

Michael Rohd and Sojourn Theatre

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I hope that by offering spaces for civic dialogue, we are actually practicing democracy. I have to believe democracy is not just about voting, but about collectively working through the issues we face as a citizenry.

— Michael Rohd

Based in Portland, Oregon, Sojourn Theatre creates community-engaged theatrical productions that have explored a broad array of social issues, ranging from the Oregon school system (*Witness Our Schools*), the future of Portland as a city (*One Day*), and the meaning and impact of going to war (*The War Project*). The Sojourn company, headed by Artistic Director Michael Rohd, has worked together since the 1990s, settling in Portland in 2000.

Sojourn's community-engaged theatre often draws on an extensive, dialogic process that begins with research interviews, public forums, and workshops. For *Witness Our Schools*, which was created and performed from 2003 to 2005, Sojourn company members spent a year and a half conducting more than 500 interviews, gathering perspectives and personal stories on the rifts facing the Oregon school system which stemmed from ideology-based collisions in the legislature and around the state. Following the research period, the theatre company used an in-depth improvisational process, translating and animating the themes gleaned from their research interviews back into nitty-gritty stories of human relationships and dilemmas for the stage. The resulting show was a multi-voiced collage of perspectives, which Sojourn performed in 30 locations around the state from September 2004 through August 2005, with each hour-long show followed by 80-90 minutes of audience dialogue.

Rohd believes that “strong art itself asks you to consider the world from perspectives beyond your own,” exercising the audience’s “muscles of imagination, conscience, empathy, curiosity, inquiry, and compassion.” But Sojourn capitalizes on the evocative nature of theatre by creating intentional spaces for discussion after the productions themselves, continuing the dialogic process initiated through the pre-production research interviews. The company experiments with different approaches to conducting these dialogues. In the *Witness Our Schools* productions, Rohd says, “Everybody in the room has been watching each other throughout the show because it is in the round and suddenly they are all there and seeing each other and... We would always start the dialogue with ‘Turn to the person next to you: Was there a mirror moment [that reflected your experience] and a window moment [that gave you insight

into an experience different than your own]?” “Alternating between small group and large group discussion, each *WOS* dialogue eventually had participants explore the question, “What is the mission of public education?”

For Sojourn, encounters that bridge differences are a major goal. Rohd says, “If you had been in a room with people you didn’t think you could connect with and found commonalities, then that’s success.” He believes the post-performance dialogue space has a particular capacity for enhancing conversations that forge connections because of the power of good theatre to “put the heat” of the issues on the stage so that the post-production discussion can be spaces of actual listening and exchange.

Rohd says that creating space for understanding across multiple perspectives is vital because “Right now in this country, if you are trying to find a way to move the system we have forward, you have to find a way to build alliances.” Drawing on new Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s recent statements, he says, “Pelosi’s rhetoric is that if we don’t have cross-the-aisle collaboration right now, there is absolutely no way we will build policy across values differences in America.” Rohd believes that “We can radically challenge the political status quo by looking at how we can connect and ally with each other.” In Rohd’s view, the performance/dialogues of *WOS* and other productions offer tangible inroads to this collaboration.

Rohd sees the value of building alliances between everyday people through the performance/dialogue process, but he also recognizes the impact of the productions in exposing legislators and other civic decision-makers to the perspectives of constituents in a heightened and potentially transformative context. The statewide education advocacy group The Chalkboard Project included selections from the actual *WOS* script in its recommendations to the state legislature about how to address the issues facing the Oregon school system. This use of the script in formal legislative policy recommendations offers another influential avenue for *WOS* to expose civic leaders to the perspectives of constituents.

Rohd makes it clear that, while provoking reflection and dialogue on social issues is an important thread throughout much of Sojourn’s work, each production is different. “There is no formula for the work,” he emphasizes. While *WOS* represented a collage of idea-evoking stories emerging from an intensive interview process, another recent Sojourn production used the results of the research process differently. *The War Project*, an exploration of how Americans decide what they are willing to kill and die for, initially was conceived as a research-based production. But as Rohd explains, “We did a ton of research [interviews about war] and the show ended up actually being a response to and against the research, in a way. The truth is, we found narrative to be a completely inadequate means of exploring the events of war, of describing the mass chaos that war is.” *The War Project* emerged as a more abstract movement theatre piece with no explicit post-show dialogue component. “It was difficult at times,” Rohd notes. “Some people were expecting us to make an anti-war piece, and some people were looking for community voices and stories — that’s not what the piece was...”

Sojourn's most recent production, *One Day*, returns to the use of post-performance dialogues, but is not based on a collage of scenes, as *WOS* is. Instead it follows eight different Portland residents through a 24-hour period as they face decisions that affect the city as a whole. Based on a city survey of residents' visions for the future of their city, each performance of *One Day*, like *WOS*, is followed by a dialogue. Rohd was approached by city officials about creating the piece after cultivating relationships with local government officials through the process of developing *Witness Our Schools*. Rohd says: "The Mayor's chief of staff was a big fan, and saw all our work since [*WOS*], brought guests to fundraisers, and when the city began its major visioning project, she pulled us in."

The city provided partial financial support for the development of *One Day* and also aided in marketing and touring. Yet although the city proposed the idea and offered to pitch in financially, Sojourn still had to fundraise for 60-65 percent of the production's costs. "The partnership with the city had its challenges," Rohd notes "but in the end, it seems to have been useful on all sides." The dilemmas of residents represented in *One Day* and the comments elicited through the post-production dialogues are being taken seriously by the city. Each dialogue has been transcribed and submitted to city officials; Rohd has also been invited to facilitate a meeting of Portland's Executive Committee, discussing their understandings of the survey results and supplementing the committee's interpretations with his own, based on the company's study of the survey for creating *One Day*. In addition, Rohd is currently serving on a city drafting sub-committee, which is developing the Portland city plan for the next 25 years, which will be proposed to the City Council for a vote. Rohd notes that this is "all because of the success of our show and the value...the city leaders now place on our contributions."

Through the process of creating community- and civically- engaged theatre, Rohd and Sojourn have become influential civic players in Portland and beyond. Yet the company still struggles financially. In addition to easing the ongoing financial struggle, Rohd's vision for enhancing his own work and contributing to the field features increasing peer-learning opportunities in community-engaged art. Rohd's ideal scenario, he says, would be "if someone said, here's a fund for 20 named artists in the field of theatre who are connected through vision and practice, and over the next three years, this fund can be used to spend a week visiting three other people in this group." He adds: "I would love to spend a month working with John Malpede and observing other peers and colleagues in the field." In contrast to the out-of-context and abbreviated nature of conferences and festivals, he believes that getting to see peers in their work setting offers a much deeper source of learning.

In addition, Rohd would like to see creation of a think-tank that could develop a framework and effective methods of disseminating information about the role of art and civic dialogue, particularly to politicians. Rohd imagines a time when every politician who is contacted by their local theatre company about doing a civic dialogue project already has a sticker on his or her computer with the question, "Has an artist approached you about civic dialogue work?" The sticker would feature the address of a website that

would contain both research about the value of civically engaged art and three exemplary works in the field. He says: “This would make the path easier for those who follow us.”

While potential projects include a partnership with the Department of Defense focusing on veterans and their families, and a possible piece dealing with the 2008 election, Rohd’s vision of the evolution of Sojourn’s work is intentionally one of ongoing discovery. He holds onto the belief that “the job of the artist is to not know.”

Rebecca Lena Richardson is a facilitator and writer. Currently the Research Coordinator for the Arts & Democracy Project, she also facilitates workshops about embodied approaches to researching family & community histories.