

# Three Lenses on MicroFest USA: Intentions, Values, and Propositions

by Gerard Stropnicky



## SNAPSHOTS

**New Orleans.** *The southern Louisiana bayou disappears at a rate roughly equivalent to the area of a football field every hour. It is rapidly being swallowed up by the construction of levees, canals, and pipelines; the profitable pursuit of oil drilling and refining; and the daily addition of Walmarts, housing developments, and fast food joints. As the wetlands diminish and disappear, so does the Cajun culture they nurture. In response, Cajun artist Nick Slie is creating Cry You One, a site-specific theater work that mourns and celebrates both the vanishing wetlands that once helped to protect New Orleans from Gulf storms, and Cajun culture itself. In the work-in-progress preview of Cry You One, Slie—a Cajun artist in mourning, dressed in stained white—slowly paddles a small boat across the still waters of a dead bayou in the Lower Ninth Ward, as music of fiddle, guitar and the sung harmonies of the [Mondo Bizarro](#) and [ArtSpot](#) ensembles fill the air with poignant joy. In its finished version, Cry You One is planned to be both a day-long music and food celebration as well as a wailing Cajun cri du coeur.*



*Cry You One*, Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot Productions, MicroFest: New Orleans Performance, 2013. Photos: Michael Premo

**Appalachia.** *A declining coal industry is scraping off nature's noble crowns in a last-ditch effort to produce coal at the lowest possible cost. This process of mountaintop removal devastates the environment, poisons streams, and employs as few miners as possible. In southeast Kentucky, a corner of Appalachia wracked by persistent poverty and facing an epidemic of drug abuse as well as a dying industry, mountaintop removal is but one of a long list of social challenges. "Problems pile up here like cordwood," said Robert Gipe, producer of the [Higher Ground](#) project in Harlan County, Kentucky. Rather than bemoan the challenges, the huge and diverse Higher Ground cast storms the black box theater at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, to sing, dance, and share stories about their place, their people, and their common problems. Assembled over years of mindful community organizing, this cast of coal miners, church choirs, recovering addicts, students, children, old folks, and more are a disparate band of citizens acting together in resistance and reconciliation.*

**Detroit.** *Detroit is bankrupt. That's official now, as the city slips into bureaucratic receivership amid shuttered industries, high crime rates, economic despair, more drugs, and block after block of abandoned homes. Only 700,000 people, half the population from Detroit's heyday of 1.8 million, remain and they all yearn for a better life. In a struggling southwest Detroit neighborhood, an energetic cast of local teens puts on a play of their own stories in a pocket park. Tired of hearing their city constantly disparaged, disrespected, and feared, they respond with disarming humor, charm and honesty in [Matrix Theatre Company's](#) Detroit Dreaming. The spirited piece was performed before a remarkable background: a sculpture built of spent spray paint cans. In a similar vein, [The Alley Project](#) encourages neighbors to invite graffiti artists to decorate their garage doors, redefining the neighborhood as an outdoor gallery rather than a scene of urban blight. In turn, the taggers defend the neighborhood. Talk about community engagement.*

## **A NEW CONVERSATION ABOUT THE SOCIAL CHANGE VALUE OF ART**

In unexpected American places, artists are using their work to explore, illuminate, and engage the world around them, making art with goals of promoting community engagement, civic engagement, and social change. The problems are huge but the work is personal and heartfelt, the expression of a community's pride and its desire for solutions. The [Network of Ensemble Theaters](#) (NET) links a diverse array of these ensembles and practitioners to one another. In 2012-2013, NET sponsored MicroFests in communities where such work is taking place, showcasing theater projects like these and many others.

For many people, this kind of work requires a new definition of "art," and a new understanding of the changes art can effect in a community. Too many in the broader culture define art as a frill, describing it as nice but unnecessary and seeking to confine it to a box marked "decoration." Others concede the economic impact of the arts, or its impact on education, since both are real and measurable. But listen to the primary themes next time the debate of government arts funding comes up: discussions of the change-making power of socially engaged art are mostly avoided.



**Matrix Theatre Company performs *Detroit Dreaming* in The Alley Project**

working together consistently over years to develop a distinctive body of work and practices” is an *ensemble*. Workers in all disciplines—musicians, sculptors, muralists, community gardeners, environmental activists, organizers—including many who may not self-define as artists, come comfortably within that definition and have joined this national conversation. NET’s stated core values of collaboration, inclusion, transparency, excellence, and respect aren’t exclusive to theatre artists. Inspiration lies just outside our comfort zones.<sup>1</sup>

We’ve experienced a broad range of work that aspires to contribute to revitalizing and renewing communities, contributing to place and public good, curated by the NET staff, particularly MicroFest Project Director Ashley Sparks. The work often pulses with energy, overflows with sincerity. Some has been staggeringly beautiful, some impressive in scale and ambition, some simple and direct. We have all been moved at one point or another. Many smart and able artists have dedicated their lives to making a difference. Are they? How can we tell?

We admire these artists and we marvel at their courage, so it feels downright churlish to return to the difficult question with which NET began these proceedings: What makes the work *work*? Intrinsic in that question is its converse: What makes the work *not work*? Put

Artists across the nation will have none of this as they apply their art making to the issues and the cultures that surround them.

Over the past months, an ever-changing band of leading ensemble artists has convened at MicroFests in Detroit, New Orleans, and Appalachia (in both Knoxville, TN and Harlan County, KY). As NET’s name suggests, the central focus of these MicroFests has been performance and ensemble theatre practice, but it has not been so limited. In NET’s definition, any “group of individuals dedicated to collaborative creation, committed to



**Mark Valdez, Ashley Sparks, and Michael Rohd (left to right), MicroFest: New Orleans. Photo: Michael Premo**

another way, if we believe that art, when served well, can help bring healing, then we must also accept the converse: that art, served not so well, can cause harm.

The stakes are high because the work is consequential: indeed, when we make art for social change, we enthusiastically embrace the concept that there *will* be consequences. When we transform local stories, issues, passions into art, we're working with something very precious indeed. When we work in and with communities in crisis, we are talking about people's lives. It's incumbent upon us to get it right. Can we hold ourselves accountable? Can we apply a level of rigor to this sincere socially engaged work? As socially conscious artists, as citizens endeavoring to be as ethical as possible, the answer is clear. However difficult, we must engage in these questions.

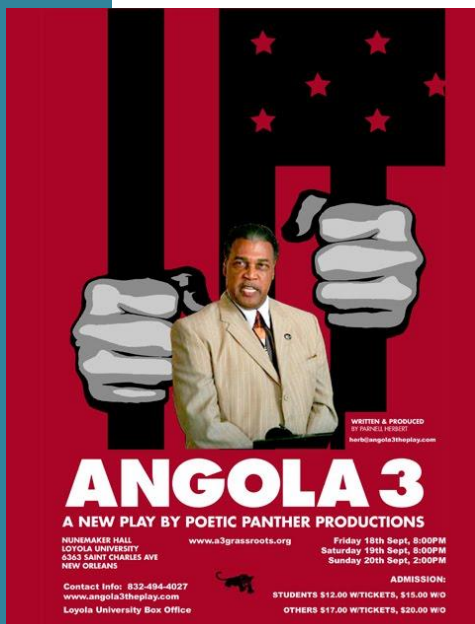
On these journeys we've faced the usual challenges when it came to frank discussions of the work. We don't yet have the words; or, perhaps as ensembles our words tend to be idiosyncratic within our own cohorts. Each ensemble develops its own distinct vocabulary, its own shorthand. While that's a positive attribute in ensemble practice, it can stand in the way once we step outside. A particular vocabulary to discuss creative placemaking or socially-engaged work has yet to be shared across our field. Using examples from these first three MicroFests, I'll offer three lenses through which we can view this work, not to finish the conversation, but to begin it. Let's get talking.

### LENS ONE: WHAT'S THE INTENTION?

In the [RAE \(Resurrection After Exoneration\) House](#), in New Orleans' storied Tremé neighborhood, two plays deal with issues of incarceration. Both plays are stylistically straightforward, both challenge audience preconceptions, and most importantly, both are strong, valid, and exemplary of their respective forms, yet each embodies a distinct intention.<sup>2</sup>

Parnell Herbert's play [Angola 3](#) examines the case of title characters Herman Wallace, Albert Woodfox, and Robert King, three men who've spent four decades in solitary confinement for a murder they insist they did not commit. They self-describe as political prisoners and their case has been taken up by Amnesty International, among many other advocates. The *intentions* of the play *Angola 3* are to raise consciousness, to illuminate the horrors these men have suffered as well as the endemic injustice of the system that made it happen, and to provoke specific actions to build enough public pressure that the system might right its manifest wrong.

Creative and engagement elements are chosen to support the intents of *consciousness-raising work* or *work designed to provoke action*. For example:



***There is a clear outside villain.*** In this case, the finger of the work points to a corrupt justice system in a complacent society. Here, the men are innocent, the system is corrupt. There is a clear right and wrong and the play exists to make that point. In other plays of this type the outside villain might be the gas industry, or coal barons, or Wall Street greed.

### John O’Neal

These NET MicroFests again and again showcased work derived from collected story. Social engagement begins and ends with listening. First, through his pioneering work in the 1960s with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference using story and performance in service to the Civil Rights Movement, then with the [Free Southern Theater](#), and more recently with [Junebug Productions](#), [John O’Neal](#) developed and refined a straightforward methodology of Story Circles that encourages groups of people to openly share what is in their hearts. For decades, John generously shared his techniques at Appalshop, through Alternate ROOTS, and in countless and wide-flung workshops. His unquenchable spirit, his example, his teaching, and his techniques sprouted and took root everywhere he taught. Much of what we know as socially engaged work, including the effective and powerful application of stories from ordinary people, can trace its source to John O’Neal. He’s not done. Junebug is creating the [Homecoming Project](#), a series of dinners, story circles, workshops, and New Orleans Second Line parades built around the post-disaster diaspora, with the conviction that “The right to return home is a specific human right.” John snuck into the back of Café Istanbul to catch some performances during MicroFest, his quiet presence belying his astonishing impact on all practitioners of this form.



***Evidence is selected in order to build an argument.*** The story told, however *true*, is presented as one-sided. Confirmation bias is at work as opposite views are not included, except to be discredited. (Some stories in life *are* one-sided, to be sure, and this seems like one of them—still, the voice of the prosecutor was absent, the court records were absent, and whatever evidence there might have been against these men was never to be considered within the frame of *Angola 3*.)

***A call to action is explicitly stated.*** After the bows, director/writer Parnell Herbert encouraged the audience to look into this case, to visit certain websites, to sign petitions, and to write letters. While the call was not within this work, Parnell made it clear it is included after every performance.

I didn’t know this story: The play motivated me to seek more information on-line (<http://www.angola3.org>, [Amnesty International Take Action](#) and more.). There I found confirmation of the play’s thesis. One of the best outcomes of such work is to motivate the receiver to further research. *Angola 3* raised my consciousness of this injustice, motivated me to support these men, and the many like them, in whatever ways I can. This work, by its own intentions, *worked*.

The other play presented at RAE House was [Did You See Me?](#) created by The Graduates, a group of women once inmates of the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women

in St. Gabriel Louisiana. It was co-directed by Ausetua Amor Amenkum, Big Queen of the Washita Nation and Artistic Director of [Kumbuka African Drum and Dance Collective](#), and Kathy Randels, Artistic Director of [ArtSpot Productions](#). The play poetically wove together stories of these women's own lives, focusing on how they've been shaped by their experiences with the criminal justice system.

While the intent certainly included raising our consciousness to the conditions, policies, and downright wrong-headedness of that system, *Did You See Me?* clearly exhibited elements common to *healing*, *restorative justice*, or *peace building*. Those elements include:

***Giving voice.*** The power of this work comes from hearing from those usually silenced in our society. In *Did You See Me?*, recently incarcerated women,

“graduates” of a place they often called their “school,” bravely shared personal stories of failure and courage, of forgiveness, of broken families, and of not-always successful struggles to rebuild broken lives. The women performed crafted versions of their own life stories, the first-person narrative adding an element of unmistakable authenticity to the experience.

***The story is presented as complex.*** The view is 360 degrees, the stories are presented “wrinkles and all,” and the women don’t seek to come off as personally heroic. Many viewpoints, even *contradictory* viewpoints, are offered, and all sides are humanized.

***Personal responsibility is acknowledged.*** While there is certainly injustice present in the system and in the stories, the women themselves specifically admit to their personal responsibility. “Remember,” said one in the play, “I did the crime. I’m a convicted felon. I deserved to be there. I was where I had to be.” In the final piece in this quartet, titled “The Villain and the Victim,” the performer (Mona Lisa) told how, while she was incarcerated, her son was murdered. Allowed to leave the LCIW to attend the trial of her son’s killers, she told how she established contact with the perpetrators, and how, over the next years, she began to counsel and even befriend one of them, bringing a kind of redemptive grace to an impossible situation. In this work, credibility is established through honest testimony and multiple perspectives. As



The Graduates, actors in *Did You See Me?* From left: Carmen Demourelle, Sherral Kahey, Ernestine Allen, Carrie Emerson. Photo: Ausetua AmorAmenkum

there is no clear hero, there is also no clear villain. In this way, the performance opens up a space where personal and community healing can occur.

*Did You See Me?* was warm-hearted and intensely moving. It certainly raised consciousness, but in its intent to “give voice” (here more than a strategy, but rather at the core of the work), it not only provided a platform, but it also created a space where these women themselves can approach personal peace. The society that incarcerated them, represented by this audience, encounters their stories in a kind of stillness, a quiet place of healing. Co-director Ausetua Amor Amenjum was asked, “Why is this group telling their story?” “Two reasons,” she answered. “In the hope that the audience would connect to them in some way. We’re all human. In life, we stumble and fall... The second reason? To see the Godliness in them, because God exists in all of us.” The work was in no way evangelical, but there was space in the stories to see how we might do better as individuals and how we might improve as a society. *Did You See Me?* worked in that it achieved its intentions.

Each of these plays included aspects of the other—we are invited to feel for the men in *Angola 3*, and the women in *Did You See Me?* made us think about the counter-productivity of our prison system, but these two theatrical events could not have been more distinct in primary intention. We err if we view plays of the first sort by the criteria appropriate for the second, and vice versa. Knowing the intent of the artists as well as the intent of the community partners, and the balance between them, means everything as we begin to truly talk about the work. Other points on the spectrum of intention can include renewal, revitalization, reaffirmation, or outright direct agitation.

The power of intent is evident in other work we’ve seen as well.

The [Louisiana Bucket Brigade](#) employs art and performance as but one of several strategies in service to an activist environmental agenda. We met up with them in the town of Norco, the site of a well-known struggle for environmental justice in which citizen action proved that the toxicity of the air in their community was due to nearby refineries, and which led to a corporate buy-out of the entire neighborhood. Once named Diamond, the town was renamed for the New Orleans Refinery Corporation: Norco, Louisiana. The work they make that we might identify as performance is specifically designed not just to inform and provoke action, but to *be the provocative action*. Singing “Chemical Carols” to state legislators at Christmastime is a perfect example.

In a performance at the [Eastern Kentucky Social Club](#), housed in the former segregated black high school in Lynch, KY, Pam Holcomb presents her solo storytelling adaptation of “The Watch Dog,” from *Ghost Dogs of the South* by Randy Russell and Janet Barnett. In it, she achieved her intention to give voice to the bravery, the struggle, the resilience, and the beauty of the miner’s life. No direct villain in this piece, just a reaffirmation of dedication, hard work, and challenge in the usually unheard voice of a coal miner and his faithful dog.

Socially engaged artists, whether of the community or teamed with outside artist partners, create work in order to agitate or to calm, to encourage or to ridicule. But socially engaged artists, when they are most effective, create with clarity of social intention. Only when intent is defined can we begin to understand if the work *worked*.

## LENS TWO: WHAT SHOULD WE VALUE?

On these MicroFest journeys, common core values began to emerge, values that underpin creative work that most effectively transforms, revitalizes, and renews communities in distress. We've tried many terms; I propose five values—*agency*, *authenticity*, *artistry*, *audacity*, and *accuracy*—as well as thoughts on the complex interrelationships between them in order to further the conversation about what makes this work *work*.

### Agency

"If you are not at the table, you might be on the menu," says the wise and indomitable Carol Bebel, co-founder and executive director of New Orleans' [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#). Put another way by a coal miner in Appalachia, "If you don't tell your story, somebody else will, and you may not like how it comes out." In the act of collaborative creation, decisions will be made. By whom?

In the context of social change work, the term *agency* has broad application, referring to the authority, capacity, and power to take action; to define the desired outcomes; and to set the strategies. When the term is applied to socially-engaged art and artists in their workplaces—the studio, the stage, the streets, the empty lot, or the community center—*agency* is useful to gauge the degree of authority held by each partner in the creative work.

The concept of agency begins with being at the table and being part of the conversation, and progresses to making, or at least participating in, the decisions about how your people, your place, and your problems are to be presented. When a project involves both outside professional and community artists, how broadly is agency shared? How much ownership does the community hold? Who determines the desired outcome? And is there transparency in the transaction?

In the Cultural Mapping game, often used in the work of engaging community members with each other, participants arrange and rearrange themselves in myriad ways—age, length of time in town, place of birth, physical home, spiritual home, vegetarian or carnivore, political spectrum, etc.—each time discovering commonalities and differences with the cohort in the room. Imagine that, in the spirit of Cultural Mapping, we create a



Storyteller Pam Holcomb performing at the Eastern Kentucky Social Club.



continuum of agency. On one end, we'll place full community agency, where community members are in complete control of how their story is presented as well as all aspects of the project from motivation to outcome. On the other end, outside artists determine the intent, the story, all the means of production, and describe the desired outcomes.

### Mapping Community Agency

From our MicroFest USA experiences, at the community agency end we'd likely find New Orleans' Mardi Gras Indians, who have no outside partners in their glorious maintenance of longstanding community artistic tradition. Nearby would be the [Tribe One](#) kids from the east side of Knoxville, TN, who are facilitated by a skilled staff of community organizers but who are determining the content and look of the mural they are creating at the Tribe One headquarters. Next might come Detroit's [Matrix Theatre](#) teens. They too have skilled and trained directors/facilitators who lead them through extensive workshop experiences, but they write and perform their own pieces. The other end might be pretty sparsely populated, given MicroFest's purpose, but for the sake of this example, we'd place there a standard operating model of the American theater—the auteur model, in which a director or an artistic director is empowered to make all artistic decisions. Most of what we've seen in these journeys has been somewhere in between, representing a mix of community and “outside artist” agency. I might line up some of the examples cited in this article as follows going from greater to lesser community agency:



Such things are never as simple as a straight line or one location on it. That's the point: By taking on this exercise, we begin to talk meaningfully about the art.

Agency should not be assumed as equivalent to legitimacy, but when consciously shared, it enhances the social efficacy and artistic power of the work.

## Agency isn't always a good thing

In my own work with local story in communities in crisis or transition, I've felt that, while maximizing community agency can be a most important tool in bringing about positive change, it isn't always or necessarily a good thing. Community agency has been known to shore up the status quo. "That's how we are," or "That's the way I was brought up," can be the refrain. If that status quo includes manifest injustice, like structural racism, or unhealthy behaviors, such as child abuse, my outside agency may be required first to make space for further conversation, community sharing, and examination. If the situation is current and ongoing, rather than told in a story of a past era, it ethically requires referral to appropriate agencies. These moments are hard, but they can be opportunities for the very best of this work. Communities seeking change may find that outside forces are not the sole cause of their distress, that they can seize control of their own patterns of behavior. My role as the outside professional artist goes beyond acting as a passive catalytic agent. It is a delicate balance. I am in a constant and conscious negotiation around agency.

The potential for change is almost always enhanced when the folks who live the issue, and will benefit from the change, are included at every step. In those cases, the desired change begins well before any performance or exhibit, as the making of art is both an organizing strategy and an act of creation.

## Authenticity

To be authentic, according to Webster's, is to be "of undisputed origin, genuine, to be done in the traditional or original way, to be based on accurate fact." An authentic thing is the thing itself. Authenticity carries magnetic power. It is what draws us to museums to see the actual painting, or to that particular BBQ joint on a North Carolina back road for the real thing. We value authenticity in life and in art.

The formerly incarcerated women of "The Graduates" are authentic. The fact that Bennie Massey and Rut Melton are themselves veteran Kentucky coal miners adds immeasurably to the efficacy of their performances as such in Harlan County's Higher Ground plays. Those Detroit teens in *Detroit Dreaming* are their own subject; Detroit hip-hop artist Invincible is the real deal. Nick Slie sings from his Cajun heart in *Cry You One*. In each case, authenticity is both a core value and a true source of power in the work.

Authenticity also rests at the center of current conversations around gentrification, cultural tourism, and creative placemaking. In Detroit, [Invincible](#) railed against the rebranding of the rough and vibrant neighborhood known as the Cass Corridor to a new name, "Midtown," in a conscious attempt to strip away history in favor of development. In Knoxville's east side, Mickeeya Harrison, Executive Director of Tribe One, took us to Chandler's Deli on Magnolia Avenue, just down the street from their building. The fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and greens were amazing. "Oh yeah," said Mickeeya, "People come from all over the city for Chandler's soul food. It's real. But they don't stay long—they get their food and go back where they came from."



**Art & Local Government session, MicroFest: New Orleans.  
Photo: Michael Premo**

noted, “A lot of creative placemaking is an interventionist model. Our model is people intervening on their own behalf. Placemaking as a long-term process rather than a short-term intervention.” Later, at a panel asking “How does local government work with and support artists?” Asante Salaam from the [New Orleans Mayor’s Office of Cultural Economy](#) echoed that approach as she described creating a cultural inventory and mapping the city’s cultural economy as a basis for moving forward. “We’re tracking how many people are having music gigs, how many theater organizations, how many cultural organizations participate in tourism. There’s a lot of demystifying of what art and culture means.” This effort is about government recognizing the authentic.

Co-opting authenticity to add power to performance is nothing new. Infamously to our modern sensibilities, showman Buffalo Bill included *Sitting Bull* in his *Wild West Show* in 1884. While in some circumstances we praise this application as collaboration, we need always to be sensitive to issues of appropriation.

And authenticity can be faked. At the [PORTAL 31 Exhibition Coal Mine and Underground Mine Tour](#) in Lynch, KY, NET travelers experienced a memorable mash-up between extreme authenticity and absolute artificiality. The location was as real as can be: the portal to what was once an enormous “captive” United States Steel deep coal mining operation that employed thousands. We rode underground in a rattling mine car, just as those miners had; each time the car stopped, audio-animatronic figures in dioramas spoke, telling stories of the history of Kentucky coal mining. These figures are voiced by veteran miners and the mine tour is unquestionably informative. It memorably serves its educational and entertainment purposes and, unlike many such tours, involved local people in the making. Nevertheless, for the NET travelers the experience vibrated between the truly authentic and the grossly artificial, and underscored the value of authenticity.

In New Orleans, at the Art and Community Development session, Stephanie McKee described the Bywater neighborhood, where an influx of new people is changing the character of the place, perhaps for the better. “At one time you couldn’t pay anyone to live here. Now there are restaurants, galleries.” Caron Atlas, who co-directs NOCD-NY, the Naturally Occurring Cultural District Working Group, spoke of the concept of Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts as a way to recognize and build around the cultural assets already in the community. She

When honored and supported, rather than faked, co-opted or commodified, authenticity clearly carries power. True authenticity is a value that underpins potent socially engaged art and effective creative placemaking.

## Artistry

Central to the success of any artistic endeavor is artistry itself. But in art with social intentions, what constitutes good and effective art? When we apply values of agency and authenticity, how must we adjust our definitions of artistry?

Quality in art is culturally and stylistically specific. That's as true about anything we've seen on the streets or in the neighborhoods on these MicroFest adventures as it is about classical music or more conventional theater. If I bring no previous knowledge of hip-hop,

what can I make of Detroit's [Invincible](#), who astonished the NET crowd with her artistry in that form? If I've never paid attention to gospel, or have no background in Kentucky roots music, how do I listen to the Mt. Sinai Spirituals, the men who sang for us in Lynch, KY? And if I'm new to New Orleans and to Mardi Gras tradition, the color and wild pageantry of a Krewe can seem merely random, even offensive. (In fact, the Krewe du Vieux Parade at the start of Mardi Gras is designed to be offensive.) Social engagement is about broadening horizons, supporting culturally and place-specific traditions *and* letting new influences in, including aesthetic influences.

This can't be taken as a carte blanche. In every form there are the skilled and

## A Caveat

Recently when working at the large-scale community performance project Swamp Gravy in Colquitt, Georgia, the arts council there housed me in a grain bin. A very nice apartment built inside something like a silo. Decades ago, when a small group of us initiated the conversations between disparate ensembles that led to the creation of NET, we had to admit that, in almost every case, the genesis of our ensembles was in reaction to work we didn't like: the motivation to build an ensemble was to create ways to do it better. As each ensemble defines itself by its "distinctive body of work and practices," it can be a struggle to take in and appreciate those of others. We create silos of style, and we live in them with our ensemble cohorts. Helping us all to value the voices and styles of others while encouraging each distinctive individual and collective voice may be NET's great accomplishment.

the unskilled, work by students, work by masters, work that succeeds in its intention, and work that falls short. When approaching unfamiliar work, it's best to begin with an open mind, seek broader perspective from those who live and work in those modalities, and to pay close attention. Our impressions always remain subjective, but we can expand our appreciations.

In art with social intention, artistry can't be considered independent of other operating values such as agency and authenticity. As a professional artist engaging with community, it's a constant and ongoing negotiation to share agency, to be willing to learn from the community, and in so doing shift and expand my sense of artistry.

In New Orleans, Latino immigrant day laborers and local African-American workers dedicated to rebuilding their communities post-Katrina competed with each other for jobs; later, some of them collaborated on a piece built from shared experience. Alison De La Cruz, Los Angeles based multi-disciplinary artist, producer, arts educator, and cultural organizer, spoke feelingly of the experience of seeing them perform immediate, unadorned, yet potent excerpts from their play. She recounts:



**Congreso de Jornaleros and Stand With Dignity members perform Mr. Moneybags. Photo: Michael Premo**

It was clear to me in watching their performance, that these worker-organizers were, in fact, theater artists. I reflected back to them how important their work was for me (and I think my colleagues in NET) to see, because it epitomized the principles of ensemble theater making that I value: respect, inclusion, and a clear ensemble built over time with a set of practices and a distinct body of work. I noticed the clear pictures their bodies made in moments of frozen images and their use of spatial relationships. I reflected back their use of humor as a bridge to build common understanding. Most importantly, I was struck by this thought: while some colleagues train for many years and spend thousands of dollars to discover ways to evoke truth and discover the high stakes within their work, these worker-organizer-actors created plays from the high stakes of life. The fear of being in the spotlight is not just about stage fright, but about the reality that when some of these worker-organizer-actors tell their truth, it has real world consequences. The truth can mean violence, detention, deportation and, in those extreme instances, death. It has consequences on the lives of not only these worker/artists, but perhaps even some of the children who were in the room.

Finding the balance between artistry and agency, and between artistry and authenticity, is a personal journey for all of us involved in this work and a conversation we need to continue.

## Audacity

Aristotle in the *POETICS* called it “spectacle,” and wrote of the awe we feel when we see something we’ve never seen before. These days, when we think “spectacular” we picture something huge and glitzy: a Las Vegas Revue, *Spiderman* on Broadway, a Super Bowl half-time show, or the latest Cirque du Soleil. In socially engaged work, the word “audacious” seems more apt. Audacity refers to a willingness to take surprising or bold risks.

Performing from a boat on a bayou, or in a burned-out house in Detroit, working closely with incarcerated women for decades, gathering an enormous cast across the battle lines of bloody Harlan, provoking legislators and lobbyists with “Chemical Carols” at Christmas—these are all examples of audacity. Ensembles dedicated to working in some of the hardest places in America with the most unlikely of partners are audacious. Risk taking happens so often in this work that it is clearly a value, serving as a source of power and effectiveness in the work.

Audacity, the willingness to take bold or significant risk, can extend to the story itself. In the early days of Kentucky’s Higher Ground project, we understood that in publicly building community to address the epidemic of prescription drug abuse, we would be upsetting moneyed, powerful interests, both criminal and official. There were a few incidents, which might have been coincidental, but the producers advised that we travel only in pairs, and at night only as needed. One of the Swamp Gravy plays I directed in southwest Georgia told the story of a white man so in love with a black woman that when she died, he had her interred in his family plot in a white cemetery. The black cast members raised rightful concerns. Their community would have to deal with the consequences of that telling, even today, and they were willing to take that on only if the story were factually true.

Audacity is risk. In work dedicated to social change, this is one area where the ethical admonition “First, do no harm” comes into play.

## Accuracy

“It drove me crazy,” said one New Orleans resident who had lived through what outsiders call Katrina, but what many New Orleanians term “the Levee Break” or, more tellingly, “the Federal Flood.” “There was this play I saw a few years ago about Katrina, and it had people waiting for rescue on their roof. In the rain. I was there. It wasn’t raining. And to suggest that it was raining is to suggest it was the storm and not the failure of the levees that caused this mess. I had to leave.” Others, including the artists who created the play, could see the metaphor of the rain as a valid artistic choice.

Artists process stories in uncountable ways, using image, movement, sound, song, slapstick, and more. We exaggerate, we poke fun, we combine characters or collapse time. Art is generally viewed as fiction. But when we take on social issues, we step into the realm of nonfiction. Our society does not readily give artists credibility in terms of facts, figures, or information, even though many socially engaged artists are experts in the issues they

explore. For this reason, it's incumbent upon socially engaged artists to be as accurate as possible in every case where accuracy is called for, and to be conscious of potential consequences when we elect not to be accurate. People in the audience will personally know the stories being shared. Factual misinformation can have the audience actively denying the value of the entire piece, making the work *not* work. Whether the intention of the work is to raise consciousness around an issue, or to provide a 360-degree examination of a community, accuracy is a value in this work.

These five values—*agency, authenticity, artistry, audacity, and accuracy*—guide the work and help to release art's potential power. Understanding these is a start in looking rigorously at work that strives for meaningful and effective social engagement. These elements are as old as Athens. We've seen each of them at work in the work that *works*.

### LENS THREE: WHAT'S THE LANGUAGE OF ENGAGEMENT?

Knowing about the guiding intelligence behind a work tells us key things about the circumstances in which it came into being and the creative strategies employed within it. The way a work's creators are identified—whether that work is by, with, in, or about — “tells us what role the place and people have in the creation of an aesthetic,” according to Mark Valdez, NET's executive director. While not a measure of validity or of subjective quality, these prepositions reflect the degree of social engagement and are another indicator of relative agency. Each of these choices may represent a strategy for making work that works.

#### By

She became fierce before our eyes. In her lecture/demonstration on Mardi Gras Indians, Cherice Harrison-Nelson, aka Big Queen Reesie of the Guardians of the Flame, made abundantly clear the transformative power of cultural tradition controlled, perpetuated, and performed completely *by* a cultural group. As she donned her magnificent regalia, explaining with each piece the traditions and



**Cherice Harrison-Nelson, aka Big Queen Reesie of the Guardians of the Flame. Photo: Michael Premo**

secrets of the Mardi Gras Indians, how each performer has a specific role—the Spy, the Wild Man, the Medicine Man, the Chief, and his Queen—her presence changed, filling the room with righteous fire. The centuries-old African-American tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians honors and remembers the native peoples who shielded and protected escaped slaves, even as it bonds a community in spirits of creativity, self-

determination, family, and tradition. The content is overtly political, indeed the parades themselves speak to resistance, as it was long a forbidden practice. Big Queen Reesie described herself as “an indigenous cultural artist.” She had full agency, complete authenticity, and mastery of artistry unique to her place and people.

During the MicroFest cycle, we encountered numerous examples of people rising up to own their stories as a means toward community empowerment. The bluegrass band in Harlan County, the kids involved in [Detroit Summer](#), the Latino day laborers of the [Congreso de Jornaleros](#) in NOLA could all be described in the words of Big Queen Reesie as “indigenous cultural artists.” In each case, the resulting art was *by* the community.

## With

Community engagement projects are built around the preposition “with.” An ensemble, institution, or individual artist works *with* a community. “With” community engagement projects are delicate to negotiate; they require careful listening and mutual respect in all directions.

*Did You See Me?* was a *with* project. The women who comprise “The Graduates” benefitted from the long-term involvement and care of co-directors Ausetua Amor Amenkum and Kathy Randels, trained artists who helped give form, focus, and frame to the piece. Every *Higher Ground* incarnation, initiated by individuals at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, has turned to outside artists (Linda Parris-Bailey, Robert Martin, Jo Carson, and me) to work *with* the community to craft their stories to final productions.

Most “with” pieces that engage non-artists might not exist without the presence of the professional artists. The inmates of the Louisiana Correctional Institution for Women would not likely have sculpted their stories on their own without the long-term involvement of their professional co-directors. The outsider can provide useful perspective not immediately apparent to the community itself; the very act of working with outsiders as artists and facilitators can make the community vulnerable to itself, opening a space that permits fresh self-examination for all involved.

## Take it to the Street

Of the Mardi Gras Indians, Kiyoko McRae, Managing Director of Junebug Productions, said:

It is a practice that can't be bought, sold or co-opted (try as some may). It's a practice and performance you can't put a price tag on. It relies on a delicate ecosystem of people who understand its importance. ... Its existence is known through word of mouth.... (it) does not depend on a paying customer or audience. It's radical in that the practice takes ownership of the streets.... It is also a reminder of the power of collective expression in sending strong messages through art and culture which can be a challenge to the establishment and/or publicly states what a community values as important.

McRae was quoted in a HowlRound article “[Take It to the Street: Parading and Theater Making in New Orleans](#)” by playwright Lisa D'Amour.



## In

There are occasions when community engagement primarily takes the form of location. In site-specific production, art is made in places that contribute atmosphere, meaning, or history to the piece. A piece about the bayou performed on the bayou gains power. But using community spaces, being in public streets, or in a familiar space unexpectedly employed may be a conscious way to create a safe space to experience difficult work. It can also be the opposite, and represent a conscious selection of an uncomfortable space chosen to enhance discomfort. [The Hinterlands](#) performed their metaphoric exploration of a lost America through the lost art of vaudeville in *Boom Town, Bust Town, Bangtown!* in the beleaguered Detroit Banglatown neighborhood. In this site-specific work, the audience moved from site to site on a residential street, sometimes led by a colorfully painted front-end loader. One sequence, performed on a stage constructed in the back of a burned-out hulk of what had once been the home of a working family, made vivid the connections. The venue increased discomfort.

Making work “in” a community should not be confused with making work “with” a community. When the community is made to feel exposed, or is not welcomed or included in the process of the performance taking place in or near their home, site-specific work can prove counter-productive, even harmful to community engagement.

## About

Most socially concerned work in American theater consists of plays *about* a particular issue. Beyond making social commentary, these often involve extensive research and engagement with activists, experts, and others involved with the given issue, and the interactions include interviews, consultations, audience talk-backs, panels, and referrals, but creative agency is held by the artistic team rather than by the community.

Parnell Herbert’s *Angola 3* is an admirable example of an *about* play, as is *Speed Killed My Cousin* by Linda Parris Bailey, directed by Andrea Assaf and performed by Carpetbag Theater in Knoxville, TN as part of MicroFest: Appalachia. *Speed Killed My Cousin* is a heartfelt, meaningful, and well-produced play about the hidden costs of military service borne by returning warriors, particularly Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the wrenching effect on generations of one African American family. Although this play is *about* a particular issue and geared for touring to many communities and audiences, its development in collaboration with local organizations serving veterans with PTSD influenced these agencies’ understanding of the role of art to heighten awareness, educate, and engage people in dialogue about the issues with the Knoxville community.

*By, with, in, and about*—these prepositions provide another lens to see and to begin talking about place-based, socially engaged arts and culture.

## CONCLUSION

The Network of Ensemble Theaters is onto something. MicroFest USA in Detroit, Appalachia, and New Orleans spotlighted dozens of projects and scores of artists and their community partners employing art toward community revitalization, renewal, and reaffirmation, as well as social change. In each place, theater ensembles are leading the way. MicroFest is serving to deepen the conversation, and in so doing, helping to advance the forms of socially engaged theater and other artistic disciplines with greater understanding of what the work looks like, the factors and rigor it takes to make it work, and how to look at the efficacy of such work that straddles artistic and social intent. The lenses of intention, values, and language may prove useful. This quest doesn't stop at making a better play—this is about building a better world.

Engaging with community begins with a simple act. After seeing *Mr. Moneybags*, the play written and developed collaboratively with members of two labor organizations once in conflict, the African American Stand with Dignity and the Latino Congreso de Jornaleros (Congress of Day Laborers), Alison De La Cruz wrote:

I was reminded that the biggest gift we can give someone else is the gift of listening. Not rushing to respond, but to actively listen and only listen to their story. ... I was reminded and humbled that as ensemble artists, we can be great listeners, especially when we pay attention to the voices in the room (in our communities) that are often silent or absent.

When moved, we artists respond, sometimes by simply listening and appreciating cultural expression as it already exists, and sometimes, in the words of Arlene Goldbard, by embracing "the sacred trust of returning a community's own stories to its members in a form they can use."

How do we know when it's in a useful form? What makes the work *work*? Clarity of intention, conscious application of values, and care in the language we employ to describe the work will go some distance in moving that conversation forward. We need to hold ourselves and each other accountable. The Network of Ensemble Theaters is onto something.



Director, writer, and actor **Gerard Stropnicky** is a founding member emeritus of Bloomsburg Theater Ensemble (BTE), co-founder of the Network of Ensemble Theaters, and the 2010 United States Artists Lowe Fellow. He recently wrote and directed *Flood Stories, Too*, a healing piece about the community response to the devastating 2011 Lee Flood, which left 25 percent of the houses in Columbia County, PA damaged, condemned or simply gone. The musical play was produced in collaboration with BTE, Bloomsburg University, the Bloomsburg Bicentennial Choir, and the people of the region. It featured a cast of 70, ranging in age from six to none-of-your-business. Currently he is writing and directing another large-scale community story play, *Tioga/Changes*, in Wellsboro, PA. Tioga County is the epicenter of Pennsylvania's Marcellus shale "fracking" boom. His other "with" projects, many with playwright Jo Carson, have included *Swamp Gravy* in Colquitt, GA; *Headwaters* in Satee-Nacoochee, GA; and *Higher Ground* in Harlan County, KY.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Thought-provoking [essays](#) about the previous Network of Ensemble Theaters' MicroFests have been written by Eddie B. Allen, Caron Atlas, Mark W. Kidd, and Michael Premo. My previous piece in this series, "[A Community of Practice: The Network of Ensemble Theaters Learning in Place](#)," is an overview of the whirlwind MicroFest experiences in Detroit and Appalachia (Knoxville, TN and Harlan County, KY).

<sup>2</sup> Resurrection After Exoneration (RAE) is a support organization for the formerly incarcerated founded by John Thompson, who spent 26 years on Louisiana's Death Row for a crime he did not commit. While there, he faced six execution dates. Once released, John became the subject of the book *Killing Time* by John Hollway and Ronald M. Gauthier. He founded RAE, headquartered in a home repurposed as a community center, where we met several other men, all former Death Row inhabitants, all now freed on new evidence through the efforts of organizations such as the [Innocence Project](#).