

# A Community of Practice: NET Learning in Place

by Gerard Stropnick



*“People need to get pretty desperate to arrive at the conclusion that a play might solve their problem.” – Jo Carson*

High on Black Mountain, on a rural winding border road between southeast Kentucky and southwest Virginia, guided by veteran coal-miners-turned-environmental-activists, we peered into a dense fog, attempting to see first-hand the harsh reality of mountain top removal. It was hopeless. We couldn't see a blessed thing that morning; the fog was a stubborn white blindfold. We were reduced to passing around an iPhone with a photo previously taken from that spot. That moment may be a fitting metaphor for the Network of Ensemble Theaters' MicroFest USA—when reality proves too foggy to see, we turn to art. Selected representation allows us to comprehend what otherwise eludes.



**Mountain top removal, Virginia side of Black Mountain. Photo: Gerard Stropnick, 2005.**

Energized forays into Detroit and Appalachia (Knoxville TN/Harlan County KY)—among America's hardest, more fascinating places—have brought leaders of the American Ensemble Movement face-to-face with the unseen, the ignored, the forgotten. On the streets of

Detroit, the eastside neighborhoods of Knoxville, and the mountain hollows of Harlan County, sometimes we can see what's in front of us, sometimes we miss it in the fog of complexity (or just the fog of the fog). On these journeys, we've met memorable, brave, and skilled people. We've encountered remarkable work that helps bring focus and clarity.

We're only halfway home. In January we're off to New Orleans for another Magical Mystery Tour in a city still recovering from the devastation of the levee break that followed Hurricane Katrina in 2005. NET's MicroFest USA wraps up in June in Honolulu, which some might envision as a welcome and deserved opportunity for Mai Tais and long hours on the beach. That misconception is the point. Even there we'll peer beneath the tourist veneer to witness another Hawai'i. (I'm still hoping for at least one Mai Tai and one beach sunset.) This four-stop odyssey focuses squarely on art for social change.

## WHY NET AND “SOCIAL CHANGE”?

The very idea of applying art for social purpose can make some truly wonderful theater artists run screaming from the room. In an old *New Yorker* cartoon, an actor in a toga points his spear at a surprised couple in aisle seats and demands, “What will YOU do to save Antigone?” Reductive, no doubt—the depth and breadth within contemporary art for social change is never so simple and rarely so inept—but we get the point.

Terrific artists dismiss socially engaged work for a wide range of reasons. It is naïve: theater couldn’t possibly make a meaningful difference. It isn’t much fun. Agitprop can’t be trusted. It seems sometimes like an attempt to seek personal value by appropriating the pain of others. I hope for my art to serve as an escape from real-world concern. Others humbly wonder when they could possibly have a full enough understanding to take on such projects. Sometimes the stated desire to create the timeless seems in opposition to dealing with the immediate. Some artists, passionately devoted to an aesthetic, to a particular training, to the intrinsic beauty and power of the form, are among my personal heroes and inspirations. These concerns and others are often personal, sincere, and valid. Social engagement need not be an essential ingredient for great work.

### Personal Sidebar: Full Disclosure

I can confess to being artistically divided, but not to being a dispassionate observer. Classically trained by Alvina Krause and devoted for decades at Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble to placing ensemble in service to the great canon of dramatic literature, I’ve also spent a significant part of my life directing, writing, or devising work for social change in and with communities, mostly in Appalachia and the deep South. For many of those projects, my creative partner was playwright Jo Carson. Her writing, in scores of community plays and in her books *Spider Speculations: A Physics and Biophysics of Storytelling* and *Liars, Thieves and Other Sinners on the Bench*, both published by Theater Communications Group, helped define the field. In the interest of full disclosure, I’m a proud five-year veteran of Harlan’s HIGHER GROUND project. As part of the founding team that brought HIGHER GROUND to life, I directed the first edition, which was written by Jo Carson. I directed and, with Jo, co-wrote the second, HIGHER GROUND: PLAYING WITH FIRE. I’m currently on my 20<sup>th</sup> community collaboration, working at the epicenter of the Marcellus Shale Gas (i.e. “Fracking”) Boom in Tioga County, PA. I employ the power of theater to contribute to change in people and communities; but I completely understand the impulse to run screaming from the room.

On the other hand, a significant subset of the 161 ensembles that comprise NET live and breathe in the space opened by the quest for community understanding and citizen action. Among many others around the country, ArtSpot Productions, Bond Street Theatre, Carpetbag Theatre Company,

Cornerstone Theater Company, HartBeat Ensemble, Irondale Ensemble Project, Junebug Productions, Littlelobe, Los Angeles Poverty Department, Mondo Bizarro, M.U.G.A.B.E.E., Pangea, Roadside Theatre, San Francisco Mime Troupe, Sojourn Theatre, Strike Anywhere, and Teatro Americano come to mind. Raising consciousness, defining community, fighting injustice, building agreement, and inciting action are central motivations for their work.

A number of ensembles have included this work as part of their practice by virtue of living and working in one place over time. The concerns of that place become their own, and find expression through each ensemble's distinctive voice. Dell'Arte International in California employed commedia to explore conflicts between the timber industry and environmentalists. Pennsylvania's Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble has made several place plays, including *HARD COAL*, *LETTERS TO THE EDITOR*, *GRAVITY HILL (or whatever...)* and *FLOOD STORIES*. Touchstone Theatre in Bethlehem, PA collaborated with Cornerstone on *STEELBOUND*, exploring the social repercussions of Bethlehem Steel's bankruptcy; later Touchstone created an enormous city-wide parade production of *DON QUIXOTE*, in which, among other things, the fabled knight battled city council for library funding. Ensembles as diverse as Double Edge in Massachusetts, within their devotion to training and collaborative creation, and San Francisco's Theatre of Yugen, in their dedication to classical Japanese theater forms of Noh and Kyugen, have built pieces around contemporary social concern. Something is happening in the ensemble world. It may not be everyone's journey, but as Linda Lohman put it, "Attention must be paid."

### **WE'RE PAYING ATTENTION. WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?**

These carefully curated journeys are designed to introduce ensemble theater-makers to local activists and often unsung artists wholly engaged in employing art toward community transformation. The forays are just enough to provide some context for the performances we see together. The MicroFest weekends are opportunities to learn, reflect, get ticked-off, get inspired, and perhaps get confused all over again. The attempt is audacious and... not a little insane.

We scratch the surface. We spend brief hours in Detroit neighborhoods, amid a patchwork of burned-out or abandoned homes on too many residential blocks of a once great industrial city. We note the barbed wire and large loud dogs protecting valiant families struggling to remain. We ride our school bus past shuttered auto plants. In Kentucky and Tennessee we roll past signs and signals of persistent Appalachian poverty, of racial and economic disparity. We engage as much as possible, in order to avoid the

inevitable sense of being disaster tourists, rubbernecking one national tragedy after another. Still, our eyes are forced open.



**A Detroit street. Photo: Gerard Stropnick, 2012.**

An inherent risk of hasty travel is that we glimpse only what confirms our pre-journey bias. To be open to surprise, to observe contradiction, to perceive the pattern, to engage in further research, requires intense personal effort. If we believe that because we've

been there and spoken to a few people, we now fully understand, we compound the problem. We battle that tendency – this is a knowledgeable crowd. Many of us depart shaken, eager to learn more. To be there is better than *not* to be there. We are, if briefly and belatedly, beginning to pay attention.

The art encounters—performances, stories, raps and rhymes, murals, and sculptures—guided by the selective and creative hands of artists, offer needed clarity and focus. Even to the true-believers, we wonder if we're fooling ourselves; art and performance can seem to be pretty weak tea in the face of overwhelming social and economic challenges. Yet, as these experiences accumulate, we can't help but confirm artists as necessary contributors to the complex and interwoven processes of revitalization, renewal, and reconnection. As Jo Carson suggested, a play (or any work of art) will not in itself "solve their problem." But art can provide a view through the fog. Jo devoted most of her creative life to this work of framing. She embraced its healing power, but completely understood its limits.

In the mathematical construct, art may be *necessary*, but it is not *sufficient*. We trust artists to tell the truth, at least as they passionately perceive it, and each ecology takes it from there.

Hip Hop artist and social justice activist [Invincible](#) is nothing if not a truth teller. Her lyrics, rhymes, and powerful presence illuminated the inside of a

wide range of Detroit experience, from gender identity to gentrification. With producer and beatmaker Waajeed and visual artist Wesley Taylor, she has established Complex Movements and together they expand the edges of Hip Hop.

Also in Detroit, teens with the [Matrix Theatre](#), frustrated by having their beleaguered home city feared and disrespected, devised an empowering theater piece of counter-stories of daily life and kindness in the Motor City.

Skilled Appalachian storyteller [Pam Holcomb](#), performing at the Eastern Kentucky Social Club, formerly Lynch KY's segregated black high school, crafted a story of a coal miner's dog that captures the inherent danger of a miner's life.



Scene from **HIGHER GROUND 3: Talking Dirt**

After a mash-up performance of scenes from all three previous HIGHER GROUND plays, Bennie Massey, a cast member, veteran underground coal miner, and Lynch community leader, reflected on what that

story performance has meant to Harlan County. “We brought the whole county together,” said Massey. “Through these plays we’ve made a connection in the whole county. Everybody’s got the same problems. We are just a big family here... It’s been a blessing to the county and to everybody.” In another place, that remark might read as fairly inconsequential: theater by definition brings people together. But this is “Bloody Harlan,” a place where until recently exploitive corporate self-interest intentionally divided already geographically isolated constituencies into coal camps and company towns, an anti-union and profit-protecting set of policies brutally enforced in living memory with guard towers, barbed wire, and automatic weapons. The resulting scar tissue of suspicion continues to stymie cooperative action. Massey speaks of a profound community transformation that permitted and encouraged the community to face its very real problems together, first through art and story, and then through cooperative action.

Some of what we experience is not ensemble; some is not even theater. Detroit's [Alley Project](#) turns urban spray paint graffiti on its head as a neighborhood actually invites graffiti artists to decorate its garage doors. Sculptures dot Detroit's [North End Community Garden](#). At [Portal 31](#), a no longer active coalmine in Lynch KY, we ride a mine car as animatronic figures, voiced by men we'll have lunch with, provide historical context for the history of deep mining.

What connects each event or installation is the story of how it was assembled, how each involved local voice in planning, or local hands in creation and sustenance. Each stop offers a model of artists engaging community.

The realm of art is not essentially informative. As Carlton Turner, executive director of [Alternate ROOTS](#) said at the Knoxville MicroFest plenary session on cross-sector collaboration, "This is about the spiritual, intellectual, cultural aspects of a people. Art is an expression of that. Culture is an equalizer. It is what connects humans." Those connections exert pulls beyond the intellectual; they appeal to our hearts, our spirits, the centers of our beings. Music and rhythm, image, story and poetry exert pressures that pry open space for conversation.

Once freed of the for-profit constructs of the entertainment complex, art and performance can no longer be dismissed as "weak tea." Well served, art stretches the envelope. "Many don't recognize this, but in the Civil Rights Movement, both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were part of a strategy," continued Turner. "By having someone really radical and having someone who is radical, but not as radical, they moved the center [of the conversation]. On his own, Martin Luther King would have been radical, but with Malcolm X in the conversation, Dr. King seemed less so. Artists can be the radical in that equation, pulling conversation so out of shape that when it snaps back, it is not what it was."

This is powerful stuff. A play (or any work of art) can't help but provide a jolt of validation, in that the place, the people, and their issues are perceived as worthy of a spotlight, even if their neighbors are the only ones watching. Art can heal, but it can also harm. We must ask hard questions: What are we validating? Do we know what we're talking about? Are we listening carefully enough? What conversations are we advancing? Power carries responsibility.

Witnessing sustained distress forces us from our comfort zone in almost every way. We're challenged emotionally as we encounter—briefly but vividly—hardship, poverty, disparity, and injustice. Intellectually, we confront concerns likely outside our usual ken, including the relationship of

the for-profit prison industry with the justice system, youth development, city planning, mountaintop removal, food justice, urban gentrification, rural neglect, cultural organizing, and cross-sector collaborations. Physically there are long rides on vans or school busses, dormitories, shower lines, exhausting days. Each place introduces artists and community members who are innovating ways to invite change; we're inspired by their strength, perseverance, wisdom and courage. It's a lot to fit on a plate. As theater-makers, we're used to speaking out. This much listening makes us uncomfortable: unaccustomed to the quiet of witness, and we are disquieted.



Partaking in Detroit SOUP, a micro-granting program. Photos: Pam Korza, 2012



The remarkable sojourners along for the journey are as much part of the rich MicroFest USA experience as anything we see. Diverse in every way but one, this group looks like America in terms of geography, race, gender, age, and even (given the largely shared interest in social engagement) aesthetic taste. The exception in their diversity is experience; fellow travelers on this complex road trip include some of the leading lights in this movement. The NET result is that any conversation can instantly become insightful, even revelatory. All this has been assembled with the leadership and fieldwork of NET staff: Event Coordinator Ashley Sparks, Managing Director Alisha Tonsic, and Executive Director Mark Valdez.

### WHAT NEXT?

On our last night in Appalachia, the intensity of the journey reached an inevitably raucous crescendo. In a small room at Pine Mountain Settlement School, a late-night moonshine-fueled musical blowout sent the sounds of banjo, fiddle, guitar, and wild not-always-on-key singing drifting out across the eastern Kentucky coalfields. We took a deep inhale together, laughed,

sang and sometimes danced. This, too, is part of the journey and, in the long run, that rough music might be what reverberates over time.

These remarkable artists, sharing difficult experience and common interest, are bonding, establishing trust, building networks, and forging connections. The artists and communities we visit are drawn into this web, influencing and being influenced in the same moment. We feel the vibrations, watch a ripple effect. In years to come the experiences of these NET MicroFests, like many an insane quest that came before, might just be perceived as somehow mythic.

On the morning of the last Sunday in Detroit, Hip Hop wonder Invincible handed out a 2006 paper on the “Lifecycle of Emergence” by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, which summarizes the [Berkana Institute](#) investigations into how change occurs in nature, and how those lessons might apply to social change. What makes a flock of birds or a school of fish suddenly change direction? What seemingly unconnected individual actions led to the end of the Soviet empire or the fall of the Berlin Wall? According to this paper, “The world doesn’t change one person at a time. It changes as networks and relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and a vision of what’s possible.” Invincible talked of *networks*

### Fellow MicroFest Travelers

Umoja Abdul-Ahad • Sari Adelson • Buzz Alexander • Eddie Allen, Jr. • Oya Amanski • Gary Anderson • Ryan Anderson • Andrea Assaf • Caron Atlas • Sherrine Azab • Daniel Banks • Aaron Barndollar • Phillip Barnhart • Mitch Barrett • Liza Bielby • Monica Blaire • Libby Blume • Trupania Bonner • William Bowling • Mikel Bresee • India Burton • Megan Carney • Beth Carol-Hunley • Dakari Carter • Khann Chov • Jonathan Clark • Whitney Coe • Sherith Colverson • David Cooke • Nick Cornett • Kevin Crider • Laura Crommelin • Sage Crump • Nic Custer • Lauri Dahl • Lisa D’Amour • Bennie Dale Coleman • Hasan Davis • Vince DeGeorge • Allison De la Cruz • Kathie deNobriga • Paula Donnelly • Jean Paul Duvall • Jela Ellefson • Kathi E. B. Ellis • Iyatunde Folayan • Gené Fouché • Jamie Gahlon • Nicole Garneau • Robert Gipe • Matthew Glassman • Moses Goods • Julie Graham • Denis Griesmer • Rachel Grossman • Jennie Hahn • Jamie Hale • Justin Hale • Stacy Hale • Mike Han • Sabrina Hamilton • dream hampton • Tom Hansell • Mickeeya Harrison • Faith Helma • Sigal Hemy • Ryan Hill • Pam Holcomb • Jake Hooker • Erik Howard • Noah Hughes • Invincible • Tad Janes • Judi Jennings • Kelle Jolly • Amy Kaheri • Njia Kai • Mark Kidd • Dan Kinkead • Pam Korza • Philip Laurie • Jessica Lefkow • Bob Leonard • Shawn Lindsey • Lisa Luevanos • Julie Lichtenberg • Mary Mar • Pegi Marshall-Amundsen • Robert Martin • Bennie Massey • Vijay Mathew • Laurie McCants • Kiyoko McCrae • Rutland Melton • Moose Morgan • Andrew Morton • Lisa Q Mount • Ryan Myers-Johnson • Rebecca Mwase • Barbara Neri • Richard Newman • Theresa Osborne • Jeremy Paul • Linda Parris-Bailey • Tawana Petty • Susan Pope • Lydia Pope • Michael Premo • Kali Quinn • Haleem Rasul • Steven Renderos • Marcus Renner • Marquez Rhyne • Scarlet Rivera • Pam Roberts • Michael Robertson • Sean Rodriguez • Mary Roeder • Michael Rohd • Robert Rorrer • Nicholette Routhier • Andrea Scobie • Elana Scopa • Kadiri Sennifer • Yusef Shakur • Lisa Shattuck • Frannie Shepard-Bates • Nick Slie • Ashley Sparks • Rick Sperling • Gerard Stropnick • Quita Sullivan • Cory Tamler • Wesley Taylor • Terry Thomas • Joe Tolbert • Alisha Tonsic • Cristal Truscott • Carlton Turner • Mark Valdez • Waajeed • Cora Walters • Jonathan Walters • Maren Ward • MK Wegman • Chancellor Williams • Jessica Brooke Williams • Benjamin Williams • Sue Wood • Shannon Wooley • Eleni Zaharopoulos • Liza Zenni



leading to *communities of practice*, out of which suddenly and surprisingly emerge *systems of influence* that produce sustained change. The network that is NET has convened a community of practice, perhaps contributing to a system of influence, creating the conditions for change. We may be onto something. See you in New Orleans.



Director, writer, and actor **Gerard Stropnicki** is a founding member of Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, co-founder of the Network of Ensemble Theaters and the 2010 United States Artists Lowe Fellow. In rural communities such as Harlan KY, Sautee-Nacoochee GA, and Colquitt GA, as well as in Bloomsburg, he creates and directs large-scale original site-specific productions featuring diverse community casts using local story to celebrate, challenge, and address intractable issues. Playwright Jo Carson was a frequent collaborator. He is also a 2010 Grandin Award winner (named for Dr. Temple Grandin) for his service to the autism community.

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