
Community Building: An Undiscovered Arts Mainstream

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I. Me, You, and Us: The Rise of Something New

I have moved thirty-nine times in my life, an average of every two years. I live in a trailer on eighteen acres of wooded paradise outside an ancient mill town in North Carolina within forty-five minutes of two international airports. My community – my friends, family, and colleagues – are all over the United States and I communicate with them every day. My time is my own. My office is a Macintosh laptop and my office building is the Internet. I work anywhere I can plug in. I completed my last two projects from a motel room in suburban Maryland. I look forward to the day when I can do it wirelessly from atop a boulder in a national park. So far, I am happily married and my three children are all right. I have founded a performance space, an arts complex, and a magazine that morphed into an Internet project and they all still function, with or without me. My income fluctuates, my field is in transition, and my health is deteriorating with age, but whatever happens, I know how to land on my feet. I have never been happier in my life.

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My late mother was appalled at my situation; she thought I was at risk. Robert Putnam would see me as disconnected from my neighbors, marginalized and “bowling alone.” Richard Florida sees me as part of the mainstream, joyfully ensconced by choice in the largest, most powerful group in our society: the “Creative Class.”

If you are reading this, there’s a good chance you are not only a member of the Creative Class, you are an advocate for the arts. You may have written mission statements that envision the arts as integral to healthy communities, catalytic to social change. You probably believe that creativity can heal, even save lives, and you may have dedicated your own life to bringing creativity into the lives of others. Congratulations. You win. According to Richard Florida, more people are living creatively than ever before in all walks of life. This bodes well not only for them, says Florida, but for our economy and for our ability to do good in the world as a nation.

A lot of people think our culture is going to hell and our best days are behind us, but I think they are wrong. We are only swinging on the hinges of history in a time of profound cultural and social change. From my point of view, artists had a hand in the creation and procreation of the Creative Class, and artists are working hard to see that we continue to build communities that thrive creatively. They just might not look like the communities we had in the past. Not to worry. We will be all right. We can thank artists for that.

II. The Architects of the New Creative Communities

This paper is about artists who were called “the new vanguard” in *Art in America* in 1982 and are now the mainstream: artists who have been building community in the places where they live for fifteen to thirty-five years. Yet, as colleagues working in a discrete arts discipline with a history, theory, and clearly discernible principles and methods, they are relatively undiscovered.

When Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard wrote “Grass Roots Vanguard” for *Art in America* twenty years ago, they declared that these “neighborhood artists” were the new avant-garde. Their article was published during a period when writers were saying the avant-garde was dead, had sold out. Adams and Goldbard suggested that the term “avant-garde” presumes alienation – artists who stand outside the dominant cultural system, but only as far as the critics will let them. They characterized community artists as the true risk-takers, so innovative, stepping so far outside the market, that their significance escaped critics and administrators. “The question is,” they say, “whether the work is too useful, too much of a departure from the art-for-art’s-sake norm.”

Community-based art has a history. It goes back to the dawn of time, but I like to begin its modern history in the 1930s with the WPA and the 1940s with Robert Gard and the Wisconsin Idea Theater. Its theory is based in the values of cultural democracy. Its principles are based in innovation, creative problem-solving, inclusion, mutual trust, and collaboration. Its methods are based in story, the personal stories of the people in their communities.

This paper will demonstrate the infinitely diverse ways in which community is being built by a select group of artists across the country: eight artist ensembles (communities themselves) who have been working collaboratively with communities in the places where they live for one to three decades. While they are by no means the only companies

doing this work, they were chosen because of their diversity of location, style, ethnic makeup, and community profiles – and because they are all run by artists. I will relay to you stories, based on more than 100 interviews between 2000 and 2002, from the artists themselves, their coworkers, their neighbors, their audiences, and even their funders. The stories tell...

- How Cornerstone Theater Company is using peoples' stories to build bridges between communities of faith across Los Angeles, California
- How Carpetbag Theatre Company is working with the African-American community in Knoxville, Tennessee, to revise history and participate in a cultural revolution.
- How the Dell'Arte Company of Blue Lake, California, is creating a center for civic dialogue around the rebirth of their tiny timber town into something new.
- How Jump-Start Performance Co. has risked its life to become a cultural intersection for the most diverse community in Texas, from Chicano traditions to gay performance art.
- How WagonBurner Theater Troop is placing creativity in the hands of their people so they can tell their own stories in ancient communities scattered across Native America.
- How Los Angeles Poverty Department is making a safe space out of the most dangerous and transitory neighborhood in the city: Skid Row.
- How Roadside Theater and the people of central Appalachia are truing the picture of a rural community exploited and lied about for 200 years.
- How Teatro Pregones is creating a place of welcome and comfort for the people of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the Bronx, New York.

Cornerstone Lays Foundations

Cornerstone Theater Company is based in downtown Los Angeles, California, surrounded by its community – the entire sprawling metropolis (pop. 3,700,000). Founded in 1986, the seventeen-person, multiracial ensemble's mission is to "build bridges between and within diverse communities." The company has developed a national reputation for its ability to create lasting community partnerships across enormous cultural gaps.

They make new plays, both original works and contemporary adaptations of classics, that combine the creativity of the professional artists with that of community folks of all ages, cultures, and levels of theatrical experience. The plays emerge from local stories, and all the collaborators are part of the creative process throughout its development. Additionally, Cornerstone does "bridge shows,"

specifically designed to bring three or more communities into a single collaboration.

They have worked with the residents of Pacoima, Watts, Santa Monica, Boyle Heights, Broadway/Hill (Chinatown), Baldwin Hills, and Beverly Hills, to name a few. They have presented the results at the Los Angeles Public Library, Los Angeles Police Department, the United States Postal Service, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority

The best example of this work is the astonishingly diverse Faith-based Theater Project (2001-2005), for which Cornerstone is collaborating with communities of faith and religion in Los Angeles. Hoping to "encourage creative and thought-provoking dialogue around the questions of how faith both unites and divides us," the project began with "The Festival of Faith: 21 Theatrical Offerings" by people of all faiths in venues all over town, from the Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple to the Los Angeles Baha'i Center. Another typical event was "CROSSINGS, journeys of Catholic immigrants," presented in St. Vibiana's Cathedral downtown by participants from five different parishes: Latino, Arab, French, Cambodian and multiethnic. Upcoming is "Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender People of Faith" in the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center, the largest gay and lesbian organization in the world, and "The Black AIDS/Black Faith Project" in collaboration with African-American clergy and African-American and AIDS organizations.

These projects are designed to welcome everyone in the community, including the audience. "We set out to do plays for people who don't normally go to theater, because we were frustrated with professional theater," says Bill Rauch, founding artistic director, who was recently honored by the Leadership in a Changing World program. "We were afraid that when we reached the end of our careers we might not have been able to reach the majority of our fellow citizens. The notion of performing *for* people turned into performing *with* people."

Part of the legacy of each Cornerstone project is the on going interaction between the community and the company. "People call us for help with college applications, or to borrow sound equipment. Often, community members stay active with the company long after the project ends," says Rauch.

Many in the fields of both art and community-building are looking to Cornerstone for models. Said Joe Jarrell in *High Performance* magazine: "What Cornerstone is attempting to build in Los Angeles is what local bureaucrats and art mavens have only bragged about.... The artists of Cornerstone may hasten the effective realization of ... a community where art inspires understanding between people and challenges prevailing injustices, a community where artists are a part of the neighborhood."

Carpetbag Changes History

Carpetbag Theatre Company has been an integral part of Knoxville, Tennessee (pop. 174,000), for thirty-three years, with roots in the Black Arts Movement of the Civil Rights Movement. The seven artists see their role as collecting stories and telling them through theater, returning those stories to the communities that they come from.

Carpetbag is in residence at the historically black Knoxville College in the Mechanicsville neighborhood of the still largely segregated city. The artists provide the college with arts programs in exchange for office, studio, and theater space.

The ensemble's most significant community-building programs have been its theater projects and its year-round youth program, Theatre Renaissance for Youth. TRY presents new theater works by local teens, who are paid for their participation. Says Yawah Awala, parent of a child in TRY:

It deals with alcohol, drugs, depression, and just regular teen problems where girls and boys both are trying to fit in with what they think the in-crowd is. And what it tries to do is deter the teens from going into that kind of direction by putting on the productions and trying to show this is what can happen if you go this-a-way. And also, a lot of the reality tragedies in our inner-city community, they reenact that on stage.

In addition, Carpetbag conducts projects in partnership with the Sexual Assault Crisis Center, East Tennessee Coalition Against State Killing, Moses Teen Center, Highlander Center, and many others.

Artistic Director Linda Parris-Bailey says Carpetbag is "a group of people who help people look at things slightly differently." Knoxville residents recall the ensemble's play *Red Summer* as the best example of this work. Dissatisfied with the way the history books told the story of Knoxville's 1919 race violence, the artists listened to the story on their side of town, then retold it from a black point of view.

Red Summer is described by Yawah Awala:

I think a lot of people didn't know that Knoxville actually did have a radical side to it. When you have people coming into the city, they tend to think that we are so passive, 'cause there are certain things that we still allow to go on as African Americans in this community, to allow it to be perpetuated tremendously without raising a voice against it. So *Red Summer* was a wake-up call to say, "Hey! We can do something here." Not saying you have to drastically go for it, that you have to take lives, but revolution is like that sometimes – and as

we know, revolution means change. *Red Summer* ... could have made some people, be they black or white, to say "Hm. Maybe we do need to speak up a bit."

Parris-Bailey remembers the community's response:

I will never forget looking up into the packed house, 750 full seats, and watching people on their feet standing and shouting and understanding that it was their story that was being told. That was one of those really goose-bump moments. One of those moments when I felt we had absolutely and completely fulfilled our mission.

Dell'Arte Builds "Theater of Place"

The Dell'Arte Company has been the largest business in Blue Lake, California, (pop. 1,200) for twenty-five years. This is a rural region whose economy, based on logging and fishing, has been in serious decline since the late '60s. Many of the early theater works of the twelve-member Dell'Arte ensemble were based on the transitions they observed taking place in their town. The artists call their work "Theater of Place" – theater created by, for, and about the area in which the artists live.

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Dell'Arte's style makes it fairly unique in U.S. theater. It is based in European popular performance: commedia dell'arte, melodrama, the world of the circus, fairs and streets, pantomime, music hall. The company tours internationally, attracts foreign artists and tourists to its Mad River theater festival and attracts students from across the globe to the school in its theater, the former IOOF Hall in the center of Blue Lake. For ten years they have conducted the Education through Art program, a partnership with Blue Lake Elementary School, with drama classes during the school day and full-scale dramatic productions with the student body.

Dell'Arte has worked with the community on plays about the decline of the paternalism of the timber industry, the struggle between logging and environmental activism, racism around an incident with a Cambodian family, the revival of the Karuk Indian language, and more. The Humboldt Area Foundation's Peter Pennekamp credits the company with building community through all these programs, but takes special note of their plays about community questions. "Because they see themselves as of the community," says Pennekamp, "they've also delved into the heart of all the most controversial issues in the area. Some of their work really got into the local stuff

in a very powerful way. At times they've nailed it so profoundly on the head. The characters are modeled after characters in the community."

Julie Fulkerson, former mayor of nearby Korb, played herself in a piece about a political struggle in the area. She describes her performance experience – and her duet with her political opposite – as an example of Dell'Arte's ability to bring together people across social and political boundaries. The play, she says, "had some really heavy political overtones, but there was equal opportunity to be made a fool of. So, it was good for all of us to see ourselves through the characters." An audience member adds, "Since Dell'Arte has taken to parodies of local personalities, people now want to be the next personality. You are really rooted in a community when your parodies are desirable. Dell'Arte has been a major influence. Blue Lake wouldn't be Blue Lake today without Dell'Arte."

Dell'Arte's newest community-building work is *The Dentalium Project*, about the construction of a Native American casino in Blue Lake, and parallel struggles over reparations, land, timber and water, and fishing rights. Dell'Arte worked with leaders of the Blue Lake Rancheria nation and the Cascadia Forum, a community-building organization, on a series of public conversations about the traditional practice of Native American gambling and the community's responses to living with a casino in its midst. All this fueled the creation of a new play by Dell'Arte.

Jump-Start Starting Something

Jump-Start Performance Co. has been working in the heart of one of the poorest cities in the U.S., San Antonio, Texas, (pop. 1,150,000) since 1985. Jump-Start sees itself as serving "disenfranchised groups," primarily people of color, women, the queer community and young people. With a huge presenting program, Jump-Start has become a popular place where all these groups come together to make their voices heard.

Jump-Start's identity with this work has become so strong staff members say the theater is known to different communities as "a women's artspace" or "a queer artspace" or "a Chicano artspace" – even "*the* Chicano artspace."

The nineteen-member multiracial company comprises artists who often do their own new solo work, drawing on the rest of the company for writing, direction, dramaturgy, criticism, and technical help. They do not limit themselves to performing arts, but see their projects as interdisciplinary. They all stress that they share a common mission – "the creation of art that is a lasting voice of many diverse cultures" – and a determination to run the company according to the principles of participatory democracy.

The ensemble is deeply committed to free expression and open access to their space for everyone in the community. The artists are very active in local politics, siding with the Esperanza Center when that organization sued the city over loss of their funding in what locals saw as a censorship dispute. They have also sparked organization of all theaters in San Antonio toward shared cultural-policy advocacy and event scheduling. Artistic Director Sterling Houston has spearheaded a project to document the history of the Civil Rights Movement in San Antonio and the historicization of the African-American East Side neighborhood.

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Jump-Start has particularly potent community programs. Says S.T. Shimi, director of their arts in education program in nearby schools, "Our presence is really strong in those schools. Almost all the kids in this neighborhood know who I am." Executive Director Steve Bailey is extremely enthusiastic about the company's community work, particularly the Healing Arts Program at Calderon Boys & Girls Club (an arts project with sexually abused children) and a new three-year contract with Fairweather Lodge Housing, a program for severely mentally ill people.

"Fairweather heard about our Healing Arts program," says Bailey, "and they applied for a grant from the United Way to have us help them infuse art and arts training into their life-skills classes, where the participants were bored, they were falling asleep. We developed art projects to help them learn to handle hygiene, money management, diet, their medicines. For example, food: We did a series of food poems and food sculptures with healthy foods. We cooked with them, using art strategies." At the same time, said Bailey, they taught critical thinking, creative problem solving, core self-esteem. "We took them to see the movie *A Beautiful Mind* [about schizophrenia] and they had issues. We talked about sexuality, stigmas about mental illness."

The artists co-teach with the Fairweather staff. "We feel comfortable in each other's roles," says Bailey. "We're thrilled, they're thrilled. The staff is now at the national Fairweather Lodge meeting training others to do what we do." Bailey says the Jump-Start artists are growing in the experience. "It's the most exciting art project I'm doing. It gives me joy and jazzes my life. I've learned so much."

WagonBurner Leaves Something Behind

WagonBurner Theater Troop is a group of midwestern Native American theater artists, mostly Choctaw, Cherokee, and Creek, who came together at the University

of Iowa ten years ago. The twenty-member ensemble works together on a project-to-project basis as opportunity affords. The company has a very small annual budget, ranging from \$3,000 to \$15,000. The artists live in different cities, based on their individual employment situations, but all WagonBurner members think of the ensemble as an ongoing commitment. They have performed in a variety of venues, from reservations to the Museum of the American Indian in New York City.

WagonBurner is part of this story about community building because it has an intimate connection with a community that has been scattered across the U.S. In a sense, the whole country is their home.

Led by Artistic Director LeAnne Howe, the company works in a collaborative fashion they call “the Indian way,” with collective input and collective ownership. Their most well-known work is *Indian Radio Days*, using satire to examine the historic culture-clash encounters between Native peoples and European migration across the continent.

While the company was at the University of South Dakota recently, LeAnne Howe conducted a writing workshop at Sinte Gleska University on the Rosebud Reservation, aimed at developing a community performance piece. The students who were interviewed appreciated Howe’s immediate inclusion of each of the participants’ ideas without judgment. “It was fun,” said student Nancy Whitehorse, “just to be able to write thoughts and feelings down and have someone not say that it wasn’t right. Everybody’s idea meant something.”

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Personal material from the lives of the students became part of the collaboration – the quality of health care on the reservation, police harassment, local Indians selling sun dances for cash. There was emphasis on religious missionaries who took Indians away in buses to church or to schools in Utah. These experiences, the students said, robbed the people of their own “traditions, beliefs and cultures that they’ve been told are a savage pagan way. They’ve been told that unless they converted, their soul was going to go to hell. You would stay a lowly savage for the rest of your life.”

The students called the workshop a life-changing experience. Whitehorse said it gave her permission to go on writing: “My story about myself, my life, my upbringing and the people around me was important because it is a part of our history. For me, it was a big release. At first I was ashamed to do it, just dredged up a bunch of things that I didn’t want to remember. But

the more I wrote and put down on that paper, I stood up and took account for my life.” Student Dee Antoine concurs: “It was almost like a healing process. I never thought writing could fill that void of not being able to resolve things. After awhile, I wanted to share it with people. Let them hear it and see if they felt the same way. After reading it to my friend who inspired me to write, she was really moved by what I wrote.”

“Somebody out there is going to benefit from what you went through,” said Whitehorse. “That makes you feel your life isn’t a lost cause, that your life isn’t going to come to a miserable meaningless end. You leave something behind.”

LAPD Delivers the Real Deal

Los Angeles Poverty Department has been working for seventeen years on the streets of one of the country’s toughest neighborhoods, L.A.’s Skid Row. The company is the most fluid of all the ensembles in this discussion: While there are currently eight people who call LAPD their artistic home, hundreds have passed through its ranks, the vast majority of them temporarily without shelter – “homeless.” Their subject, their artistic style, their passion is homelessness itself, and everything that contributes to it: the savagery of a democracy that lets its people sleep in the cold, eat from trash cans, lose themselves in drugs and face death on the streets.

LAPD is an award-winning touring company that was founded by the members of a performance workshop on Skid Row created by performance artist John Malpede, whose day job was as a Skid Row activist for a free law center. Its audience is the neighborhood, the largest concentration of homeless people in the U.S., who collect in the area because that is where the services exist for the county’s poorest people. This is where they find the missions, shelters, and free drug-treatment programs. Surveys indicate that a third are mentally ill and half are addicted to drugs or alcohol. They sleep in cardboard boxes, all-night movie theaters, mission beds, and substandard flophouses, often staying awake all night for fear of attack.

The neighborhood knows LAPD well. Because they have no permanent playing space, performances take place on street corners, in mission lines, at parties, and in art spaces and downtown theaters. The company’s uniquely anarchic performance style grows from the talents and temperaments of its members and its audience and from the chaos that ensues when homelessness meets creativity. Fantasy and memory intersect in overlapping versions of the truth of life on the street. Their slogan is: “You want the cosmetic version, or you want the Real Deal?” Works include *Jupiter 35*, based on a member’s fall from a high

window on Skid Row that broke every bone in his body, and his recovery aided by the LAPD “family;” and *Agents and Assets*, a verbatim reenactment of an actual Congressional hearing on charges that the CIA sold drugs in the L.A. African-American community to finance the contras in Nicaragua.

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LAPD trains other to do what they do. Their summer intensive, “Change Exchange: Implementing Community-based Art Programs,” requires participants to actively engage with Skid Row, working as advocates at welfare offices, living in local hotels, and creating shows in shelters. This summer, “Change Exchange” included a Skid Row history project in a rented storefront “gallery.”

LAPD has helped change the lives of its participants, many of whom have found housing, jobs, stable relationships and activism. Director Malpede is proud of LAPD members who have founded organizations that are “re-knitting a fabric that has been torn, that the drug war and other aspects of the total uncaring society have ripped asunder.”

LAPD’s community partner SRO Housing Corporation transforms flophouses into affordable housing on Skid Row. SRO’s Jeff Gilbert says SRO and LAPD have the shared mission of “helping people to grow to be more active participants in their environment” and “establishing normative relations on Skid Row. It’s about making people stakeholders in their turf.”

Roadside at the Grass Roots

Roadside Theater of Central Appalachia, is quintessentially community-based. Founded in 1975, the seven-person ensemble is, in their own words, “made from the history and cultural traditions of this place, by ensemble members who grew up and remain in this place, and all of the company’s work is created and performed in partnership with the people of its place.”

In his study of Roadside, artist Michael Fields says of Central Appalachia:

It would be an oversimplification to say that this region is “economically depressed.” In many ways, this community has had 100 years of economic exploitation, attempted cultural suppression and geographic isolation. This region of America has been treated as a third-world economy and has experienced the resulting cycles of deep-seated poverty, the

flight of the young, the comprehensive devaluing of indigenous cultural expression and the ownership of the land by absentee landlords, who in most cases are transnational corporations. Unemployment ranges from 30 to 65 percent in the region. One-third of the region’s population lives below the poverty line. U.S. government studies indicate a pervasive pattern of substandard health care and severe environmental damage.

Roadside is part of legendary Appalshop, a multi-disciplinary arts and education center in Whitesburg, Kentucky, dedicated to “supporting communities’ efforts to solve their own problems in a just and equitable way.” Both Roadside and Appalshop are committed to preserving and sometimes resurrecting the culture of the Appalachian coalfields of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. Roadside prides itself on having created a body of Appalachian literature where none existed before, based on the musical and storytelling traditions of its home.

One of the ensemble’s most distinctive accomplishments is its development of a working-class audience, both at home and on tour. Seventy percent of Roadside Theater’s national audience live in rural communities and 33 percent are people of color, 43 percent earn between \$25,000 and \$50,000 annually, 30 percent earn less than \$24,000 a year. According to several sets of data, the typical nonprofit professional theater draws 80 percent of its audience from the top 15 percent of the U.S. population, measured by income. In contrast, Roadside Theater draws 73 percent of its audience from 85 percent of the population, measured by income.

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The determination to connect with a working-class audience amounts to an aesthetic because it governs everything that goes into the making of Roadside’s art work, from its choice of material to its choice of partners, venues, marketing language, and workshop methodology. The fact that “form, content, audience, and place were linked at the inception of the theater,” says Artistic Director Dudley Cocke, “has allowed us to be an experimental theater because it has given us a firm foundation upon which to make new work.” He also points out that the audience “is always, in Roadside’s work, part of the show. There’s no fourth wall.”

This principle has led to multiple collaborations with social and civic clubs, public schools, and social service

agencies in their own community, from the Hope House Family Crisis Center and Mountain Laurel Cancer Research and Support Center in Virginia to such groups as the Zuni Native American community of New Mexico, Junebug Productions of New Orleans, and Pregones Theater of New York City, who share a common ground with Roadside and with whom they created *Promise of a Love Song*.

Roadside member Ron Short sees the ensemble's work as "grassroots theater," as "a place where common people, everyday people, can get up and speak their mind and have other people listen to them. That process of dialogue with the audience enters into the collective consciousness of that community and helps shape that community."

Pregones en Nuyorico

Teatro Pregones resides in the Bronx borough of New York City. Working collaboratively since 1979, the company (currently four artists) has included both immigrants from Puerto Rico and Nuyoricans – people of Puerto Rican descent born in New York. Though their audience is 85 percent Latino, many Nuyoricans speak only English, so Pregones works in both English and Spanish.

"I trust Pregones because they speak my language, because I know they like to eat their tostones con mojito."

Pregones has created a new audience for theater in the Bronx and is part of the revitalization of its own neighborhood, but the company locates itself firmly in the Puerto Rican community wherever it exists. Founding Artistic Director Rosalba Rolón says, "Audience and community are the same thing to us. Our audience comes from the community that we serve, and for us community and neighborhood are not the same thing." She identifies "community" as "a very specific social structure," whether at home in the Bronx or with Latinos "scattered everywhere. That which is community somehow belongs to many places."

Pregones (Spanish for "street vendor") creates its own theater works with a mix of classic and popular Puerto Rican styles. It operates a vigorous presenting program and belongs to LaRuta, a Latino presenting consortium. All of which adds up to a reputation as a leading Latino arts producing and presenting organization. It also conducts Teatro Matinee, a citywide bilingual program with youth, seniors, and adults with special needs, as well as adult literacy programs and teacher training workshops

The artists share a deep interest in Puerto Rico and what Associate Director Jorge Merced calls "the gaps in our

history." Their works, based on collected personal stories and historical records, include *La colección*, 100 years of Puerto Rican theater in nine scenes, *Migrants!* on the Puerto Rican diaspora, *Voces de acero/Voces of Steel*, on Puerto Rican political prisoners, and *El embrazo*, on Latinos with AIDS. Their library is a Latino theater information storehouse.

Scholar Arnaldo Lopez, in his Pregones study, emphasizes the value of their effort to develop a Latino-centered theater:

Latinos will often travel outside their immediate geography for relevant arts and cultural events. A Latino community convenes at Pregones because the ensemble's work helps, in turn, to make sense of their Latino lives. The scarcity of quality arts programs "by Latinos, for Latinos" is still painfully evident. The ensemble believes that Latinos are tired of rampant stereotyping, and stunned by the cultural myopia of all but a handful of performing-arts programs.

Jorge Merced, born in Puerto Rico but a longtime U.S. resident, points to "a missing connection to identity, the definition of what makes you unique, what makes you yourself." He found he shared this with children in Pregones' youth programs. "They had no connection, the way I had no connection growing up in Puerto Rico until I arrive at Pregones and I begin to understand how the world around me works. These children did not have that space, and Pregones offers that space for them to pursue their own questioning."

The warmth of the artist-audience relationship is easily recognized. Says one patron:

I trust Pregones because they speak my language, because I know they like to eat their *tostones con mojito*. That's why I think people will come in here with their guards down – it's safe. But it's not just about that, it's not like at the *bodega* or at the [Puerto Rican Day] parade. You're not gonna leave the same way you came in.

III. What Next: Swinging on the Hinges of History

I call these ensembles the art mainstream because they have been doing the bedrock work of building this country from its center, from its grass roots, and doing it in the most innovative and unexpected ways. It is lasting work because it is lighting the fires of creativity in the hearts of thousands of Americans of every description, who are carrying that fire to millions in their families, neighborhoods and workplaces. They are building the Creative Class that will change this century.

We have established that this work is valuable. Next it is interesting and important to examine its future. What is happening to these ensembles as the founders enter their fifties? Will they be able to continue to work, to retire? What will happen to their organizations? Will they stay on their feet? In event of a disaster, will they land on their feet? Will they thrive in the hands of a new generation? What will happen to their communities if they disappear?

The annual budgets of these theaters range widely, from \$1 million to \$3,000. Even though their communities support them as much as they can, it is still not enough to keep the projects/companies healthy. This is not because the work has not been beneficial, but because these artists choose to work in communities that need help the most, communities that are small and poor.

Only one has an endowment, which sounds fruitful, but currently it generates income of only \$12,000 annually. A few offer health benefits to staff and own the property they inhabit, but most are without that kind of support and two are literally homeless. What they all have in common is the threat of a death sentence that emerged last year from a RAND Corporation study of the health of performing arts organizations (*The Performing Arts in a New Era*, commissioned by the Pew Charitable Trusts), which said mid-sized organizations are by far the most vulnerable financially. Along with reports of a decline in U.S. arts funding and giving at every level, the prediction of their doom has been recited in newsletters, key note speeches, and emails all over the country until it has become gospel.

The RAND researchers don't define what "mid-sized" means, and it varies according to the size of the economy of the ensemble's home community. Generally, these eight are small, compared to, say, regional theaters, but their agendas are large because they attempt to treat their ensemble members with equity and fairness. Cornerstone, for example, tries to provide salaries, benefits including dental, and a retirement plan.

The study predicts that small-sized organizations will survive because they will be supported by their own communities, but that won't help these eight arts organizations continue to build community, says MK Wegmann, president and CEO of the National Performance Network. That may sometimes be okay, she says, "but if you are trying to pay salaries and benefits so your people will stick around, if you are trying to institutionalize, you need operating money. There has never been any of that in the world of artist-run organizations, but when funding was more plentiful, you could at least piece together salaries from project grants. Now even those are so small, it's becoming impossible." In addition, and perhaps most tellingly, because these organizations are so progressive, they

don't have access to the power boards or wealthy donors who support the larger, more conservative arts organizations, says Wegmann.

Lack of support for infrastructure makes survival additionally difficult for these artist ensembles because they have comparatively little to offer a younger generation, other than inspiration. These companies are led by their founding generations, most of whom are in their late 40s and 50s. "It's one thing for founding artists to work into their 50s living in denial about there being no job security, no health benefits, no real property," says Wegmann. "But *good luck* attracting young people who will carry on the mission with that example in front of them."

Even though their communities support them as much as they can, it is still not enough to keep the projects/companies healthy, because these artists choose to work in communities that are small and poor.

In most of the eight theaters, ensembles have lost founding members; colleagues have dropped out because they had families to support or their health was suffering. One theater has seen its rolls cut in half.

There is no doubt times are hard economically – "the most sobering picture in recent memory," says the Theatre Communications Group about the results of its 2001 annual survey of the fiscal health of U.S. nonprofit theater. "Now is the lowest point in my twenty-six years," said Roadside Theater's Dudley Cocke in an interview with A.B. Spellman at the 2002 Americans for the Arts convention. "The not-for-profit arts field is in real crisis today. Policy makers are not seeing what is happening to us. Do we want to be without the institutions that we've spent thirty-some years building?"

If Richard Florida is right, communities must attract the Creative Class in order to survive this time of transition, and to do that, they must invest in their most creative resource: artists and their companies. Some cities are already doing this. But will investment come in time?

These eight companies are not clueless; they are inventive and they have detailed plans of their own for survival. But none of them will be able to relinquish a reliance on unearned income. Based on my interviews, their survival plans and dreams include:

- attracting and training new ensemble members;
- developing cultural Empowerment Zones in their neighborhoods;
- realizing income from their intellectual property;

- establishing artist-run, accredited masters degree programs in community-based art;
- contracting partnerships with organizations in “unrelated fields” like healthcare;
- building a Skid Row museum and reinventing cultural tourism;
- nurturing a U.S. Puerto Rican national community theater;
- breaking ground for an intellectual home for indigenous creative thinkers; and
- creating a national cultural policy developed by a think-tank of community-based artists.

But do they have what they need to make these plans work?

Finally, what would their communities look like without these eight companies? Would Muslims and Catholics be making art together in Los Angeles? Would black Knoxville have an idea of its own activist past? Would Blue Lake have been able to talk over the revolutionary emergence of its Indian casino? Would Chicanos, Asians, blacks, queers, women, and kids have a place to share their dreams in San Antonio? Would L.A.’s Skid Row think of itself as a community with a history and a culture? Would there be a working-class theater audience in Appalachia or anywhere else? Would there be a shared cultural home for Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans?

How many fewer marginalized people would have experienced living creatively? How much less attractive would it be to live in these eight communities; how much more dangerous, stingy, contentious, lonely, ugly, cold, and boring would they be?

I can only attest to one thing. My own life would be far less rich and fulfilling than it has been without the work of these artists. They have changed me and the organizations I have founded. The future may look great for the Creative Class these artists helped to foster, but if our culture cannot help sustain such pioneer ensembles, I hope history holds us accountable.

I do know that history will look back on the period of 1970-2000 as a Golden Age.

Linda Frye Burnham is a writer of national reputation on a variety of subjects, with special emphasis on artists working in community, education, and activism. Her most recent book is The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena (with Steven Durland; Gardiner, New York: Critical Press, 1999). She has written extensively on performance art, feminism, and multiculturalism in the arts. Burnham founded High Performance magazine, an international arts quarterly, and (with Steven Durland) served as its editor 1978-1998. Currently she is co-director of Art in the Public Interest and the Community Arts Network (www.communityarts.net). She lives in Saxapahaw, North Carolina

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For more information about the theaters profiled in this article, search for their names on the Community Arts Network site on the Internet <<http://www.communityarts.net>>, in particular “Performing Communities: The Grassroots Ensemble Theater Research Project” (forthcoming on the Web site).