

AN IDEAL THEATER

FOUNDING VISIONS
FOR A NEW AMERICAN ART

Edited and Introduced by
TODD LONDON

Class and the Performing Arts

Dudley Cocke

Introduction

Appalshop, in the coalmining country of central Appalachia, is a child of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." Founded in 1969 in the Kentucky city of Whitesburg (population approximately 1,600), the only rural pilot program in that war, as led by the federal Office of Economic Opportunity, Appalshop began as a way of training local kids for jobs in film and TV. The federal money dried up after two years, but the cameras kept rolling, and in 1975 Roadside theater joined Appalshop's programs, determined to use storytelling to reflect the community back to itself, to heal and inspire, to work with the people of the region to give public voice to their culture and concerns, and so direct their own future. Over the years, Roadside has excelled in using story to connect its community to others, across the country and around the world.

From the beginning, the prospect of success seemed unlikely. As Roadside's long-term managing director Donna Porterfield has written, "Born in the late 1940's, we were educated in substandard public schools where we were told that our parents did not speak or live correctly, and that if we were ever going to amount to anything in this life, we would have to change everything about ourselves, leave the mountains and never look back. The national media, where we regularly saw shameful hillbilly stereotypes of ourselves, emphatically affirmed this message. [. . .] We opened *Life* magazine and saw ourselves, our friends and our neighbors, depicted as raggedly, shack-dwelling, forlorn-looking people."

This 2008 essay, by founding artistic director Dudley Cocke, is less a picture of a founding vision than the articulation of an evolving one – and the specific ideas and practices that grow to fulfill that vision. It's a vision that builds on those that have come before, notably the work of Robert Gard and Hallie Flanagan. Cocke's look at Roadside's democratic, participatory methods also provides an eloquent depiction of the ways class influences culture, a vital aspect of that theater's search for America.

Todd London

Class and the Performing Arts

Alexander Hamilton, political rival of Virginia planter and slave owner, Thomas Jefferson, proposed that the President and Senate be elected for life. Hamilton wrote: "All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and wellborn, the other the mass of people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however

generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right.”

The Founding Fathers rejected Hamilton’s elite proposition in favor of Jefferson’s declaration of equality. Thus began our nation’s journey – still not completed – to align the Deed with the Creed.

Several months before the 2000 presidential election, a Florida reporter interviewed citizens about why the vote was important. She approached two retirees relaxing by the pool, “Why is the upcoming presidential election important to you?”

Without hesitation, the first responded, “The Supreme Court.” The second added, “the economy.” Then, almost in unison, they said, “The culture.”

The reporter blinked and wondered, “What do you fellas mean?”

The first retiree looked squarely at her and answered, “Who controls the culture . . .” The second jumped in and finished the sentence, “. . . controls the story the nation tells itself.”

The past quarter century has been unkind to the democratic impulse in the arts. A 2002 poll by the Urban Institute found that 96 percent of respondents said they were “greatly inspired and moved by art.” However, only 27 percent said that artists contribute “a lot” to the good of society. National surveys (including those by the League of American Theatres and Producers and the 1991-1996 Wallace Foundation-sponsored AMS survey) consistently report that audiences are 80-plus percent white and originating from the top 15 percent of the population, as measured by income and education levels. The widening income gap between rich and poor is threatening to create a permanent underclass. In a 27-year-long trend to apply market values to our social life since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, we have embedded our spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and political life in the economy. And economic globalization has been the steroid of this trend. The exact opposite should be the case.

I will argue that culture – and its concentrated expression, art – has an important role to play in realizing our nation’s democratic aspirations. But in the not-for-profit performing arts – and many other arts fields as well – progress toward leveling the playing field has stalled, leaving our many U.S. cultures without an equal chance to express themselves, to develop and cross-pollinate. The good news is that knowledge and new opportunities do exist to remove obstacles blocking arts’ progress toward inclusion.

Art in a Democracy: Four Historical Vignettes

Ever since our forebears began putting on dramas, the U.S. theater has been a social forum where race and class, cultural power, and separatism versus integration have been debated.

In 1996-'97, it was the late playwright August Wilson going at it with Harvard theater director and critic, Robert Brustein. In 1821, it was the African Grove Theater, in Manhattan, where a growing community of free African Americans was mounting productions of Shakespeare, as well as original plays like *The Drama of King Shotaway*, which called for a slave rebellion. The African Grove's audience was racially mixed, although the theater's management found it necessary to segregate whites, as some did not know "how to behave themselves at entertainments designed for ladies and gentlemen of color."

It's January 16, 1936, Des Moines, Iowa. At the Shrine Temple Auditorium the curtain rises on the encore performance of the opera, *The Bohemian Girl*. Regina Steele, 12 years old, steps from the wings and in a clear voice, which carries to the last person in the audience of 4,000, brings the story of the opera to the second act. The cast of 150 is from 50 of Iowa's 100 counties. They are farm girls and boys, farm men and women. Regina is wearing her blue 4-H uniform. "Who can measure the rewards of such an event?" wrote Marjorie Patten at the time. "Perhaps the greatest value lies in the rich experience of each person who took part in it, the growth through good training, the joy of having had a part in producing a lovely thing and the freeing of some craving for expression." As one cast member put it, "We have no new linoleum on the kitchen floor, but we have sung in opera!"

In 1991, I invited Robert Gard, founder of the venerable populist Wisconsin Idea Theater, to a meeting of 100 grassroots theater practitioners at Cornell University. It was to be his last public address. He described a vision he had when he was 27 years old: "I felt the conviction then that I have maintained since – that the knowledge and love of place is a large part of the joy in people's lives. There must be plays that grow from all the countrysides of America, fabricated by the people themselves, born of toiling hands and free minds, born of music and love and reason. There must be many great voices singing out the lore and legend of America from a thousand hilltops, and there must be students to listen and to learn, and writers encouraged to use the materials."

After politically motivated investigations by the Congressional Dies and Woodrum committees, at midnight on June 30, 1939, only four years after its inception, the WPA's Federal Theatre Project – the apotheosis of the theater's democratic impulse – was closed by Congress. The Project's director, Hallie Flanagan, put its aims succinctly: "National in scope, regional in emphasis, and democratic in attitude." In its first two years it had presented 42,000 performances to more than 20 million people of all races, creeds and classes. According to meticulous audience surveys, 65 percent of those attending were seeing a live play for the first time.

Finding Answers: A Contemporary Case Study

Roadside Theater, which I direct, is a working class ensemble based in the central Appalachian coalfields, where 98 percent of the population is white. The theater has performed in thousands of communities in 43 U.S. states and around Europe. The demographic profile of Roadside's audience is the inverse of the national norm: 73 percent have annual incomes under

\$50,000, according to a Wallace AMS survey, and 30 percent earn \$20,000 or less. Seventy percent live in rural communities. One third are people of color. How did this happen?

In 1990, as Roadside was preparing its strategy to diversify the audience for the professional American theater, many experts advised us we would fail. We found ourselves wrestling with tough questions. What is a public space? What is an affordable ticket? What are acceptable protocols (e.g., must a show start promptly? should children be admitted?) What community organizations should be our partners?

We determined the key was finding presenters and local leaders who would join us in wrestling with such questions. Over six years, using a process of trial and error, Roadside developed a cultural development model that guaranteed audiences that looked like the whole community. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam describes our approach as “mustering diverse local folks to celebrate their traditions and restore community confidence through dramatization of local stories and music.” The model’s methodology rests on five pillars:

- Active participation;
- Partnerships and collaborations with an inclusive range of community organizations;
- Local leadership;
- Engagement over the course of several years;
- Flexibility to alternate between the roles of leader and follower.

Roadside’s method can be represented as a circle that rests on these pillars, but the different points on the circle don’t necessarily occur as discreet events. Here’s how it works.

The first point of the circle is when we come into a community and perform from our repertoire of original plays. People see and evaluate what we do. We explain our history and process in workshops after the performances.

In the second phase of our residency, we prompt the creation of community music and story circles, so the participants can begin to hear their own voices. We pick a theme – maybe a local historic incident – and community members start listening to each other’s stories and songs. They often hear new information about a common experience. The songs and stories, which are often recorded, become the ingredients for community celebrations at the end of the second phase. These often involve potluck suppers; people play music, sing, tell their stories. Through such big, structured celebrations, the community voice proclaims itself.

In the third phase, the community’s own stories and songs become a natural resource for creating drama. Nascent and experienced local playwrights, producers, directors, actors, and designers use this material to make plays. We fill in the gaps in inexperience. The fourth point comes after the drama is up and running. We suggest ways for the community to honor its artists and leaders, and we help establish a theater in the community. We then introduce our

new colleagues to the national network of artists and communities that are engaged in similar explorations.

Roadside's model is labor intensive. It requires that each Roadside artist become a producer (Paulo Freire's writing oriented us to this new role). Early on in each multi-year residency, the assigned Roadside producer sits down with community leaders to articulate common aspirations. The farming and ranching community of Choteau, MT completed the circle and established a theater company. Here is the agreement that guided our partnership:

- *The plays will be given their voice by the community:* The artists will be part of the culture from which the work is drawn. Their histories and feedback will inform the work. The audience will not be consumers of, but rather, participants in the performance.
- *The plays will witness a commitment to place:* They will be grounded in the local and specific, which, when rendered faithfully and creatively, can affect people anywhere.
- *The traditional and indigenous are integral to rural life:* They help us maintain continuity with the past, respond to the present, and prepare for the future.
- *The project will strive to be inclusive in its producing practices:* We will partner with community organizations. Performances will be in places where the community feels welcome. Tickets will be affordable.
- *The project will recognize that management structures and business practices are value-laden:* We support broad participation, self-reliance, and collective responsibility.
- *The project will be consciously linked to struggles for cultural, social, economic, and political equity:* Advocating equity often meets resistance, and such resistance, when articulated, is an opportunity for positive change.

This kind of residency work is never smooth sailing. Even so, we were rewarded by the AMS survey results. After all, we had demonstrated that there were no insurmountable barriers to attendance – a good thing for the box office, for democracy, and the art form. We expected that the arts field would be excited by our success, but there was no such reaction. Apparently, we had misunderstood something. Looking back, the warning signs were clear.

One warning sign confronted us in Alabama. We had arrived at the northern Alabama venue greeted by a crowd – “twice as many people as show-up for our performances,” exclaimed the presenter. The audience was a cross-section of the city. The working class people had a great time because they understood our Appalachian working-class play better than many who were from the more formally educated class. But they didn't invite us back. After our third follow-up call, the presenter said, “We've not had such a big crowd before or since. But our board of directors just didn't like the way y'all talked.” Alabamians didn't like the way Appalachians talked! Apparently, for some folks, the arts are like a country club – a chance to be with their own kind.

Another example of what the Brooklyn poet Marianne Moore described as “people not liking what they don't understand” occurred in Scottsdale, AZ. We were performing at the charming,

upscale Kerr Cultural Center. The event, sponsored by Arizona State University, was supposed to bring together a diverse audience: wealthy white patrons, folks from the Chicano community, and Native Americans from the Pima Reservation. The culture clash occurred around the performance protocols. Some Chicanos and Native Americans showed up an hour early. They were made to wait outside in the cold for 30 minutes until the doors officially opened. Others arrived 10-15 minutes after the 8:00 pm curtain and were not admitted. The kids from the local Boys & Girls Club (our special guests, performing their own stories) were made to sit on bleachers “to control their behavior.” (It reminded me of Ngugi wa Thiongo’s experience in post-colonial Kenya. It was not censorship of my words, Thiongo had said, but censorship of the desired configuration of the performance space and of my audience’s other cultural norms.)

Despite such attitudes, Roadside has become adept at removing barriers. A long-standing Roadside collaborator is Junebug Productions, an African American theater in New Orleans. One of our co-creations, *Junebug/Jack*, is about the relationships between black and white working class southerners. As we toured the U.S., naturally we wanted black and white working-class people to attend the play. The problem is that black and white working-class people do not go out together (or separately, for that matter) to the professional theater. Our solution was to ask the sponsors of *Junebug/Jack*, which is a musical, to pull together singers from different parts of their community –from the white Methodist church to the black AME Zion church to the integrated public high school. Out of support for their church, family, and friends, as well as sheer curiosity, large numbers of people showed up for the performances, who would not otherwise have attended. The disparate parts of each community came together to sing. Only then began the journey of understanding each other. [. . .]

Strategic Directions

The community itself is the answer to the problem of the class gap. Outside expertise can help. Here are some approaches that, in our experience, are demonstrated to work:

- The principles of community cultural development as articulated above;
- Diverse and equitable community partnerships which free the partners from the prejudices of their silos;
- Learning together through manageable cycles of action and assessment;
- Storytelling;
- Remembering that those with the problem are the basis for the solution.

These are some things that, we have concluded, do not work:

- Community outreach (what is required, instead, is community in-reach);
- Allowing the community to select which development principles to include in a project;
- Trying to make one community’s cultural development project fit all communities;

- Allowing large power imbalances among community partners (too much power can be a deterrent to learning);
- Inhibiting the community from taking the lead.

[...]

Conclusion

A joke from the Depression: Two black men are standing in a government breadline; one turns to the other, "How you making it?" The other looks up the line, "White folks still in the lead."

For a sustainable future, society needs creativity and innovation from a healthy arts ecosystem. For 27 years, we have failed to advance the fundamental principle of cultural equity, or, as my mentor Alan Lomax insisted, "to tap for our common good the inherent genius of every cultural community." There are, however, indications that now might be a moment of opportunity:

- *Unprecedented numbers of young people are seeking opportunities for civic engagement*, often motivated by a search for meaning – religious, spiritual, or humanist.
- *Colleges and universities offering steady supply of new community cultural development courses, programs, and engagement opportunities.* (Syracuse University Chancellor, Nancy Cantor, was recently honored by the Carnegie Corporation for her efforts on behalf of public scholarship. She is co-founder of Imagining America, a coalition of 80 colleges and universities devoted to creating knowledge in the arts, humanities, and design to help communities and campuses transform into centers for civic engagement).
- *A lot of the action is happening at the intersections of disciplines, of fields, and of cultural boundaries.* Unlikely suspects, such as environmental activists and politicians, are finding themselves drawn to collaborations with artists.
- *A critical mass of analytic writing* has accrued, bringing attention to community cultural development theories and practices that have been gathering force over the last 50 years.
- *As ever, the folk arts remain vibrant and flying under the radar.* Their audience already looks like the whole community.
- *New concern about how the U.S. is negatively perceived by many in the world is awakening government leaders* to the need for re-starting international arts exchange programs which demonstrate our nation's commitment to pluralism and cultural diversity abroad as well as at home.

As any Darwinian will tell us, when challenged by change, the fatal response is denial. At a time when the arts should be innovating broadly (not just in a narrow, avant-garde sense), we have become too uptight, too hesitant, too risks-averse. We must encourage citizen participation and bridge the inequalities that divide us. More than the law, politics, or the economy, democratic participatory arts connect us to our fellow human beings in the most powerful ways.

About the Book

An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art is a wide-ranging, inspiring documentary history of the American theater movement as told by the visionaries who goaded it into being. This anthology collects fifty essays, manifestos, letters and speeches that are each introduced and placed in historical context by noted writer and arts commentator, Todd London, who spent nearly a decade assembling this collection. This celebration of the artists who came before is an exhilarating look backward, as well as toward the future. Roadside's contribution appears in the book's first chapter: *What is America? / What is American Theater?*

"We've got our own theater. It's not in a very good neighborhood; it's not in a very good neighborhood; it's been closed for years, and it's in pretty bad shape. But it's a theater, and it's ours. It's got a stage, and it's got seats, and that's all we care about. [. . .] We haven't got very much money, but we've got youth, and I think, talent. They'll tell you the theater is dying. I don't believe it. Anything that can bring us together like this, and hold us to this one ideal in spite of everything, isn't going to die."

~ George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart,
The Fabulous Invalid, 1938