and looked

through these—opening, closing, writing, and drawing. She looked at them, trying to remember their names as Ms. Harvey had called them out—Rodney, Joshua, Dexter, Michael, Jay, Donald, Oltha, and Neko.

Royals was responsible for teaching four blocks of students each day for an hour and a half each with a thirty minute break for lunch. She arrived at 7:30 am and left each day around 4 pm. About four weeks into teaching, she came to the conclusion one evening on the way home that spending all the time with them just to teach them how to pass the tests was a waste.

So, one day in class she posed a question and began writing their thoughts on the board. While her back was turned, one of the men started to discuss her ass and what he would do with that ass. Royals kept her face toward the board, not knowing whether to scream or cry or run. Something exploded for her though, because instead of doing any of those things, she whipped around and, losing it, she screamed: “You fucking disrespectful son of a bitch! This is my ass and nobody—not even my own god damn husband—talks about my ass like that! And so I am asking you, as civilly as I possibly can, to shut the fuck up!”

Well he did, in fact every single one of the men just kind of stared at her and several mouths just kind of fell open. Then they started laughing and calling the man out who had been talking behind her back—“oh man Ms. Royals slammed you—you just got yanked.” They were laughing and going off on him and then she started laughing with them. Actually they couldn’t stop. They just kept laughing. The event had brought them together somehow in a way that hadn’t been there before. Then the prison/school bell rang and they left. “That was great Ms. Royals.” “See you tomorrow Ms. Royals.”

On her way home from the prison she kept returning to the laughter and the way in which the treatment toward her had changed when she lost her composure. Their roles as teacher and student had been altered. They had performed differently in that moment. They had found laughter together. Now she had to find something to do with them, to be with them, to learn with them.

When Royals got home, she found a copy of Maya Angelou's book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Her mother had given her this book as a Christmas gift several years earlier. She knew the book's title had come from a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem, "Sympathy." She knew that the book was about finding voice, coming of age and learning to love self. She knew the poem. This was what she was going to teach her classes and so she made copies of the poem and brought that and the book to the next classes—to her students—to these young men—to these children.

With Dunbar's poem, they began a dialogue and something real began to happen. As a group they decided that they cared about learning. They turned the poem and something opened up. The poem shows what happens to a culture when it cannot overcome intolerance and prejudice, and pleads with its reader to speak out against the injustice that exists in their lives.

Every day at Polk Prison was an experience. Each moment, each day, each week changed. As students aged out they were shipped to Central Prison and Royals never saw them again. She might start working with a student on Monday and then by Friday that student was gone. She documented her time there in a journal that she carried in each day. The more she became a part of these men's lives, the less she focused on the research as the primary reason for her being there, and a relationship of respect slowly started to be

established. Royals was hired to teach students to write well enough to pass the GED. When she began the job, she was in over her head, without any clear definition as to what each day would hold. Working with this volatile population was a moment-to-moment spontaneous evolution of learning. Initially, the students were rebellious, disrespectful and generally frightening. The sexual comments and gestures were intimidating and threatening.

Time and again she was reminded of what she had been taught: teachers and students are not identical, and, as Freire wrote, it is the “difference between them that make them precisely students or teachers.” If they were identical, they would just be the same. If they were the same, what would come out of the relationship to one another that would render knowledge? (*Pedagogy of Hope*, 117)⁵

One day as Royals was in the copy room preparing for her classes, making copies, and sifting through old literature books for pages she had marked to share in class, she grew aware that one of the prison administrators had entered the room. He cleared his throat and she turned to look at him offering up a “good morning” and then turned back around to the copier. He continued to stand behind her and so she turned back to him, waiting to hear what he had to say. He wasn’t there to make copies; nothing was in his hands, except his coffee

⁵ “Dialogue between the two do not level them, does not even them out, reduce them to each other. Dialogue is not a favor done by one for the other, a kind of grace accorded. On the contrary, it implies a sincere, fundamental respect on the part of the subjects engaged in it, a respect that is violated, or prevented from materialism, by authoritarianism. Permissiveness does the same thing, in a different, but equally deleterious, way.

... There is no dialogue in ‘spontaneism’ any more than in the omnipotence of the teacher. But a dialogical relation does not, as is sometimes thought, rule out the possibility of the act of teaching. On the contrary, it founds these acts, which is completed and sealed in its correlative, the act of learning, and both become authentically possible only when the educator’s thinking, critical and concerned though it be, nevertheless refuses to ‘apply the brakes’ to the educand’s ability to think. On the contrary, both ‘thinkings’ become delivered over to the educand’s curiosity. If the educator’s thinking cancels, crushes or hinders the development of the educand’s thinking, then the educator’s thinking being authoritarian, tends to generate in the educands upon whom it impinges a timid, inauthentic, sometimes even merely rebellious thinking” (Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 117).

mug. He was superbly dressed, finely manicured and meticulously combed. “So you’re the teacher,” he said. “Yes,” she replied. He stared down on her for a moment, took a sip of his coffee and then said, “I don’t know why you spend so much time investing in the education of these people. They will continue to return to prison and that continued return is my job security. That is just the way the system works.” She did not respond to him. She picked up her things and left.

An education revolution is possible if the state recognizes its responsibility to the education system. Bert O. States’s book, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, discusses the moments of understanding, growth, and education that can happen even on the smallest stage. The little classroom there at the prison became a room that held out the potential for a place of reckoning—learning and dialoguing—a place where “something is brought forth” (2).

In early March of 1997, Royals learned that she was pregnant. When she called the OB/GYN doctors in Raleigh, they suggested that since her first son had been so easy, she should wait a couple of months before she came in for an appointment. She scheduled the appointment for mid-May and continued the work with her students. Their work together was becoming more productive. She had been able to get permission to bring in and show the 1981 documentary about Bob Marley’s life, *The Color Purple* film, and the Baz Luhrmann *Romeo and Juliet* with Leonardo Dicaprio. She scheduled the showing of these films to coincide with reading of *The Color Purple*, Shakespeare, and the history of the Harlem Renaissance.



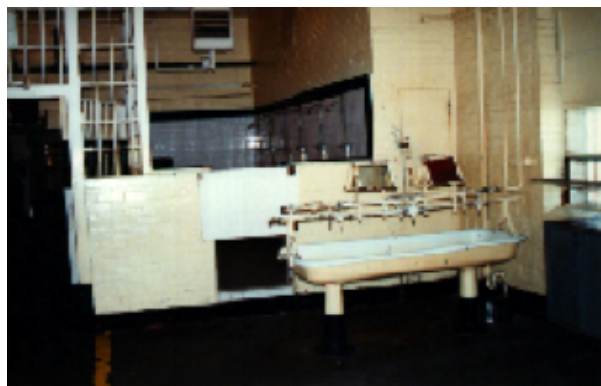
A correctional officer in a security tower greeted visitors to the old Polk Youth Institution on Blue Ridge Road in Raleigh.



The tower officer used a remote control to open the security gate and visitors entered the prison walking down a long sidewalk between two high security fences along Blue Ridge Road.



Officer's desk between the two dormitories.



Bathrooms and showers

Figure 1: Polk Youth Prison

Source: <http://www.doc.state.nc.us/DOP/Polk/op5.htm>



Bunks in the main two dorm building



Segregation cells



Entrance to segregation.



Classroom Trailer, in front of prison facing

Figure 2: Polk Youth Prison

<http://www.doc.state.nc.us/DOP/Polk/op5.htm>



Medical/Dental Trailer, behind school offices. This trailer was also used as a classroom trailer.



Maintenance Shed at Old Polk.

Figure 3: Polk Youth Prison

Source: <http://www.doc.state.nc.us/DOP/Polk/op5.htm>

Early one May morning around 4, she was startled awake by incredible pain in her abdomen. Royals got up and realized that she was bleeding but not in massive amounts. She called the OB/GYN doctors and the nurse on call told her that she was probably having a miscarriage and to come into the office when it opened. Her husband was out of town and her son was asleep. She called Polk at 7 am and told them that she was ill and wouldn't be in and then, at 9 am, she called the doctor's office again and got herself scheduled in to see one of the midwives that worked for the practice. She woke up her son and packed his backpack with toys and snacks. He wanted some fruit roll-ups, so, on the way to the doctor, she stopped by Harris Teeter and picked up some for him. The pain was excruciating by this time and she was having a hard time breathing and walking. When she arrived at the office and

got into see the midwife, her breathing had become even more labored. The midwife told her that indeed she was having a miscarriage, suggested that she lie down on the couch in the office, and gave her some Motrin for the pain. Royals lay there for about a half hour waiting for the pain to subside. The midwife came in to check on her and Royals told her she needed go to the bathroom. As she walked to the bathroom her body began to sweat. There was more blood than before and sweat was rolling off her body profusely. The midwife looked at her oddly as Royals made her way back.

The midwife called in one of the doctors at the practice. He went in to see Royals and without doing another examination, he sent her to the emergency room located near the offices. Royals didn't understand what was going on; the midwife was getting the numbers of her sisters and promising to get her son taken care of. People were trying to get in touch with her husband. She was on the way to the ER and then there was a whole series of emergency tests. At this point she could no longer stand the pain and was beginning to pass out. Someone placed her body on a stretcher and she was wheeled into an operating room where tubes were inserted down her throat. The last thing she remembered was thinking, "Why are my arms tied out to the sides of my body"?

She woke up later in a recovery room. Her sister was there with her son. Her throat was hoarse and she couldn't make words. Her sister rubbed her head telling her that everything was okay, that she had an ectopic pregnancy, that it had been misdiagnosed, that emergency surgery had been necessary, that she was lucky to be alive, and that her husband was on his way. Three days later she was out of the hospital and sleeping quietly in her bedroom. It was Mother's Day and her mother was there to take care of her. Her mom had placed honeysuckles beside her bed and their fragrance filled the room. Beside the

honeysuckles was a stack of letters telling her to get better. The letters had beautiful drawings and the words on them spoke about how Royals was missed and that she was being prayed for—the letters were from her students at Polk. About two weeks later Royals returned to work.

While students came and went based on age and crimes committed, there was a core group who were with her for a while. Several of her students began to successfully complete the GED tests. During the year and a half that she was their teacher, they achieved a 60% increase in passing the writing and language arts sections of the GED.

About midsummer, months after she lost the baby, everyone at the Old Polk Youth Prison learned that the prison was going to be torn down. Staff and inmates were to be relocated to the new supermax prison in Oxford, North Carolina. The New Polk would open by early November 1997. In September Royals was asked to visit the new Polk with Mr. McCoy and Ms. Upperman. They asked her to move with the teaching staff to the new facility, about an hour from her home.

She drove to Oxford and toured the facility. The new prison's living quarters had no big windows where you could see and hear the world outside. The new facility had slits instead of windows. The classrooms were a little better with small windows, which looked out over the heavily barricaded prison yard with multiple guard stations. Everything in the prison was attached to the floor or the wall. Royals returned to the Old Polk that afternoon, to her little room, her trailer—with a heavy heart. The demands of an hour drive each way and making sure that her son got to his first grade class on time would be too much. Before she left that day she sat down with Mr. McCoy and told him that she wouldn't be able to move with them when they went to the New Polk. He asked her if she would stay with them until

the transition and help to get the classes started and she agreed. In early November they began to move her students to the new location; she continued to work with the ones who remained behind. Slowly the numbers at the Old Polk youth prison dwindled and after Thanksgiving her classes came to a close. Before the last day of class, Mr. McCoy asked if she would come to the New Polk and give the graduation speech for the students who had successfully passed all sections of the GED and would be receiving high school diplomas. She agreed and in the first week of December 1997, she stood in front of her students giving a graduation speech in the day room at the New Polk. Many of her students had parents and family members there that day. After they each received a diploma, there was music and then a small reception for families. The young men were escorted out as the reception began. Royals watched her students leaving, knowing that she might never see some of them again. As she stood there watching them leave, a thin older woman with wispy grey hair and blue eyes came up to her. She introduced herself as the mother of one of the graduates. She took Royals' hand and looked into her face and began to cry. Royals stood there holding her hand, not really knowing what to say. The woman finally pulled herself together and simply said—"don't ever stop doing what you do."

Playing Freeze Tag in Slow Motion at Central Prison, 2000–2001

A week after graduation at Polk, Royals found out that she was pregnant again. She miscarried the baby before New Year's. A short time later, someone from North Carolina Central Prison called to ask her about creating a program that would incorporate performance as she had done at the Old Polk. She said she was willing, but nothing came of that. In the meantime, Moose asked her if she would continue to work with Wake Tech by teaching

creative writing classes at Raleigh Rescue Mission, a homeless shelter in downtown Raleigh and Royals agreed.

The work she did with the men she worked with both at Polk Youth Prison and then continued at Raleigh Rescue Mission was similar to that of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, incorporating artwork, music and movement into performance. The work she did with the homeless men at Raleigh Rescue Mission was also presented to the public in a chapel across the street from a park where many of them had lived while they were homeless. The performance was free to the public and they passed the hat to collect a monetary contribution which was given to the mission to support its work.

The next few years, 1998 through 2000, were busy ones for Royals. She began new arts and theater projects at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. She continued teaching creative writing at the Raleigh Rescue Mission where she also started a “food share” program for the neighboring communities around the mission. She was hired as the managing director of Raleigh Ensemble Players, an avant-garde theater company situated in downtown Raleigh. She directed the first show for “Applause!” a newly-formed children’s theater company in nearby Cary. The town of Cary then hired her on a part time basis to develop its programming and provide the production structure for all its artistic work. And she continued to prepare a series of classes and workshops that she hoped to teach at Central Prison when and if the project actually materialized.

She also gave birth to her second son, Noah, who was born on her birthday in 1998. After losing two babies and miscarrying the twin that she carried with Noah, she decided that this must all have been in God’s plan. The day that Noah was born, every one of her students from Raleigh Rescue Mission figured out a way to get a bus pass to come down and see the

new baby. The following year, Father Dan Kenna encouraged her to create the Arts for Justice Ministry at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church.

Then, in October 2000, after several months of planning and clearing her schedule, when Royals finally met with staff at Central Prison who had asked her to develop an arts program. When she was allowed inside, the tangled web of hallways, passage ways, elevators and stairs she was taken through reminded her of the maze of concrete and gates at Polk. She was guided past kitchens, medical health rooms, prayer halls, mail rooms, administrative offices, and caged areas for the segregated population. At the core of the labyrinth, she may have glimpsed the circle of cells containing inmates sentenced to death.

Royals was three months pregnant when she started her work at Central Prison. Based on the work she had done at Polk Prison, Central's manager of special programs asked her to provide workshops that would open up a creative, safe opportunity for selected inmates to both write and speak about their lives, histories, and crimes. The manager thought this would benefit these inmates in their "rehabilitation" process. Royals' intent was to witness, experience, and continue research on how performance works in the prison setting. Several of her students from Polk Youth Prison had been incarcerated at Central Prison when they turned 21. Royals wanted to know about this prison. The young men at Polk had often talked about Central Prison as if it was the "emerald city" destination. This was the place where the real men went, as they aged out of Polk. For those with more severe crimes and long sentences, Central Prison is an inevitable destination. As a part of her continued research, it was logical to work at Central Prison. Before the first class, she was required to take a tour of the prison. Like the tour of Polk Youth Prison, this one was complete: every area of the prison was covered, including a visit to old death row and, as the final stop, the new death

row. Royals went into the tiny witness room with one large window located behind the room where the executions take place. She also went into the rooms where those being executed spend their last days and final hours.

When the tour was completed, she was taken up to the room where the classes would be held each week. The workshops would happen in a small room on the center of the third floor in the main area of the prison. It was in close proximity to the elevator. Its cinder block walls were painted a faded cream color. Three were solid. The fourth wall was broken by the single door and by industrialized windows that looked out to the elevators. The dirty brown concrete floor was scratched and worn from years of use. There were various types of odd chairs and tables up against the walls around the periphery of the room. Broken electrical outlets stuck up out of the floor in the center of the room, as well as along the back wall and the window side. On the table by the door there was a broken phone with a long connecting cord dangling over its side. Inscribed on the buttons of the phone were various bits of information for the offices and rooms that they used to connect to: medical, dental, segregation, canteen and dining hall. There were other random articles/things strewn around the room—including clipboards, pens, and empty Styrofoam cups. The men who had received permission to participate in the program were escorted to the room by two completely uniformed armed guards. The men in her class ranged in age from 23 to 67 years. The majority of them were black. The oldest man was white: he had been in Central Prison for about 20 years. Royals again recognized the distinct smell of prison; blends of detergent, smoke, and time. They were dressed in maximum security grey with matching shirts and white t-shirts underneath. They wore white sneakers without laces. Each time the group met, the men arrived in the same outfits and the landscape of the room never changed.

She met with the men twice a week until the birth of her baby drew near, and then she had to limit it to once a week. She worked with the men to create performative writing, encourage participation in Boalian theater games, weave together scripts and talk about the ways in which the scripts and writing could be adapted into performance for members of the prison population.

A week or two before her due date, she slowly took her body into the prison to the little meeting room where she held class. Her body had changed significantly from the first class. Her ankles no longer existed, she couldn't wear her wedding band because her fingers were swollen and she easily got out of breath as she trudged along the halls, and passageways, through security, ID check, up the elevator and to the room. Royals began the work on that particular evening as they always did—with Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal games to warm up and awaken minds. They had completed a series of Boalian exercises when they began one of their favorite games, the Spolin slow motion freeze tag game. The objective is to avoid being caught by the "it" while moving the body in a deliberately measured way to stay out of "its" reach ... bodies moving through space in an obstacle laden room. The men's experience of the exercise included the navigation through an obstacle course of the protruding outlets, weaving around random chairs and tables in the room, avoiding the arbitrary Styrofoam cup forgotten on the floor. Royals was participating in the exercise with them and then without warning, she lost her balance. Unprepared for this she began to fall forward. It was inevitable that she was going to hit the floor. Then a hand grabbed her body and stopped the fall. The man wrapped his arms around her body, under her breasts and pulled her back to his chest, then he steered her body to the closest chair and settled her safely down into the chair. Everything and everybody stopped. The guards froze;

the inmates watching through the window outside the room froze. Nothing moved. Slowly, everyone began to breath again.

Shortly after her third son was born, Central Prison cancelled all her programming. They had finished work on a new exercise area.

Creating the Arts for Justice Ministry, 1999–2004

Two years earlier, in 1999, when Dan Kenna invited her to create the Arts for Justice Ministry at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, they sought to use the performing and visual arts as a way to intentionally engage people in a conversation around important “issues of social concern.” The Arts for Justice Ministry was inspired by Saint Francis’s example of seeking out ways to bring people closer to Christ using performance (as he did when he celebrated Christ’s birth with live animals in a stable in Greccio) (Cunningham, 73–77, 134–135). It was rooted in Liberation theology and Catholic social teaching. These are productive guides to living what Paolo Freire articulates as a “climate of hope” (Freire 1995). “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel,” and of the Franciscan mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation (*Justice in the World*).

The ministry engaged a number of projects between 1999 and 2003. These included assisting Royals with the original performance work that grew out of the creative writing classes at the Raleigh Rescue Mission, participating in programming (including dance) at the Raleigh Correctional Center for Women, writing to people who were living on North

Carolina's death row, creating visual art that was displayed at Saint Francis during Pentecost⁶ weekends, volunteering at the summer theater camps and participating in the events and prayer services that were scheduled throughout the liturgical year for the Catholic church.

The Arts for Justice Ministry was intended to provide a way for socially minded artists attending St. Francis to reach out and address social needs that were urgent or chronic, and the ministry grew through efforts to meet those outside exigencies. One of its expanding projects was an annual children's summer theater camp for the parishioners and surrounding neighborhood at Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church that Royals formed and managed as demand for it grew. These summer camps have been offered every year since 1999. They remained part of the Arts for Justice Ministry until 2004, when they were moved up under the umbrella of The Justice Theater Project. The curriculum always included yoga, dance, art, and creative drama. Over the years, Royals found better ways to structure the classes to help children stay focused.⁷

Royals encouraged anyone interested in being a part of Arts for Justice to become a part of the ministry's existing projects, including those that were happening at the Raleigh Rescue Mission, Halifax Court public housing complex, in St. Francis's summer theater camps for children, or liturgical dance.

⁶ Pentecost is a holy day in the Catholic Church that celebrates the spirit pouring down on the disciples of Jesus and empowering them to take this truth into the world.

⁷ Mask work, one of the practices Royals treasured from her undergraduate training, is a part of the curriculum at these camps. This wonderfully messy experience affords the child different ways of viewing herself and the children around her. Masks and the characters that the children produce make productive ways for them to express ideas and thoughts that might not otherwise emerge. Mask exercises have been especially useful with "at risk" marginalized communities. Even when a language barrier separates them from their teacher, children can engage with the process of mask making; the exercises provide them with nonverbal means to create expression and share feelings.

She was asked, in the summer of 2001, to become a part of the Liturgy Portfolio at Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. One of the directives of the group was to work through the Vatican II Documents: she was assigned the sections on liturgical music and dance. She and the others she worked with came to understand how the ways the church worshiped had changed since the 1960s. Discovering how the documents related to the way the mass was now celebrated provided her with insights into her own “Catholic Identity” and, in particular, to the importance within it of music and movement, and made her aware that the Catholic Church could change. It was around this time she also participated in eight months of “Just Faith” education workshops that provided her with a much better foundation in the areas of Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology.

When the Arts for Justice Ministry began, its purpose was to use performance as a way of intentionally engaging people in conversations around important issues of social concern. The death penalty and its effect on the community was a very specific concern for many people here in North Carolina. It was the execution of Henry Hunt that moved the ministry to do something more.

**A Prayer for Henry Hunt,
September 11, 2003**

Beginning in 2002, Royals had taken several members of the Arts for Justice Ministry with her into the Raleigh Correctional Center for Women to work with 26 women inmates to create performances that included dance. On September 11, 2003, members of this group including women from the prison took part in a memorial prayer service at St. Francis commemorating the events surrounding the attacks two years earlier.



Figure 4: Henry Hunt (Executed September 12, 2003)

<http://www.clarkprosecutor.org/html/death/US/hunt875.htm>

Royals was sitting on a pew at the back The prayer service had been a blend of music, prayers, liturgical dance woven together; breathing together in that moment and that place. When it ended, Dan Kenna stood up to make a final comment.

“Please keep Henry Hunt in your prayers tonight,” he said.

The State of North Carolina had scheduled the execution of Henry Hunt for 2:00 am the next morning. Dan told those present that Henry Hunt was from Robeson County and that he had lived a hard life, sold drugs, loved his family and had great pride in his Lumbee roots. Yellow, the color for unconditional love was Henry’s spiritual color. In 1984 Henry was convicted of slaying Jackie Ransom for \$2,000 at the direction of Ransom’s wife, Dottie Ransom, who planned to cash in her husband’s \$25,000 insurance policy. A few days later, police informant Larry Jones, who had been talking to police about the Ransom killing, was murdered. Henry was convicted in his death as well. Henry maintained his innocence from the time of his arrest and passed two lie detector tests.

Henry Hunt was not a personal friend; he was not a member of her family; and she had never had a conversation with him. Yet she and the other members of the Arts for Justice Ministry member who were there at the September 11, 2003 prayer service were deeply moved that night. They watched Dan emotionally share this prayer request. While the members of the ministry had worked on several types of projects to bring awareness to people about the use of death penalty in North Carolina and the way in which it was in opposition to their faith, as they talked following the service on this night before Henry's execution they came to see that these projects had been more passive than active. Following the execution of Henry Hunt, the death penalty became the focus of the ministry's work. The use of the death penalty in North Carolina was beginning to receive a fair amount of push back from a broader portion of the community. Royals realized that this was an opportune moment to open up a discourse about the use of the death penalty and wanted the Arts For Justice Ministry to be a part of this discussion.

**Producing *A Lesson Before Dying*,
2004**

Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Raleigh North Carolina had a long history of involvement in matters of social justice. Paul Ahmrein was the director of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) ministries at the time of Henry Hunt's execution by lethal injection. The JPIC ministries, which included the Arts for Justice Ministry, were ministries at St Francis that had been formed to address and raise awareness of advocacy efforts on social justice topics and Catholic Social Teaching and supply resources for ongoing education. Following Henry's execution, Royals went to Ahmrein and discussed with him the possibility of doing *A Lesson Before Dying*, a theatrical play based on the book

by Earnest J. Gaines and adapted by Romulus Linney for the stage, as a way to spark a conversation about the death penalty and its effects on people here in North Carolina at St. Francis. They worked together to obtain the rights for the piece, and as soon as they succeeded, they began planning the rehearsal schedule and performance dates. Royals went to people that she had been working with in the Triangle theater community and asked specific folks who were appropriate for the roles if they would be interested in doing the show. Paul secured funding for the piece from the Justice and Peace ministries at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. The show would happen in the main church and they received permission from Father Dan to do the show on the altar.



Figure 5: Confrontational seating at St. Francis

Photo by Deb Royals

St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in north Raleigh is not like the traditional cathedrals of Catholicism past. The church is constructed of cinder block walls, translucent windows, and exposed-beam ceilings. The design of the church was intended to put the focus

on people who are there in the church attending as opposed to statues or elaborate stained glass. To that end, the pews are staggered in what is referred to as confrontational seating so that people attending events or parishioners attending services have nowhere to hide. The hope was to keep folks from being distracted by the surroundings and instead confront the altar and one another.

In the spring of 2004, in advance of the vote for a North Carolina moratorium on executions and in conjunction with People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, whose mission is to “to educate and mobilize faith communities to act to abolish the death penalty in the United States” and The North Carolina Council of Churches, the ministry produced *A Lesson Before Dying*. Performances began in the midst of the breaking news that Alan Gell, an inmate living on North Carolina’s Death Row, was innocent. Ahead of the performance, Megan Nerz, a member of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church and an experienced marketing research director, was able to arrange for Royals to be on WUNC’s “The State of Things” with host Frank Stacio on March 16, 2004. *A Lesson Before Dying*’s playwright Romulus Linney and local visual artist Elin O’Hara Slavick were also invited guests on the program. The four of them discussed how the arts can contribute to conversations about issues of social concern.

A Lesson Before Dying was presented in the church on March 5, 2004. On that Friday night, following the WUNC’s radio show’s airing, over 700 people showed up to attend the performance and be a part of the discussion that followed. The first discussion was an informal Q&A with Royals, Ahmrein, the audience, the actors and the design team. It was riveting. There was an amazing amount of information exchanged that night about the death penalty, its history, and about recently executed death row inmates including Henry Hunt.

Those involved in the show were asked over and over when a second performance would happen. While making plans for that, they started talking about creating a theater. Nerz wanted to call it the Justice Theater Company. Royals accepted the emphasis on justice, but suggested “Project” instead, so that it would be a happening, in progress, alive, evolving, involving ongoing connections.

Megan Nerz became highly involved with the work and together with Ahmrein and Royals was able to schedule a second performance in the cafeteria of the Franciscan School on the campus of St. Francis. Shortly after the second performance, Nerz and Royals received permission from Cardinal Gibbons High School to use its space to stage a third performance.

Intervening in *A Lesson Before Dying*, 2004

Alan Gell had heard about the play through his lawyer Mary Pollard. Pollard worked with Nerz, Ahmrein, and Royals to facilitate a way for him to speak after the performance at Gibbons. The media had been tracking Gell and knew that he was going to attend the production that afternoon. Alan and his mother wanted to get out ahead of this frenzy and so he and his mom made plans with Royals and Nerz to arrive early. They walked into the building with a quiet grace and approached Royals asking if they could enter the theater and sit for a while before folks started arriving. By the time the commotion started, Alan and his mom had been in their seats for about an hour. Many entering the theater that day looking for him didn’t even know what he looked like. The play began and the gut-wrenching story began to unfold in front of everyone there. At intermission Alan asked to speak before the

second act because he did not feel he would be able to speak at the end. He knew where this story was going.

It was in deciding to be respectful and listen to Alan Gell's request to share in that moment that the company began. Letting go and leaning into that moment was in step with Dwight Conquergood's way of being in and with the people. Alan Gell had lived on death row, with men who had the same feelings about life and themselves as the one being portrayed in the production. Alan understood what it meant to be a subordinate. He had known what it meant to not "have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted" (Conquergood, "Performance Studies" 36). Living on death row was NOT a place of privilege. When Royals and Nerz agreed to his request, they made a way for everyone there that day to hear and think about a personal and real truth—his truth based on his experiences and his knowledge with regard to the realities of life on Death Row at North Carolina's Central Prison.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the character facing the death penalty, Jefferson, asks, "if I look deep in me, it'll make my writin' better?" Alan's courage asked the audience to do the same, to look "deep in you." Looking deep within might make people better. Performance can make a safe place where this might happen (Linney 46).

Listening to Alan's request and allowing him to intervene before the end of the story, to engage the audience and make present the men he had lived with on death row "relocated" the audience, exposing them to the death row through the experience of the play and then even further through the performance of his testimony. Alan stopped the flow of how the performance was going to unfold and he changed the outcome—his intervention forced all to

stop, to listen, to consider and to reflect—he changed the way that the people would experience the end of the play and in so doing he shifted the way that some would think about death row. He made a way for people to experience the end of this story with clearer understanding of the realities that frame it. His intervention was documented by the audience and by members of the press.

This production marked the beginning for the company and simultaneously laid the groundwork for the ways in which the company would operate. *A Lesson Before Dying* was intentionally selected because of the possibility that it could contribute to the conversation about the death penalty and its practice in North Carolina. Gell's presence helped the company understand how intentional focus can be brought to each project or performance and create conversations integral to the performance's work.

Gell was the company's first facilitator of discussion around an issue of social concern. His participation with the company had a strong effect. The story of the young black man convicted of murder and the repercussions of this in *A Lesson Before Dying* were too close to the truths of many of the men Alan had come to know and respect. His witness before the audience there made these men and their lives present. His testimony attached humanity to the men living on North Carolina's death row and this affected people. The predominant response at the end of the performance was tears and silence as people made their way out of the theater. Because of the way in which the play is written there is no way to turn away from the raw reality of the execution. In the weeks that followed, the response grew and people from St Francis and other churches began to ask Royals and Nerz for more. The news coverage and reviews of the work also created an interest from the broader

community. People were seeking ways to make sense of their experience of the show and to deepen their understanding of the death penalty and killing in the name of justice.

Alan admitted that yes, many of the men whom he had been living with on death row were guilty of murder, but he also believed that some might very likely be innocent. Some people are just in the wrong place at the wrong time or they are the wrong color. He said that “Most of the children who become prison inmates grow up in poverty, ill-educated (some have low IQs), and become addicted to alcohol and drugs after being abused and neglected by parents and relations who themselves often have little education, have suffered physical, sexual, verbal and psychological abuse at the hands of people they trusted, and are frequently addicts” (Royals, Field Notes).

A Lesson Before Dying was performed again in Alan Gell’s home town of Dunn in May. It was reviewed by the *Independent Weekly* of Durham and received the first five stars rating for theater work in the area from this publication. Megan Nerz, in a press release, had told the Independent’s reviewer that they were thinking about creating a company called “The Justice Theater Project.” He mentioned the name in his review even though at that point, all there was behind it was an excited group of actors and supporters and a single production (Woods, “A Necessary Lesson”).

Energized by the way *Lesson* had shaken the community, work to create the company began in earnest: in March 2004, Nerz and Royals completed articles of incorporation and bylaws, and they identified and invited people with important skills, experience, and connections to join the new organization as board members. They received 501(c)(3) non-for-profit status by mid summer. The Justice Theater Project was officially begun—a social

justice theater company that would use performance as a way to encourage discourse around issues of social concern.

In the Boalian model of Forum Theater, a short original script usually focused on a theme or issue is created with a group. When it has been fully prepared in rehearsal it is then presented in performance to an audience. One of the key components of this performance includes the “joker” who is the person who facilitates the forum. The joker is typically portrayed as playful, inviting and open. The joker explains how the Forum will work, explaining terms and leading the audience in a series of exercises to warm them up to the experience. The joker manages the pace and facilitates discussion. Once the performance of the script has been presented straight through once, then the “joker” tells the audience that the piece is going to start again, but this second time through, the audience will be able to stop the action, at moments where they feel it is necessary, and step into the play to shift an outcome for the protagonist. In these “interventions,” an audience member volunteers to step in and shift the outcome of the scene. This happens several times through the replay of the script and, each time, the intervention moment is given a title and, each time, there is shift in the outcome of the scenes that the volunteers step into, becoming what Boal calls “spect-actors” (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 43–50, 56, 64–65, 237–238).

Alan Gell was both actor and audience member that afternoon. He stepped into a scripted event and shifted the outcome that the audience would have as they experienced the end of the play. His witness in front of everyone, including members of the media, became what Boal might call an “intervention moment.” Moving from the spectator to spect-actor, he helped the audience to experience the end of the “Lesson Before Dying” story with a clearer understanding of the realities that frame the issue of the death penalty.

In Boal's dramatic system the Forum's aim is "to create a safe place where people feel free to exchange their story and look for solutions" (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 179). The audience is given permission to step onto the stage and into the drama with the intent to share different outcomes and possibly advance productive ways of thinking about and shifting particular issues of social concern. Alan was aware of the way in which the story was going to unfold. He knew that his own response to this end was going to be fragile at best. He was seeking a way to provide insight that might lead to action. In making the choice to intervene, Alan made a way for the audience to think about the end differently and possibly be activated to new understanding about the death penalty.

Our histories are integral to understanding why we become the people we become. Royals' story is not an extraordinary one; however, the way the pieces fell into place clearly indicate the path she seems to have been destined to travel.

"There is a story here," as Dwight Conquergood commented on the paper he returned to her in July 1995. Royals learned to be respectful and listen as modeled by Dwight. His example led Royals and those who worked with her to open a space for Alan Gell and others. In the years that followed, they would work to create performance projects with pedagogy that renders constructive discourses around issues of social concern.

CHAPTER 3. INFANCY: INCORPORATION AND *STILL ... LIFE*

The very nature of organizing is inherently political, including questions of power distribution. The dynamics of traveling through success and failure can be instructive in regard to the pedagogy of community-based agencies. The history of Justice Theater Project is performative, political, and full of struggles. The work to create a legitimate theater company is massive. There is money to be raised, papers to be filled out, documents to be created and people to be brought on board. Despite these struggles the two women who founded the company persisted and “instead of becoming frustrated by these struggles . . . [viewed them as] “essential and productive” (Papa, Singhal, and Papa, 62). Megan Nerz and Deb Royals remained resolutely committed to the creation of a performance company that has made a difference in discourses and opinions in regard to some of the immediate issues of social concern in the central North Carolina community.

Incorporating Justice Theater Project, 2004

Following the production of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Nerz and Royals completed articles of incorporation and successfully submitted the company’s 501(c)(3) papers. They completed By-Laws, filed for and received North Carolina tax exempt status, purchased business insurance (commercial general liability coverage) and held the company’s first fundraiser in June 2004, which raised over \$20,000. The two women also started using QuickBooks as a way to monitor and track finances. The company set up bank accounts,

applied for and received bankcards that could be used for company purchases. They also created the first operating budget for the company.

Shortly after the fundraiser, they began to put together a board. In an effort to address every need of a small not-for-profit, they developed a list of key people that they felt would be integral to the company as it began. The two women carefully identified potential board members who represented expertise in the financial, legal, public relations, marketing and artistic areas. Throughout the 2004 summer months, they met with these people and discussed this new company, its emerging mission and the visions for its programming future.

By August of 2004, Nerz and Royals had a strong board in place composed of incredibly gifted individuals with robust work ethics: Tim Thronson, a partner at Price Waterhouse Cooper; Father Dan Kenna of St Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, Mary Pollard, a lawyer at Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice; Keith Loughlin, a Financial Advisor at Wells Fargo Bank; and Jeanne Tedrow, the Executive Director at Passage Home Incorporated. Three were immediately integral to the formation of the company. Tim Thronson's experience and understanding of non-for-profit applications proved helpful in applying for the company's 501(c)(3) status, although the whole process took almost a year. Father Dan Kenna helped to solidify the use of much needed space on his church's campus. And Mary Pollard, Alan Gell's lawyer, was a key resource as the work around the death penalty continued (Royals, *The Justice Theater Project Board Contact Information*).

In addition to completing the work necessary to make a company official, Nerz and Royals began to work on making the Arts for Justice Ministry's summer theater camp for children part of The Justice Theater Project program. In an effort to make the camp more

official, they completed paperwork and programming descriptions. They created standard contracts for staff, counselors and junior counselors. They generated new budgets that would better track enrollment, expenses and income. Linking the new organization to a much-admired, years-old community resource provided JTP with a sound funding source, and helped to streamline Royals' work: rather than splitting her attention between two jobs for two organizations, she could now focus on being Artistic Director for the company and all its offerings.

In September 2004, with incorporation and finances in place, Nerz and Royals turned to designing the JTP logo, the organization/program literature, and the first season brochure. The women then began work on what would be the company's next two production projects. They contracted actors, designers and musicians for each, and contracted with venues for both shows. They created a marketing strategy and timeline for each production and sent press releases to all media outlets discussing the new company and its upcoming work.

JTP's first season, 2004–2005

The Justice Theater Project produced its second show in November 2004. The piece, entitled *Nickel and Dimed, on not getting by in America*, was adapted for stage by Joan Holden (formerly the principal playwright for the San Francisco Mime Troupe) from the book by Barbara Ehrenreich. It is the story of the working poor who just barely scrape by cleaning houses, waiting tables, and re-stocking shelves across America. The play chronicles Barbara Ehrenreich's real-life experience spending several months working different low wage jobs and trying to make ends meet on what she earns. JTP presented five performances of the show at Cary Academy, which it was able to rent with funds from an anonymous

donor who had seen the production of *A Lesson Before Dying* and wanted to support the work of the company. The programming for this production included town hall forums, talk-back discussions, and a round table event. The round table event, titled “Barely Surviving,” featured several scenes from the show and a panel of community leaders, along with the playwright, who discussed issues faced by low-wage workers in America. This production of *Nickled and Dimed* garnered high praise. In his review, Alan Hall wrote:

This remarkable cast made it work on a stage as very nearly empty as a Shakespearean set, with characterizations that made us care for these individuals and want to do more for them. An excellent play has been written for an excellent reason, and it is bare-faced, direct and completely impossible to ignore.

Shortly following the close of this show, the first Justice Theater Project board meeting took place, on Saturday, December 11, 2004. At this meeting, the staff and board members began to work on the plans for JTP’s future. Specific actions that took place at this board meeting were: 1) a discussion regarding the role and responsibility of a non-for-profit board; 2) a vote to approve the mission statement; 3) a vote on adopting the strong theater camp Royals had created as a part of the Arts for Justice Ministry as an official part of The Justice Theater Project company; 4) a discussion of how the company would achieve financial growth, including timelines and strategies; and 5) a discussion on the importance of educational programming for each project and how this was going to be achieved. To achieve financial growth and continued recognition for the company, everyone felt that strategic planning should happen in three different areas: Social Justice, Art, and Marketing. The board also began a financial plan. (Figure 6 lists the objectives and goals that the board agreed to that day.)

<p style="text-align: center;">Social Justice Objectives</p> <p>To create programs and design productions with a critical connection to the seven key themes of Catholic Social teaching:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life and Dignity of the Human Person • Call to Family, Community, and Participation • Human Rights and Responsibilities • Option for the Poor and Vulnerable • The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers • Solidarity • Care for God's Creation <p>Through a unique theater experience, to build the community's understanding of the need to build a just society despite the challenges of modern society.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Artistic Goals and Objectives</p> <p>To provide an ongoing series of experiences that stir, inspire, and awaken the community socially and creatively; and present challenging ideas that force participants to confront life's extremes and explore issues at the heart of human experience.</p> <p>Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To continue to develop revenue generating programming and to support main stage productions and other artistic endeavors. • To sustain the number of main stage productions in the 2005 season. • To introduce staged readings and small group discussions with the SFA Social Concerns ministry and other educational institutions and social organizations. • To present select scenes from "The Grapes of Wrath" at the United Arts Council Symposium in order to sell the show to the Triangle public schools. • To provide sample performances (i.e. Witness and the MLK Center) to educational institutions and organizations.)
<p style="text-align: center;">Financial Objectives</p> <p>To develop a stable financial base of operation.</p> <p>Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase funding by at least 50%. • To increase corporate and individual contributions by at least 30-50%. • To meet all financial obligations for the fiscal year of 2005. • To continue to grow the current revenue stream (summer camp) and to explore new opportunities to create revenue to support programs and productions. • To increase funding by applying for appropriate grants to supplement and underwrite the costs of productions and programming. • Ticket pricing goal: to maintain low ticket prices so people from all socioeconomic levels can experience theater/grow in social consciousness. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Marketing Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase awareness of who we are and what we do. • To increase the size of our audiences and participants in educational forums. • To gain recognition among social organizations and educational institutions in order to set up performances/tours and partnerships. • To increase media coverage of JTP productions, programs and artistic/social justice projects

Figure 6: Objectives and goals agreed to at initial Justice Theater Project Board Meeting

(Reproduced from board presentation by Deb Royals and Megan L. Nerz, December 11, 2004)

Soon after the first company board meeting, Royals began to work on the third production of the company. *Witness*, adapted by John Urquhart, is a historical play based on Newbery Award winner Karen Hesse's book of the same name. Using real events, Hesse told a story of the Ku Klux Klan in a small town in Vermont in 1924. This stunning piece of little-known American history paints small town America on the brink of self-destruction. When the show was presented in February 2005 at Cardinal Gibbons High School Performing Arts Theater, the reviewer for *Classical Voice of North Carolina* wrote, "What this play gives us, then, is a sort of horror dropped into a place alien to it, a sort of Native Son Meets Our Town. The result is shockingly direct and amazingly subtle" (Hall). In addition to the performances, the company presented a selection of scenes from *Witness* in conjunction with the annual Martin Luther King Celebration, in advance of a town hall meeting that included multiple organizations from the Raleigh area to discuss what faith leaders, business leaders, and the media should do to help the community think beyond tolerance and complacency. JTP also presented a special community forum at St. Francis around the issues of racism and bigotry, where esteemed theologian Stanley M. Hauerwas spoke on how people of faith should respond to acts of hatred and hostility in the world today. People who attended the performances of *Witness* were asked to take a "Vow of Non Violence." The JTP sent over one hundred of these signed pledges to Pax Christi, an international Catholic peace movement.

Following the production of *Witness*, Nerz and Royals began to plan for the 2006 season. That plan was to produce and create programming for *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, *Exonerated* by Erik Jensen and Jessica Blank, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* adapted for stage by Frank Galati. After selecting these three pieces, the

two women submitted a grant to fund these projects to Holy Name Province, an evangelical missionary fraternity located in New York that is rooted in Catholic and Franciscan traditions⁸. It was March 2005, almost exactly a year from when Alan Gell had spoken to the audience at the intermission for *A Lesson Before Dying*. The company was on a roll and then....

Discovering a framework and an initial focus, 2005

In mid April 2005, the company received a letter saying that the grant proposal had been turned down. Knowing that Dan Kenna was a member of Holy Name Province, Megan Nerz and Deb Royals asked if he could meet to discuss why they had been turned down

Nerz, Royals, and Tim Thronson met with Dan Kenna. Dan had contacted the grant administrator at the New York City office of Holy Name Province. The grant administrator and his team thought that the grant proposal that had been submitted had great merit but that the intended work as suggested in the grant narrative seemed to be too fragmented and lacked a focus.

The four began to talk about why this might be the case. One idea was that the shows and programming being planned seemed to be going in too many directions and this made the proposed season seem disjointed. Tim expressed that there was much work he felt the company had left undone regarding the death penalty. The consensus around the table was that maybe the company should return to the death penalty and really delve into the ways in

⁸ Holy Name Province is the largest of seven administrative regions established in the United States by the worldwide Orders of Friar Minor (O.F.M.), better known as the Franciscan mendicant order. Its “more than 300 men” minister in “colleges, urban ministry centers, parishes, overseas missions and a wide variety of social services for the poor in society.” They follow the spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi seeking to meet people where they are and respond to genuine need.

which this was affecting the people of North Carolina. At this time North Carolina was regularly executing people, with strong evidence suggesting that it was going to continue.

And so they started talking about how they might explore the death penalty further. Dan began to talk about Henry Hunt. “Henry was fierce, he did not hold back when it came to saying what he thought.” “Henry continued to say until the end that he was not guilty.” “He was raised rough and had done a lot of bad things but he loved his people and his people loved him.” Following this he asked, “why not create an original piece about how the death penalty is affecting people here in North Carolina?” (Royals, Field Notes)

Deb recalled for the group that she had created original performances in Chicago under Dwight Conquergood’s guidance, based on critical ethnographic fieldwork at Cabrini Green, collecting stories, conducting oral history interviews, and doing hard research to piece together how Cabrini Green’s children had been affected by gang violence, drugs, and a lack of support from the Illinois department of children and family services. She emphasized, as Dwight had, that when you develop a performance with a group of people to tell their story, it is important to remain connected with them afterwards. Megan was excited, because she was familiar with ethnographic fieldwork. Her company, MLN Research, routinely used an approach similar to the one Deb described to do marketing research for her clients, she explained. Between the two women, there was a good deal of ethnographic experience and while it had taken place in very different locales the experiences of both could lend a valuable aspect to the creation of an original piece about the death penalty.

Dan challenged Deb and Megan to rewrite the grant to: articulate a project focused on the death penalty, its use, and the effect it was having on people in North Carolina; based on local ethnographic field research; resulting in an original performance piece; to be presented

together with educational programming that would prompt the audience to discuss the issue and take action. He promised to contact the Province, let them know of the new plans, and speak in strong support for the work and how important it was in the light of the regular executions that were being carried out.

Before the four people sitting at the table left, they discussed the people who might be a part of the initial research and interviews. These immediately included Mary Pollard, Alan Gell, and Dan Kenna. Dan promised to get the women in to interview other chaplains ministering with him on Death Row at Central Prison.

Without realizing it, the small group had created the framework for all the future years of the company. Pick a topic. Stay on that topic. Create an entire season of performance experience around that topic that hopefully is “received in consciousness and reflected upon” (Madison 151). Then tether to this performance experience educational programming that has the “potential for something more.” Stay committed. Foster as much discussion as possible around that topic.

In July 2005, The Justice Theater Project received \$25,000 in funding from Holy Name Province in response to the revised grant proposal. Nerz and Royals had already begun scheduling and conducting interviews.

All four people knew that they had found a purpose for the theater company’s continued existence.

Ethnographic fieldwork around the death penalty in North Carolina, 2005–2006

The next project of the company had begun. How to approach it? Royals remembered that “potential performers of ethnographic materials should not enter the field with the

overriding motive of ‘finding some good performance material’” (Conquergood, “Performing” 70). She wanted to seek, listen, respect and feel. She knew from her days with Dwight that this was the only way to move into a project like this one.

Over the course of the next year, the two women traveled the state of North Carolina talking to people who understood or had experience with the death penalty. The work took them on a journey where they met people who were strongly opposed to the death penalty and those that wanted every person who had ever been assigned the death penalty to die—regardless of costs, mitigation or retrial. These included death row inmates, two death row prison chaplains with opposing views, family members of murder victims who opposed capital punishment, family members of murder victims who supported capital punishment, family members of the condemned, Catholic Worker House residents who were providing home/hospitality care for families of the condemned, lawyers who supported capital punishment, lawyers who opposed the death penalty, the family of a murder victim who supported capital punishment, social workers, prison wardens, prison guards, prison psychologists, newspaper reporters who had attended executions, legislators who supported capital punishment, legislators who opposed the death penalty, an exonerated death row inmate, and a family witness to the execution.

Their method for each interview began with careful research about the people they would be meeting. They then worked together to draft relevant questions that they felt would prompt the interviewee to share appropriate information. Royals also purchased a journal to keep field notes throughout the process. This had become a part of her method while still working at Polk Youth Prison. They also purchased a small tape recorder that they would use to record each interview. At the beginning of each interview, they obtained written consent

from each participant, taking care to explain that material from the audiotaped interviews would be used to create an original script to be performed in public.

During the interviews they met people whose stories affected them in ways that they never had imagined. One was Dick Adams, who met with the two women in late August 2005. During Dick's first interview, he told them that he was just a "dumb, North Carolina redneck" and that he "was proud of it." Dick shared his life with them and how he was married and had two children, a son and a daughter. The son was the older of the two and Dick was proud of what his son had accomplished at a very early age. On December 23, 1983 when Dick got home from his work shift that had ended at 8 a.m. the Chief of Police drove in behind him. The chief got out of his car and walked over to Dick and handed him a piece of paper, telling Dick he needed to call the number on the paper. Dick said that the chief then turned around, got in his car and left Dick there wondering what was going on. When Dick opened the paper, he realized that what he was holding was a "Death Notification." When he called the number, he found out that the person who was dead was his own 21-year-old son, Richard. He learned in the weeks that followed that Richard's killer had been released from prison after two years despite serving a mandatory seven-year sentence. He also learned that his son's murderer had killed four people in the four months following his release. One of these people was his son. He almost shut down after his son's death and recalled finding a "big oak tree out in the forest, sat down with nature, had a talk with myself." He made a decision under that tree that he was not going to give in to the bottle but instead was going to be the voice for other crime victims, seeing them through to the end, to when the death penalty would be carried out, providing justice for their loss. Dick regularly attended executions even after his son's murderer was executed, calling for the

death penalty for all perpetrators of violent crime. When Nerz asked Dick if he had found any closure after the execution, Dick replied,

A reporter was waiting at the Central Prison gate as we were coming out at 3 a.m. after the execution. He wanted to know the same thing, and I will tell you what I told him: “When the man who was just executed murders his next victim, give me a call. I’ll come to Raleigh, we’ll go to the 42nd Street Oyster Bar, wherever, we’ll have lunch, dinner, breakfast, lunch—we’ll talk as long as you want.”

And you know what? That was 1992 and he hasn’t called and I don’t believe he’s going to call” (Adams).

In September 2005, Royals traveled to meet Sindy Neagle Maxwell at Charlotte Motor Speedway, where she worked in operations, to interview her about her experiences in her other job, as a mitigation specialist approved by North Carolina’s Office of Indigent Defense Services.

A mitigation specialist has a demanding job, according to the American Bar Association. She is “an indispensable member of the defense team throughout all capital proceedings” who possesses “clinical and information-gathering skills and training that most lawyers simply do not have” including:

the time and the ability to elicit sensitive, embarrassing and often humiliating evidence (e.g., family sexual abuse) that the defendant may have never disclosed. They have the clinical skills to recognize such things as congenital, mental or neurological conditions, to understand how these conditions may have affected the defendant’s development and behavior, and to identify the most appropriate experts to examine the defendant or testify on his behalf. Moreover, they may be critical to assuring that the client obtains therapeutic services that render him cognitively and emotionally competent to make sound decisions concerning his case. Perhaps most critically, having a qualified mitigation specialist assigned to every capital case as an integral part of the defense team insures that the presentation to be made at the penalty phase is integrated into the overall preparation of the case rather than being hurriedly thrown together by defense counsel still in shock at the guilty verdict. ... The mitigation specialist often plays an important role as well in maintaining close contact with the client and his family while the case is

pending. The rapport developed in this process can be the key to persuading a client to accept a plea to a sentence less than death (“Guidelines” 959–960).

In a death penalty case, it is the mitigation specialist’s responsibility to gather and evaluate “mitigation evidence,” which “includes, but is not limited to,”

compassionate factors stemming from the diverse frailties of humankind, the ability to make a positive adjustment to incarceration, the realities of incarceration and the actual meaning of a life sentence, capacity for redemption, remorse, execution impact, vulnerabilities related to mental health, explanations of patterns of behavior, negation of aggravating evidence regardless of its designation as an aggravating factor, positive acts or qualities, responsible conduct in other areas of life (e.g. employment, education, military service, as a family member), any evidence bearing on the degree of moral culpability, and any other reason for a sentence less than death. (“Supplementary” 679)

During the interview with Sindy it became clear that her experiences with the trials that she had worked on as a mitigating officer over the years had taken a huge toll on her. The case that troubled her the most was Ronnie Frye’s. Ronny Frye was executed on August 31, 2001. The jury never heard the mitigating evidence about the severe abuse he suffered as a child; she believed that if they had it might well have saved his life. Sindy was also sure that Ronnie’s lawyer was, as she put it, “dead dog” drunk the entire trial. His lawyer, Tom Portwood, died a year later from cirrhosis of the liver. She showed Royals a picture of Ronnie when he was still a little boy. He had whip marks across his chest and back. The picture at that time was still used at the department of Child and Family Services as a visual tool for police to recognize child abuse. (See Figure 7 and Figure 8.) None of this information was ever entered into his sentencing hearing. “One system after another let that child down”, she said, and “finally the system just went ahead and killed him.” Sindy pulled out some of Ronnie’s artwork and the artwork of other clients that she had come to know over the years.



Figure 7: Ronnie Frye as a child

This image was used by the N.C. Department of Child and Family Services as an example for what severe abuse looks like.
nccadp.org/stories-old/ronald-frye



Figure 8: Ronnie Frye as an adult

nccadp.org/stories-old/ronald-frye

The case that she was working on at the time of the interview with Royals was that of Elias Syriani, who stabbed his wife to death in 1990, was convicted of murder in 1991, and

was nearing the end of his appeals. Cindy suggested that Royals meet Elias' lawyer, Henderson Hill, and arranged for her to meet with him the following week in his office in Charlotte, which she did (Maxwell).

Between them, Cindy and Henderson told Royals how Elias Syriani came to be on death row. When Elias was just a boy, he and his family suffered persecution as Assyrian Christians in Jerusalem. When Elias was 10, his father was arrested. When Elias's father was released from prison they were all sent to Jordan. His father had suffered a major breakdown during imprisonment. When Elias and the rest of his family went to live with his father in Jordan, it was evident that he was no longer the man they had known. From that time on, Elias's mother treated his father, in his words, "worse than a dog."

Elias married his wife Theresa just three months after they met. The couple initially lived in Chicago in a strict Jordanian home where Arabic was spoken. After they moved to Charlotte, Elias lost his job and his past came back to haunt him in horrible experiences that must have reminded him of what had happened to his father.

In Charlotte, Theresa Syriani hit her husband on several occasions in front of the children; Elias Syriani's Jordanian roots made this type of insult unbearable. Mutually inflicted physical abuse became a pattern in their marriage. Cindy and Henderson each concluded that the night of the murder, Elias just lost his mind to anger, so it could not have been premeditated murder. Elias said that Theresa came at him first and he responded using the only object he could get his hands on, a screw driver lying in the back seat of the car, stabbing her twenty-eight times, causing her death twenty-six days later.

Henderson explained how he had tried to bring these mitigating circumstances into Elias's appeals, arguing that it was the childhood trauma, the estrangement from his wife

Theresa, and Jordanian culture that triggered Elias' violence and his ultimate attack on his wife. He also told Royals that, for fourteen years following his conviction, the Syriani children did not visit their father. After the trial they lived with his sisters, cut his picture out of family photographs, and only referred to Elias as "him." But somewhere along the way they each found themselves missing the presence of their dad, wanting to know if he still sang songs and danced traditional Jordanian dances. In 2004 they decided together to go and see their father. They had made their way back; each of them now wanted him in their life; they wanted to forgive and they wanted to be reconciled (Hill; Maxwell).

And after all that, it seemed likely their father would be executed.

Towards the end of her interview, Sindy explained that Elias was going to be her last case. Even with the massive research work into Elias' past and the cultural differences that existed and were blatantly obvious, she did not think that her work was going to make a difference. No one had wanted to hear about the cultural differences and disturbing history she had "dug up." When they were done with the interview she took Royals up to the very top of the Charlotte Motor Speedway and the two watched as the mini racecars flew around and around the tract in one big circle. A sweet faced woman with a lot of spirit, her mitigating work must have felt like those race cars, just going around and around in one big circle (Maxwell).

At the end of his interview, Henderson suggested that Royals meet the Syriani children. He would be with them in Raleigh when they went to ask for clemency from the governor for their father. (Hill).

Henderson called Royals a couple of weeks later. The children were going to be meeting with Governor Mike Easley on November 10, 2005. He discussed their schedule

with her, which would include news conferences after their meeting with the governor and a public meeting at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church for people who wanted to talk to them about how they had forgiven their father. Henderson explained that the children were eager to meet with Royals and asked if they might come to Royals' home for dinner prior to going over to St. Francis, instead of having dinner somewhere publicly. He offered to bring the dinner, but Royals told him that she would make them a meal. Henderson told Royals that in addition to the children, their lawyer Russ Sizemore and Meg Eggleston, one of Elias' closest friends and his spiritual adviser, would be joining them for dinner.

That evening the entire group arrived at Royals' home around 6 p.m. The four children were beautiful young adults in their 20s. Rose, Sarah, John, and Janet were very close, joking and teasing one another. Sarah joined Royals in the kitchen, asking if there was anything she could help with. She folded napkins, and set out the spoons and bowls. Throughout the preparation of the meal, Henderson and Sizemore stayed on the phone with several different people—they did not say with whom. From the sound of the conversation it was clear that they were discussing the children's visit with the governor earlier that day.

Royals prepared chili and cornbread with shredded cheese on the side. Henderson and Russ rejoined and the group began to eat. Everyone filled their bowls and sat around the kitchen table or in the living room chatting and eating. Sarah told Royals, "I think the governor will spare our father. He seems to understand how we feel as children." She said, "the governor actually showed us a picture of his own children." They finished dinner and the group loaded into two cars to go to St. Francis. They had had such a wonderful time with each other (Eggleston et al.).

A week later on November 17, 2005 Royals and Nerz received word that Governor Easley had given the final go-ahead for the execution of Elias, saying he could find no convincing reason to grant clemency. Many people were shocked by this decision. The children had been on CNN's *Larry King Live* and ABC's *Good Morning America*, making people throughout the country familiar with the case. The children had discussed publicly how they had been able to forgive, reunite, and re-establish their love for their father. They had told the people of North Carolina and nationally that the loss of one parent had been enough. They begged not to lose another parent.

Nerz and Royals went to Central Prison that night as quickly as they could to support the children. They stood outside the prison for quite awhile and around 11 p.m., Henderson Hill and the children came out to thank the people who were protesting the execution. Sarah hugged Royals, weeping and trembling. She said that her father had held each of them close, had sung traditional songs for them and then asked them to leave before the execution took place. He didn't want them to suffer another traumatic event. She told Royals that they had spent the entire day together and that they never lost hope. Elias was 67 years old when he was executed, one of the oldest since the reinstatement of the death penalty in North Carolina. Henderson Hill was shattered by the execution. Shaking his head and using only a few words when leaving the vigil, he said he needed to "get the children somewhere warm and quiet." The Syriani children were survivors to violence twice – once through the murder of their mother and the second through the execution of their father. (Royals, Field Notes).



Figure 9: Elias Syriani with Meg Eggleston, on the evening before his execution in 2005

(Photo given to the author by Meg Eggleston.)

**From research notes to performance,
2006**

During the interviews the women worked carefully and respectfully to collect the personal stories, reactions and pertinent material that would then be adapted into an original performance piece; a piece that would be shared with the North Carolina community. This process they hoped would provide a new understanding, and the truths that would unfold could be the “beauty [...] and hope that are unveiled and inseparable from shared and inherited expressions of communal strivings, social history, and political possibility”

(Madison 26). The first twelve months of research were focused on the collection of stories, voices, and processing data and other documented statistical fact regarding the death penalty. Once the ethnographic research was done, they realized that they had compiled 842 pages of research.

Nerz and Royals traveled throughout the state of North Carolina completing the interviews for the original work. A lot of discussion took place between the two during these travels and they spoke at great length about the shape of the piece and its script. They had very different ideas about how the development of the script should take place. This tension became almost unbearable for other members of the JTP board, when, at meetings, the two would discuss at length what they wanted for the script or how each wanted it to play out. Royals wanted the script to flow from voice to voice, provide the audience with an experience of being in the presence of the people who had been interviewed, and use nonconventional performance methods including movement, projections, and music. Nerz wanted to create a script that developed a single story line, involved created characters, and told that story in a theatrically conventional way. These two different desires became a significant point of conflict for both women. Nerz decided that she no longer wanted to act as the Executive Managing Director for the company and left that role to work on the Justice and Peace Ministries at Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. She and Royals discussed this decision one night after a board meeting. Nerz asked Royals to continue the work: “Please, promise me to make JTP continue as we had envisioned it could.” Royals promised Nerz that she would work to make the company all that it could be as a way to honor her contribution to the founding of the company.

Originally a group of actors and designers worked on the piece to begin to give it a shape. They culled through all the material and began to piece together a performance. This original “workshop” piece was presented in January 2006 at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh North Carolina and the group collected feedback from the audience. Following the workshop performance they continued to present the piece throughout the state of North Carolina, gathering responses to the material. From these workshop performances, they were able to carefully refine and further develop the script.

In the *Still ... Life* piece, Royals and the company of actors took an organic approach Royals borrowed from her understanding of Joan Littlewood’s work, adopting the same Brechtian self-conscious theatricality Littlewood did, and using humor to present the human tragedy surrounding the use of the death penalty in North Carolina. These styles are especially noticeable in one of the music and dance sections of *Still ... Life*. At the time, Choice Hotels was running popular television commercial that incorporated Johnny Cash singing the Geoff Mack song, “I’ve Been Everywhere Man,” to list and present images of all the places people showed up and stayed in their hotels. At one of the rehearsals, the actors had a conversation about how to show the large number of lives taken as a result of the death penalty’s use. Someone mentioned the commercial. The group decided to create a spin on this song, performing a similar piece that would name every person executed in the state of North Carolina. Royals found the names of every person who had been executed and they placed the names in alphabetical order. A section of the list was given to each actor to sing while they danced about. The song was entitled: “I’ve Killed Everyone Man” and the performance of it ultimately named in this humorous but cold way the names of every person who had been executed since 1910 when the state resumed responsibility of carrying out the

death penalty. (This process of collaboration between the artists has continued to be part of JTP's productions and performance projects ever since, anchoring the artists involved and giving them a personal sense of investment.)

"Still ... Life" has stirred an emotion inside of me that I never knew was there.

The 'talk-back' session after the production was probably one of the most profound and insightful discussions I have ever experienced in my life.

I was pretty sure I was for the death penalty when I walked in here and now I find myself questioning the whole idea of putting people to death

In 1991, as a young college student, I thought it was cool to be clearly on the side of the death penalty, and to publicly say so. I continued to think this way until two years ago when I saw *A Lesson Before Dying* presented by the Justice Theater Project and listened to recently exonerated death row inmate Alan Gell speak.

This made me think in ways I have never experienced before.

Struck me as being not just a topical play about the death penalty, but personal accounts of feelings shared on the stage and in discussion after the show.

Growing up in Johnston County on a small farm, attending a small high school of 500 and church of 50, who knew there were issues like the death penalty? A growing community college and prospering Baptist University still did not raise these issues. Where was that in my education—what were the cold, hard facts about life? As a graduate working in a small town, it still was not an apparent issue until someone dear to me sent an email. Through her explanation I heard and the articles I saw, nothing was as impressionable as my decision to drive to Raleigh one rainy night to witness the first workshop performance of 'Still ... Life.' People are affected in an infinite number of ways. For me, it was witnessing the amount of work, dedication, and character development that carefully molded this new piece. To think that there is such a driving force for so-called redemption of a loved one's life, that there is just that much seeking forgiveness. We are often told not to judge others, but the human flaw is in us all; the struggle is whether you control it or it controls you. Clearly the death penalty and many more are issues that are facing new generations straight on. It is impossible to decide for or against until you can humble yourself to see both sides. 'Still ... Life' can only grow and infiltrate beyond our minds deep into our souls—and to think, an email sparked the change of my mentality and I only had to wait 23 years. How long should one be willing to wait?

Figure 10: Excerpts of field notes collected while workshopping portions of *Still ... Life*

(Deb Royals, *Still ... Life Archive*)

During the final months of the interview process Royals applied to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's doctoral program in communication studies, intending to concentrate in performance studies. The application to this program grew out of conversations with Della Pollock, who had invited Royals to work with her Politics and Performance Studies Service Learning students. In March of 2006, Royals learned that she had been accepted into the program. One of the courses that she registered for was an adaptation seminar taught by Joseph Megel. She felt that this would be a great way to continue and complete the work on the script which now had a title: *Still ... Life. An exploration of a killing state: North Carolina.*

During the *Still ... Life* workshop performances that were being presented throughout the triangle area members of the University of North Carolina's Performing Arts staff had the opportunity to see portions of the piece. Learning that Royals would be coming to the school in fall 2006, the staff contacted Royals to discuss the possibility of doing the piece again during Carolina Performing Arts' 2007–08 "Criminal/Justice" series; a yearlong project that would examine the Death Penalty. The project had been awarded a grant from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters Creative Campus Innovations Grant Program, which is a component of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Their hope was that the piece could be presented again so as to contribute to the campus wide conversation.

Witnessing the execution vigil for Sammy Flippen, 2006

On August 18, 2006, just as her time as a doctoral student was starting, Sammy Flippen was executed at North Carolina Central Prison. Royals, her oldest son, and other members of The Justice Theater Project attended the vigil. She carefully documented the

evening. In the years since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1977, the Western Boulevard gates of Central Prison had become the place where the execution vigils and protests had become the site of political performances. The ritual began with a prayer service at Pullen Baptist Church. From there, a bagpiper led a procession of people who objected to the state-legislated killing of the convicted offender as they trudged down city streets and along the main highway. Hundreds walked silently or spoke in whispered prayer as they came to the front gates of the prison. The long line of candle-bearers and the music continued throughout the night. In front of the protesters, barricades of officers guarded the entryway, to prevent anyone from moving past the prison gates. On one side of the gates, Sammy's family and friends stood and on the other, the murdered child's relatives stood. Close to the hour of execution at 2 a.m., the protesters began to move toward this barricade. The officers did not move as the death penalty protestors pressed in on them. The protestors who were able to push past the barricade just fell to their knees. As soon as that happened, the officers began grabbing the kneeling protestors, jerking their hands up behind their backs and handcuffing them. Four people were arrested that night.

Following this a police van came down Western Boulevard and pulled up to the prison entrance. The four protestors were loaded into the van one at a time—yanked up from their knees, dragged to the van, and forced to enter. They were then taken to jail. This visceral public protest performance with willing submission and the preordained dominance of the police played out during the final stages of the execution. The vigil protestors who were not arrested prayed aloud for the officers carrying out these actions, in addition to their prayers for the executed prisoner. Royals prayed along with others until the execution was complete.

There was a truth that happened that night, once the execution had been carried out and Sammy's body was removed from Central Prison and placed in the white state prison van. As the van moved away from the prison, it passed—in a moment of irony—the “dead end” sign where it was parked until the body was ready to be loaded. The sight of the van leaving told the world that the prison (or, rather, the State of North Carolina) had spoken: the killing was done, the remains removed. When the prisoner's body reached the morgue, the state medical examiner determined the cause of death and filled out the death certificate. As it is for every execution in North Carolina, the manner of Sammy Flippen's death was listed as “homicide.”

The doctors who prepared the body and proclaimed the cause of death, aided by the police guarding the barricade, the prison guards and the executioners, completed their part in the performance now drawing to a close. It was one of the few instances surrounding the death penalty when everyone was forced to confront its truth. Death for the executed is a murderous act. The effects of its use here in North Carolina had been enacted on the streets of downtown Raleigh. The main prison gates became the improvised stage where real people took on roles as a way of analyzing the inequities in social structures and flawed systems. Sammy's family wept and prayed. The family of the little girl he was accused of murdering wept and prayed.

For his last meal that night, Sammy Flippen had popcorn shrimp, hush puppies, french fries and a Coke. He was 36 years old and never publicly admitted to the little girl's death. A journalist present described Sammy staring into the eyes of his parents and mouthing the words, “I love you”. He died at 2:11 a.m. on August 18, 2006. He would be the last person executed in the state of North Carolina. Following his execution the state entered

into a “faux moratorium period,” which happened as a result of making it a requirement that a physician be present at executions. This requirement posed a legal hurdle that brought a halt to executions. Many people hoped North Carolina would abandon the death penalty altogether (Dead Man Eating; Gartner; Royals, Field Notes).



Figure 11: Samuel Flippen (Executed August 18, 2006)

<http://www.clarkprosecutor.org/html/death/US/flippen1041.htm>

From the death penalty to immigration, 2006–2007

One of the courses that Royals registered upon returning to school was Joseph Megel’s Adaptation Seminar and she decided to focus further on the *Still ... Life* piece as her project in this class. Throughout the fall Royals continued to work on the piece; continuing to add material from the original research and developing the script into a fully realized two act performance. Royals and others in the class worked together to scour through the pages of research she and Nerz had originally collected, spending hours reading over the mountain of

material. Keeping the main characters from the original piece, she worked to add more dialogue, develop additional scenes, transitions, music, dance, and incorporated into the piece the use of projected images. She worked on the script until she finally felt like she had something that was ready. It was ready to be presented again in its new full form. With the script now completed, the company decided that they would present the *Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project* based on the book by Helen Prejean, with the adaptation by Tim Robbins in January 2007 and then follow this up with performances of the new iteration of *Still ... Life* in April 2007.⁹

To provide sound programming for the *Dead Man Walking* piece, Royals and the new managing director of JTP, Melissa Zeph, worked closely with Sister Maureen Fenlon, who was a part of the nationwide *Dead Man Walking* project with Sister Helen Prejean and Tim Robbins. Sister Maureen helped them to strategically plan discussions and forums for the *Dead Man Walking* production. Royals received permission from the *Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project*, Sister Prejean and Tim Robbins to experiment with some of her own ideas of how to block and present the production. The result was tight production pieces that now incorporated fluid movement and in the place of spoken dialogue Royals wove the recorded voice of the lead character to represent her thoughts. These new production elements rendered a tight piece of theater, and the production of *Dead Man Walking* provoked strong response and discussion, including these comments from Byron Woods in an *Independent Weekly* review:

Historically, absolute knowledge alone—the knowledge of the gods—has justified similarly absolute, irreversible action to the religious zealot. The dilemma facing death penalty supporters is that so much less than this—the

⁹ *Dead Man Walking* was originally scheduled to for September 2006 but because was rescheduled to January 2007.

absence of a reasonable doubt—is all American jurisprudence needs, to this day, to justify the shedding of blood. This is the issue exercised in *Dead Man Walking*.

Sister Helen visited Royals and other members of the company when the show closed. The company then began rehearsals again for *Still ... Life* and the new completed piece was presented at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh on April 13, 14 and 15, 2007.¹⁰

In September of 2007 The Justice Theater Project began a new season with a year-long focus on fair immigration reform with a production of *The Grapes of Wrath* adapted for stage by Frank Galati based on the book by John Steinbeck. The season also included an original piece¹¹ entitled *¡Esprésate!—The Price You Pay!*, written by Royals based on her field research in southeast North Carolina, presented in January 2008. The company closed the 2007–2008 season with *A Line in the Sand*, an original piece written by the Catholic Relief Services Drama Project, in June 2008.

***Still...Life* after Eve Carson's murder, 2008**

In between the January 2008 production of *¡Esprésate!* and the June 2008 production of *A Line in the Sand* the company went back into rehearsal for *Still ... Life* in preparation for performances that had been scheduled as a part of the university's year long focus on the death penalty. It was early in the rehearsal period for the show, that UNC student body president Eve Carson was violently murdered. On March 5, 2008 members of the cast and production team for the piece, including Royals shared in the memorial service held in the

¹⁰ That same April, Eve Carson was elected as student body president at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹¹ *¡Esprésate!* is discussed in Chapter 4.

quad at 7 p.m. at the university as they made their way to rehearsal that one evening. There were several helicopters circling above as hundreds of students held candles, prayed or stood silently. Throughout the evening several students spoke about Eve, sharing anecdotal stories, thoughts or remembrances.

Royals contacted Maureen Fenlon the day after Eve's vigil and asked her if she would consider coming back to North Carolina explaining the events surrounding her request and how it would be so helpful to have her there as people came and participated in the performances of *Still ... Life*. Maureen agreed and spoke to audiences after two of the performances. These conversations were a blend of anger, grief, and disbelief. Having Maureen there to facilitate was helpful and healing.

During the months that it was being researched, developed in workshops, and performed, *Still ... Life* touched people throughout the state of North Carolina. Following one of the workshop performances, a white middle-aged woman sought out Royals to tell her that she was now afraid. "When I came into the theater tonight, I knew where I stood regarding this issue, now I am confused and afraid and not sure at all about how I feel" (Royals, "Field Notes for January 2006"). Throughout the process the creators of the piece seemed to have the same experience often questioning their own beliefs. They also struggled with what this all meant as they represented through performance the people that had been a part of their research.

When the work began Royals and Nerz believed that the development of this piece would move people to work for justice regarding the use of the death penalty in North Carolina. The project's potential regarding the death penalty, its use, and its repercussions seemed to be a way into the deeper problems that existed in the state. As the two women

interviewed and then began to develop the piece the company began to wrangle with the resulting impact of performed research. Justice Theater Project was attempting the difficult task of “speaking for others,” and confronting Alcoff’s challenge: “as philosophers and social theorists we are authorized by virtue of our academic positions to develop theories that express and encompass the ideas, needs, and goals of others. However, we must begin to ask ourselves whether this is a legitimate authority” (7). The company was learning to question self and to question others and in this process to seek out the implications of their work.

The moral and the ethical were becoming all tangled up and in the “efforts to grasp the native’s point of view, to understand the human complexities displayed in the even the most humble folk performance,” they were “surrender[ing] themselves to the centripetal pulls of culture, to get close to the face of humanity where life is not always pretty.” The performance of the ethnographic fieldwork they collected and became a part of made them “keenly aware that performance does not proceed in ideological innocence and axiological purity” (Conquergood, “Performing” 67).

They would continue to discover beyond their own *a priori* assumptions as the work of the company grew, rupturing the borders that morally existed for their selves and around issues of social concern.

Excerpts from *Still ... Life. An exploration of a killing state: North Carolina*

Cherisse (Sister to murdered brother, advocating against the death penalty):

Bobby Lee walked into Thrifty Liquor on August 12th and shot my brother Russell. Bam! Bam! Bam! No warning, no need, no conflict, no scuffle, no nothing. He just shot him. Russell's killer, I believe was a bona fide sociopath. He had a history of criminal violence. He must have been 12 when he and two other boys attacked another young boy, late night, in a cemetery. They stripped him, beat him up, held him down while he was sodomized with a stick. I mean I'm human. I have feelings of revenge and fantasies of vengeance. He's handcuffed and I've got a pipe, you know. I didn't want to kill him. I just wanted to beat the shit out of him. I was at this place in my life where I had just begun to trust the universe and then my brother was murdered. It brought a lot of trust crashing to the ground. I actively went in search of a spiritual practice. My acting for many years had been that for me. It was community. It was fellowship. It felt like I was trying to reach deep down and give the very best parts of myself and make an offering of it, and that felt religious and spiritual to me. I auditioned churches for many years. Then for a while it was Twelve Step meetings. People would be talking, you know, they'd be sharing in a meeting and they would say you know, things like: "I have learned that God never gives me more than I can handle." "I know my higher power's always looking out for me." "Everybody has a path in life and this was just Russell's path." And I was thinking you're telling me this why? This is supposed to be reassuring? And then: "I know how bad I felt when my dog died." Oh, really? Did somebody just whip out a .38 Special and plug your dog full of bullets?" If I ever needed faith or to have a sense that something was bigger than me, it was now. The only thing I could make any kind of decision about or have any kind of governance over me . . . and who I was going to be and maybe more importantly who I was not going to allow myself to become as a result of what had been done. My opposition to the death penalty has nothing to do with my brother's killer and that makes me a little bit like the bastard child at the family reunion."



Figure 12: Workshop performance of *Still ... Life*

(Photo taken by Scott Langley on behalf of The Justice Theater Project)

Mother of Death Row inmate:

I made a vow when my son was born. I promised God that I would take care of him, and I would never let anybody hurt him—and every time I fed him or bathed him or, or loved him or played with him, I was keeping that promise, and I had always been there for him. He'd never done anything. God, the worst thing he'd even done in his life was a fifty dollar speeding ticket . . . (laughter) fifty dollar speeding ticket, and I bought him the car that he did it with, (laughter) a Grand Sport. It's, it's in my back yard behind my building, covered up with my popcorn trees and everything that's covered it over. I felt so guilty because I was able to do things. I could go places and do things, and my son's locked up like an animal, you know, for something he didn't do. I wouldn't go to the movies. I wouldn't go to restaurants. I wouldn't do anything. I confined myself. Anything that Jeff couldn't, I haven't put a Christmas tree up since he was arrested. Because he can't be there, and he can't be home, and it's not, it's not Christmas.



Figure 13: Workshop performance of *Still ... Life*

(Photo taken by Tom Wolf on behalf of The Justice Theater Project)

Prison Chaplain:

That's the great thing about being a chaplain in prison. I always felt so blessed because, you see, there's not a thing in the world I could do about why they came to prison. I mean, there's nothing I could do, so my only option was how I am going to relate to the person exactly where they are right now, so I didn't have to get bogged down with all this stuff. (Laughter) You know, I, it, it was just, you just accept the person for where they are, and then do your best just to love them, you know, and that was a mandate given to me by Velma Barfield when she was executed, and I never forgot that any time I was in Central Prison, when she told me to, she said, "Don't worry about me." She said, "I'm okay. I'm getting ready to enter the Gates of Heaven." And you know, she said, "I'm, I'm fine, but those are, those guys back there are the ones that need you." She said, "Just please do your best to love them," and I never forgot that. I tried to do that every day I was in that place. I can see her face. That was the first execution I went to.

Prison Chaplain:

When God forgives and that's the promise you know . . . all of that plays into my own theology about the Death Penalty. I mean if God can forgive so perfectly that even God doesn't remember our wrong doings—I don't know. I just don't know.

(Daughter of murder victim):

They can't even talk about it. There are moments, anniversaries, holidays, birthdays. There are just waves of time. And when you least expect it—is when it hits you and knocks you down.

Father of a son lost to murder:

My boy, he was 29 when he was 9. You know, he wanted to get on with his life, but, really. But, anyway, he, at the end of his, during his eleventh year of public school, he just decided he wanted to go to college the next year rather than, so anyway, he left high school at the end of his eleventh grade and went to Brevard College. He was very, he, he was very productive. You know, he wanted to get on with life. But when he was 20, just short of 21, he graduated with a business degree. He really wanted to get an MBA from William and Mary. And there's a, I advised him to go work a couple of years to, he applied and got a job with a corporation. And they placed him in this restaurant chain as a management trainee and was moved over to Winston-Salem. And the day before Christmas Eve, a man robbed the place and killed my boy. And it was two days before Christmas, well, it was, he was killed on the 23rd of December. My shift ended at 8:00 that morning, and I got home about 9:00 that morning. When I drove in my driveway, the chief of police drove in behind me. And I got out and he got out, and he walked over and just handed me a piece of paper, and it said to call this number. And, but I didn't have any idea. I started to ask him, "Well, what's, am I in trouble?" He just turned around and got in his car and left. Death notification . . . That's really the way they do it. He had been released from prison — serving a mandatory seven-year sentence for armed robbery. Armed robbery was a mandatory, well; he served two years and was paroled. And was out on the street. And, and in the course of, let's see, October, November, December, January, course

of four months, he killed four people. After it happened, I went out and found me a big oak tree out in the forest, [image projected that is a big old tree, Actor 3 goes finds a place in front of the image that makes him appear to be sitting under the tree] I sat down with nature, had a talk with myself. You know, I could either find me a bottle or I could make a difference or I could be a voice for an individual who, whose only right is to remain silent for the rest of eternity. We did not choose to do this. This chose us. I don't, I don't think I had a choice in it. I felt like it was something that I have to do. I feel like I have to see that these other crime victims that I work with have to see something to the end, because I never am going to see that peace. But if I can help somebody else get there, I think it's very important.

Prison chaplain:

Harvey Lee Green. Harvey was the one that probably emotionally got to me, and that was in September, which was followed in October with Arthur Boyd, and then David Brown was in November. It was those three, right back-to-back, and, but Harvey Green took us all by surprise. I mean, we just never ever thought that, that he would go. I mean, his stuff came up and before you know it, he was in the execution room. Yeah, and, and, but Harvey, Harvey just, I mean, I mean, I wasn't real sure what was going to happen to me after that because that was the, well, there were a lot of firsts in that because Harvey was the first inmate, he was the first person that I had ever stood by beside on the gurney just before the execution, he was the first person that ever cried on the table, and, of course, you know, they're strapped down. You know, they got the doggone needles in their arms. You know, they're, they're strapped down, and, and tears were in his eyes, and, of course, he can't do anything, you know. He's just laying there, you know, and so I took my handkerchief out and was, was dabbing his eyes, you know, and, and I went back then, of course, we went through it and went back to my office that night and got a plastic bag, and I put that handkerchief in a plastic bag, and it's never been out of that bag since. I, I'd declared that a holy item, and I've never, I've never taken it back out . . .

CHAPTER 4. ADOLESCENCE: MANAGING DEMANDS AND ;EXPRÉSATE!

Children's Theater Leads to Another Important Project

In July 2005 as JTP's co-founders began to develop strategies, complete research, schedule interviews and travel throughout North Carolina to complete the ethnographic work for the *Still ... Life* piece another group had begun a project that would affect the growth of The Justice Theater Project. The leadership of JTP was learning that staying on one topic at a time while simultaneously trying to form a company was not so simple. In the midst of developing its capacity to maintain a focus on a single issue of social concern and maintain a connection with the community around that issue, JTP was also coming to realize that it would have to juggle multiple demands and manage multiple commitments if it was going to continue to advance its mission, spark conversation and generate social change.

Royals' work in Raleigh and the surrounding area was making news that drew attention to her and to the company's work. The JTP theater camps were also growing. Praise from parents whose children attended each summer reached the ears of the people planning programs for a new community center soon to be built to serve children and families who lived in the west end area of Durham. Right beside the lot where the center would be located stood Immaculate Conception Church, another Franciscan community. One of the church's members who got behind the community center project was Duke University's head basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K). Coach K agreed to become the center's founder because of his own experiences as a young person growing up in a poor racially

diverse community on Chicago's North Side. His struggling hardworking parents had found support for their family at their neighborhood's community center: he spent a great deal of time in this safe and nurturing environment during his youth. Coach K, inspired by his mother, Emily, who had scrubbed floors to make ends meet, gave the center her name: The Emily K Center.

One of the members of Immaculate Conception church who was aware of the efforts taking place to form a planning committee for the center was also the parent of a child that had attended the camps at St Francis of Assisi Catholic church under Royals' leadership. The parent suggested to Coach K and his daughter that they might want to invite Royals to be a part of this group because of her background in children's theater. The planning committee contacted Royals and asked if she would be willing to help them develop the performing arts programming for the new center. She agreed and in August 2005 Royals in addition to the ongoing work for *Still ... Life*, joined the committee along with the Emily K's new executive director, Marleah Rogers, Coach K, Coach K's daughter Debbie Krzyzewski, and Joseph Henderson. Joseph Henderson was the co-founder and executive director for the Walltown Children's Theatre located near Northgate Shopping Mall in Durham. The committee asked Royals if she would be willing to work on a proposal that would explain why theatre, drama and production programming for the center, would be helpful for the new center. Royals agreed to do this and created a matrix for the committee to work from that defined possible offerings including a summer theater camp for the center. The matrix also explained the positive ways in which this type of programming would benefit children enrolled in these offerings at the center. A result of her participation on this committee was the invitation from Marleah to organize and lead the first camp for the center when it opened June 2006. Royals

agreed and continued to meet with the group from that time forward to prepare for the center's opening and plan the first camp that would take place. The camp would be a theater camp modeled from the successful camps already taking place at Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church under the umbrella of The Justice Theater Project.

Late one September afternoon in 2005 as she was leaving one of these meetings she ran into one of the friars from Immaculate Conception in the church parking lot. He recognized her from a news article he had read about her work. The friar's name was Father Jacek. He stopped her and asked if she was the same person he had read about in the news regarding her work in the prisons and with the death penalty. She told him yes and he asked her why she was here in Immaculate Conception. She explained to him how she had been invited to help create plans for the new center. He also asked her experiences he had read about regarding her time at Polk Youth Prison. As they talked further Royals told Jacek about how she had started doing this work while a student at Northwestern University and the ways in which she had been able to connect her theater background to her performance studies course while at Cabrini Green and how she had led theater and performance workshops with the young people there. She discussed with him how they had collectively created small performance pieces about their lives there for the immediate community. Then Jacek told Royals about a fight that had broken out on the playground of Immaculate Conception church.

¡Exprésate!—Immigrant Teens in Durham, NC

Father Jacek was the associate pastor at Immaculate Conception. He was a leader in the west end community, a community that was in the midst of complex ethnic changes that were directly affecting the church. He was overwhelmed with his responsibilities there at the

church, where there were only two friars serving a church with over 2000 families. Many of these families were from Durham's most impoverished and unstable areas. Most were recent immigrants who had traveled to North Carolina and lived in Durham without “legal” citizen status. A challenge that had come out of this nexus was the way in which the youth were moving about in the community—a community of people who were living an immigrant diaspora.

The teens in this group had found ways to negotiate space, creating a status of their own within the fragmented landscape. Jacek was well respected and connected to the people that he served. There were tensions around how to organize the church youth and whether the Spanish speaking youth and English speaking youth should meet as one group or two. Gang violence was also prevalent in the church community, with several different gangs represented at any given time. These gangs were constantly in flux, shaping and reshaping themselves and their environment. The community at large was also in flux for a variety of reasons, including the conditions that had led the Church of Immaculate Conception to begin offering services in Spanish.

A fight broke out after one of these masses at Immaculate Conception between two boys who had been regularly attending the Spanish speaking services. These two boys represented rival gangs that were active in the immediate neighborhood surrounding the church. The English-speaking members of the church were appalled and embarrassed by this incident. They did not want to claim the youths as part of their church community, and initiated efforts to exclude the two boys from the church entirely. Many of the Spanish-speaking members who held positions of power and authority in the church were also disgusted and embarrassed by the actions of the youth. They wanted to wash their hands of

these youths, perceived as a “problem” and seen as a threat to the reputation of their church. This threat was not without basis. Within North Carolina discourses about Hispanic immigrants, it was not uncommon for persons who speak Spanish to be lumped together negatively under the name “Mexican” and illegal immigrant. The youth, and the attendant violence, threatened to further label all of the Spanish-speaking members as a problem and a burden for the church. And so, in the midst of both English and Spanish speaking members of the community moving to restore the image of the church by expelling several of the suspect youth, Jacek was looking for a way to address the gang violence and the fractured identities there at his church.

At the end of their conversation Jacek asked Royals if she would be open to doing the same kind of work she had created at Polk Youth Prison with the Latina youth of his church. A week following their discussion Royals contacted Jacek and set a time to meet with him. They met and she discussed with Jacek the ways in which she could use Forum Theater and other methods at a weekly workshop for the youth. Building on her experiences from Cabrini Green and Polk Youth Prison, she would work with them to collectively make felt experiences that provided involved communication and alternative ways to negotiate their reality. Jacek’s hope was that she would engage them, as she had been able to engage others and create a performance piece that would enlighten and educate. Royals knew that this invitation would give The Justice Theater Project another opportunity to put into praxis Boalian methods and in so doing live its mission by providing a safe place where the youth’s bodies and their realities could meet, a middle ground where “the scene, the stage becomes the rehearsal space for real life” (Boal, *Rainbow* 44).

Father Jacek's position permitted him to propose the program that he and Royals had discussed. She would start an ongoing series of workshops that would lead to a performance piece that the teens would share with their community, much like the children had done at Cabrini Green. Royals began meeting and working with the teens. Early on in the teens told Royals that they should have a name. She agreed and they named themselves, ¡Exprésate!"—Express yourself! Royals started meeting with them each week after their church youth group finished.

Trying to Stay Whole While Being Pulled in Multiple Directions

In late November 2005, Megan Nerz left The Justice Theater Project to assist in further development of the Justice and Peace ministries at Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. This left a huge hole in the company leaving the JTP with no one to do marketing or manage the growing administrative work of JTP. Members of the JTP board were concerned about the ability of the company to continue in Megan's absence. Father Dan Kenna and board chair Tim Thronson met with Julio De La Rosa, who had just retired from Saint Francis as its Finance Director, and asked if he would be interested in working with JTP as its Finance Director as well as to assist Royals with marketing and administrative needs of the company. Julio agreed. Together, he and Royals were able to keep the work of the company going. All of this took place concurrent with the continued meetings with the ¡Exprésate! teens and while completing work on the script for *Still ... Life*. At the end of the 2005 Royals applied to the doctoral program in Communication Studies at UNC. In January 2006, the first workshop production of *Still ... Life* was presented (members of the UNC Carolina Performing Arts Group, the North Carolina Arts Council and the United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County saw this performance.) Following the workshop

performance premier of *Still ... Life*, the North Carolina Arts Council and the United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County approached Royals and De La Rosa and encouraged them to write for grant funding for JTP's continued projects. Royals knew that she was going to have to figure out a way to manage these demands. She set a meeting with Melissa Zeph. Zeph had worked with Royals during the time that she had created and developed the Town of Cary's children's theater, Applause! The two had established a productive working relationship. Royals invited Zeph to join JTP as its part time marketing director. This position would also include some management responsibilities to include grant writing. Zeph accepted the position.

In March 2006, Royals learned she had been accepted into the doctoral program at UNC. At that month's Board meeting, Royals started a discussion about what issue of social concern the company would work on next. She also brought up expanding the JTP's offerings to produce multiple projects over the course of a year that would include original work and established plays that fit the themes found within the issues of social concern they chose to address.

Based on the work that she was already doing with the Latino youth at Immaculate Conception she proposed that they consider a yearlong conversation about fair immigration reform. The board did not immediately buy in to a season of work with more than one project scheduled because of the amount of work that she was already involved with and instead asked Royals to create a timeline to explain how the company would complete the *Still ... Life* project, premiere the original script and start working on a new season of projects for the following year 2007–2008.

At the June 3, 2006 board meeting, Royals laid out those plans:

- June 2006–April 2007, present *Dead Man Walking* a popular well known story that could lead up to the premiere of *Still ... Life* which would be finished and presented the final in March 2007.
- June 2006–April 2007, continue to work with the ¡Exprésate! Youth to complete their performance to take place for the Immaculate Conception Community in April 2007.
- June 2006–July 2006, hold a summer theater camp as a part of the opening for the Emily K Center as well as to continue the established annual camp programming at Saint Francis of Assisi July 2006.

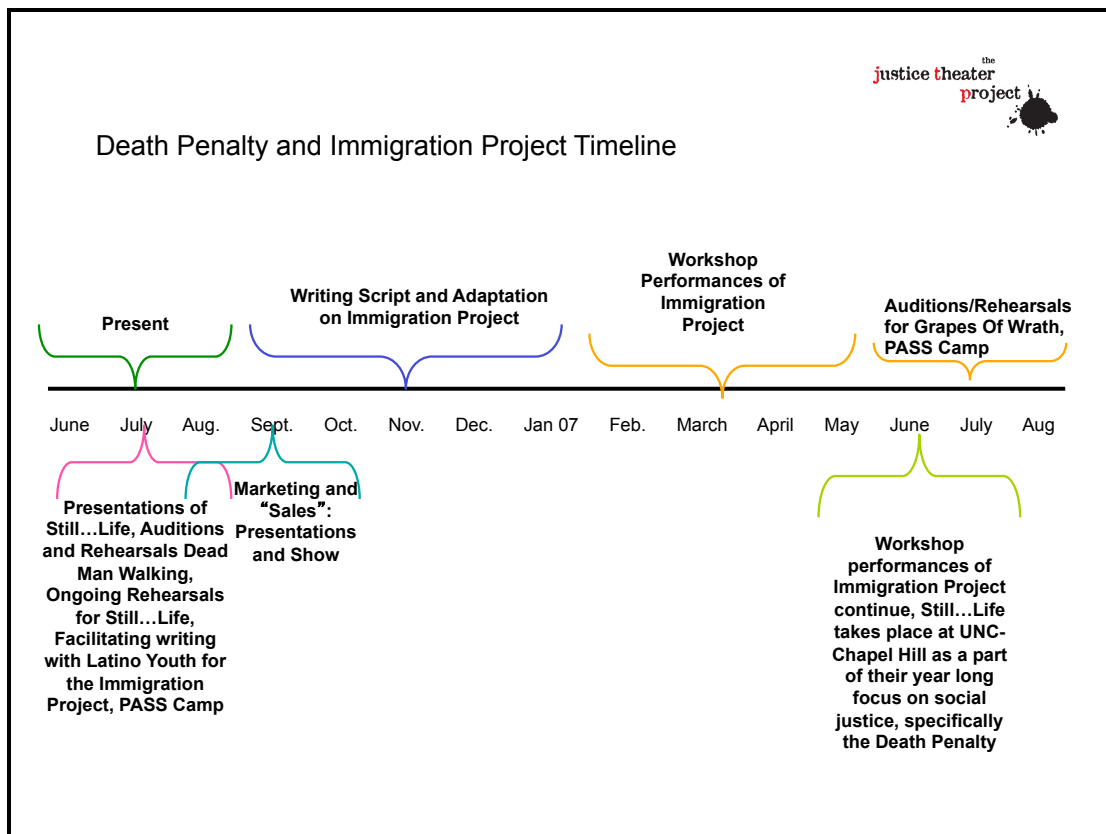


Figure 14: Death Penalty and Immigration Project Timeline, June 2006–August 2007

(Reproduced from board presentation by Deb Royals June 3, 2006)

- June 2006, hold auditions for *Dead Man Walking* to open Fall 2006¹²
- July 2006, hold auditions for *Grapes of Wrath*, Galati adaptation based on the book by John Steinbeck, which would open the 2007–2008 season on fair immigration reform; this production was proposed for September 2007.

The board approved the proposal with the proviso that Royals map out the entire 2007–2008 Season on Fair Immigration Reform by September 2006.

Can University Students Learn from a Community Theater Project? Fall 2006

Throughout that summer, Royals continued to work with the ¡Exprésate! teens, establishing a strong relationship with them and with their families. She also started singing with the choir at Immaculate Conception Church attending their worship services regularly. In the fall, when she returned to school, she started working as a teaching fellow for the university and taught courses in Performance Studies and Oral Traditions. As discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, Royals continued to refine and complete the *Still ... Life* script, which had been moved to premiere in its final form on April 13–15, 2007 at Cardinal Gibbons High School. The ¡Exprésate! teens' script would be completed in March 2007 and presented at a public performance on April 25, 2007 at the Immaculate Conception Church.

As all of this was being generated, another opportunity for the company presented itself through a conversation Royals had with one of her peers at UNC in September 2006.

One of the most salient issues confronting today's scholars is how to ensure that their work is relevant both within and beyond the walls of the academy. After all, people receive

¹² The performance dates for *Dead Man Walking* were later changed to February 2007.

education within localized communities that contribute extensive resources to that education, and stand to benefit greatly if students locate their scholarship within the broad context of participatory citizenship. In September 2006, Royals discussed the work she had been engaging for over a year at Immaculate Conception church with a fellow student, Jessica Fifield. Fifield and Royals were both committed to becoming scholars whose work emerges out of the lived conditions of those persons and places that speak to human beings in the world.

The discussion about the work that The Justice Theater Project had been doing with the ¡Exprésate! teens resulted in a mutual desire that they might co-teach a course that could bring UNC students together with the ¡Exprésate! teens working with The Justice Theater Project and Royals at Immaculate Conception. But this could only happen if Jacek, the teens, their parents and the rest of the Latina community at Immaculate Conception decided that a project like this might work. As a part of this project they both agreed that a key element would be an independent study with Dr. Della Pollock who could monitor their ongoing process. The independent study would provide a place for each to further discuss the project as it was taking place with the youth and with their students; and to open up a space for an academic discussion about how this project was relatable to each of their individual areas of study and theoretical approaches. The independent study and time with Della would provide each woman a place to really think about the ways that scholarship was pertinent to conversations regarding struggles with issues of identity, poverty, gangs, violence and marginalized perceptions. For Royals it was also a perfect way to develop additional language that could articulate the work of the growing theater company.

City Youth Find Freedom Through Performance, Winter 2006–2007

The ¡Exprésate! teens included 15 members, 14 teens (8 girls and 6 boys) and a youth group advisor from the Latina community who had been hired by the church. The group included the two boys from rivaling gangs who had fought on the playground as well as one additional boy who was a part of one of these gangs. There were also three girls in the group who were either gang affiliated or dating gang members. All of them were parishioners at Immaculate Conception Church. Their parents were also members of the church.

Jacek set a meeting that would bring the teens, their parents and Royals together to discuss this new possibility regarding their ongoing work. The parents decided to prepare dinner as a part of this meeting and when they all came together the group prayed, ate and talked about this new idea of including the UNC students as a part of the work that Royals and Jacek had started. In an effort to make sure that everything was discussed in both Spanish and English, a member of the Immaculate Conception staff who spoke both languages attended the dinner to help facilitate as needed.

One of the primary concerns of the parents was protecting anyone involved with the project who had not become legal citizens as of yet and also those who had joined gangs in the west end area. Jacek suggested that they could work on release forms that each participant would sign that clearly stated that nothing could be shared with the UNC students or staff without permission from the participant and that participant's parent. For the most part there was consensus that they wanted to do the project and liked the idea of connecting young people from two different communities to work together on the performance piece that they had been planning for April 2007. There was concern from a couple of parents that making the project broader would jeopardize the safety of their children and their families.

Everyone agreed that if at any time the project affected the security of anyone in the group that the work would stop and they would reevaluate how to go forward. The group was eager to meet with Fifield. So Jacek and Royals invited the teens, their parents, and Fifield to a meeting.

At that meeting, in early November 2006, Jacek and Royals introduced Fifield. Everyone started to discuss again the ways in which they would like the project to go forward and the concerns regarding identity. Fifield suggested that they create the release forms based on the IRB format. She also suggested that she and Royals complete the IRB study and test. She explained to the group what that required. Everyone present agreed that this would be a safe way to protect every aspect of the project including identities and personal information that might be included in the research. Royals and Jacek also agreed to create the release forms based on the IRB protocol.

The sense of security that these conversations created renewed their excitement about the piece that they had been working on. The teens along with their parents began to list other things that they would like to see covered in the performance. Then the group discussed a meeting schedule that would bring the teens together with the students in the class on a regular basis. The public performance, also to be titled *¡Exprésate!*, was scheduled to take place on April 22, 2007, on the grounds of Immaculata Catholic School, adjacent to the Immaculate Conception Church and just behind the Emily K Family Life Center. There would be two performances presented by the ¡Exprésate! teens and these would run in tandem with a fair that was being held at the Emily K Family Life Center.

From the inception of the group, everyone worked to create a place where the teens and their parents could participate freely regardless of gang affiliation or country of origin.

Since the group was made up of teens from rival gangs, the efforts to bring them together in this way were not without peril. Somehow the “church” seemed to make a neutral ground where they could participate in a dialogic manner with each other. Royals and Fifield began the meetings for the teens and students in mid January 2007. They used Boal games as a way to warm up the entire group as well as to generate ideas for the way the piece might be constructed. These games also served as great icebreakers for everyone and made it easier to get into the actual collection of the ethnographic information that some of the members decided to share as a part of the scripted material that would be included.

Engaging the teens and students in this type of performance praxis often eliminated the boundaries that typically existed and as they collaborated with each other to create a story for the community, engaging in this performance work began to bring them together and unite them. Together the entire group sought to incorporate performance as a tool for articulating and creating individual and group identity and in the process of doing this the teens were able to interact, cope with, and challenge the social conditions that mediated their daily lives. As they developed *¡Exprésate!*, they found themselves driving hard to reveal and liquidate tightly-held concepts about the youth, gang life, the Latina diaspora, and violence. They asked themselves individually and collectively, Why should we be scared of gangs? Why are these children thought of as alien in their own community and alienated by powerful members of that community? *¡Exprésate!* sought to wrangle with the language that contested the common versus the uncommon ground—the landscape of their lives.

At one of their meetings they used one of Boal’s rehearsal games called: “One story told by several people” where one person starts a story and then a second continues the story and then a third and so on until everyone has been able to participate. Based on a suggestion

from the boys in the group they incorporated a soccer ball and decided to tell real life events. The first person started with the soccer ball and spoke about her life and then passed the ball of to the second and then to the third and continued until everyone had an opportunity to participate. They also allowed the teens to steal a pass if they felt strongly about what was being shared and wanted to immediately contribute without waiting for a pass. The final performance included this game as a part of our performance aesthetic and this incorporation into the performance was a way for them to play out and move with meaning.

During the soccer game in *Exprésate!* the audience heard this story-telling sequence:

1st Teen: It comes from the way that you join a gang. Killing...beating up...

We think that joining a gang can scare you a lot because your family can get hurt. I put my family in danger when I join a gang.

2nd Teen: Kids join because they are lonely; some don't even have both their parents together. Some of us are being raised by extended family members—others join just to become a bigger person than they are, or to be known as “bad” instead of the good kids they really are.

3rd Teen: I had that pressure. I did it because my parents never listened to me, they never believed me, they listened more to other family members instead of me. I started separating from them, so I started having new friends. Friends that are in gangs, [and] when I add the pressure of my parents, their not listening then I feel that I had to be with them more.

4th Teen: I was dressing the way that I like it, not like the gang exactly, but the way that I like it. I started fighting to get my way into them. Fighting...getting suspended too much...almost got sent to Lakeview. [A Durham school for youths who have been suspended or labeled as chronically unmanageable.]

5th Teen: Getting in all the fights and being suspended made me popular, what made me change were my friends, like they would help me get through it. And like I started losing a lot of friends and I realized it wasn't worth it, and so my real friends—even

though back in the time they were in the gang with me—they changed and started a new life and they are trying to help me do the same thing.

6th Teen: I wanted to move to a different school and I applied to other schools, but none would accept me because they thought I was a problem.

7th Teen: One of my real, real friends that is in a gang right now is with me. We are calm right now and we help each other to get over it.

Working with Boal-related tools, the group was building both an individual and community consciousness. At the forum theater level, discussing group work with these teens provided a place for both Fifield and Royals to build on existing scholarship that assumed that performance is not only an aesthetic practice, but also a theoretical intervention that could open up possibilities for identifying and, where necessary, altering the practices that had fractured their families and neighborhoods.

Royals, Fifield and students from the UNC class worked with the teens over the winter and early spring months to get the group ready for the April workshop performance project scheduled to be presented to family, friends, close community partners including the church and staff at the Emily K Center. The service-learning component of the Politics of Performance course provided an opportunity for students from the class to work with Royals and Fifield at the church as they developed the piece. Coursework for the class was fashioned to create linkages between theory and the project that was being created with the ¡Expresate! group. The hope for the course, the work with the teens and with JTP was that it would encourage students to ask more critical questions about the “politics” of performance, particularly in the context of the Latina experience.

A Mixed Community Listens to Its Young People on Stage, Early Spring 2007

In early March, Royals completed the final script of *¡Exprésate!* The performance was modeled in the standard Theatre of Oppressed (TO) form as created by Augusto Boal. The group assigned their “Joker,” to be one of the older girls in the group. Banlly seemed to instinctively understand the way in which the Joker is responsible for mediating the world between the performers and the audience. Additionally, she had become like a mother to the group and her maternal protection of the group made her the perfect Joker. As a mother figure, she had come to fiercely understand the importance of what it meant to be “sometimes director, sometimes referee, and sometimes facilitator” (Linds 122). When the group shared their script to both the English speaking and Spanish speaking community there, it was her courage and grace that helped all to “engage in a discourse of embodied critique and possibility” (123).

During the performances the teens definitely gained the respect of many of the members of Immaculate Conception Church in a way that laid the groundwork for what would become opportunity for both combined English/Spanish speaking youth ministry meetings as well as time for them to continue to meet separately. The performance also gave the teens the opportunity to safely explain the reality of their lives. They claimed their individuality through the intervention moments that took place during the event. The performance provided new understanding for the English-speaking members of the church. The teens’ performance shared the truths about their life. Through performance they were able to “express” their differences by performing how their families were from different South American countries each with unique perspectives and ways of being in the world. For the Spanish-speaking members it became a way for the adults to grasp the frustrations of

their teens and to better understand these frustrations within the context of family, school and church.

But there were members of the audience that did not grasp what the teens were attempting to communicate. Here are some of those comments:

What are you doing? Why are you doing it?

You doing it makes no sense.

Why are you on the playground in this performance?

What are they doing? Why are they on my playground?

Go to another playground, big kids don't belong on swings, they don't use them right.

How is you doing this going to matter?

Why do you care and why are you here?

Performance work is not successful if everyone loves it, understands it, has nothing negative to say about it, and agrees with the reasons for doing it. Push back from members of the community revealed different perspectives, providing an opportunity for everyone to reflect on how differently each other interpreted the work. A tense but safely “Jokered” discussion followed that exposed additional reasons for the division in the community: Some English-speaking staff and church members were completely out of touch with the lives of Spanish-speaking youth. Some older Spanish-speaking church members admonished the young people that they should be ashamed to be “fighting like this”—they should just go to church and be good. The teens responded, respectfully, saying, this is who we are, we all go to church here, this is what our lives are like.

The objective of the work had been to portray the plight of the teens and to stir up a productive conversation. By creating and performing *¡Exprésate!*, the teens had made a place for that portrayal and that conversation to happen. The negative response and questions about the legitimacy of the work may in fact have been a confirmation of the importance of the

work and the ways in which it had worked to stir up the community and encouraged them to talk.

At the time that the performances took place the threat of gang violence in the immediate areas surrounding the church was pervasive. Today that has shifted in small ways. The Justice Theater Project, Royals and others have continued to work with the youth at Immaculate Conception Church and at the Emily K Family Life Center. Royals has continued to do the theater camp at the Emily K Family life Center every summer since 2006 making it a permanent part of the JTP performing art summer series and now hires many of Latina teens and their younger siblings as counselors and instructors creating sustained relationships that have continued to develop over the years.¹³

Looking Beyond Durham to Youth Working in Tobacco Fields, Late Spring 2007

In addition to the continued performance work that The Justice Theater Project and Royals leads there each summer at the summer theater camps, there is now a scholars to college program at the Emily K Family Life Center and a community garden open to the neighborhood surrounding the church, school and community center. Spanish- and English-speaking people alike use the garden.

The work that was unleashed by the teens, the students and JTP garnered interest from other organizations in Durham. During the early spring while they were preparing the final performances, Rosie Rangel, who was working for Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF) approached Royals about The Justice Theater Project doing the same with their

¹³ At the time of the *¡Exprésate!* performance, some Hispanic parents considered Banlly a teen who had a baby way too early, as part of the problem. She is now an integral staff member of the Emily K center, right next door to the church, tying the church and the center together. She continues to “mother” the entire community.

Project Levante group. SAF has a long history of incorporating the Boal Forum model into their project as a way to address the isolation that immigrants face, the harsh environments within which they are forced to work, and how the lack of fair immigration reform affects every aspect of their lives. Challenged by the invitation Royals decided to work with the Project Levante. Project Levante are groups of teens from migrant farm working communities throughout southeast North Carolina that each year are selected and supported by SAF as they work on unique projects that affirm their life and realities. SAF, JTP, and Royals put together a plan that would include the presentation of a final performance piece shaped using the Boal Forum theater model. The forum script would be created by the group and would ultimately be shared as a part of The Justice Theater Project's 2008 season on "fair immigration reform." Each party involved agreed to the plan for the production with a promise that the performance work would never compromise the identity of the teens or place them in a situation that threatened their fragile citizenship.

The desire of everyone involved with SAF, Project Levante and the Justice Theater Project was that Royals would facilitate the creation of a Boal-inspired Forum Theater performance with the teens just as she had with the teens at Immaculate Conception Church that would share the reality of hidden lives in southeast North Carolina where migrants labored in tobacco fields. SAF specifically wanted to bring attention to the lack of health care and poor living conditions in the migrant camps. Project Levante wanted to focus on how the teens negotiated their life and the lives of their parents. Justice Theater Project wanted to perpetuate a discourse that encouraged people to educate themselves about immigration in the United States and the importance of reform.

<p style="text-align: center;">The Immigration Project 2007/2008</p> <p>JTP continues original, main stage and community outreach on issues of social concern.</p> <p>Employing the arts to engage audiences around issues of social concern is the only one of its kind in Wake County.</p> <p>JTP 2007-2008 programming will include:</p> <p>Creation of original work ritings and presentations highlighting immigration as well as the staging of one classic and one contemporary work that brings a focus to the social justice issue of immigration.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 of 20</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">April 2007</p> <p>Still...Life, an exploration of a killing state, North Carolina</p> <p>Still...Life will premiere at Cardinal Gibbons Fine and Performing Arts Center on April 13, 14 & 15, following a year of development into a fully fleshed out scripted performance piece.</p> <p>The first workshop performance took place in February, 2006.</p> <p>Small portions of the show has been presented to over 20 schools, universities, churches and organizations in the greater Triangle area.</p> <p>These presentations have each included talk-back or workshop moments spring boarding out of the work, inspiring discussions, creating thought and challenging preset ideas.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">7 of 20</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">May 2007</p> <p>Auditions for the JTP 2007/2008 Project year at Cardinal Gibbons Fine and Performing Arts Center</p> <p>Casting will be completed before the end of the school year, contracts will be offered to artists the first of June.</p> <p>2007 PASS Camp at TFS forms collected and organized in preparation for the camp</p> <p>2007 PASS Camp at Emily K forms collected and organized in preparation for the camp</p> <p>Camp staff and counselors complete any required training and receive contracts</p> <p>Exprésate workshop presented</p> <p style="text-align: right;">8 of 20</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">June 2007</p> <p>Camp staff and counselor training meetings</p> <p>Camp supplies purchased, organized and prepped for move in</p> <p>Fundraising meetings for the 2007/2008 project begin</p> <p>Production planning (set, lights, costumes) meetings</p> <p>Preliminary work for 2008/2009 project begins – this entails reading scripts, considering project focus, discussion of actor availability, and research with regard to the performance space</p> <p>Fundraising committee meets to plan February/March 2008 Fundraiser Event</p> <p style="text-align: right;">9 of 20</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">July 2007</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final preparations for camp are complete • Truck rented and packed for July 8 load in to TFS • Camp begins at TFS July 9 – and runs for three weeks • Marketing ramp up for Grapes of Wrath • TFS Performances presented on July 26 and July 27 • Load out from TFS and Load in to Emily K on July 28/29 • Camp begins at the Emily K center July 30 and runs for two weeks • Mary K Performances presented August 10 and August 11 • Strike August 11, 12 and 13 • Paul Green Foundation Grant due <p style="text-align: right;">10 of 20</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">August 2007</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grapes of Wrath rehearsals begin August 6 • Grapes of Wrath marketing in high gear • Grapes of Wrath opens August 23 • Performances August 23, 24, 25, 26, 30, 31, Sept 1, 2 • Apples Service learning project begins with students at UNC Chapel Hill, primary responsibility for each student is to assist in Marketing, booking Exprésate to organizations/churches in triangle area, and support the events scheduled for Grapes of Wrath (fundraiser and talk back) as directed by Marketing Director Melissa Zeph. • Fundraising committee meets to plan February/March 2008 Fundraiser Event <p style="text-align: right;">11 of 20</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Apples Service Learning Project</p> <p>The Exprésate Project was the core piece of an independent study approved at UNC Chapel Hill – Spring 2007</p> <p>The study has been developed into and been approved by staff at UNC Chapel Hill as an integral part of the Politics and Performance class that Deb Royals will be teaching in the fall 2007</p> <p>An integral part of this class includes a service learning component that is overseen by Apples Service Learning program at UNC Chapel Hill</p> <p>Students in the class are required to work with JTP as a part of their grade</p> <p>Primary responsibilities will be to assist in marketing, scheduling snippets of Exprésate at churches, schools and universities in the triangle area, and creating promotional materials.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">12 of 20</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">September 2007</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grapes of Wrath Performances September 1, 2 • Grapes of Wrath Strike and wrap up September 2 - 5 • Presentations of Exprésate begin to be scheduled by Apples Service Learning Students, under the supervision of JTP Marketing Coordinator – Melissa Zeph. • Fundraising committee meets to plan February/March 2008 Fundraiser Event <p style="text-align: right;">13 of 20</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">October 2007</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exprésate snippet performances scheduled and begin to be presented to schools, churches and organizations in the triangle area • Final proposals prepared for the 2008/2009 season the week of October 1-5 and completed for board presentation and approval • Fundraising committee meets to plan February/March 2008 Fundraiser Event • Mary Duke Biddle Grant Due <p style="text-align: right;">14 of 20</p>

Figure 15: The Justice Theater Project: A Year at a Glance, April 2007–April 2008

(Reproduced from board presentation by Deb Royals March 10, 2007)

<p>November 2007</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fundraising Committee meets ▪ Grant narratives are outlined ▪ Marketing continues for Exprésate ▪ Exprésate snippets continued to be performed throughout Triangle ▪ Fundraising committee meets to plan February/March 2008 Fundraiser Event <p>15 of 20</p>	<p>December 2007</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete 2008/2009 Grant Narratives • Continue marketing Exprésate production • Continue to plan and market Fundraiser <p>16 of 20</p>
<p>January 2008</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exprésate presented January 4,5 at Cardinal Gibbons Performing Arts Center • Facilitated talk-backs and programming surrounds the performances • Summer 2008 Camp materials created • Summer 2008 Camp information goes out • Continue to plan and market Fundraiser <p>17 of 20</p>	<p>February 2008</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camp Packets are mailed out • Production Meetings start for culminating production • Collaboration meetings with UNC Chapel Hill happens as they prepare to present Still...Life as a part of the year long focus there on the Justice System, specifically the Death Penalty and its use here in the state of North Carolina. • Continue to plan and market Fundraiser <p>18 of 20</p>
<p>March 2008</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fundraiser!! • Turn in Grants – United Arts Council, North Carolina Arts Council • Market the final Immigration Project show • Collect camp forms and organize staff for the summer <p>19 of 20</p>	<p>April 2008</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still...Life is presented at UNC Chapel Hill • Camp registration continues • Production planning for final project of The Immigration Project • Marketing ramps up for final project of The Immigration Project <p>20 of 20</p>

Figure 16: The Justice Theater Project: A Year at a Glance, April 2007–April 2008

(Reproduced from board presentation by Deb Royals March 10, 2007)

Learning to Juggle

On March 3, 2007 Royals laid out for the JTP board of directors the plan for the 2007–2008 season as they had requested a year earlier. (See Figure 15 and Figure 16.) The season was entitled “The Immigration Project”. Royals explained the specific details around how Rosie Rangel at SAF had approached her and how this work would complement a season hungry to make conversations about immigration. The season would begin with *Grapes of Wrath*, followed by the piece to be developed teens in the migrant camps, and close with *A Line in the Sand*, an original ethnographic piece that had be conceived and

completed by Catholic Relief Services. The board approved the proposal and Royals got started with the migrant farmworking youth.

Making Theater with Young Migrant Farmworkers, Summer 2007

Following the performance with the ¡Exprésate! teens at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, Royals began to travel to Benson, North Carolina and strategize with the SAF staff working there on how they might bring teens working in farmworking communities in southeast North Carolina together to create a performance piece. The local SAF group in Benson had a strong desire to show the harsh realities of life that was taking place in migrant camps, the exploitation of this labor, the lack of health care and the filthy living and working conditions. The group would include eight youths aged 13 to 18 years. They were all children of migrant workers or migrant workers themselves. The performances would be presented throughout central and southeastern North Carolina. Royals and the group would meet each week to create a Forum Theater script and then continue to meet as they refined and rehearsed the piece for performance. At one of the first meetings, the group asked Royals what the group in Durham had called their play. When they heard its name, *¡Exprésate!*, they decided to riff on it, choosing to call their performances, *¡Exprésate!—The Price You Pay!*

Migrant farmworking camps in southeast North Carolina are often completely hidden far off from the main roads, behind pine trees and invisible to the outside world. As the summer months began Royals traveled from her home in Raleigh to be with the migrant farm working teens. She measured her time together with them by watching the tobacco priming process take place. Over these weeks she noted that the tobacco plants were slowly being

picked away. Priming tobacco begins at the base of the plant and slowly the leaves disappear as the fieldworkers gradually climb up the plant picking away the leaves and exposing the single stalk that runs through the center of the plant. The leaves on the bottom (first pick) are the largest and in the morning dews are the heaviest. This first pick of the leaves closest to the ground can often render snakebites to the hands.

As the work on their performance piece took shape the tobacco plants slowly morphed from leafy plants to single stalks standing naked in the field, a final reminder of the migrant's work in boiling temperatures. Together she and the teens engaged in making a performance piece that would pull fragments together about the realities of their lives and in so doing make revelations about their world for others to come and know. This collision of fragments created by the teens would make a performance that belonged to both the world of participant and the audience in communities where families live in harsh conditions, surviving despite all odds.

A major shift has occurred in the scale of worldwide transnational migration and the scale of the parallel backlash in receiving countries. One distinguishing characteristic of this migration in the Southeastern United States is that it is not, like previous waves, restricted to urban centers like the one in the west end area of Durham that surrounds Immaculate Conception Church. Instead, unlike the current worldwide trend of urban migration (an estimated 50 percent of the human population are now considered to be urban dwellers), a high number of immigrants settle in rural areas. Although Latina immigrants have contributed significantly to the recent upswing of the Southern U.S. economy in these rural areas, they have not generally been welcome.

The teens knew this and often referred to the ways in which people had defined them using this word, “illegal”, a label that continued to find its way into the conversations that Royals and the teens had regarding the development of the performance piece they were making. Performance finds a way to tie people and situations to words, images, meanings, and pedagogy whose text is both tangible and not tangible. Words push beyond containment and seek to find a way for a neutral experience, free from the cultural and the social. These social scripts can find a place outside the confining “doxa” and open up the liminal space of neither precisely one thing nor the other—a place that could be called “the paradoxa”—then a performance might exist—while maybe only briefly—without definition, encouraging movement/passage and imagination. The term “illegal,” which functions simultaneously as a political, cultural, and economic category, is a key concept in contemporary discourses about immigration in the United States. While immigration has been a mainstay of the history of the United States, what is new about the current migration situation is the creation of a discourse surrounding the term “illegal.” This discourse dehumanizes the migrants, “people without documents [who] live behind another kind of border, a baffling and sometimes terrifying boarder that separates them from those around them and the country and society in which they live” (Chomsky 86).

The creation of their scripts, the development, presentation, embodied engagement as practiced by each teenager in the group, highlights Barthes’ point that “the text is experienced [only] in an activity of production” (170). Using performance offers a radical commitment to both embodiment and critical aesthetics that is key to understanding the ways in which people negotiate the contingent statuses of both being “illegal” (on the part of

migrants) and policing “legality” (on the part of both individuals and institutions). Quite simply, it looks at the movements of bodies as a kind of dance. As Judith Hamera writes:

The social work of aesthetics is especially central to performance, where labors of creation are explicitly communal and corporeal, and where corporeality and sociality are remade as surely as a formal event is produced. Here the contingent, situated nature of art’s norms and pleasures is exposed with special clarity. The norms and pleasures are literally incarnated, embraced or resisted by particular bodies in specific places and times. In such corporeal, contextual specificity, aesthetics can never be mistaken for transcendent or timeless (3).

Royals traveled back and forth from her home in Raleigh to southeast North Carolina to work with teens on the project. Because their work was going to be presented throughout southeast North Carolina in migrant camps, churches, and organizations beginning in September 2007, it was necessary to meet consistently during the week from late spring through the summer months and in to early fall. The group traveled across seasons, from springtime temperatures to “Indian Summer” heat.

The border ruptures the futures of two sisters, Summer 2007

Somewhere between a home in Raleigh and the migrant camps of North Carolina Farmworkers, the earth changes color—the earth, like society, collides. This collision begins a performance that belongs to both the world of participant and audience in communities where families live in pitiable conditions, surviving despite all odds. Leaving early in the morning, Royals drove her family van drove down to the camps and homes of migrants who lived and work in the sweet potato, tobacco and strawberry fields; farmland that stretches out over much of central and southeastern North Carolina. The morning trips were sensory ones: dew hanging tight to trees, crops, and window shields, earthy odors of dirt, tobacco. Often

Royals would roll down the window and let this visceral sensory moment flood the inside of the van.

Royals would pick up the teens working on the project every weekend, they would go to the SAF office in Benson where they completed work on the developing script, rehearsed the material, added costumes, props and set ideas. Each session lasted for about four hours and then Royals would drive them back home through the winding roads that cut through this rural countryside.

The time in the van with the teens was an experience of touching through listening and hearing; blending voices and languages, they talked to each other and they talked to her; and then they were gone and she would be alone again, driving home. It was during one of these times back in the van as she returned the teens home that she learned that two of the girls—sisters—shared very different realities in their home. The older sister, Rosa had been born in El Salvador, before her parents migrated here to North Carolina. Because of this she was not considered a United States citizen. Her younger sister, Anna had been born in North Carolina since her family had migrated here. Anna was a “legal” citizen. Rosa told Royals one evening on the way home that her sister “Anna is able to get a license and she will be able to go to college.” Royals then asked her what she planned to do. She answered, “I will work in the fields with my parents or clean homes.” She also shared with Royals how Anna was treated differently in the home. Anna’s citizenship held out hope and promise for the family and her parents doted on her and while Rosa knew her parents loved her she also knew that they did not see her being able to do as much for the family beyond her work in the fields. Rosa’s reality is a reality of many undocumented workers. Chomsky clearly articulates this truth when she discusses children and families. “Every worker,” she says, is a “human

being” and that means they have “children and families” just like any other person. Because more and more migrant workers have to “long-term family settlement, more and more children have been affected by issues of status” (152).

After Royals dropped the teens off, their words and their presence would continue to buzz inside the van. This buzz meshed with the evening summer skies and she didn’t dare to turn the air-conditioning on. Instead she gave in to a compelling desire to continue to smell, keeping the window down so as to bring in not only what was left of a summer day but also maybe the remnants of Rosa’s reality, one that lurked in the shadows, behind the trees, hidden from sight on these back roads.

Being in the migrant camps in the heat of the summer was like being *hidden deep inside* something, away from the urban dwellers, in fields where tobacco plants are being picked away and snakes are making nests under large green leaves. Camps that are situated far off the road away from view and behind the Carolina pines, where people sleep in ovens after long hours of work. This heat presses down, lifts up, suppresses, expresses and submits. As Royals made her way back home one evening, she experienced what she would later call a “rupture.”

The rupture that exploded into one of these particular moments had roots far from this time and place in a van that was creeping along back roads. Something profound happened in this moment, in this quiet. Such triggering points are a part of a larger script, which demands to be dissected and understood. The rupture and the work it begs for is a repercussion of something larger: a collective experience, a timeless understanding, of heat, work and memory. Royals understood that there had to be a way to grasp this rupture experience more clearly.

**“Yo valgo más que esto,”
2007**

The Justice Theater Project and Royals completed the work with the teens in September. They performed *¡Exprésate!—The Price You Pay!* in migrant farm working camps throughout central and southeastern North Carolina. There were 14 performances in all. Most of these performance happened in the actual camps for the migrant workers. These performances were particularly enlightening with regard to the migrant life and the reality of living “out of sight.” The audience numbers ranged from 5 to 20 people at each performance. The migrants at these camps actively engaged the work. One very poignant moment of intervention happened when one of the older men at the camp jumped in to intervene. He chose the moment of the play where the actors are playing out how they will work for little money as indicated on their signs or “price tags,” removed the sign from around his neck, and placed it on the ground with the price no longer showing. He then stood on the sign, looked out at the audience and said, “Yo valgo más que esto.” (“I am worth more than this.”)

One of the performances took place around a front porch of a house in the middle of a tobacco field outside of Newton Grove North Carolina. Hanging across the roof of the front porch were strings of multi-colored Christmas lights. Mama dogs and their puppies barked and ran around their feet. Laid out on tables on the front porch was a feast of homemade tortillas, pulled pork and chicken, jalapeño peppers, sodas. The teens performed in the yard off the front porch, while music and the smells of food wafted through the front yard now converted to a stage. Following the performance, the entire group shared a family dinner. One of the representatives from SAF told the participants there the ways in which they might get access to some medical care when they needed it. Over plates of food, in both Spanish and English, they also discussed the performance and its message. They talked about the

ways in which this performance might help the migrant worker think about the importance of clean water and why drinking dirty water or beer as a substitute for water can contribute in very negative ways to healthy bodies.¹⁴

Throughout the performances, Royals continued to pick up the teens and go to the offices in Benson to continue to add to the performance, discuss the feedback that they were receiving, and rehearse the material. When the weather was nice they would rehearse in a park close to the office that had a community stage. The audience on those days were primarily from the homeless community; they would sit scattered on park benches watching the group perform. Sometimes they laughed at the performance work, and sometimes they would ask members of the group for help. In addition to the camp performances, the teens also performed the piece at the outdoor community center area at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church on November 11, 2007, for an audience of around 200 people.

Shortly before the end of their work together, Royals went down to meet with the teens and they had lunch. It was late December. The group as a whole was catching up and preparing for the main stage performance experience that the company was providing for the broader community in January of 2008 in Raleigh, North Carolina. Several members of the group spoke excitedly about their upcoming trips to their home country for the holidays. At the end of their meal Royals again drove each of the teens back home again. The landscape in December was different. The dirt in the fields has been turned and the trees have dropped

¹⁴ The previous year, the *Raleigh News and Observer* published a story about a tomato company that illegally exposed the migrants it employed in its fields in southeast North Carolina to dangerous pesticides. The article profiles three female workers who were pregnant at the time of exposure. When they gave birth, one baby was born without limbs, another with a deformed jaw, and the third with no nose and no visible sex organs—that baby quickly died. The teens from the camps that Royals was working with were keenly aware of these stories and very concerned about the same thing happening to them and to their children. These events had affected people that they and their families knew and they were deeply troubled (Collins).

their leaves. She dropped each teen back home; each of them sending her off with a hug, kiss or a smile.



Figure 17: Project Levante Students rehearse scripts, September 2007, Benson, NC.

(Photos by Melissa Zeph)

The final performance of *¡Exprésate—the Price You Pay!* was in Raleigh at Cardinal Gibbons High School on January 4 and 5, 2008. The audience that attended this performance included members of the faculty and staff at Cardinal Gibbons, the teens who had created the performance piece *¡Exprésate!* in Durham, members of Immaculate Conception Church and Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, the staff from Student Action with Farmworkers, people from the SAF offices in Benson, and selected individuals who had been working toward just immigration reform. There were close to 40 people in the audience.

Orla Swift, a writer for the News and Observer, attended. Orla had shown interest in Royals' work for some time and had written several articles about it and about her. She asked Royals if she could interview the teens and write a full in article for the newspaper with a photograph. Royals told Orla that a short article describing the work was okay but including a photograph might put some of the teens in legal jeopardy. Orla asked if she could take a picture of only those teens that were United States citizens. Royals agreed that this was okay. The article ran before the performances at Gibbons took place.

Seeing the Wall in Nogales, March 2008

To gain perspective on migrant life, in late fall of 2007, Royals signed up for the North Carolina Farmworkers course that was being taught at Duke University at the Center for Documentary studies. When the classes began in January, shortly after the *¡Exprésate!—The Price You Pay!* performances, Royals was told that an integral part of this class was a trip to the United States–Mexico border. Based on her research with the teens and their families, she knew that several traveled from Mexico to North Carolina up through Arizona. A town in common was Nogales, Mexico and that was where the group would be going as a

part of the course in the spring of 2008. Royals, knowing that the conversation about immigration reform JTP was engaged in would continue for a year, decided to figure out a way to make this trip work and agreed take part, expecting that it would add a layer to her understanding and that it would enable her to lead better discussions of the season's final production, *A Line in the Sand* (as she explained to her board).



Figure 18: The Border Wall, March 10, 2008, Nogales, Mexico.

(Photograph courtesy of Charlie Thompson, Duke University Center for Documentary Studies)

At Nogales, the border wall cuts through the sand between the United States and Mexico. When Royals finally stood next to it its presence and the injurious wound that it was making on the earth and between people overwhelmed her. This line in the sand, this place of crossing, death and promise, is integrally linked to the sandy tobacco fields that majestically paint the North Carolina landscape. Many of the families there had broken the barrier of this wall, only to labor further across the desert before arriving in North Carolina and beginning a

life of more hiding and laboring, but this time in the shadows behind North Carolina pine trees, invisible to most North Carolinians.

Keenly aware of the Nogales heat, Royals placed her hand on the wall and kept it there for several moments so that she could feel the scorch, a moment of “touch” that was not “bodily sensation but [...] self-displacing, self-transforming objectification” (Scarry 166).

Royals found words written on the wall that claim friendship between the United States and Mexico, but the words the wall really speak discuss how people risk everything to break the barrier of the wall and travel through a desert that kills. In desperation, migrants cross the border at the harshest time of year baking under the sun and stumbling through dark nights, hoping to find seasonal work in fields like those in North Carolina so as to provide for a better life for their families. Their journeys are stories that lay bare the truths about a human body that is both writhing in pain and dancing ways to remake.

When the U.S. House of Representatives voted in December 2005 to build a separation barrier along parts of the border, the resulting text was a blockade of 700 miles of high-security, triple-layer fencing, with reinforcing border patrol vehicles that raze up and the down the drag roads that frame the United States side of the wall. Their language spoke about the hopes that barriers of this sort would drastically reduce drug smuggling and “illegal” immigration. But this wall has responded with words that contradict hope. The wall speaks about the ways in which the act of its construction has only redirected migration flows into the most desolate and unforgiving areas of the desert and thus increased the death rate of “illegals.” But these are actually human beings, and despite the wall and the threat of death they continue to pursue a path to migrant camps throughout the United States, including North Carolina. If they make it across the desert, desperate employers embrace these

immigrants, hiding them away in camps on farms where they work for little money, with no health care, in harmful conditions. These people, including the teenagers she had traveled to be with every week for a year and a half, continue to come and come and come, dying in the process, sacrificing everything because (as Steinbeck might have said, had he ever heard the word “NAFTA”) they are inside a nightmare that cramps their stomachs, a starving inside wretched bellies more afraid of the alternative to the “wall” than what the wall represents. It’s a one-way flow: the security measures in place and performed along and around this border prevents the push–pull, give–take relationship that formerly existed between the two countries. A citizen from Mexico can no longer travel to the United States to work and then return. Instead, migrants often feel forced to stay in the United States, bringing their families to be with them and living a life labeled as “illegals”. Although Latino immigrants contribute significantly to the Southern U.S. economy, their presence in the region is met with ambivalence at best. The term “illegal,” which functions simultaneously as a political, cultural, and economic category, is a key concept in contemporary discourses about immigration in the United States. While immigration has been a mainstay of the history of the United States, what is new about the current migration situation is the creation of a discourse surrounding this term “illegal.”

The American response has included security measures to strengthen the power of the wall and vigilante groups like the “Minute Men”; yet, migrants dialogue with the wall, continue to break the wall, and create a paradox around the doxa wall even as they place their bodies on the line to do so. No longer able to cross the heavily guarded sectors of the 2,000-mile border, many have opted to make their moves in the more desolate areas of the Southwest, typically along the Arizona border. These crossings are the most dangerous: since

the inception of NAFTA in January 1994, more than 5,000 have died from drowning, dehydration, heat stroke, asphyxiation in sealed trucks and being run over by cars in their attempts to avoid the official points of entry.

These numbers are not inclusive; there are uncounted bodies which have silently drifted away, absorbed by the dust and the sand. But there are bodies too that have survived, and now live hidden away in migrant camps across the United States, including those in the South. These bodies toil in the fields; are subject to grossly inadequate housing; receive poor medical care; and are deprived of educational opportunity. Such bodies are a response to the wall as it knifes its way through the Southwestern landscape, encouraging the sickness that is spreading throughout the larger human body. These bodies are both performance and work; they exist and create in a way that is, according to Barthes, “radically symbolic: [...] conceived, perceived and received in its integrally symbolic nature” (171). The work of these bodies press the wall, dance with it, break it, move beyond it and in so doing speak to other parts of the larger human body.

The lives and struggles of such people force discussion around the ways in which the body continues to be killed, is forced to live in pain and abandoned. When the “functional sophistication of a human organism” comes up against the technology of the border wall—constructed from leftover Gulf War materials—and the supporting technology that draws lines up and down its length, it is our human body that is deconstructed. And when this happens, according to Baudrillard, the body is “no longer a functional medium, but the extension of death” (111).

The wall at Nogales is both doxa and paradox. It is a stage that represents a truth—and a surprising truth at that. The wall scripts and choreographs a drama and a dance that

reach deep into the world's gut-wrenching and soothing places all at once, where work is both curse and salvation.

When Royals reached down and touched her palms to the earth at Nogales, she really did feel... connected to the rupture that had taken place earlier that year on a summer evening set against the North Carolina landscape. The scorched barren landscape in Nogales Mexico provided a visceral connection to life, from resilient little patches of green foliage that are able to grow to the harsh call of some unknown desert animal in the distance. In that unforgiving environment, Royals felt the tremor again, a tremor connected to people who were, in that same moment, walking, talking, breathing, feeling, suffering and hoping as they walked across an unforgiving desert.

This rattled Royals to the very marrow; everything about this was jarring and unnatural. As movement, shifts within a community, as policing and hiding operate within it, what is being choreographed? Judith Hamera argues "every day, urban communities are danced into being. This is more than a metaphor. It is a testament to the power of performance as a social force, as cultural poesis, as a communication infrastructure that makes identity, solidarity and memory sharable" (1).

Along the border between the United States and Mexico, a performance is taking place. A performance text being written about the reality of the wall, of the border that cuts through and the ways in which it demarcates a physical boundary between two countries. This boundary in turn represents both a separation and a marriage between two countries that have claimed partnership, and friendship, since the inception of NAFTA and its commencement on January 1, 1994. The text that the wall writes perpetuates a discourse that includes many voices, those on the United States and Mexico border, those living and

working in migrant camps, those who provide medical, education and social services to the migrants, those who fight and those who watch the fight. The wall physically manifests a dance with and between bodies, words, policing institutions and emotions, in which bodies are impacted, separated and connected. At the wall, texts including “alien,” “illegal,” “immigrant” and others are written on and performed by bodies.

Vehicular traffic going from the U.S. into Mexico takes around ten minutes. The return trip from Mexico to the U.S. can take hours. Official security folk peer into each car, lined up and waiting; poking and prodding, questioning, flashing small mirrors into unexposed corners that arouse suspicion.

One of the migrant farm working parents in North Carolina said to Royals during the many months that she had traveled back and forth to work with the teens:

Hopefully, whoever becomes the president can help us out, help out the people who work in the fields because we're scared. We want to be with our families. We don't mind if we work...the whole thing is going back to visit our families for a week, even for a day, that's the dream. We're scared because we have some children who were born here, in the United States, and some are from Mexico, so what happens if we get picked up? What happens to our children? That's why I'm scared...scared of leaving my kids behind and being separated (Royals *¡Exprésate!* Archive).¹⁵

¹⁵ In the 2008 campaign cycle, President Obama promised to overhaul immigration in his first year in office. Though he called for comprehensive reform in June of 2009, the “effort got little push from the White House and went nowhere.”—Brian Montopoli CBS News, October 24, 2012. The economic crisis that the United States was navigating at the time seemed to be the primary reason for the stall regarding immigration reform. However in 2013 when a comprehensive reform bill that had passed in the Senate was brought before the House of Representative it died. In November 2014, on his own President Obama tried to build on the 2012 program of deportation relief call DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. When the president announced that he was going to expand this program and give similar relief, extending deportation deferrals and work permits to millions of undocumented immigrants who are parents of American citizens or legal residents, the Republicans were enraged and found a federal district judge in Texas who along with 25 other states brought lawsuits challenging the president’s executive actions and placed nationwide hold on the program. The Texas judge’s ruling was appealed to the United States Court of appeal for the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans. The appeal was denied to the Obama administration’s request to lift a hold on the president’s executive actions on immigration. In 2014 President Barack Obama’s executive action on immigration sought to protect millions of families in the US but there are still major rights concerns

This migrant farm working parent's text, his struggle to survive and the risks that he has been willing to endure is particularly resonant when juxtaposed dialogically with Steinbeck's questions: "How can you frighten a man whose hunger is not only in his own cramped stomach, but in the wretched bellies of his children? You can't scare him—he has known a fear beyond every other" (Chap. 19).

The wall at Nogales—the "doxa" as discussed by Roland Barthes performs real words that cut, collide and converge into performance, music and dance in ways that are equally painful and beautiful. The Mexico side of the wall is decorated with complete pieces of visual art that speak about the wall and what its presence writes. These installations (some simple graffiti, others complete works) use words like sin, loss, God, death, promise, outlaws, esteem and hope. This text is calling on a response, a dialogue between the two countries and the people that live on either side of the wall and possibly pointing to what this proposed Wittgensteinian, "language game" might do and the possibility of connections. Connections that might render conversation about the circumstantial situations that exist on either side of the wall; a dialogue about accountability and a conversation that discusses texts of fear, alien, illegal, starvation, and death. A connection that paradoxically would open up a pathway around the doxa – one that "requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice" (Barthes 173).

left unaddressed at the border. Human Rights Watch have continued to plead with President Obama and the Congress to end harsh treatment at the border, unnecessary detention, and unfair criminal penalties that tear families apart. The hope of the mother quoted above is shared by many migrant farm-working parents and continues to be relevant now eight years later.)

**Meeting Las Madres,
March 2008**

An artist who lives in Arizona, Debbi McCullough travels to the border crossings every day with her partner. They carry with them jugs of water, food, and medical supplies for the migrants they know they will find. They enter the desert in remote locations to bring these to the migrants lost or abandoned in their attempt to cross into United States. In addition to bringing food and water, they bring supplies to bind the face, hands and feet of the people they find who have been scorched/blistered by the sun. This artist struggles daily with the pain of these daily trips and the people she meets in the desert. She can no longer respond to the wall's words and the ways in which these words attempt to manage people without incorporating her own understanding as an artist. Scattered throughout the desert floor along the paths that she and her partner cover, she finds clothing, shoes, tuna cans, busted gallon water jugs, prayer cards, pictures of children, bandanas—all of which she has begun to make into sculpted pieces of artwork. McCullough worked with three other artists living in Tucson to create the “Las Madres” project. Las Madres is installed at Pima Community College. The sculptures of three women were created from natural Sonoran materials and clothing, particularly jeans. They stand in stillness with closed eyes, and crossed arms. Like the real-life defenseless mothers and their children who disappear in Southern Arizona's harsh elements, the unprotected stationary “madres” (mothers) are disintegrating from exposure to sun and heat, cold and rain. To experience them is to visually and viscerally touch them making them—their “corporeality [...] the connective tissues that nourish and sustain the possibility of seeing” (Oliver 201).

McCullough's response to the wall and to the encounters that she experiences every day renders another performance, artwork that talks about the experiences that people are

sharing with one another as a result of the wall and the way in which they articulate the wall and rearticulate their responses in efforts to escape the wall—the “doxa” in this case—and work toward an open neutral space for processing—the “paradoxa.” These intricately



Figure 19: Las Madres.

Sculpted in 2005 by Valarie James with Antonia Gallegas, Deborah McCullough, and Cesar Lopez.
Collection of Pima Community College, Tucson, Arizona.
(Deb Royals, March 12, 2008)

stitched-together moments of pain and production are what Judith Hamera describes as “the social work of aesthetics,” and in stitching these together creates a merger between the aesthetic and the mundane, that provides an acceptable and possibly an alternative that is meaningful to the audience and the participant: “Norms and pleasures are literally incarnated, embraced or resisted by particular bodies in specific and times” (3). On this stage of collision, of wall making, boundaries, power, death, and disarray—those privileged to make, create, consume, and mourn, yearning for healing.

The bodies crossing the desert, the bodies dying, the bodies working in the fields, the artist coping, the mother waiting to hear about her child’s fate, farm working families working in pitiable conditions in southeast North Carolina and a woman in a van moving along rural back roads—each of these people is engaged in that “social space which leaves no language safe, outside, or any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder” (Barthes 174). The work with the teens and the trip to Nogales teaching the paradox of each hug, of each good bye and the fragile importance of what each of these represent.

During the trip to the United States/Mexico border Royals also met Delle McCormick, the executive director at that time for the Borderlinks organization there. When the class visited the Las Madres art project, she spoke to Royals about her work with migrants crossing the border and how she deals daily with their plight and she said something to Royals that stuck, “our country (referring to the United States) is sick and in need of healthy healing” (Royals, *¡Exprésate!* Archive). Something is happening as a result of these walls. Tender things of beauty are being sculpted, painted, danced and performed, creating a space/place for what bell hooks might call “the love ethic” where “we expand our concern

about politics of domination and our capacity to care about the oppression and exploitation of others.”

Rural back roads can be the point where the productive rupture can happen and new awareness that can make connections to the script perpetuated by walls that slice the place on the body “where the Third World grates against the fist and bleeds and before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (Anzaldúa 25). The border wall is a character that talks of “us” and “them” of “haves” and “have nots,” of “more than” and “less than.”

The wall’s words, the border culture it creates, has deep historical roots. These roots are far reaching. They are directly linked to histories and present day realities in the countryside in southeast North Carolina. Slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, tenant farmers—brown and black bodies have been toiling in and dying on the same soil where the migrants toil today. But complete repressing has not yet taken place, not while teens seek to courageously make performance about their lives and share it with their own families and friends and the broader community.

An Ethic of Love, 2008

In *Outlaw Culture, Resisting Representation*, bell hooks writes, “in this society there is no powerful discourse on love emerging either from the politically progressive radicals or from the Left.” She also argues that “without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination, imperialism, sexism, racism, classicism” (243). Society may just need an ethic of love, a new political vision, aspirations that will

shake—better yet shock—allegiances to systems of domination, imperialism, sexism, racism and classicism.

Border walls are pervasive. There is a border—a line between Royals’ home in Raleigh and the places where migrant farmworking families live and work. Borders exist between our own understanding of what these teens are and what their lives actually are; and there are the borders that prevent the writing that the “theory of text” demands (Barthes 174). Walls perform. The words that they speak slice through countries, exploit the bodies of women and men, hide away histories, harm futures, and make the body, the human body sick.

The “Great Wall of Mexico” and the text it writes, communicates, the ways in which it separates and creates disparity and further desperation is a painful reflection of what is unhealthy about the human body. The “will to extend one’s self for the purpose of one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” is a possible response text for all people (hooks 243). The migrant farmworking teens and Royals worked together to create a text which opened up a passageway—providing them with a space to discuss the world as **they** see it, the walls **they** interact with, the joys **they** experience and the illusive “**hope**” that Augusto Boal calls possible. Their hope and their work were a source of passion, rupture, of after shock and the act of breaking through some boundaries...possibly creating tremors, after shocks that are felt far from here. Through the work, JTP was seeking out that which is compromised by blindness. The power of interrogation and of risk taking is being in midst of the doing, traveling from the assumed “safe” to the fresh opportunity of the “unsafe” and learning how if the turn “away” is a turn toward justice we might hear important stories and histories. We turn and open the opportunity to new realities and maybe heal the collective soul.

“Using the power of the soul, we find ways to self-actualized,” bell hooks says, “the power of the soul fosters in us awareness that we must care for the needs of our spirits and seek an emancipatory spirituality. The soul guiding light still shines no matter the extent of our collective blindness. At any moment, at any time, we can turn toward this light to renew our spirits and restore our souls” (*Rock My Soul* 226). There is proof that suggests that pressuring forces can turn people off, numbing them to the existing issues of social concerns. Performance supplies a gentle linkage with others that may be our only hope. The Justice Theater Project, Royals, and others working with the company were creating a way through performance that exemplified the dialogic approach to social change that Paulo Freire had championed in his lifetime. This pedagogy was one that “emphasized the role of ‘teacher as learner’ and the ‘learner as teacher,’ with each person learning from the other in a mutual, reciprocal, iterative, and transformative process” (Papa, Singhal, and Papa 165).

The collaboration with Student Action with Farmworkers and Project Levante to create the *¡Exprésate!—The Price You Pay!* forum event clearly rooted The Justice Theater Project as a social justice company organized to seek and create discourse that would perpetuate shifts toward justice. By the end of the 2007–2008 season, the company had been able to forge relationships that have remained sound and rich throughout its continued history.

The final show of the 2007–2008 Immigration Project season was the production of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) original play, *The Line in the Sand*, directed by Carnessa Ottelin.¹⁶ The performance used film, slides, and original music on a set resembling, the desert built almost completely of sand, to tell, as one reviewer wrote,

¹⁶ Royals portrayed one of the characters in the production.

a distillation of several stories related first-hand to a group of people from the Catholic Relief Services, an arm of which is dedicated to assisting those "crossers," as they have become known, in surviving the terrible trials they meet in this desert. [The play shows] ... what the crossers are risking, why they do it, and how they are treated as a result. It is the other side of the tale of illegal immigration, told from the point of view of those who feel they must do it (Hall).

JTP had raised money to bring Royals' recent acquaintances, Las Madres artist Debbi McCullough and Borderlinks executive director Delle McCormick, to speak to audiences in North Carolina about the reality that exists on the border.

JTP partnered with multiple organizations over the course of the 2007–2008 season, including North Carolina Central University, Durham Technical Community College, Passage Home, Student Action with Farmworkers, East Coast Migrant Headstart Program, No Mas Muertes, Samaritans, BorderLinks, Catholic Relief Services, Emily K Family Life Center, faculty and the North Carolina Hunger Network. All serve the Latina and immigrant population here in North Carolina. JTP sought out these groups in an effort to continue its commitment to providing education and action beyond the theater door. In addition to the performances, presentations were created as tools to sensitize the community to the reality of Latina immigrants and the circumstances in which they live. The educational and informational programs scheduled around each production that season included book groups within churches, universities and organizations (with facilitators provided to guide and steer discussions); staged readings; post-show "Talk Back" discussions between cast, crew, and audience; community forums that brought together experts/specialists on the issue; town hall style meetings; panel discussions; lectures; and instructional classes.

In June of 2008, following the production of *The Line In the Sand*, the company laid out the next year's work which would be entitled: "Human Dignity Project" to include

productions of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Frank McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, and *Working: A Musical*, by Stephen Schwartz and Nina Faso, based on the book by Studs Terkel, as well to as continue to create original work. The original piece was again to be a product of the Boalian Forum Theater method and would be created with the teens at Poplar Springs Christian Church in Garner, North Carolina in an effort to address how human beings seek to dignify each other in a world rife with bullying, drug abuse, and gun violence.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION: PROVIDING A PLACE TO BEGIN

On April 5, 2008, following a performance of *Still ... Life. An exploration of a killing state: North Carolina*, a gentleman approached me and asked if there was any documentation about how The Justice Theater Project had begun. He explained he was interested in doing the same type of work at his church, Saint Mark's United Methodist in Raleigh. I told him that I had saved the historical documentation about how The Justice Theater Project had started, including its incorporation papers, along with all the ethnographic field research the company had done to that point, outlines for performance workshops, board meeting agendas and presentations, and the production planning that had been filed for each project. These papers had been collected and catalogued over the years. But I had never put them together to tell a story.

"What's so special about storytelling for social change?" Simon Hodges asked, and answered, "The problem has not been making up good stories, but getting people to listen to the ones they already have."

When the time came to decide on the focus and scope of this dissertation, the question was never, Should this be about my work with The Justice Theater Project? The puzzle was, Which perspective I should cover? I decided, thinking back to the conversation with the gentleman from St. Mark's, that telling the story of The Justice Theater Project's early history, of how we started it and where its influences came from, could provide valuable documentation for the company and perhaps be of use to others interested in doing the same kind of work. My hope was and is that this dissertation will serve as a valuable "how to"

guide, discussing problems actual and potential, strategic planning, and the various stages of building and sustaining a non-for profit organization, and that, through it, JTP can be a prototype for others pursuing similar work.

In recent years, after I began to have recurring bouts of pneumonia, completing this account came to seem urgent. Those stretches of illness made me wonder, who else could tell the story of how the JTP began if something more serious happened to me?

The sense of resolve deepened when my dad transitioned in early 2015. His death left my siblings and I with many open-ended questions about how to go forward. We had not discussed with him the things he wanted for his funeral. We never asked him to preserve, nor helped him to organize, the items and documents he left behind that were intricately connected to our family history. Our parents had divorced several years earlier, so we weren't able to turn to our mom for help. The lack of documents to direct us impeded our ability to do what he would have wanted. In some ways, it threatened tangible connections to him and to our history. As we moved through the loss of our father, the potential loss of his writings, historical pictures, clothing, and other small items that meant so much to us intensified our grief, all because we had no instructions to tell us what he wanted and no legal authority to obtain or ask for these precious pieces of our history.

I lost him while writing a dissertation that discussed the story of a company that I had dedicated so much of my life to making—a company many people now refer to as their “JTP family.” This coincidence made me realize that, if I didn't record how The Justice Theater Project had come into being, I could be setting up a similar scenario of loss: loss for the people who are a part of the company now, for anyone who might want to step into my shoes

when I retire, and for others, like the gentleman described above, who could learn from the ways that the JTP was created in order to do similar work.

As the founder of the Arts for Justice Ministry and co-founder of the theater company that grew out of this ministry, I knew that it was important to document the background, influences and experiences that had shaped the company's beginnings. In the process, I was reminded how personal histories, faith, relationships, and life experiences relate to what a life becomes. Mine had kindled the creation of the JTP, though I can only see that now in hindsight. As someone once said in my presence, "You don't do performance, performance does you."

What I have written, in the process of documenting the beginnings of The Justice Theater Project and its initial projects, is a story that I hope will benefit others seeking to do the same type of work. In looking back at this history, I have been given an opportunity to think about and chronicle how JTP went through the process of organizing and how it became an alternative to the traditional community theater here in central North Carolina.

When I started the Arts For Justice ministry at Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, my goal was to use the performing arts to encourage engagement by members of our church with issues of social concern. On the eve of Henry Hunt's execution in 2003, I decided that the ministry needed to be more deliberate in its efforts to involve people in a conversation about the death penalty and its effect on folks here in North Carolina. In the course of trying to figure out how to do this, I remembered the play, *A Lesson Before Dying*, and decided that perhaps producing this piece could spark that discussion. The Catholic Community of Saint Francis of Assisi supported the project, offered to pay the show's costs,

and gave us permission to produce the piece on the main church altar. Over 700 people came to that initial performance; all of them stayed for the conversation that followed.

In the weeks thereafter, requests for repeat performances came from people in the immediate community, both inside and outside the church. While still trying to find space and ways to mount the show again, and then again, and then again, Megan Nerz and I felt a sense of momentum. We began to believe that we might be able to start a company that would use performance and productions to bring people into conversations about important issues.

From the company's beginning I have served as its Artistic Director, creating the grant narratives that describe the work of each season and developing and directing the company's artistic, educational, and advocacy efforts. The artists who are a part of the company meet seasonally to address the artistic projects and productions of the company. Additionally, local artists and activists now work with the JTP to strategically plan programming that seeks to create yearlong conversations. From its initial conception, the JTP has been dedicated to using the arts to address issues of social concern. Today the company is recognized as a mature legitimate theatre company that consistently encourages dialogue by presenting compelling, high-quality productions and performance projects, with educational programming and opportunities to become involved.

Over the past twelve years, the JTP has created performance projects and theater that contributes to the struggles for justice and in the process has remained bound to a theologically-based pedagogy with the goal of creating a discussion regarding specific issues and themes. The JTP makes "community" by following Dwight Conquergood's example of staying connected to everyone who becomes a part of our work. The company continues to

fellowship with, work with, and create a place for the people who have been a part of our original projects, ethnographic interviews, forum theater pieces and traditional productions to collectively create expression, dialogue and engagement with the issues of social concern that effect the immediate community in central North Carolina and beyond.

As the JTP has matured, it has begun to cross “borders” to do original work beyond the company’s home here in central North Carolina. This is evident in the trip that I took to Nogales, Mexico to first hand witness the effects of United States immigration laws and practices. More recently, following the tragic events of the Deepwater Horizon off the coast of southern Louisiana, we decided to plan a yearlong discussion about environmental concern. We were fortunate to be able to collaborate with Joel Borne, a writer for National Geographic to look deeply at how our fragile earth is being threatened by addictions to oil, money and power. After writing for and receiving funding for this project, I traveled back and forth to southern Louisiana to engage in critical ethnographic research with the people there who had been shattered by the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon. When Joel learned about the scope of the project we were planning he agreed to help us collect research, documentation and expert perspectives on this event. His involvement was imperative to the project as I completed the ethnographic research and ultimately adapting the research into a performance piece entitled “Light on the Horizon” that was presented during our season about the environment.

Many of the practices I learned from Dwight are now applied by company members of The Justice Theater Project, continuing his legacy and the commitment he made to work that seeks a “shift” toward justice. Dwight created a space for his students to engage in that “rare hybridity” of performance studies work taking place in the academy where “a

commingling of analytical and artistic ways of knowing that unsettles the institutional organization of knowledge and disciplines,” continues to happen (“Performance Studies” 41). I first began to learn this from him in the summer of 1995. It was the experience of being in his class that made me believe that “creating performance pieces as a supplement to, not substitute for” rigorous research can “show and make us know” truth and reality. His commitment to the work and to his students are the reason his work continues both in the writing we do and in the performance work we make. He had faith in us.

As I said, the process of writing this dissertation has reminded me how important our histories are. Drawing on Dwight’s example of careful research and documentation, I found multiple linkages between my life journey and the birth of the JTP. This dissertation has explored several of those patterns. One pattern worth exploring, now that the reader can reflect on its effects, is how the cross-connections between my own life story, my Catholic faith, changes in the Catholic Church, and what might be called grace affected the company’s birth.

As a child born in the post-Vatican II era of the church, I was fashioned by the more progressive trends developing in the Catholic Church during that time. These movements offered alternative ways of thinking about how to be with the poor, the marginal, and the oppressed—and how to touch hearts. My faith and my life as an artist from an early age propelled me to use performance to call to the fore of public attention the needs of the marginalized, in an effort to place people in touch with each other and as a way to provoke a shift toward a just response.

In many ways the work of the JTP, like that of St. Francis and his ensemble of friars in 1209, has sought to follow the example of Christ as articulated in the gospels: “the life of

the disciple includes a life of poverty dedicated to preaching the way of penance and conversion” (Cunningham 34). JTP speaks to the mainstream people who come to our performance space, to the people in the streets, the prisons, the migrant farming communities, and shrimping towns left devastated by environmental disasters—always with the goal to use our work to make a difference in people’s lives.

From the JTP’s beginnings, many individuals and organizations have given of their time, talent, and treasure, sharing expertise, experience, insights, skill sets, and the fruits of their education to shape the company and make its work possible. I have tried to acknowledge as many of these contributors to and partners in our work as possible.

Dwight, when he heard that dolphins had paced me on one of my three-mile runs on Topsail Beach over a Thanksgiving holiday one year, told me that the dolphins were my auguries and shamans. He would agree, I think: an important part of what has made the JTP possible is beyond serendipity. It’s something mystical, kismet or perhaps grace.

People who spoke up or showed up in ways no one expected made important contributions. Alan Gell helped The Justice Theater Project and its leaders learn that openings for intervention, interaction, and conversation can be standard components of every performance project. Father Jacek, Banlly, Project Levante, and Rosa became characters in the company’s history who showed the artistic leadership that to do the best work it must be willing to be invited, bridged, pushed farther, and plugged in beyond the borders of what we thought was possible and perceived to be true and real.

As it shifted focus from the death penalty and its effect on people in North Carolina and moved into its season on immigration, the JTP found new ways to engage in discussion, to help people to become actively involved, and to create clarity in the midst of the emptiness

experienced when people suffer injustice. As it learned to manage the demands of beginning the next project while completing the last, the company developed a practice of performing in a way that opens up a safe place for community to confront each issue of social concern, facilitating and sustaining necessary discussions, and posing new challenges to the company and its audiences each year.

Over time the company saw that it could actively engage people around one central issue of social concern each year by weaving together traditional theater productions, original work, and Forum Theater events (as modeled by Augusto Boal), together with intentional education programming and options for action. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* continues to do justice work in the world today; an international collection of people and organizations incorporate his practices ("Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, Inc."). JTP is only one of many organizations continuing to use the Boalian model with a political and artistic intent to create a dialogue about injustice by making a space to hear the voices of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

The JTP has continued (as Boal did) to emulate the "matter of fact" nature of "epic theater," intending at times to provoke a thoughtful response to "society's laws of motion" by "treat[ing] social situations as processes, and trac[ing] out all their inconsistencies" (*Brecht on Theatre* 193). In addition to creating original performance works that have incorporated this style, in the fall of 2008, The Justice Theater Project produced Brecht's *Mother Courage*, as a part of its season on Human Dignity. The intent behind the inclusion of this piece was to find ways into a conversation that would critically and objectively assess the effects of war on a pragmatic level. Because *Mother Courage* so powerfully condemns war, JTP hoped that the experience of the production would prompt questions about the impact of war among

people exploited during times of war and the horrors it renders. When the show opened in October 2008, the United States was swept up in a war, a partisan presidential campaign, and one of the worst financial crises since the Great Depression. The work sparked deep discussions around war, institutionalized greed, consumerism, and addiction. The company was able to find profound contemporary connections with the piece, rich in humor, yet sobering—especially with regard to the products of war and economic greed.

Choosing to create seasons and produce performances focusing on a social issue that is already on people's minds is also in line with Brecht. He was discussing political theater when he wrote: "an artist, even if he sits in strictest seclusion in the traditional garret working for future generations, is unlikely to produce anything without some wind in his sails," and then goes on to call on the importance of seeking out that "wind prevailing in his own period, and not some future wind" to make a place for the public—for the people to think about themselves and their politics. Imagine what the future has in store if this kind of discernment does not happen (*Brecht on Theatre* 7).

The Justice Theater Project strategically plans programming that makes a space for that community to engage in a conversation around an issue of social concern. Each year an issue is examined through original performance work and research, relevant traditional pieces of theater, and strategic educational programming, with opportunities for action. Combining critical ethnographic work with performance, theater, education, and advocacy, while building a JTP family community, has guided me to several new understandings, usually when I confronted aspects of community life or human experience new to me. I have witnessed firsthand ways in which engaged performance work can shift us from rigorous research and documentation to making this research and documentation perform. Embodying

critical ethnographic work into performance can make the participants keenly aware of how vulnerable they are and aware of how performing the research work can profoundly educate all of us, who witness or participate in the process. Following one of the *Still...Life* performances, I had a conversation with Dr. Renee Alexander Craft about the experience of going into the research with my own predetermined opinion about the death penalty. I found myself coming to know and care for someone who had experienced the violent loss of her mother, who now wanted to see justice for the loss of her mother's life, by carrying out the death penalty sentence on the person who had taken her mother from her. In the layered experiences of completing the ethnographic research and then performing her story, my understanding of her became more and more painful. The work is complicated. Complicating the issues is important, complexity stirs something up and in the midst of questioning and fear something new might be realized. Following the performance, I was no longer able to just think about the death penalty from a blind-sided perspective; now I had to contemplate the tragedy of loss, the awfulness of it, and the desire of revenge for victims of violence.

Finishing my degree was not a goal in and of itself; it is meaningful because it strengthens and deepens my ability to do the work. I am an artist who went to grad school to further my understanding about the work that The Justice Theater Project was doing. I am not an academic who went to grad school to learn how to become an artist. Returning to the academy challenged me to think about the theoretical and has provided me with additional language necessary to articulate what the JTP has done and inform what it does; making clearer the intersections between traditional theater productions, Boal, ethnography, the creation of original performances, and an embodied practice that makes critical contributions to conversations about issues of social concern.

It is possible to understand where JTP has arrived at in its history by comparison with the companies its founders used as models. One in particular that proved to be of great value was the San Francisco Mime Troupe, which has managed to not only survive but also thrive for more than four decades. This longevity can be directly attributed to its commitment to self-evaluation and making the changes necessary to continue its life as a not-for-profit organization. In 1972, they reorganized the way in which they operated, moving from an organizational structure with one vision, that of the Artistic Director, to a collective leadership, a shift that seemed to excite and reinvigorate the company.

While The Justice Theater Project has not made that same type of leadership shift, it continues to be self-reflective about the developments and changes that seem necessary to make the company thrive and survive as it has continued to develop its board and staff, acknowledging the tensions along the way.

Currently the company is creating ways to make a place for the emerging activists and performers who are a part of the JTP family and of its immediate community to practice and grow by providing ways for them to work as associates, where they become key players in the creation of the company's performance projects, ethnographic work, research, educational programming, and production work. The JTP realizes that it has a responsibility to these young people drawn to our work and that we must make them a part of who we become as we plan for the future. It was this realization that led us to start our "Emerging Young Artists" program. It provides new and emerging artists with the guidance of seasoned practitioners—in the areas of acting, directing, set design, costume design, adaptation of text, critical ethnography, theater education, and management—in an effort to nurture and support

potential future leaders within our company. This requires great effort and commitment from both the emerging artist and the mentor.

The Justice Theater Project asks the same of the community it fosters each season integral to that season's work: the commitment to accept responsibility for, and effort to develop the ability to, change systems as the way toward emancipation and empowerment.

Over the last twelve years it has also become clear to the leadership of The Justice Theater Project that the only way to secure the continued success for JTP is to plan for its future. The vanishing of a company we took as a model for our work taught us this lesson. The Dashiki Project, like JTP, formed a relationship with the church in its immediate community: St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church. This connection was mutually positive, creating a place for many young artists to belong and practice their craft, and, although the Project primarily was home to work created by and for Black artists, it also was able to provide an integrated opportunity for people in a segregated era. The driving passion behind the company's growth and stability was its artistic director, Ted Gilliam. Unfortunately, when he died of complications from AIDs in 1991, the energy that he brought to the company died as well, and the company disintegrated. He also left behind scant publications, manuscripts, or records. There was very little from which to reconstruct Dashiki's history, nothing to serve as a guide to continue its work, as a former member of the company, Stanley R. Coleman, explains in his dissertation, written more than a decade after Gilliam's death. Coleman's experience validates this effort to document the beginnings of the JTP before it is too late to do so, and to organize its library of documents to serve as references for its future leadership.

As JTP continues to grow and involve its community in options for justice and liberation for people living on the margins, it is clear that its work cannot be bound to one person's vision. The JTP needs to endeavor to make its mission manifest both internally and externally. As the company moves into its thirteenth year, it is imperative that it explores ways to sustain itself, opening up a more collective vision and ownership. In its beginning a company must have a strong dream, passion, and desire. One of the greatest challenges some non-for profit organizations face, however, is the implosion of the dream because they rely too heavily on a single individual to fulfill the dream.

What does it mean to organize for social change? For The Justice Theater Project and the people who originally become a part of making the company it was evident that the common unifier was that we all wanted to make a difference based on a common understanding of justice as it is articulated through our own understandings as well as the social teachings in the church. The necessary work to incorporate and become a non-profit organization included going through the process of filing papers, writing documents, and fusing together a business in the traditional sense. But we also had to grasp our own individual roles and behaviors, how our talents would benefit the development of the company, how we would navigate to speak on behalf of others, and how we could live out this type of discipleship responsibly and productively.

The use of performance, whether in the form of street/body protest, visual art, happenings, or in conventional theater spaces, and the ability of each performance project to deliberately take aim at awakening the conscience, were key to the ministerial aspect of the JTP. The death penalty project became the foundational work of a company which now takes up a specific issue of social concern every season. Through the use of performance,

ethnographic work, and educational programming we work to encourage productive discourses that ask for justice.

I feel that the company's work has served multiple communities as it has continued to organize and work to provide a place for people to confront issues of social concern. This pursuit of possibility through performance, educational programming, and strategically developed options for actions has been a way to guide our audiences to empathy, critique, and investment. At one of the company's grant defenses before the City of Raleigh Arts Commission, a member of the grants panel referred to us as the "conscience of the community."

The work of JTP continues to build on faith and existing scholarship which accepts that performance is not only an aesthetic practice but also a theoretical intervention that can open possibilities for identifying and, where necessary, possibly altering current political practices in order to foster more equal forms of citizenship. The company has covered a lot of ground over the past twelve years, creating and sustaining a theater community family that is dedicated to the work and to the possibility it holds regarding issues of social concern and shifts toward justice.

Looking to the future, I hope that those people who continue to do the important work of the JTP, and others striving to create unique performance projects and to found theater companies geared toward justice, will be able to learn from the gestation, infancy, and adolescence stages of JTP's history. Perhaps this document will provide a place for them to begin.

Researching and reflecting on this history has shown me what my non-negotiable principles for operating The Justice Theater Project have been. You can call these "the JTPs

of JTP.”¹⁷ I believe holding true to them insures the good work of the company going forward:

J: Justice must always be at the forefront of the company’s mindset. It must listen to the needs of the community, seek to encourage conversation around important issues of social concern, learn together with people from all perspectives, promote efforts to create responses to injustice, and seek the common good.

T: Theme-specific programming should be our goal every season. This requires choosing a single issue of social concern to focus on; creating and informing year-long conversations about it; using performance, rigorous research, and educational moments to connect to, collaborate with, and reach out into the community; listening carefully to what people say; paying attention to what they need; and encouraging people to get involved.

P: Performance work should always combine doing research with people directly involved with a social issue, finding ways to perform and reflect on what is learned, and making possible the participation of everyone, including the audience, in active knowledge-making engagements.

¹⁷ Compare the three A’s Dwight Conquergood proposed as the pivot points for Performance Studies: Accomplishment, Analysis, and Articulation (“Performance Studies” 42).

APPENDIX. DWIGHT CONQUERGOOD'S COMMENTS TO A STUDENT, JUNE 1995

Performance Studies - C32: Urban Festivity
Dwight Conquergood
"You are what you eat: Microethnography of a meal."
Debbie Royals
June 26, 1995

*The meal becomes an intersection
for the multiple worlds in which each
participant lives to converge and be shared
with others*

** Dwight Quote.*

*There is a story
here*

This evening, like many evenings during the summer, we had our evening meal outside on our patio. The meal was to consist of baked potatoes, big huge potatoes that I had selected from a grocery store not far from our home. We often have baked potatoes as a main meal because of the variety of ways in which they can be served...with cheese, fresh vegetables, with bran if needed, ketchup, plain, with butter, salt and pepper. Tonight I sliced pickles, onions, tomatoes and cut up little pieces of sharp cheddar cheese. I took the pickles, onions, tomatoes, cheese, salt, pepper and some pretzels out to the patio while we were waiting for the potatoes to cook in the microwave. Because of their size it usually takes the potatoes twenty to twenty-five minutes to be fully cooked. Joe brought out the diet Pepsi and glasses. We filled our glasses and sat outside there talking about the day that had transpired. Joe discussed meetings he had attended through the day. Danny filled in the gaps with information as to events taking place in his class at school. I discussed those things that I had been involved with pertaining to school. I had returned eighteen library books today, and it was important for me to tell Joe about this as the action of returning these books had to me marked the final closure to the spring quarter. I told my husband about going to pick up Danny and watching the children play in the sprinkler at his school. They often do this at Danny's preschool when the weather is really hot.

We live in a very diverse neighborhood. Many of the families are young couples with one or two children. The community of people here are Jewish, Polish, Irish and Russian, just to mention a few. Our home is a duplex, and our adjoining neighbors came out while we were talking and began to prepare their evening meal on the grill. They talked to us about the events of their day; their work, and of their new little son. They speak in amazement about how he is growing and the new things that he is doing. I looked out through my back yard into the back yard of the neighbors behind us. The family there is Russian and the main language in their home is Russian. I could here a the murmur of voices coming through the windows. I cannot understand their words but the melody of their language is quite pleasing to hear. The mother of the house was outside working on her rose bushes as she often does. She takes great pride in these roses and it is quite evident as they are incredibly luscious and rich with beauty. I could hear the sound of children coming from all over the neighborhood. The smell of other barbecues blended in with our

*yes...and this information also
dramatizes the workload and
demands of graduate school!*

This could function as a metaphor for the balance and harmony in gentle in life: the diligent graduate student, the wife, the mother

Your writing is so detailed - almost impressionistic style

Very evocative rendering of scene, particularly the sensory dimension

The meaning of the meal is all about simplicity, order, efficiency (schedules do not permit so many preparations) but deep values of nurturance and bonding are discovered within. pretty much the same thing that Joe, Danny and I were doing. Every now and again Joe and I would walk over to the table and have a pretzel or eat a piece of cheese, or crunch on a pickle. Today had been really, really hot. I could feel the heat still rising up out of the grass. Although it was slightly cooler now, the air was still rather warm. When a slight breeze would travel through, the effect was coolly soothing. I had left the patio door slightly cracked open as our screen is broken and the only way to hear the microwave is to keep the door this way...but not too much as the house would fill up with mosquitoes, and other various insects. I left the door cracked so I could hear the microwave when it was finished. (Or the phone if it was to ring)

The buzz of potato completion finally sounded and we talked for a couple of minutes letting them simmer inside the microwave. I went inside the kitchen and took the potatoes out of the microwave. Joe came in with me and collected the plates, knives, forks and the liter of Pepsi. We sliced pieces of turkey and got yogurt for Danny, as often he eats better if he has a variety of things to graze on. We brought everything outside. I cut into the potatoes and the steam of heat wafted off them much as the heat was rising off the grass. I scooped potato out for Danny, and sprinkled cheese and salt over the top. I mashed it down for him. I lay the sliced pieces of turkey beside the potato and set the carton of yogurt beside his plate. I poured a little bit of Pepsi into a glass for him and placed it down on his special little picnic table. Joe filled his potato with cheese, onions and pickles, then deciding that he needed butter he ran inside to get this from the fridge. He added the butter to his potato and sprinkled salt and pepper over the top as the butter oozed down inside the hot potato. He began mashing everything together after a moment or two.

I put cheese, onions and tomatoes on mine. In exactly this order, as I like to have the cheese melted and the vegetables remain cool and crunchy as I eat my potato. My forkfuls almost always consist of a little potato, some cheese and some vegetable on top. In this way I feel I am getting the best of everything...something cooked, something raw and something crunchy. Not only is it satisfying to have the differences in texture, but equally satisfying is the experience of diverse tastes: the blandness of the potato, the strong rich taste of the cheese and the sweet, acidic fresh plant flavor of the vegetable. I love baked potatoes. I love eating them. They have a very nurturing quality. They are simple to fix and the outcome is always satisfying to the appetite. Many of the meals I prepare for my family are uncomplicated in nature. Because our schedules are so full it is important to find time to spend together even if this time is during the preparation of a meal. Throughout our meal, Joe, Danny and I had continuous conversation. Danny, informing

Very precise, sensory details of environment and ambience, you write

very detailed descriptions - very textured

us of the movies he wants to see this summer, what he does at school and can we please let Sam and Reggae (our cats) out of the house while we are eating.

In between bites, my husband and I continued to exchange bits of conversation. We talked of our plans for the future, the things we need to do around our home and other bits of talk tying our day together.

Both Joe and I cleaned our plates. Danny on the other hand left his plate with food untouched. He had lost interest in supper and left to play in his little plastic pool. Joe and I having completely finished the meat of our potatoes continued to eat the skin as well. Joe, sliced off a pat of butter to spread on the skin and I sprinkled salt and pepper on mine. We sat for a long time before taking everything back inside. Sometimes we talked, sometimes we sat in quiet, just listening to all the sounds around us as our neighborhood settled. We have little patio lights that Joe put in last summer, he plugged them in and I lit a centrepiece candle. Danny played in the pool. I let Sam and Reggae come outside. We filled our Pepsi a final time, drained our glasses of their liquid and then began to stack together our dishes. The order is plate upon plate, with the knives and forks on top. We made only a couple of trips into the kitchen. Joe retrieved Sam and Reggae. I brought a towel from inside the house. After taking Danny's clothes off and wrapping him in the towel, I carried him inside to the bathroom for a bath. Joe wiped off the table and went inside to load the dishes into the dishwasher. I walked to the patio door and looked out into the backyard at the little patio lights still burning outside. Joe closed the dishwasher door and our evening meal was completed.

signifying detail

Richly evocative, unpretentious, and gracefully written fieldnotes from everyday life. This is a "slice-of-life" anthropography. It is brimming with "cultural data" about how a young, busy, professional couple with two young children (sorry - about the print - my printer is dying a slow death - navigate the demands of careers, hectic schedules, graduate school, young children home maintenance).

DC quote: Told from the point-of-view of the woman, it reveals the search for meaning and harmony among competing demands of graduate school. Her appreciation of contrasts and graceful juggling of multiple roles is projected in her "getting the best of everything, something crooked, something raw, something crunchy, potatoes."

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