

YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA



Alumni Transforming Communities
Sustainable Staging **A Talent for Change**

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Report from the Institute for Music Theatre

Throughout its history, Yale School of Drama has graduated artists and administrators who see theatre as a means of community growth, particularly when the artistic process is motivated by a concern for their neighborhood and the people who live there. Many of these artists are reaching out locally. From coast to coast, they can be found committing their talents and skills — honed and refined during their three years spent between York and Park Streets — to communities in need of artistic outlets to stimulate a sense of themselves and their world.

PLAYING THE NEIGHBORHOOD:

YSD Alumni Use Theatre to Transform Communities

BY RYAN DAVIS '11 AND MATT CORNISH '09

In the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City, **Carol Ochs '84** runs the 52nd Street Project, introducing youngsters to the creative exuberance and sense of accomplishment that comes with writing for the stage. **David Feiner '95**, at the Albany Park Theater Project on the northwest side of Chicago, works with young artists to stage vibrant productions that address teenagers' lives as immigrant and working-class Americans. In the diverse metropolis of Los Angeles, **Juliette Carrillo '91**, **Shay Wafer '89**, and **Geoff Korf '91** have spent years working with Cornerstone Theater, weaving theatrical tapestries of civic exchange and shared understanding.

These alumni devote themselves to fostering the artistic expression of people who might otherwise never make theatre, and to eliciting and staging personal stories that capture the hardships and dreams of marginalized American communities. The result is mutual service: these communities find a platform for self-expression, and the theatre institution itself discovers unknown aesthetic traditions as well as the urgency and resonance of fresh ideas.

Albany Park Theater Project Chicago



52nd Street Project New York



Cornerstone Theater Company Los Angeles



(Clockwise from top) Albany Park Theatre Project's production of God's Work, photo courtesy of Albany Park Theatre Project. Cornerstone Theater's production of Touch the Water, photo by John Luker. Carol Ochs '84 and the children of The 52nd Street Project at the Block Island Writing Retreat. Photo courtesy of The 52nd Street Project.

A Creative Space...

52nd Street Project

With its brightly colored posters, locker-sized cubbyholes, and kitchen in familial disarray, the Clubhouse at the 52nd Street Project looks like any afterschool care center. A look of pride glows from Executive Director Carol Ochs as she surveys the room. Then she puts on a hardhat, turns on her heel, and walks one block north to check on the construction site that will be the Project's new, expanded home.

Founded in 1981 by MacArthur grant-winning actor and playwright Willie Reale, the 52nd Street Project is devoted to providing the kids of Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood with a creative space all their own. There, at-risk youths (ages 9–18) learn how to put their zaniest imaginings on the stage, encouraged by a tireless staff and a group of loyal volunteer artists. (The list of staff and volunteers has included Billy Crudup, Peter Dinklage, Edie Falco, **Frances McDormand '82**, Oliver Platt, and **Wendy Wasserstein '76**).

The Project is set up to give each child individual guidance as he or she is introduced to the process of creating theatre. Budding playwrights advance through a series of nine week-long courses in dramatic writing, culminating in an out-of-town retreat to complete their plays. Each play is cast with professional actors and performed in an off-Broadway theatre. "The goal of the Project is to give these kids the



Carol Ochs '84.

Photo courtesy of The 52nd Street Project.

experience that something they create can be a success," says Ochs, who was enticed to the Project by the prospect of fostering each child's recognition of his or her potential. According to Ochs, that's the allure the Project continues to have for its talented pool of volunteers: "It's not about them. It's about the kids."

The allure was particularly strong for **Reg Flowers '93**, who was Associate Artistic Director of the Project from 2005 until May 2009. At 52nd Street, Flowers ran the Teen Project, where adolescents tackle the challenges and rewards of performing Shakespeare, and every year take a

production on tour. In the past, the teens have taken their shows to places like Lorgues, France and London, England. This year they'll be performing *King Lear* for audiences in the arts community of Marfa, Texas.

After nearly 30 years of introducing inner-city kids to the stage, the 52nd Street Project is about to undergo a major expansion: The Clubhouse headquarters is slated to move into brand-new facilities. "I never thought I'd be so involved in constructing a building," laughs Ochs. "That was not part of my training at Yale School of Drama. Now I live and breathe it." The new space, the result of a capital campaign that raised \$19 million, will boast a computer lab, a study balcony to complement the Project's academic mentoring initiative, rehearsal studios to increase the capacity of course offerings, and a theatre to showcase the kids' works.

There are concerns that with the troubled economy and shrinking funding pool the Project will face difficulties meeting operation costs for the new space, as well as for the expanded programming. As of April 2009, roughly half a million dollars toward the endowment remained to be raised. Despite the uncertainties, Ochs remains optimistic. Definitely something of a "mama duck" at the Clubhouse, Ochs hopes to continue the Project's teen employment and scholarship programs, initiatives that teach life lessons beyond the stage. The aim of this year's fundraiser—a spring gala called *Packing Peanuts: A Moving Experience with the 52nd Street Project*—was to raise enough money to ensure that the big beautiful facility will have adequate financing.

Ochs maintains faith in the enthusiasm and generosity the Project inspires among Yale School of Drama students and alumni, who have a long history of donating their time as volunteers to the young artists who have gone through the Project's curriculum. More importantly,

The 52nd Street Project was the inspiration for Yale School of Drama's **Dwight/Edgewood Project**, a program with similar aims and methods. Run by Ruth Feldman (Staff), the Dwight/Edgewood Project matches School of Drama student mentors with children, all prospective playwrights, from area schools. After helping the middle-school students write plays, the School of Drama students perform them publicly for appreciative audiences.

Ochs has faith in the immense treasure that the 52nd Street Project offers its community as a wellspring of confident and eager individuals—not to mention talented new artists who will contribute to the future of theatre.

Where Theatre Can Take Flight...

Albany Park Theater Project

The children bounce around the stage to rippling electronic music, memorizing Bible verses. They rock back and forth, little balls of energy dressed alike in light gray clothing. But this is no light-hearted evocation of a gymnastic childhood; this is a play. Adapted by the teenage artists of the Albany Park Theater Project in Chicago from the life story of a fellow student, *God's Work* is about child abuse and religious fanaticism. The children's punishment if they fail the memorization exercise will come swiftly and surely from the hand of their father. *God's Work* opened in 2006 after two years of preparation, just one example of the theatre produced by APTP, where works of art also open previously unattainable horizons for the multicultural teens who tell their stories.

David Feiner '95, '90 and **Laura Wiley '94**, the founders of Albany Park Theater Project, met while studying dramaturgy (Feiner) and theatre management (Wiley) at Yale School of Drama. "Laura introduced me to community-based theatre, to theatre for social change," Feiner says. "Our partnership, the vision for APTP, was hatched in the old Drama School library." They married in 1995, and since Wiley hailed from Chicago, the couple moved there after graduation. "When I left the School of Drama, I saw myself studying cultural anthropology, the role of local movements in the preservation of cultures," Feiner says. He soon found that he enjoyed making work more than studying it. "Two weeks before starting a graduate program at the University of Chicago, I had a change of heart."

Feiner and Wiley began the journey that resulted in APTP by looking for an artistic and personal residence in one of the many neighborhoods of Chicago. "We wanted to discover how we could be of the most use," Feiner says. They established a number of principles to help them achieve their goals, the most important being permanence. "With a long-term presence, the theatre could earn the authority to tell the stories of a community, to represent the world through the community's eyes," Feiner says. "Permanence would also enable the institution to make an enhanced impact beyond its art. Besides, we were nesters; we wanted a home."

A number of their colleagues suggested Albany Park, in the northwest part of the city. Albany Park has traditionally been the first place many immigrants move to after coming to America. This culturally diverse community includes families from, among other places, Vietnam, Guatemala, and Poland, often living in the same apartment building—unlike the *de facto* segregation that often occurs in more established urban neighborhoods. There is also a high population of teenagers with little or no access to after-school programming or the

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David Feiner '95, '90 YC, Albany Park Theater Project

arts. Feiner and Wiley spent nine months talking to parents, students, officials, and local police about the best ways to create a theatre for social change in the community. They also worked hard to raise money through grants and other solicitations: "We wanted this to be a real job, a way of making a living," Feiner says. "We wanted to provide the community with well-trained professionals." In 1997, they found a workable space to move into—an under-utilized field house building in Eugene Field Park—and Albany Park Theater Project was born. Sadly, Laura Wiley '94 passed away on June 18, 2007. Her memory and work continue on at APTP, where she retains the title of co-founder.

Today, their theatre ensemble boasts an audience of theatre lovers from all over the city, as well as from the neighborhood. APTP has staged 18 productions and roughly 60 performance pieces. Their budget has grown from \$35,000 to \$500,000. They have four year-round employees (two of whom are APTP alumni), with 55 artists on their payroll at the busiest times. They've hosted guest artists like Phelim McDermott of Improbable Theatre and David Rousseve of the REALITY dance company. Their designers also work for the Goodman, Steppenwolf, and Looking Glass theatre companies.

APTP offers free workshops year-round, attracting many students from the community. Teenagers typically spend between two and seven years as members of the ensemble, growing into a tight-knit, trusting community—though anybody can walk in and "play." The teens who stay work with Feiner and professional designers, as they did with *God's Work*, to develop a story, write the script, and stage their play. Actors are drawn from the ensemble of teens who have been involved with the process. Feiner strives to make APTP a place where, he says, "the greatest artists in Chicago and 15-year-old high school students can come together, giving one another the resources to tell stories on the stage in the best way they can dream up."

Though the theatrical work is essential, it isn't the program's only goal. "A couple of years into APTP, kids began their senior year of high school, so they started asking questions about college," Feiner says. "It would have been malpractice to give them a place to start dreaming, and then not help them to move on and continue their journey." APTP's program now includes college guidance, artistic retreats, and a book discussion group. The rate of college matriculation among their alumni is over six times higher than the general population of Chicago's public school system—and their alumni are eight times more likely to graduate from college once they get there.

This past summer, the students in APTP's ensemble once again set about collecting material for a future production, studying food and the role it plays in family life, culture, and society. They are looking for old recipes, and for stories of starvation, rationing, genocide, traditional agriculture, factory farms, and local restaurants. They're also going to make jam, soup, and stew the same way they make art—together. "We're interested in food as a nexus of health, environment, economy, and human rights. We hope to humanize big, thorny issues through the rich, textured stories of individuals," Feiner says. As with *God's Work*, this new endeavor promises to result in personal, charged theatre: a way for teens to transform themselves, and their community.

As Feiner puts it, "theatre is the heart and soul of the project." This focus is why APTP works so well. "When you're talking about teens—and especially poor teens—of color, or undocumented immigrants, you get a pervasive sense from them that they don't matter, that they're insignificant. When you're making a work of theatre, you're engaged in creating a representation of the world as you see it. And you get to stand on stage in front of an audience, who watch what you've created with rapt attention. What the kids come to see is that they've done something that has made a difference in someone's life, and in the community. It's a game changer."

On the Road and In Local Neighborhoods...

Cornerstone Theater Company

"Make a difference in the community" might be the motto of the Cornerstone Theater Company. A sort of godfather among theatres doing community-based work, it has long been home to a number of Yale School of Drama alumni employing their theatrical talents in the service of others, including lighting designer **Geoff Korf '91**; former Managing Director **Shay Wafer '89**; and director **Juliette Carrillo '91**.

It is no coincidence that the three spent their formative years as theatre professionals at Yale School of Drama under **Lloyd Richards** (Former Dean), who believed in the theatre's potential to speak for its



Laura Wiley '94 and David Feiner '95

community. Also shared by the trio is a feeling of restlessness. It is axiomatic that a theatre artist leads a nomadic life, but these artists' itinerant existence derives from an eagerness to go where the work is *needed*.

Korf shuttles between teaching as Head of Design at University of Washington School of Drama, designing productions at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and working with Cornerstone in Los Angeles. Wafer recently left her long-time post at Cornerstone to help open the new August Wilson Center for African American Culture in Pittsburgh, and to serve as its Vice President of Programs. Carrillo has crisscrossed the country for the last year, directing productions of *Lydia*, written by her close col-

laborator Octavio Solis (making a stop at the Yale Repertory Theatre for the East Coast premiere in spring 2009). Recently, Carrillo returned to her home base at Cornerstone in Los Angeles to stage a new play that dramatizes local residents' concerns about environmental justice and the fate of the Los Angeles River. Cornerstone's appeal for these alumni lies in the way it marries social responsibility, based on communication and exchange, to the theatre's inherent attraction to a variety of places, people, and stories.

The Cornerstone Theater Company was formed in 1986 by director Bill Rauch (Yale Repertory Theatre Associate Artist) and playwright Alison Carey with the aim of engaging communities that traditionally want for a theatrical voice. Riding on a spirit of community-based work, Cornerstone spent its first five years traversing the country, finding collaborators in 12 rural locales and adapting classics to serve as expressions of their unique concerns. In 1991, Cornerstone united these various communities to create a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, re-dubbed *An Interstate Adventure*, which they produced in Washington, D.C. The Managing Director at the time, Dean **James Bundy '95**, who is still an Associate Artist of the company, says that this work "helped me begin to think about the most immediate relationship that classic plays and artists could have with their audiences, about how one might create discoveries for a contemporary audience which are similar to the moments that the original audience might have experienced."

At first, the company sought to collaborate with communities defined by the conventional terms of geographic and ethnic association. "Theatre is most effective if it has to do with a place and a people," Korf says, "a notion very much at the heart of the regional theatre." Los Angeles was an ideal location in which to finally settle, thanks to its kaleidoscopic cultural perspectives, which provided the company with opportunities to team up with a number of under-represented groups. Cornerstone has been able to develop vibrant, challenging theatre in a variety of makeshift venues, while partnering with communities bound together by common neighborhoods, languages, faiths, and even occupations and birthdays.

Over the years, Cornerstone has developed a singular method for its theatrical brand of community activism. Departing from traditional seasonal programming, the company's ensemble tackles large questions that affect local communities with a series of plays produced over the span of several years. Each play has its genesis in the gatherings of the ensemble with constituents of the communities to be represented, meetings called Story Circles. Over the course of these Story Circles, members of the group relate personal experiences and ideas, and a playwright compiles material for the composition of a drama to be acted by the contributors.

Cornerstone is currently in the midst of its Justice Cycle, which examines the myriad complexities and social consequences of American law, raising questions about citizenship, reproductive rights, and environmental policy. *Touch the Water: A River Play*, by Julie Hébert, looks to the population of the industrially modified Los Angeles River for insight into the debate over modern society's exploitation of nature. "It's a tramp river," director Carrillo explains. "Its path is always changing, bubbling up from underneath the concrete, and forcing people to reckon with its presence." Created with local river residents, engineers, biologists, environmentalists, activists, advocates, and everyday citizens, the play continues Cornerstone's tradition of redefining community beyond geographic classification.

In addition to its social aims, Cornerstone is committed to the continuing development of theatre artists. Exploring alternative funding resources to sustain the company's undertakings, Wafer helped conceive and implement the Cornerstone Institute, an educational initiative designed to expose individuals to community-based theatre work. Realizing the value of communities as fonts from which to draw inspiration, the Institute, as Wafer describes it, "offers young artists and students practical experience with Cornerstone's methods. For six weeks they go into the community and participate in a dialogue set up by the Cornerstone ensemble."

Cornerstone consistently demands growth and excellence from its resident artistic team, and Korf is keenly aware of the ways Cornerstone has challenged him as an artist. "Grad school was significant, but Cornerstone has been equally significant in helping me shape my identity as a designer. It doesn't allow you to live in a world of assumptions." Very often his work with the company requires him to light unfamiliar venues or site-specific facilities ill-equipped for theatrical production. This can be frustrating but inspiring. "Limits propel artists to find expansive solutions," he says. "And every new show at Cornerstone, no matter what, forces the designers to stay on their toes."

From New York to Chicago to Los Angeles—and in many communities in between—Yale School of Drama alumni are helping to change the lives of people in their local neighborhoods. The number of budding playwrights, college graduates, and audiences served by these companies is impressive, lives have been touched and changed for the better. But statistics do not reflect the transformative aspect of companies like the 52nd Street Project, Albany Park Theater Project, and Cornerstone: the creation of live theatre with, by, and for their communities. ♣

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The ensemble rehearses for Cornerstone Theater's Touch the Water: A River Play. Photos by Lane Barden.