



Crafting a Vision for Art, Equity and Civic Engagement: Convening the Community Arts Field in Higher Education

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A Week-Long Immersion in the Activist Theory and Practice of Appalshop

This essay is drawn from the California College of the Arts' Conference session, "Appalshop: A Student Intensive Model in Community-Based Art," co-facilitated by MacKenzie Fegan. In 2003, Professor Jan Cohen-Cruz and Appalshop's Dudley Cocke created the NYU/Appalshop immersion program, and they have continued to mentor its participants. Special thanks to Dudley Cocke for the conversations about Appalshop's history and about his own theory of social justice which informed both the conference's session and this essay. The quotations cited in this article are from the final March 18th, 2006 reflection circle at the most recent NYU/Appalshop immersion.

The NYU Tisch University Scholars Travel to Whiteburg, Kentucky – Jamie Haft, New York University Tish School of the Arts Alumni

Prologue

When excitedly preparing for our session at the California College of Arts' conference, MacKenzie and I noticed a contradiction. The theme of the conference was "Creating a Vision for Art, Equity, and Civic Engagement," and our case study was the Tisch University Scholars Program's weeklong immersion at the activist Appalachian arts and humanities center, Appalshop. Given the theme of the conference, it became clear that the underlying theme of our presentation would be the tension between an elite university program and the social justice principles of our immersion host, Appalshop.

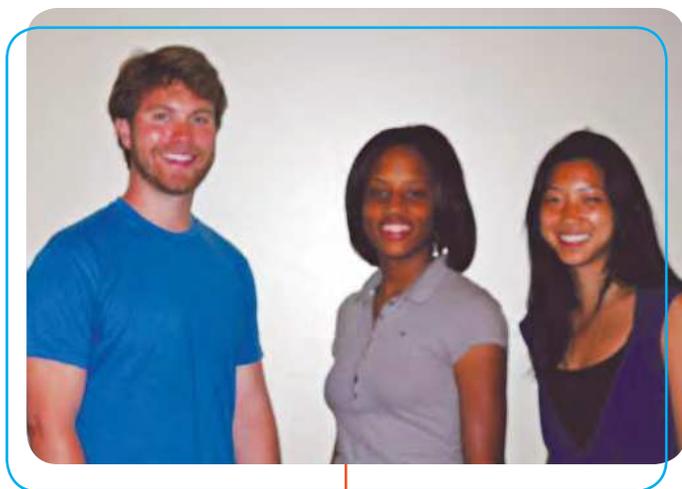
The Scholars

The Tisch University Scholars Program began in 1965 at New York University as a recruitment tool. Students accepted into the program received a full scholarship and a free international vacation each year. Administrators believed that admittance into this prestigious program could be the decisive factor in a student's decision to attend NYU.

By 2002, it had become clear that NYU no longer needed such a recruitment tool. The university was celebrating a steady rise in applications, despite September 11th, and *Newsweek* was consistently ranking it the #1 dream school of high school students. NYU's Tisch School of the Arts had become the premier undergraduate arts program in the nation; its alumni included stars like Chris Columbus, Spike Lee, and Martin Scorsese. Tuition

hikes accompanied Tisch's rising reputation; this year, the annual cost of attending Tisch is \$50,000 plus.

No longer needed to woo the best and the brightest, administrators and deans at Tisch began to ask, what purpose should the Scholars Program now serve? And how could it be restructured so participants shed the sense of entitlement that the program once intentionally engendered? In the past five years, the Tisch Scholars Program has been refocusing on leadership training, and the annual freshman class trip to Appalshop has become one of the most successful ways this refocusing has occurred.



The Activists

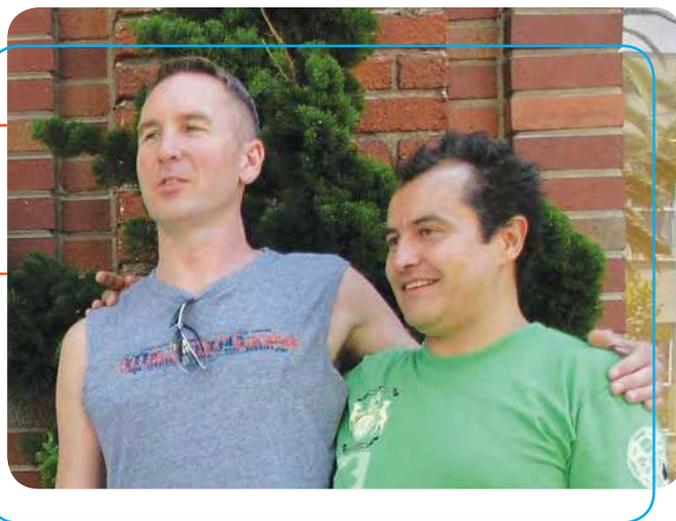
Appalshop, from Appalachian Workshop, began in 1969 when a handful of young people – some still in high school – secured funding from the federal “War on Poverty” to set up a filmmaking program to help their working-class and poor families and neighbors grapple with their region's poverty. Through the 1980s and 90s, Appalshop connected the struggle of Appalachia to the struggles of other poor and marginalized communities across the United States, confronting a range of issues including race and class: cultural, gender, and sexual bias and stereotypes; human rights violations in the criminal justice system; and immigrants rights and citizenship. The young activists' passion for social, economic, and cultural justice expanded to other artistic forms, resulting in the creation of hundreds of community-centered plays and numerous new grassroots theater groups, the production of over two hundred documentary films and community-initiated radio projects; and the launching of programs to stimulate citizen participation in social reform and policy change.

Appalshop believes that effective grassroots organizing for social justice begins small, with the individual. First, one discovers his or her own truth of an issue, and then tests and develops that truth in dialogue with others. It is believed that if this individual

and collective learning process is multiplied, a national movement for reform will develop and change society. This theory of change holds that such a movement can only be sustained when this grassroots process of individual and collective learning continues to inspire awareness and shape the plan of action. This bottom-up theory of change emphasizes that those who directly experience a problem must make up the generative base for devising and enacting the problem's solution.

The Immersion

For the past three years, during the NYU spring break in March, a group of students and faculty from the Tisch Scholars Program have traveled to Whitesburg, Kentucky to participate in a five-day immersion in the activist theory and practice of Appalshop. The preparation for the immersion begins at NYU months before the trip when Appalshop's Dudley Cocke facilitates a story circle in one of the Scholars' weekly meetings. Cocke's goal is to get students and faculty to think about their own cultural roots and identity.



Appalshop filmmaker Elizabeth Barrett's *Stranger with a Camera* is screened and discussed at another Scholars meeting prior to visiting Kentucky. The documentary investigates the circumstances around a cold-blooded murder in Letcher County, Eastern Kentucky in 1967, when a famous Canadian filmmaker, Hugh O'Connor, was shot by a local man while he, an outsider, was filming the region's poverty. Students are shaken by Barret's stark narration in the film, in which she asks: “Can filmmakers show poverty without shaming the people we portray? I came to see that there was a complex relationship between social action and social embarrassment. As a local filmmaker, I live every day with the implications of what happened.”

Students are also asked to study the Appalshop website (www.appalshop.org) and to formulate several questions that

the site's content raises about their own future careers as artists. Questions from last year include:

- What is it like to be part of an intimate, creative environment so far from the main, widely known urban centers of artistic activity?
- Can community-based work become too insular?
- How do others describe Appalshop's place in the national arts community?
- Have there been any negative reactions to Appalshop? If so, why?

Finally by way of preparation, students and faculty are asked to select a personally meaningful song or spoken word recording to play and discuss on Appalshop's radio station, WWMT, which broadcasts to parts of five states and streams live on the Internet.

The trip to Kentucky begins before sunrise, when everyone travels together to JFK airport, takes an airplane to Atlanta, and then transfers to a small propjet bound for Tri-Cities, Tennessee. From Tennessee, the group caravans for several hours through the mountainous coal fields of southwest Virginia before reaching

“A lot of people have been saying that they liked the sense of community, and that’s my favorite thing about this week, too.”

Whitesburg's Super 8 Motel. Freshmen Scholars quickly learn that Whitesburg is a dry town in a dry country, which adds an immediate disappointing twist to their first college spring break. But because the Appalshop immersion is built around engagement, the experience will bond students more than any week of drinking in Cancun.

NATE JONES, CLASS OF 2009:

A lot of people have been saying that they liked the sense of community, and that's my favorite thing about this week, too. I went to a high school where we had a strong sense of community, so one of the things I don't like about NYU is that we don't have one. But here, when you're out on the street, people say hi to you. And this week, we even became a community within ourselves.

Soon after settling into the Super 8, everyone heads to the Courthouse Café to break bread for the first time with Appalshop

staff and local folks. A majority of the meals during the immersion will be at the Café, which is a delight to most participants who can't get enough of the homemade Tanglewood Pie! After supper, the group goes to Appalshop, for the first time, to get an introduction to Appalachian culture on the Roadside Theater stage with singer-songer-playwright Ron Short.

LUCIA GRAHAMJONES, CLASS OF 2009:

I remember the first night when we watched Ron Short. I never really liked bluegrass at all – I hated it. I was just really glad to get to watch that performance, because it gave me a greater appreciation for it.

Before drifting off to sleep, students head to Food City, the grocery store behind the motel. Marveling at how much more reasonably priced the food is than in New York City, they stock up on all kinds of goodies for the upcoming nights of friend-making and philosophizing.

ERICA TACHOIR, CLASS OF 2009:

Thursday night we had been up really late working on our projects, and everyone decided that it was sleep night, and that we'd hang out tomorrow. We had this really long day, so we were drained. I went back to the room with Lipica and Rochelle, physically exhausted and determined to go to bed... but then, we started to talk about what this experience meant to us. We sat there so fired up. It wasn't girl talk about boys or anything. We were talking about how this place inspired us and how we want to do something with this experience back at NYU.

On the second day, before the sun has dried the dew, Herbie Smith, who joined Appalshop in 1969 as a teenager, takes a group in his van for a tour of the region, stopping for pictures and to relate historical details about the coal mines and the tightly-packed coal camps where the miners lived. The group also visits the very place where the 1967 murder documented by *Stranger with a Camera* occurred.

While Herbie's tour is happening, another group of students and faculty is broadcasting on the radio, sharing their favorite songs and swapping stories with the Appalshop DJ. Upon learning that two of his guests are musical theater majors, DJ Dee Davis calls for a song. Never shy about an opportunity to get discovered, the two students burst into a beautiful two-part harmony from one of their favorite Broadway shows.

Still a third group is participating in story circle training. The methodology of a story circle, which keys off the power of traditional Appalachian and Scotch-Irish storytelling, was created by Appalshop's theater wing, Roadside Theater. The rules of the

story circle are simple. The group sits in a circle, and each person tells a personal story based on a mutually agreed upon theme, such as experience with race or class. One person volunteers to begin, and the circle moves to the right. You can pass if you aren't ready to tell a story, and the opportunity to speak will come back to you. Stories should have a beginning, middle and end, characters, and maybe even conflict. No one can join the story circle late, and everyone must participate. Even if someone tells a controversial story, there is no cross-talking to respond; participants must wait to respond through their own story.

Story circles have the immediate grounding effect of personalizing something abstract. For example, I have trouble imagining what residents in New Orleans felt like during Hurricane Katrina, but I could tell a story about a moment when I felt displaced from my home or comfort zone. Through telling a personal story, I am able to better understand the stories of New Orleans residents.

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The exploration of one's personal narrative is important in grassroots work for several other reasons. It helps students to value their own identities more, and taking turns listening and sharing builds compassion for those who are different, helping each participant better understand his or her relative position in society.

SARITH DEMUNI, CLASS OF 2008:

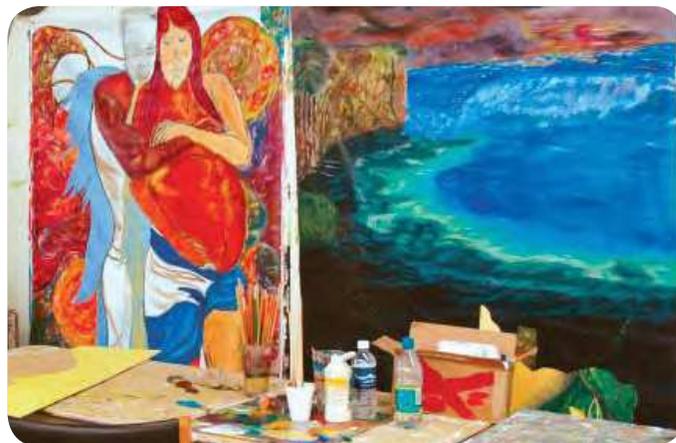
In terms of what this place is doing with the tradition of the area, it got me thinking about my roots. I was born in Sri Lanka, and I'm pretty far removed from that. I think I should really start thinking about where I come from, my people. I really don't know much about it, and I've never cared to learn until now.

ALICIA MATUSHESKI, CLASS OF 2007:

I'm thankful for my experience here because I feel like I got to slow down and think about my life, in ways that I seldom find time to do in New York. I put this pressure on myself when I'm at school to reject my community and my home. When I have the chance to write about it, I think, oh it's not good enough for this class. I really

admire how everyone here embraces their community. It makes me want to go back to my home and do that.

The immersion's interlacing activity revolves around trips to the Courthouse Café and meals prepared by Appalshop staff



and community cooks. Imagine this: Beans – cooked in a big pot, transformed into soup – with cornbread for dipping – and homemade fudge for dessert, all enjoyed in folding chairs and tables in a make-shift mess hall in the lobby of Appalshop. The burning question the local cooks have for their New York dinner guests: Why in the world would anyone request *vegetarian* soup beans?

Midway through the third day, the immersion moves into an intense 24-hour production phase.

Students and faculty divide into groups based on their interests. In the most recent immersion, students had three options: To team with Herbie Smith and Robert Salyer to make a video biography about James Caudill, a much respected preacher and singer in the Old Regular Baptist Church; to collaborate with local youth in the Appalachian Media Institute to create two video and two audio public service announcements – one to encourage young Appalachians to vote in the upcoming local elections, and the other to confront the rise in deadly drug use among local youth; or to work with Roadside Theater artists to devise a performance piece based on story circles. After the groups pull an all-nighter to complete their projects, the production phase ends in a celebratory showing of the new work for all Appalshop staff and community participants.

SEAN CALDER, CLASS OF 2008:

It's a weird thing being from New York ... everyone thinks identity is an individual thing, and if you're not blazing your own path, tearing down traditions and creating something new, then it's not worthwhile. Even people who have influences try to like, claim it as their own. It's this shameful thing to be a part of something, especially

at Tisch. It's nice to see artists who are just naturally following in the tradition and in others' footsteps.

SHAINA TAUB, CLASS OF 2009:

I think that what Appalshop does is beautiful. Being a young artist in New York, in an environment such as we are in at NYU, it can become very ... the social lifestyle can become very judgmental, petty, material, very quickly. In that environment a lot of the joy falls out of the work. Appalshop really reminds me that the joy coming out of doing the work is why we do it in the first place.

The immersion, which by now also become an exchange, closes with the most popular event of the week: the potluck supper and square dance at the Cowan Creek Community Center, which is naturally right beside a bubbling creek. At Cowan, community members of all ages are present, and students and faculty delight in having the opportunity to cook and share one of their favorite dishes made from ingredients bought at Food City. As the Old Time band swells to as many as fifteen – including Tisch students and faculty – the crowd goes wild with two-stepping and storytelling. In one corner, NYU students are recounting tales from their exciting city lives to bright-eyed local teenagers; in another corner, Kentuckians under the age of eight are teaching NYU students the dance steps they can do in their sleep, rolling their eyes in disbelief that university students can't figure out how to do the Virginia Reel.

ANITA GUPTA, DIRECTOR OF THE TISCH SCHOLARS PROGRAM:

I had shared with some of you in one of our story circles about how uncomfortable I felt when I first got here, thinking that my Indian-ness didn't belong in Whitesburg. I didn't know how the week was going to evolve for me. But each day parts of me have opened up. I had the opportunity to share so much with the people here, and had so many people take interest in who I am. That all culminated in last night's square dance – there were so many complete strangers who just came over and talked to me! I felt like, wow, I guess in my own way I do belong here. I also just want to say to the Scholars – I've had the chance to work with you in different subsets, story circles and projects, even just being in the van together! It's been incredible. I have so much respect and regard for each of you. I honor you, and I'm going take that back to New York with me.

The Implications:

The Tisch Scholars return from Appalshop enthused, ready to take on the world with their newly developed activist spirits. However,

they are now ahead of their institution, and they quickly discover that the environment at NYU doesn't nurture this kind of work. As sadly noted by the conference's opening keynote speaker Michael Roth, President of California College of Arts: "The university is no longer a place where one goes to access opportunity, but rather, is just a mechanism for preserving privilege."

Dudley Cocke believes that universities can change in two ways: from the top-down, with a dean, president, or provost committed to social justice; or from the bottom-up, with students demanding they get a different, more socially-responsible education. Those working at the top of any hierarchy have the highest stake in preserving the hierarchy's privilege, so the change may not easily occur from the top-down.

If doing social justice work was a priority for students, they actually would be in a position to demand such change. In our consumer society, students, as "buyers" of expensive university degrees, could in theory purchase change – and the university, as "seller," would have to adapt its product to the market. However, it is psychologically difficult for students to be active in university politics. Many have had to take out large loans to attend school and get their degree, which doesn't even guarantee a job, so their minds are often narrowly focused on just getting the training necessary to have some chance of success in the marketplace.

There is one huge problem, however, that the present status quo is not taking into account: Outside the university, there is an impending crisis. This crisis takes many forms, including gentrification, the rising cost of real estate, environmental degradation, racism, stark economic inequality, pandemic disease, and global terrorism. For the arts, the specific crisis is elitism, which prevents artists from playing their historically important role of holding up a mirror to all of society. For the arts, it is a *silent* crisis, as no one, including those affiliated with university training programs, is acknowledging it as such. For my art form, theater, the evidence of this elitism is found in audience surveys which consistently report that both the nonprofit and commercial theater audience is 80% white and overwhelmingly from the wealthiest 15% of the population. Not only are universities ignoring this rampant elitism, their practices are *perpetuating* it. If the gateway to becoming an artist is now through a very expensive university degree, art will become increasingly exclusionary.

Elitism not only greatly reduces the talent pool upon which artistic excellence depends; it cripples the formidable role the arts can play in a pluralistic society. The effects of elitism in the arts are especially poignant now when we are fighting global terrorism, because the only credible path to world peace is through increasing our tolerance and compassion for one another. It is a role of the arts to help us find this compassion within ourselves.

For the well being of humankind, the 21st century university must address the role it is playing in preserving and perpetuating elitism. Mindful of Appalshop's theory of change, it is we who are affiliated with universities who must implicate ourselves in this problem and begin devising and enacting solutions. For my student peers, we must become active in university politics, knowing our tuition is the fuel that the university runs on.

I find hope in the democratizing efforts being spearheaded by some inspired faculty and students at universities. At NYU, the Tisch Drama Department offers a Minor in Applied Theater, conceived and directed by Professor Jan Cohen-Cruz, who is currently working to transform it into a major. The major would include a studio specifically designed to train theater artists committed to using their skills to further justice. Cohen-Cruz also runs the Office of Community Connections, a clearinghouse, which helps connect Tisch students to community engagement opportunities in the city. In the past five years, the Tisch Department of Art and Public Policy was formed, and it recently created a socially-relevant core curriculum for all freshmen undergraduate arts students: "Art and the World" and "The World through Art." In fall 2007, the Department will also launch a Graduate Program in Arts Politics. And then, of course, there is the ever-evolving Tisch Scholars Program. This year's weekly sessions are framed by the theme, "Paradigms of Privilege." In retrospect, had I not encountered such socially conscious curricula, I may not have gained awareness of my own level of privilege, nor would I have understood the opportunity my privilege offers me to fight for social, economic, and cultural justice.

DUDLEY COCKE, INTERIM DIRECTOR OF APPALSHOP, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF ROADSIDE THEATER:

There's a phrase down here in the mountains that goes, "Don't get above your raisin!" You can imagine that in planning this NYU immersion some friends and neighbors have said, "Why are you messing around with an elite university in New York City? You know that a large part of our poverty here was caused by just such privileged institutions. Looks to me, son, that you're trying to get above your raisin!" I've responded, "Right, NYU is an elite institution with privilege, but that doesn't mean that the people there have completely bought into that privilege. In fact, we often find that the students and faculty who visit us here care deeply about justice." I think this weeklong immersion and exchange is evidence that this is not about copping to some sort of elitism. It's not what you've come here for, and we at Appalshop thank you for that."

