

Steps towards a new world

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I started New WORLD Theater when I was 23 years old; in many ways I grew up in it. I raised my children, Chinua and Mikiko, in the theater and grew a community around it—it was the world that I wanted for them, for us to live in. New WORLD Theater was a thirty-year experiment in cultural organizing, social paradigm shifting, and artistic questioning. I had the privilege of working with artists across a span of generations—from sages who have gone to dance with the ancestors like James Baldwin, Horace Clarence Boyer, Alice Childress, Gordon Heath, Errol Hill, Pearl Primus, Barney Simon, and Sekou Sundiata, to artists who have revitalized American theater and arts today, such as Jorge Cortiñas, Danny Hoch, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Nobuko Miyamoto, Dipankar Mukherjee, Lê thi diem thúy, Carl Hancock Rux, Mildred Ruiz and Steve Sapp and UNIVERSES, and so many others. I remember my toddler son playing with “Uncle Jimmy,” my daughter being hoisted onto the back of a dancer during rehearsal with Pearl, Carl writing a poem about the two of them when they were teens, my daughter babysitting Steve and Mildred’s son Kwest, and both of them performing in Project 2050 as they came of age. The story of New WORLD is the story of a community family farm that raised not just me and my children, but flourished under the labor of, and provided sustenance for, so many others—artists, students, organizers, administrators, educators, and our larger community. As its founder, I offer these reflections as a way of understanding the ethos of New WORLD Theater. What were NWT’s overarching principles over the years? The eleven precepts below are neither prescriptive nor complete, but are considerations of revelatory moments and points of consistency through the decades I led the theater. I offer these stories about the past as ways to think about creating the future.

1. It’s about difference

The drama started in the lobby. Arriving for a staged reading of *Blues for Mr. Charlie* by James Baldwin, the buzz was swelling in pockets of commotion as audience members encountered the two entrances, one marked “Whites Only” and the other beneath a “Colored” sign. A middle-aged white man refuses to go through the “Whites Only” door; he tells the usher, “I marched on Washington,

it was wrong then and it’s wrong now.” He starts through the “Colored” entrance and a group of young black students stop him, “This is our door—yours is over there.” They are laughing; his expression shifts from confusion, to hurt, to anger as he reconsiders the “Whites Only” door. A young white woman is reasoning with the usher at the “Colored” door, “My child is black, I’ve been shunned by the white community, I’m part of the black community because of him—I should sit in the black section.” A black woman turns to her and says gently, “It’s a play. And you can choose to be a white woman any other time, so why not for just a while now?”

Inside, the drama continues and the play has yet to begin. The audience is wrapped around the thrust performance area in an upside down horseshoe—and at the top, right in the middle, James Baldwin is sitting, watching, his large luminous eyes taking it all in. To his left is the “Colored” side, divided down the center; and facing it, the “Whites Only” side. The white audience members sit in quiet, nervous anticipation. But the colored side is boisterous, people greeting each other; somehow it’s become a reunion. Yet as they settle in, small intergroup dramas erupt: a man from India is sidling down a row in the “Colored” section and a black man advises him that he should be sitting on the white side. Another black man cuts in with ironic laughter, “The man is darker than you—let the brother sit down!”

I was a young Asian American woman theater director who had been asked to work with James Baldwin to stage a reading of his dense and powerful drama. It had originally flopped on Broadway when it was staged by Burgess Meredith at the height of the Civil Rights struggle in 1964. In 1983, Baldwin was in residence at the Five Colleges and I knew him as a friend of my husband at that time; I had listened to him late into many nights “talking story” as we say in Hawai’i. To me he was Jimmy: elegantly kind, wickedly funny, wise, generous to a fault, and irreverent. Now we were working on the play together. I was pregnant and coping mightily with meetings in his favorite habitat, smoke-filled bars, where at least I could control his gregarious tendency to recast parts unauditioned. I learned from him that staging the play on Broadway in 1964 had been critical to him, urgent even. He could have put the play on anywhere else, certainly in Harlem, but he wanted it where Mr. Charlie could not ignore it. How fitting that two decades later, the invitation would come from Amherst College, to wake up Mr. Charlie’s grandchildren.

I had been wracking my brain with how to make the play come alive for a contemporary 1983 audience and not be viewed comfortably from a twenty-year distance as a museum relic of the Civil Rights movement. The answer was in front of me, literally in the architecture of the venue chosen for the reading. Converse Hall at Amherst College is a lecture hall raked in a horseshoe around a postage stamp of an arena, with two entrance doors on either end facing a common lobby. As a reading there would be no props or set beyond chairs and the signs above the doors. The segregated audiences would face each other, mirroring the play’s division between Blacktown and Whitetown. The black actors would sit in a row in front of the Blacktown audience side, the white actors on their side, each scene

intermixing as they interacted, but always returning to their “tribe” as Baldwin put it. There was no theater lighting in the lecture hall, so the audience would remain unavoidably present to each other, watching each others’ responses throughout.

My one anxiety about the two doors was not wanting to disrespect an elderly black person. I imagined an unheralded elder being offended and lost sleep wondering how s/he might react to this conceit. Would it be seen as making light of history? Would it provoke painful memories? But Baldwin liked the idea and thought we should try it. It might work because the staging made the audiences equals, rather than in a traditional proscenium, where blacks had sat behind or above whites during segregation, watching the stage through their filter. In this staging, they would never lose sight of each other throughout the play; they would have to watch each other bear witness, as Baldwin’s writing had urged—we could not look away.

Difference, as opposed to the multicultural notion of sameness, was an ongoing, sometimes painful, often exhilarating exploration of New WORLD Theater. Multiculturalism’s assumption had been that in celebrating our distinct identities, a common humanity would be engendered. Its limitations were reached at the blurred edges of reductive and essentialized identity categories, and in the complex refusal of narratives to conform to simple representation. At NWT the schisms and nuances of difference were grappled with on stage, in staff dynamics, and in the deepening of how the theater related to its community. In knowing that difference was continuously acknowledged, if not always understood, our audiences in time transformed into a community.

2. Getting out of the way

I recall director Nefertiti Burton’s delighted surprise when I asked if she would like to direct Elizabeth Wong’s *Letters to a Student Revolutionary*, a play inspired by events of the Tiananmen Square uprising. As an African American woman, she was used to being approached about “the black play,” but didn’t anticipate that an Asian American would offer this production to her. It made more sense to invite Nefertiti to direct, rather than to take this project on myself. At that point in my life, I hadn’t been to China; even if I had, Nefertiti had years of experience as part of the U.S. China Peoples’ Friendship Association and could bring far more knowledge, insight, and passion to the project.

I’ve never believed in matching productions to the race or ethnicity of a director, or the practice of sanctioning white directors to direct everything and pigeonholing directors of color to a diversity slot. And I’ve always been troubled by white, usually academic, directors who tell me they don’t know if they have a right to direct work by playwrights of color—and yet they have no problem directing Chekhov or Churchill, but not writers from their own country. When asked for advice on how to build rapport with casts/audiences of color, I’ve advised that they take a step back—not only to examine their own social relationships, but to think about how to best position themselves within a project. Maybe they aren’t the

best fit for the material; and, instead of not staging it, can they move themselves to a producing or assistant directing position and raise the funds to bring in a guest director, or to give an opportunity to an emerging director? Thus at New WORLD I gave many emerging directors opportunities across racial categories, when they had a passion and vision for the material—Anna Dolan, an Irish woman, directed Puerto Rican playwright Estrella Artau’s *Marine Tiger*; a Nigerian, Anna Ibe, directed the Trinidadian playwright Erroll Hill’s *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*; Cecelia Cavalcanti, a Brazilian, directed Cuban Pepe Carril’s *Shango de Ima*, Joe Salvatore, a Caucasian American, directed *Quinceañera* by Beto Arraiza, Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, and Michael Marines, and so forth—while I supported their vision by raising resources, producing, and assisting behind the scenes.

When I chose projects to direct at NWT, it was because I felt I had insight to offer and that the work might mesh with my directing and dramaturgical process. But I also disciplined myself to step back and play a supportive role by creating the right environment, beginning with trust and belief in processes I wasn’t leading. For example, Steven Sapp and Mildred Ruiz of UNIVERSES were my Artistic Associates for four years during which time they developed *Slanguage* with director Jo Bonney. While Steve and Mildred collaborated deeply with me on Project 2050 and the Intersections conferences, for *Slanguage*, the right decision was to give the artists the ideal conditions to produce their work. Simply put, to determine the best way to make it happen and get out of the way of the work.

3. Concentric circles and the further margin

New WORLD Theater was known by artists as having an extraordinary audience: large, appreciative, and eloquent; racially and ethnically pluralistic, multi-generational, integrated across class and education, and possessing a high level of cultural literacy. I have almost never seen this audience profile at mainstream theaters—even now, in my fifties, my husband will look around a New York mainstream theater audience and comment that I may be both the diversity and youth quotient. I was often asked how we built that community and who we considered our target audience; for whom were we making work? From the start, when we were very aware that we, as artists of color, were a minority in New England—I never wanted the theater to be a travel guide explaining “the other” to tourists. I believed the work should exist in concentric circles: at the center those of the play’s cultural context, however the artists defined it. I felt if truth was at the core, then those sitting farther away might not understand everything, but they would certainly feel the reverberations. This was a different paradigm than the polarizing and limiting dualty majority/minority, black/white cultural politics.

Another aspect of the concentric circles approach was an awareness of who was sitting at the furthest margin; whose stories weren’t being told and what creative strategy could be developed. For example, in the early 1990s I was troubled that heterosexuality was the normative narrative we were presenting on stage. We were not engaging the reality of our staff, production and acting ensemble.

Queer artists of color were, for the most part, not being supported for their own work by Black, Asian American and other ethnically specific theaters, but finding homes in experimental, women's, and queer spaces. The staff agreed we needed to change, but before we could, we had to acknowledge the deep divisions between and within our communities and move forward without the pretense that we are all allies. We held a community forum with an unwieldy title, something like "Homophobia in Communities of Color and Racism in the Gay Community"—basically, we set up a microphone and a room full of people lined up and said anything they felt on the topic. It was heated, heartfelt, exhausting, and cathartic. We didn't bring in scholars or health professionals or create any artistic response. In retrospect, it wasn't thought through at all, but somehow it worked. The 1992–93 season followed, featuring work by the Pomo Afro Homos and commission of Marga Gomez. Rather than relegate queer work to a play laboratory, it was launched with full commitment and woven through our season, commissioning, youth work, and play lab.

4. Working with the given circumstances

In my directing studio seminar, I used to give my graduate students an early exercise: to respond to a given text by staging a scene anywhere in the immediate environment, except in a rehearsal room or on a stage. Champing to get on stage, they typically initially felt blown off—until the next class revealed the myriad possibilities in a stairwell shaft, atop piles of cable, a hallway of lockers, etc.

The first time I was invited to be part of a grant review panel for the Theater Communication Group directing fellowship awards program, I was struck by resumes of young aspiring directors, almost all conservatory trained with impressive credentials as assistant directors to a series of notable theater directors. And yet several didn't have a body of work themselves as directors. During the review panel discussions, I noticed a bias towards mainstream (implicitly white) spaces. A black woman director under consideration had two decades of productions in what some panelists were calling "community-based" theaters (translation: black and women's theaters). They wondered if she was "too junior," "too emerging," in contrast to other younger candidates who had far fewer or no productions under their sole direction, but impressive credentials of who they had assisted in recognized regional theaters. Making a career seemed to be of greater value to the review panel than actually making the work.

I believe a director directs, a writer writes—an artist makes art because that is the way s/he engages the world. Limitations—lack of a venue, production slot, budget aren't an excuse for not making the work; as artists of color, that's just part of the given circumstances. Beyond formal theater space, NWT appropriated space and made theater in public parks, school gymnasiums, community centers, parking lots, gay bars, and churches. A New WORLD artist leads with the art, finding possibility in every deficit, recognizing resources in people, and not waiting for, but continuously making, opportunity.

5. Taking small steps

The legendary choreographer Pearl Primus inadvertently gave me the metaphor for our basic work in the theater. It was at the first dance rehearsal for Wole Soyinka's *Lion and the Jewel*, a NWT co-production with the UMass Department of Theater that brought another legend of the American Theater, actor Gordon Heath, home from Europe after decades of absence, and featured a young student actor, Jeffrey Wright, who would go on to Tony award and feature film acclaim.

The dancers were anxiously awaiting Primus's arrival, eager to meet the "Grandmother of Black Dance," the dance ethnographer, the woman who in her prime had been featured in photographs, leaping her height. As she regally entered the room; warm-ups and stretching ended abruptly; all fell silent under her appraising eye. She warmly beckoned us to sit as she began the rehearsal. I thought she was going to give her insights into the text, talk about the Yoruba cosmology, or her research in Africa. All of that would come in time. Instead she asked us to cradle our bare feet. She said to look for cracks, to examine our nails, to look at the condition of the skin. And then she proceeded to explain step-by-step the proper washing, oiling, and caring for our feet. She advised us to care for ourselves and then extrapolated to the work at hand, "Your feet plant you on the ground—and that is the essence of African dance."

Aside from the profound cultural and spiritual orientation to African dance, I was stunned by Pearl's introduction because the norm in a dance rehearsal is to demand from the body, not to care for it, to delve into action, not reflect inwardly. As theater artists, as community organizers, we often forget to take care of ourselves or we demand more from our bodies than possible for the long haul. And as theater makers, we often put the artistic vision before all the initial work of community building that ensures our audience will go with us, even when we fail. Pearl taught us that there are small steps before leaping. I believe we took the small steps of earning community trust, which allowed for experimentation and urged greater rigor. But the small steps of caring for ourselves was the harder lesson as a constant all-hands-on-deck small arts organization with large ideas. Yvonne Mendez, NWT's design director, and I would joke that it took having a baby or a car accident to make us stop, and even that would be momentary. It's a lesson I still am learning.

6. Commitment to the unknown

It's often said that theater is a process of discovery and I believe in that revelatory process. But I also believe it requires deep commitment and even courage to delve into the unknown. And that means going to the unexpected.

In the mid-1980s, I wanted to push our artistic program to produce Native American Theater; previously we had presented touring works by artists such as Spiderwoman, Craig Kee Strete, and Hanay Geiogamah, but we had never produced a Native playwright work ourselves. We identified a production slot in the

season, but quickly realized that it was too soon; in order for Native American dramaturgy to be integral to the theater, we had a lot of homework to do. I started by contacting playwright Hanay Geiogamah, who was teaching at UCLA and he graciously arranged a visit to the American Indian Studies Center archive to read plays. Returning armed with a trove of literature, I co-developed and co-taught a course on Native American theater with Donna Goodleaf, a Mohawk UMass graduate student and activist. We reached out to UMass-Amherst's Josephine White Eagle Cultural Center which helped us recruit a number of Native American students to the class. Parallel to that, with New WORLD Theater dramaturgy staff and interns, we started a script review process open to the community.

This would be our first production of a Native American play and it was important to me that we recruit and train actors locally. New WORLD Theater had started as a student organizing project; my goal had always been to activate our community, not just inspire or inform. So of course, I had a script in mind; it was a series of vignettes that would be easy to cast and train a number of novice actors. At the initial script review meeting, I got my first lesson. I was overjoyed that a lot of Native students and community members attended. But I wasn't prepared for everyone to speak—that we would go around the table and each person would give voice to their thoughts. The meetings lasted forever; yet, I was amazed that everyone read the texts and I deeply appreciated the insights and comments. Of course, I tried to steer towards the play that would be the easiest to stage; I wanted this initial project to be a success. And of course the group eventually chose a play that would be the most challenging as a first production.

Sneaky by William Yellow Robe Jr. is a play about three estranged Assiniboiné brothers who come together after the death of their mother. Despite their deep differences, they decide to re-discover and carry out a traditional Assiniboiné burial, where the body is nestled in a tree and burned. The play requires actors who can sustain a full-length drama. A body is stolen from a morgue. A tree is torched on stage. Oh, and did someone mention there is also a grandmother, a child actor, and a puppy? I loved this play, but didn't know if we could find an all-Native cast locally, carrying through with the commitment to cast within our community.

George Whirlwind Soldier (Lakota), John Cruz (Filipino Hawaiian), Scott Shepherd (Wampanoag), Sharon Smith (Mohawk) emerged from our community—I never announced that the rehearsals were open, but got used to people respectfully coming to observe; the support was palpable. On one break the Apache artist, Kitty Wagner, approached me and with a smile handed me something rolled in newspaper, one of her beautiful prints. And when the play opened, it was the Native community that gave the audience its bearings. Given the topic of death and conventional stereotypical images of Indians, non-Natives came with stoic expectations. The Native audience readily got the hilarity integral to the play's dramatic storytelling.

I reached out to find playwright Bill Yellow Robe of the Fort Peck reservation in Montana. When he came for the production, he told me that he was deeply touched because it was the first time a theater had committed to an all-Native cast,

despite his having worked with regional theaters in Montana and Colorado. We had far less money than a regional theater, but we had the resource of time; we were willing to shift to what became a protracted process that led to discoveries of assets deep within our own community. When we had our cast party, we were surprised by Chris Pegram and the Youngblood Singers who had brought their drums from Shinnecock on Long Island. When they played an honor song for us, Bill and I were invited to link arms to dance together as everyone present passed to shake hands with us, joining an ever-widening circle.

7. Relevance

I've always disliked "political" theater that ends with actors, fists raised, calling for revolution. That dramaturgical cop-out is as lazy as ending a play by dragging audience members up to the stage to dance. What made these choices work for *Waiting for Lefty* or *Hair* is that they were: (1) original and (2) of their moment. In high school I was a student organizer for the United Farm Workers Support Committee and was inspired by the agit-prop theater I saw both spontaneously on the picket line and also in the brilliant plays of Luis Valdez's Teatro Campesino. The urgency of the cause and direct connection to the "audience" being spurred to action was immediate. Today I see that in the powerful work of Teatro Jornalero Sin Fronteras (the Day Laborers Theater Without Borders), performed at Home Depots, workers' centers and other sites where day laborers gather. And also in the movement of political theaters evolving this work in a complex way like Cornerstone Theater, the Foundry, Pangea World Theater, Sojourn Theater, Theater Offensive, Playback Theater, and others.

As Artistic Director, I never prescribed a singular aesthetic for the theater. Playwright Lorraine Hansberry said, "A classical people deserve a classical art." I felt that a complex community needed a complex array of genres and aesthetics to tell our stories—drama, solo performance, devised works, spectacle, melodrama, performance art, agit prop, satire, comedy, musical, hip-hop performance, ensemble performance, community collaborations, folk opera, and so forth—from canon works, to innovative new approaches. What mattered was relevance. We searched for material that had meaning, and could give context to our society. From its inaugural season, themes were presented that would continue to be complicated and explored over three decades. Some of the most prominent themes included:

- A feminist voice: NWT never identified as a feminist theater because of the marginalization of women of color within feminist organizing, but it activated feminism on its own terms. The majority of playwrights, directors, and production staff were women of color and women who multi-tasked, raised children of their own or of the community, taught or mentored, and made art. Over time, this enacted feminism manifested and linked an enormous span of artistic voices. And it created a culture markedly different

than most theaters. A white woman set designer told me that in the mainstream theater, she never mentioned having children for fear of not being perceived as a professional artist. In contrast, she observed that working at NWT, children were omnipresent and beloved. She shared her revelation that “At New WORLD, having children seems to give women even greater credibility.”

- Incarceration: Related to the feminist perspective, the first play produced in the debut season was Mascheri Chapell’s *Prisms*, a choreopoem written by a Smith College student, inspired by her brother’s letters from prison. This wasn’t the expected narrative coming from a Seven Sister college; incarceration as a topic was re-examined through many different lenses from canon work like Miguel Piñero’s *Short Eyes*, to Rha Goddess collaborating with Project 2050 youth artists to envision what would be considered a crime in the future.
- Segregation and inequity: NWT always had a global perspective, originally naming itself the Third World Theater Series, and aligning with international struggles, most prominently, the South African anti-apartheid movement. It related global struggles for human rights to domestic fights for equality through works like Modern Times Theater’s *Homeland* by Steve Friedman and Selaelo Maredi, Barney Simon and the Market Theater’s *Born in the R.S.A.*, *Asinamali* by Mbongeni Ngema, Alice Childress’s *Florence*, and *Sheila’s Day* by Duma Ndlovu.
- Re-visioning history: In many ways theater is a magpie art of borrowing, repurposing, and creating anew; filled with traps and expected choices. Conscious of the absence of our stories and histories, we sought to revision history, but not from a celebratory, Black/Asian American/Latino/Native American History Month/Week/Day, but to seek fresh ways of foregrounding these histories with innovative productions and presentations like Roger Guenveur Smith’s *Frederick Douglas Now!*, *Dance and the Railroad* by David Henry Hwang, *Dark Cowgirls and Prairie Queens* by Carpetbag Theater, *Do the Riot Thing* by Chicano Secret Service, *Miss Ida B. Wells* by Endesha Ida Mae Holland and Pearl Cleage’s *Flying West*, *The Return of Elijah*, *the African* and *Udu* by Sekou Sundiata, and *Ameriville* by UNIVERSES.
- Complex identities: While we rejected multiculturalism and asserted an anti-racism framework, finding accurate language for the work of NWT was an ongoing challenge. In hindsight, polyculturalism might best describe the work, but at the time we adapted the term “People of Color” to describe our artists. The theater was started by myself as staff and three students: Miriam Carter, Derek Davis, and Karen Lederer—Asian American, Panamanian/Jamaican, African American, and Caucasian—agnostic, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish. We never had to diversify or become inclusive; we were. The works of NWT would explore over time the dynamics and layered identities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class.

8. Go there

Audience development was a huge buzzword of the 1990s. An aging subscription audience, the cultural shifts in media consumption, and changing demographics challenged theaters then and continue to challenge their relevance in the twenty-first century. After attending a theater conference session where theater administrators addressed the problem by suggesting enlarging the type size on programs, starting shows earlier, making performances shorter, and boosting sound levels, I wondered what would happen to these theaters after the demise of their aging patrons? I was also frustrated by a discussion about youth audiences. The speakers outlined strategies to introduce youth to culture. Unstated was a smug cultural superiority; they viewed young people as passive consumers at best or violent at worst, and that theaters could help bring them to civilization.

I’m convinced that theater will never die because even with a thousand television channels, people still crave the live moment of being in a room together, experiencing great performance and interaction. I’m also certain that creative expression is inherent to all people, but that we live in parallel universes, often oblivious to each other’s worlds. My conviction that young people were making art, gathering of their own volition to express themselves led me to b-boy gatherings, ciphers, and hip-hop events; and later to poetry slams—places where I never failed to be the oldest person in the room. I remember going to an event organized by the Linwood B-boys from Compton; the emcee called out, “The chairs are reserved for the elders in the room—so if your name isn’t Roberta Uno, get your butt out of the seats.” I think I was 40 at the time.

The engagement of hip-hop produced unexpected tension within NWT when I asked our dramaturgy staff to go to these events. Two met with me and summed up their dissatisfaction, “We didn’t get M.F.A.’s in theater to go to watch kids rapping. Why are we doing this?” Although much younger than me, they explained that they felt uncomfortable and out of place, that they wanted to return to reading texts and finding great plays. I responded that NWT had never been about being comfortable, that it’s okay to be out of one’s element, that’s the beginning of discovery. Reluctantly, they came around and eventually fully embraced where the exploration led us. I’ve written elsewhere about Future Aesthetics, the term I eventually coined to capture a genre of work inspired by hip-hop aesthetics and approaches. But my point here is to make theater, it’s important to go outside the theater, beyond its insular walls.

9. It’s not about the money: lead with the art

New WORLD Theater started without money and ended with over a half a million dollars in its accounts.¹ After its thirty-year residency at the University of Massachusetts, following the disastrous economic meltdown of 2008, the Fine Arts Center Director, Dr. Willie Hill, a short-sighted bureaucrat, decided to suspend the theater’s operations in 2009, effectively ending a program that had

brought the University major national attention and significant community participation. The *Amherst Bulletin* reported that, "closing New WORLD is expected to save UMass \$116,000, as the university attempts to close a \$10 million budget gap by trimming expenses."²

At the time NWT started, because it was housed at a Massachusetts state institution, the by-laws of the Massachusetts Cultural Council prevented it from applying for their grants, which would be seen as "double dipping"—effectively the state funding the state. So while the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, one of the most richly endowed U.S. universities, was eligible, New WORLD Theater, based at an underfunded public university was not. Lacking state imprimatur, it wasn't seen as a viable candidate for National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding. NEA staff were gracious, but couldn't find a programmatic fit with their guidelines of that era. What they deemed strong multicultural work couldn't be funded by their Expansion Arts program, because the theater wasn't located in an urban center or rural area. And it didn't qualify for the NEA Theater program because it was university-based and worked with a combination of professionals, students, and community people. Without state and NEA funding, NWT couldn't approach national funders. Ironically, until I was invited for a job interview at the Ford Foundation, I had never been given a meeting there and had a file of Ford rejection letters. NWT did not receive any outside grants for well over its first decade.

Instead we turned to our community and found support in unanticipated places. A surprising disappointment was that the obvious academic allies (Theater, Women's Studies, Blacks Studies) were not initially responsive to the fledgling project. Rather it was the Dean of Students, William Field, who controlled discretionary funds from pinball (later video) and soda machine concessions, and took a risk by offering matching funds. I went to the various student organizations: the Afrik Am Society, Ahora, the Asian American Student Association, and others to leverage the first \$10,000 that launched the program. During the summer, I started a free jazz music festival, the Bright Moments Festival, that attracted broad audiences, and which after expenses, brought concessions and donation revenue into the commissioning of new work. Finally, once I was invited to join its board, the Massachusetts Cultural Council eligibility criteria was changed. As NEA programs were re-conceptualized, NWT was finally awarded funding, through its interdisciplinary and presenting programs.

I believe that the silver lining of being locked out of external funding, was that we were compelled to mine deep relationships at all levels of our community and to develop entrepreneurial thinking. Without external funding, we honed our artistic vision organically, instead of responding to funders' priorities. Significantly, artist peers who had worked at NWT over that decade began serving on grant review panels; they were able to validate and carry our vision and story to others. Through necessity we learned to lead with the art, not with need.

Ultimately money couldn't save the theater—unbelievably, the University had to return grants awarded by national foundations. Perhaps it was mistakenly

thought by the administration that grant funding could be repurposed for other priorities within the Fine Arts Center. The key timing of the decision, during the summer while students and faculty were away, made it a foregone conclusion by the fall. Dissension among staff and tension in the community revealed fissures that precluded a united strategy of response; tragically the community organizing roots of the theater had been neglected. However, the precept of NWT's original vision was underscored: It's never just about the money. Money may impact the scale of work, but never the vision. And in the absence of clear artistic leadership, grounded in the theater's founding principle of community organizing, NWT ended.

The value of leadership is that one person can make a tremendous difference; the downside is that without that key individual, there is no change unless the institution has changed. New WORLD Theater was a project that found power and autonomy in the periphery, functioning best at times in the shadow of institutional neglect. But the fact that it was dismantled with relative ease is a testament to how it had failed to be institutionalized, despite great effort over three decades. Its end was also evidence of a change in institutional priorities following field wide developments weakening progressive gains of the Civil Rights era in higher education. It was the leadership of key individuals: William Field, former Dean of Students who took a chance and provided initial seed funds, Fred Tillis, a visionary Vice Chancellor and Director of the Fine Arts Center, who gave the theater an administrative home within the Fine Arts Center; and Murray Schwartz, Dean of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, and his successor, Lee Edwards, who mentored me as an academic, protecting me within a fractious, territorial academic department. Once they retired and I left the University—and my successors were without the academic rank of the professorship that was coupled with my artistic position—there was no institutional foothold for response, especially in the absence of organized strategy.

10. Transforming space

New WORLD Theater was an experiment that was initially made possible because at the time the University had a unique and rare independent space: Hampden Theater—a 120-seat flexible theater, with a scene shop, renovated from a former dining hall. It was located in the heart of the Southwest Residential complex, an experiment in student housing whose vertical towers had concentrated students, producing tensions—it had been the site of racial violence and student riots. The staff, Robert Antil and Eugene Warner, provided exceptional artistic programming and significant open access to students and community members. Most important, it was unaffiliated with an academic department. It was unencumbered by the bureaucracy of faculty review, season selection committees, or curriculum requirements. Until it was closed in 1999, this unorthodox facility and its creative programmers allowed New WORLD to germinate and flourish. By that time, NWT was regularly presenting in larger venues, but it lost the invaluable rehearsal and production space that Hampden Theater had provided.

Subsequently, NWT produced and presented in a variety of venues, with numerous collaborators including the UMass Department of Theater and those of the Five Colleges. Amherst College Department of Theater was a gracious host to Project 2050 in the summers. NWT might have been characterized as a homeless theater; I thought of it as an itinerant theater, continuously appropriating and transforming others' spaces. We were the people who had invited ourselves in and who didn't conform to the status quo—in our production choices, in forging new curriculum, in bringing new partners and people into spaces they had never known existed. NWT was the house sitter who rearranged all the furniture, threw a fabulous party, and couldn't understand why the owner hesitated to hand over the keys again. But profoundly, NWT was a desegregation project. It brought the first writers and directors of color into many production spaces and at the University of Massachusetts, it brought public cultural access to facilities of a state university funded by public dollars. I would never forget that in 1982, before I joined the department as its first faculty of color, I approached the UMass Department of Theater and offered them an evening with Ozzie Davis and Ruby Dee at no expense. They merely had to identify a dark night in the theater where we could drop two microphones and a music stand in front of the act curtain. The Department had never produced a play by a writer of color in nineteen seasons and turned down the offer to host these two icons of the American theater. Instead of the mainstage of the Department, we presented the evening Ms. Dee and Mr. Davis in the much larger Student Union Ballroom, filling it to capacity.

Years later, once I had become a faculty member of the Department, I was able to bring the first productions by writers of color to the Department's main and second stages and to recruit the first black graduate students to the directing program. The moment that spoke to me most strongly of change was when I saw some graffiti by one of the Latino actors in our youth program on a concrete column in the scenic shop. Proudly underscored was where he was from: "Holyoke"—a former mill town, deeply challenged economically. I don't know why this moved me; something to do with how off-limits that scenic shop was, a very male, rock music and flannel shirt environment. And now it had been tagged, simple proof of the fact that we are here.

This struggle for space largely influenced my work at the Ford Foundation, where one of my initiatives supported a new generation of arts leadership and facilities that are firmly grounded in the communities in which they reside and that are models of artistic innovation, cultural equity, and social partnership. The issue of space isn't limited to conventional arts facilities development; it's also about virtual space, spiritual and mental space, and the larger public sphere. Many non-profit arts organizations have worked hard to build a building, only to find it becomes an albatross that weighs heavily on artistic experimentation as debt and depreciation impact artistic choices. Others are so focused on the four walls that they don't engage the surrounding neighborhood, maintaining a type of de-facto segregation evidenced by the difference between their audiences and the residents

in the community or larger city surrounding the building. I see this issue of space as one of the unanswered questions raised by the Civil Rights struggle. We are still grappling with institutional racism, including inequality perpetuated by the built environment.

11. Imagine the future

New WORLD Theater was an experiment in imagining a collective future, in appropriating places we were never meant to occupy, and in artistically defining an unimagined space. Our work with youth through Project 2050 most vividly embodied that experiment. Whereas most theaters view youth work as service, educational outreach, or audience development—emphasizing the numbers served—I saw Project 2050 as a core artistic program. The adult/youth ratio was intentionally 5:1, recognizing that all were participants in the exploration. It brought together key potential stakeholders: youth, professional artists, community activists, and scholars in dialogue and creative visioning about the future. Policy discussions about the future are typically made without the participation of people who will live the consequences of decisions made. Working with youth was a chance to collaborate with people of the future.

The concept for Project 2050 was built on earlier work we had been doing with youth and professional artists in separate Western Massachusetts neighborhood-based projects with Latino teens from Holyoke, Cambodian youth from Northampton, and Vietnamese and African American youth from Springfield. These youth lived in pockets of geographical isolation; initially we worked separately with them to develop a primary voice and ensemble identity. Later we experimented with ways to bring them together cross culturally. We were partnering with various local community-based organizations that specialized in youth organizing, to community health, and social service.

One of the most powerful works from that era was called *Simultaneous Histories*. We brought together our separate Latino, Cambodian, African American, and Vietnamese groups in a series of cross cultural encounters that culminated in a week retreat exploring various themes. In *Simultaneous Histories*, youth were asked to identify key dates including: a date before their lifetime that affected who they are now and a date in the future they hoped to impact. The result was fascinating, for example they chose 1975: noting key social phenomena like the invention of Microsoft. For the Vietnamese youth, the war with America had ended and they were in the throes of being refugees, the Cambodian genocide was in process; and for the Latino and African American youth, their fathers and uncles were returning veterans, many with post-traumatic shock, struggling to find jobs and adjust to their families.

These markers of time suddenly provided larger social context for individual experience, often missing from much youth theater. Most powerful and unexpected was the date the youth chose to imagine the future: 2061, the return of Halley's Comet. It was electrifying to hear their voices refracted from decades to

come—these were unexpected missives from people who often wouldn't speak about their lives beyond the next trimester.

We brought scholars and activists into the mix to provide a framework of knowledge, activism and ideas, with a historical and social framework. While I couldn't think of a date as poetic as the return of Halley's Comet, I thought that 2050, the year that demographers had predicted Caucasians would be eclipsed by people of color in the United States, would provide fertile context. Originally, I called it The 2050 Project. But when one of the youth showed me a T-shirt design he created, I pointed out he had written the name incorrectly as Project 2050. He didn't hesitate in answering, "But shouldn't it be a verb and a noun?" Indeed.

This ability to flip a noun into a verb, to produce a performance without a stage, to create new aesthetics from reclaimed materials, and to create a collective imaginary is what I see as New WORLD Theater's cultural contribution to the American theater. Its continued relevance is evident in the persistence of the social inequities and divides it attempted to redress. These divisions are seen in the polarized and vitriolic terms of national political debate, the ever-growing gap between rich and poor, and continued racial inequity in terms of access and opportunity. The distribution of arts funding has yet to create a level playing field. The 2011 report on cultural equity by the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy concluded that,

The majority of arts funding supports large organizations with budgets greater than \$5 million. Such organizations, which comprise less than 2 percent of the universe of arts and cultural nonprofits, receive more than half of the sector's total revenue. These institutions focus primarily on Western European art forms, and their programs serve audiences that are predominantly white and upper income. Only 10 percent of grant dollars made with a primary or secondary purpose of supporting the arts explicitly benefit underserved communities, including lower-income populations, communities of color, and other disadvantaged groups.

Clearly, there is much work to be done.

New WORLD Theater began in a context of social unrest and ended in an era of economic upheaval; its most significant contribution was a dynamic and continuous remapping of a new America. To me, while the end of NWT was heartbreaking and perhaps avoidable, I always questioned whether it was an institution that should last forever. In the early years, I optimistically dreamed that the institution and the society would change around it as the margins became the center of a changing nation. As I mourned the end of NWT, my husband Andrew, in his calm wisdom told me, "Thirty years is a good round number—think of all the legacies out there, the artists New WORLD touched." And a friend expanded on this saying, "Some organizations sunset—and then there are those

that supernova and create new universes." I'm certain there are scores of New WORLDS out there, not waiting for, but making change.

Notes

- 1 At the time of its closing, the University of Massachusetts Fine Arts Center had received grants from the Ford Foundation, Surdna Foundation, and Nathan Cummings Foundation totaling over \$500,000 for the New WORLD Theater. These funds were subsequently returned or grants modified to support the archiving of key holdings of the theater.
- 2 Kristin Palpini, "Curtains for Novel Theater: Funding Problems Shut 30-Year UMass Venture," *Amherst Bulletin*, July 24, 2009.