

The audience nestled on the stone steps of the California Plaza amphitheatre in downtown Los Angeles quiets as an actor, sporting a dark red security-guard blazer, crosses downstage and exclaims, "Listen up, people: I got one thing to say to you: I see the future and it's going down" (Iizuka, 3 *Truths* 1). As the young African American performer continues riffing on injustice in contemporary Southern California, 3 *Truths* by Naomi Iizuka begins. Iizuka's play is the culmination of Cornerstone Theater Company's *Justice Cycle*, which explores how the justice system and larger questions of justice impact communities in Los Angeles. The *Justice Cycle* examines not only the issues surrounding criminal punishment and retribution, but also immigration and documentation, reproductive rights, and the environment. Two of the plays in the cycle were written by Cornerstone ensemble members: Michael John Garcés and Shishir Kurup. For the other plays, Cornerstone commissioned Julie Marie Myatt (later a member of the ensemble), KJ Sanchez, Julie Hébert, and Iizuka. The cycle spans four years, six plays, and over 150 community artists. Cornerstone's artists employ a unique community-based theatre methodology, gathering stories from myriad community members and weaving passionate, private, and public tales into the fabric of their original plays.

As a dramaturg in the cycle, I experienced firsthand the unique and transformative power of Cornerstone's methodology. The sheer number and diversity of voices and stories represented by the numerous performers and interview subjects participating in the project is impressive. The individuals interviewed and cast in the shows come from every community in Los Angeles, and from a range of socioeconomic and educational

Cornerstone Theater Company's *Justice Cycle*

by Anne García-Romero

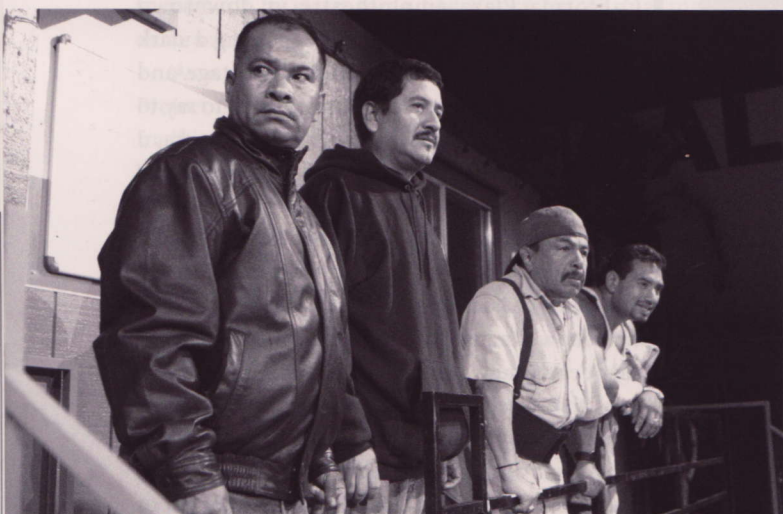
Anne García-Romero is a playwright and scholar, who is a Moreau Fellow in the Department of Film, Television, and Theatre at the University of Notre Dame. She is currently writing a book on contemporary Latina playwrights. Her latest play, *Paloma*, was part of the 2010 First Look Festival at the Open Fist Theatre Company in Los Angeles, California.

Photo 1: Cornerstone Theater Company, *Touch The Water* (2009). Roger Vadim (Lewis MacAdams) wades in the L.A. River.

Photo: John Luker

Photo 2: Cornerstone Theater Company, *Los Illegals* (2007). Ernesto (Juan José Mangandi), Jimmy (Betto Arcos), Omar (Ubaldo Hernandez) and Ramon (Jesus Zamora) unite.

Photo: John Luker



backgrounds. They represent different sides of the issues confronted by the plays. The range of perspectives included in the writing process is one unique feature of the Cornerstone methodology. The fact that members of the community are included in every step—from story circles in the earliest part of the writing process, to multiple readings of drafts-in-process where community members are invited to give feedback, to performance where community members are actually cast as actors—is also unique. It is rare to see that degree of community participation at every step of the theatre-making process. It is equally rare to witness the ways in which a Cornerstone project can bring together in a room individuals who might otherwise never meet, many of whom stand diametrically opposed to one another on issues like immigration or reproductive rights.

The Cornerstone methodology provides a way for people to tell their stories, to have those stories heard, and to hear the stories of others whose life experiences and opinions may be different from their own. It is truly transformative to watch, for example, the sister of a homicide victim share her story with a man convicted of homicide. Those conversations happen over and over again in the process of writing a Cornerstone play. The *Justice Cycle*'s unique production process provides a vibrant model for creating dynamic works of theatre that fully reflect the complexities of twenty-first century U.S. society.

Iizuka's play examines the question, "What is truth?" drawing upon elements in the previous five cycle plays and Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In her three act drama, each act engages a question: What is my truth? What is your truth? What is the truth? This interrogation delves not only into characters' lives but also the ethos of greater Los Angeles and the state of the U.S. justice system. These questions

can also serve as a frame with which to examine more closely the creation, collaboration, and production of Cornerstone's *Justice Cycle*.

My Truth: Inception of Cornerstone's *Justice Cycle*

Cornerstone Theater Company was founded in 1986 by Alison Carey and Bill Rauch and originally consisted of residencies in towns across the U.S. where company artists would partner with community members to create adaptations of classic texts. For example, during a residency in Marmath, North Dakota, Cornerstone produced *Marmath Hamlet*, a Wild West musical. After staging *The Winter's Tale—an Interstate Adventure*, a national tour in 1991 with community members from the previous five years of residencies, Cornerstone established permanent residence in Los Angeles in 1992. During the subsequent years, the company created productions with local Southern California communities as well as undertaking a seven-year faith-based cycle. In 2006, Bill Rauch stepped down as Artistic Director and Michael John Garcés was chosen as the company's next leader.

At the time of Garcés's appointment, he had been directing a play in Florida where he began to interact with the undocumented workers and day laborers in the Latin American community. A bicultural, bilingual theatre artist of Cuban and U.S. descent who grew up in Colombia, Garcés became keenly interested in creating theatre with this population. As the Cornerstone ensemble and Garcés started to brainstorm their first project under his leadership, he expressed his desire to explore documentation and

...a vibrant model for creating dynamic works of theatre that fully reflect the complexities of twenty-first century U.S. society.

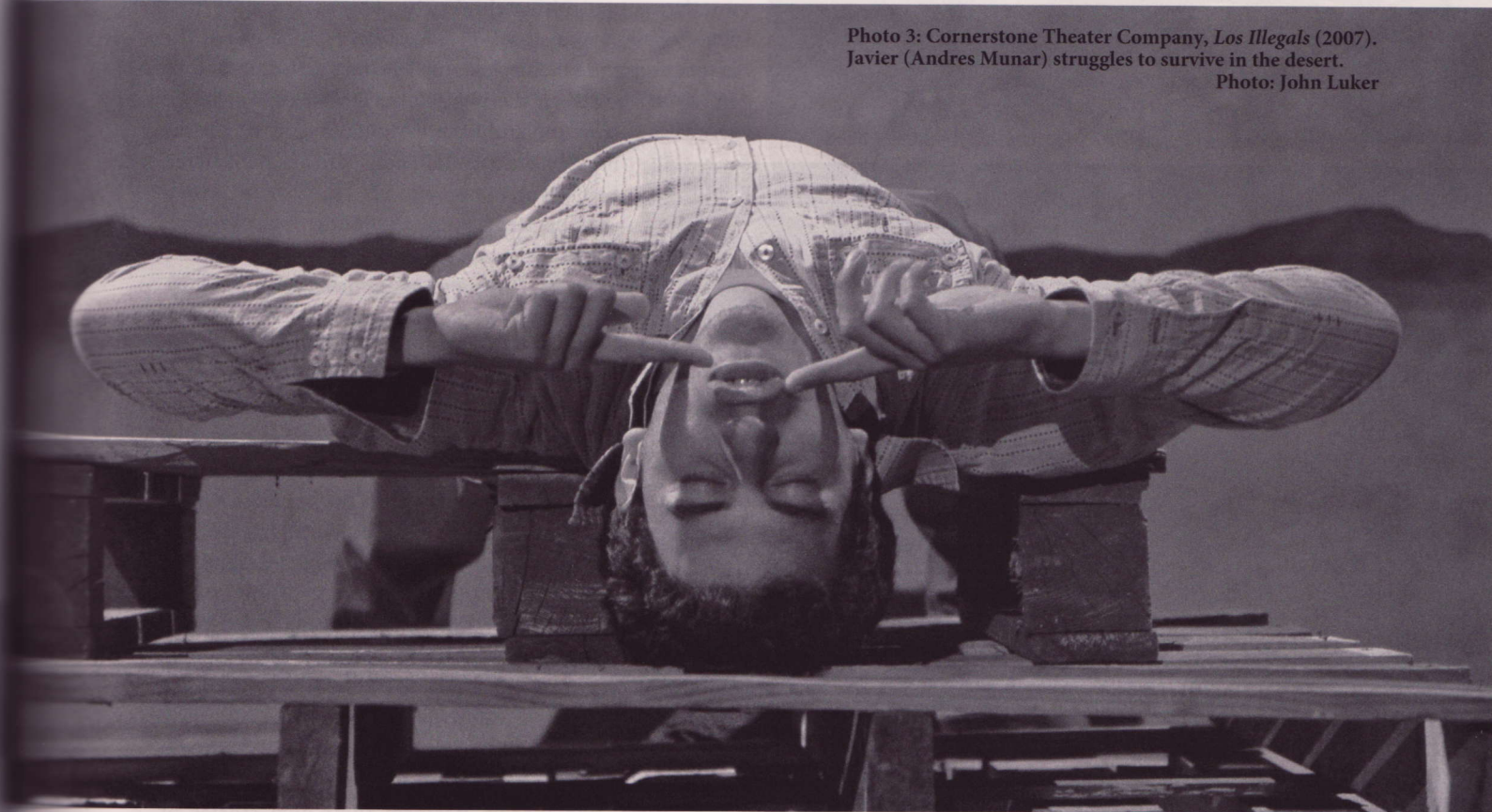
immigration and this led to conversations about issues of legality. In an interview, Garcés recalls, "In talking about what excited us... there was a running theme of law and the body... how your body is not legal in this country... reproductive rights and how your body is legislated... having your body in prison and how your physical person relates to legislation and laws and the environment and your physical surroundings." These discussions led the company to make a commitment to create a cycle of plays exploring justice in Los Angeles.

Cornerstone's permanent ensemble of nineteen includes actors, directors, playwrights, designers, and stage managers, who assume various roles and responsibilities for each production. After the ensemble decided upon their theme, they hired additional playwrights, actors, designers, managers, and other theatre artists to partner with them in the genesis of this cycle. The cast sizes vary from as few as six to as many as seventy-two. Cornerstone's directors

cast a significant number of community members who take part in the play's creation process, many of whom have had little or no previous acting experience. Thus, the cycle includes a rich combination of professional theatre artists and various community members joining together to tell the stories of justice in their city. The majority of community members in each Cornerstone *Justice Cycle* cast were new to the production and had not taken part in the story circle process.

cull them into a cohesive, compelling text. The production's community partners included Feminist Majority Foundation, the Hollywood chapter of the National Organization for Women, South Asian Network, Women Lawyers Association of L.A., and Women's Reproductive Rights Assistance Project. Each partner assisted in the story circles by inviting members from their organizations into the Cornerstone process. Members of these partner organizations participated in the story circles that resulted in a play with twenty-five characters. During one of the story circles, Myatt met Diana Jordan, an MFA-trained

Photo 3: Cornerstone Theater Company, *Los Illegals* (2007). Javier (Andres Munar) struggles to survive in the desert.
Photo: John Luker



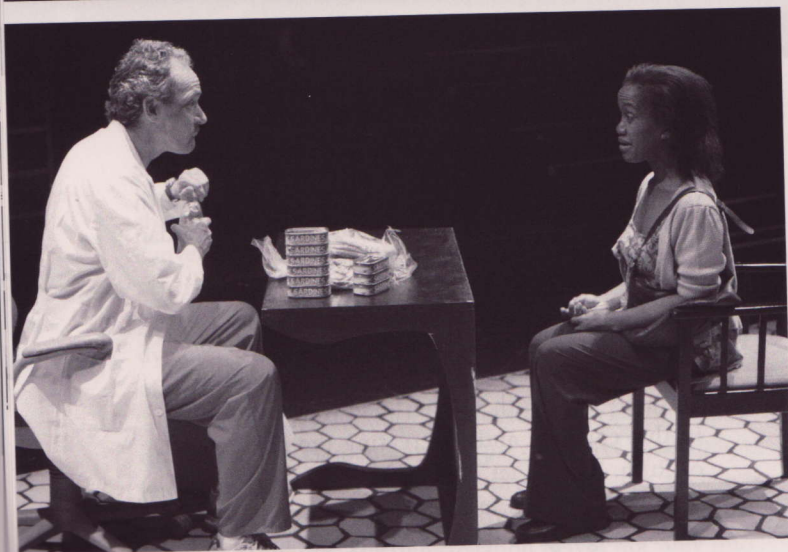
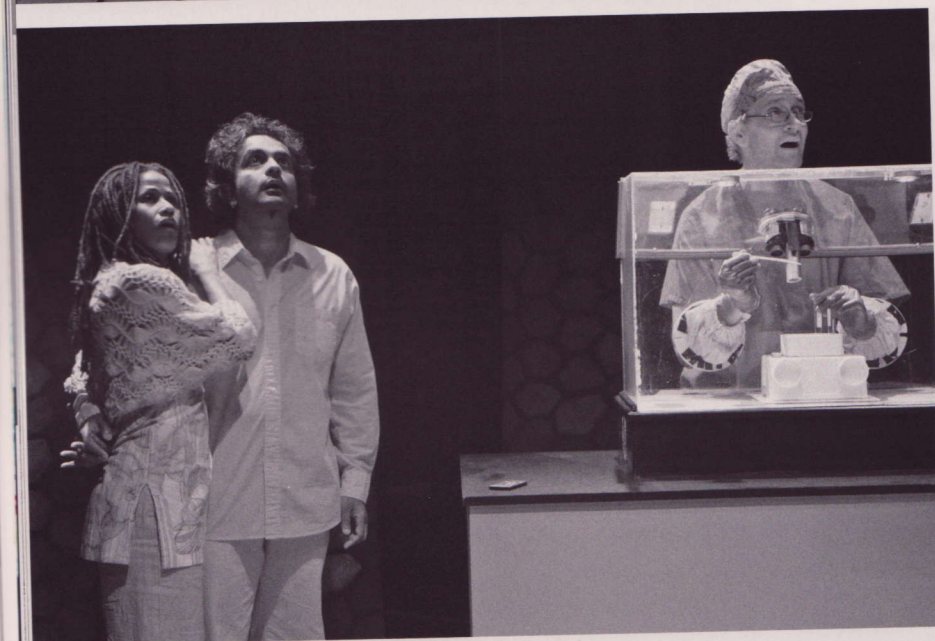
Your Truth: Cornerstone's *Justice Cycle* Collaborations

All Cornerstone shows are created through story circles—meetings of artists and community members in which the playwright gathers peoples' experiences, insights, opinions and histories to incorporate into the creation of the play. Of the process, Iizuka recalls, "The story circles, in particular, are remarkable. To get a whole bunch of people in a room who have had experiences that may put them on opposite or very different sides of an issue, and to get them talking to one another about their lives—that's an amazing thing" (Interview). The story circles not only provide personal narratives to incorporate into the piece, but also often inform the focus and trajectory of the play's genesis.

I served as dramaturg on *Someday* by Julie Marie Myatt, the project about reproductive rights, and marveled at Myatt's ability to receive hours upon hours of stories and

actor who also has cerebral palsy. Myatt soon decided to create a character, Ruth, inspired by Jordan's story and the issues women with disabilities face as they grapple with reproductive rights. Furthermore, in the production, Jordan played the role. Myatt reflects in an email,

When I sat down to interview Diana, her questions and concerns about motherhood were so very similar to my own...I felt that we so rarely deal with motherhood and disability in this country, and by creating the character of Ruth, I could let Diana's body speak to that shared desire for motherhood, in a way that maybe language couldn't. Yes, she may move and speak differently than I do, but what she wants in life is the same, and letting the audience be



part of Ruth's quest for a child through Diana, was an important part of the story to me, and the conversation of reproductive rights.

Thus the story circle not only gave Myatt one of the main trajectories for her play but also one of her lead actors.

As dramaturg, I also witnessed the collaborations of community members and ensemble artists. Garcés, the director of *Someday*, has a remarkable ability to create a level playing field, empowering professionals and novices to collectively participate in the production process. While he rehearsed a scene with Jordan and Tracy Leigh Turner, another actor with cerebral palsy who uses a motorized wheelchair, I was struck by how Garcés encouraged the actors to explore their roles while eliciting the comedic tone in Myatt's scene. In the play, Ruth, Jordan's character, is contemplating the various ways in which she might have a child. Sarah, Turner's character, suggests an option:

SARAH: Sperm donor.

RUTH: A sperm donor? I don't know.

SARAH: No complication there. For you.

RUTH: Really?

SARAH: It would be no one's kid but yours.

RUTH: What would I tell people? (*Silence*)

SARAH: Immaculate Conception. (21-22)

Turner has certain speech challenges stemming from her physical condition; however, Garcés was able to help her find the comedic timing for the final line of this segment which she later performed with delight. Watching Garcés direct these two actors is emblematic of the kind of work Cornerstone does: putting stories and performers on stage to make visible what often is considerably less visible in U.S. professional theatre and our society at large.

The collaboration process for each show is often quite moving as community members and artists, like Jordan, perform their own stories or characters based on their own lives as well as characters based on the lives of other cast members. The experience of being involved in a cycle play and hearing one's testimonial spoken by another performer provides an equally significant aspect to the process. Cast members often become deeply committed to the production as personal and professional lives intersect.

I, too, gave an individual interview to Myatt relaying my thoughts and experiences regarding reproductive rights. Later, during the first read through of the script, I recognized part of my story in the final scene of the play. At first I was surprised to be included in the script because I don't normally discuss such personal information openly. But soon I felt honored. In the scene, a couple has

Photos 4-6: Cornerstone Theater Company, *Someday* (2008). From top: Ruth (Diana Jordan) finds an abandoned baby; Doctor (Peter Howard) performs an in-vitro procedure for Anne (Bahni Turpin) and Sam (Shishir Kurup); Doctor counsels Ruth. Photos: Michael Lamont

just adopted a child who was originally abandoned in a dumpster and found by Ruth. Ruth is unable to adopt the child but is invited to visit the home of the newly adoptive parents, Maureen and Will. When the baby cries in the next room, Will exits to attend to the infant while Maureen confides in Ruth:

MAUREEN: I could never have my own children. (*Silence*) I had to have a hysterectomy when I was 16. Went in for a pretty standard surgery to have a little tumor removed, and woke up with a complete hysterectomy and my father sobbing at my bedside... (*She smiles an awkward smile.*) We've been trying to adopt for years, without much luck... We had given up actually. So Will spent last year at the hospital as a volunteer, holding newborns... just to have the experience of holding a baby... and mourning, I think. He had always thought he was going to be a father. (84)

I will never forget the impact of hearing the story of my teenage surgery, first in rehearsal and later in performance, alongside so many others reflecting on reproductive rights. Making the unknown known proved quite powerful for me. Furthermore, experiencing my words performed by an actor in the company and then witnessing an audience's response served to normalize my experience as one among many. Thus, Cornerstone's *Justice Cycle* not only elucidates communal justice, it also provides an opportunity to significantly reframe notions of private and personal justice.

The Truth: Cornerstone's *Justice Cycle* Productions—*Los Illegals*

Cornerstone often engages in site-specific work. The set for *Los Illegals*, written by Garcés and directed by ensemble member Shishir Kurup, covers a significant portion of the parking lot at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, California, including a temporary trailer and a chain-link fence surrounding a collection of rectangular tables with folding chairs. The design looks more like a space for a community meal than a play. Each audience member sits at one of the tables as the play occurs in and around the audience. The Spanish Golden Age playwright Lope de Vega's classic seventeenth-century text *Fuente Ovejuna*, in which a small town collectively rises up against its despotic ruler, inspired *Los Illegals*. Garcés' text explores the stories of individuals who are immigrating or who are recent immigrants to the U.S. The play, created in collaboration with the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California, The National Day Laborer Organizing Network, The South Asian Network and the UCLA Downtown Labor Center, simultaneously examines the lives of men and women at a United Day Laborers Work Site at GIANT Hardware while also telling the stories of a young man and woman, Javier and Rosenda, struggling to journey to the U.S. from El Salvador and Mexico. Written bilingually, with almost half the text in Spanish (a Cornerstone first), the production demonstrates the heroic challenges these

individuals face as they struggle to earn a living and seek a better life in the U.S. The audience placed in the center of the action immerses each spectator in these immigrants' stories. Furthermore, the audience members who don't understand the Spanish sections soon experience the language barriers these immigrants face. [Photo 2]

The play's action builds when a woman who hires one of the workers has him arrested for suspected assault and robbery. After the arrest, the GIANT store shuts down the day laborer work site. However, the workers, and their lawyer and citizen activist choose to stay and resist the eviction. As the tension mounts, one of the day laborers, Ernesto, reveals it was he who worked for the woman, not Lalo, another laborer who'd been falsely accused and arrested. Ernesto recounts that after three days of work, the woman would not pay him so in anger he raised his voice, slammed her door and began to undo his work, which he was not being paid for. The other workers respond with understanding, acknowledging that they had experienced similar situations as day laborers.

In *Fuente Ovejuna*, when the town is confronted with the murder of their despotic comandante, each town member joins in proclaiming it was the town that committed the crime, not an individual. Although Ernesto is not accused of murder, he is eventually brought before a judge regarding his immigration status. As the judge pointedly asks Ernesto if he damaged the woman's property, one by one, the day laborers join in solidarity with Ernesto and accept responsibility, each saying they did it:

JUDGE: Listen carefully, and pay attention. Did you damage her property in anger when she would not pay you what had been agreed upon? If you lie, you could face serious charges of perjury.

TRANSLATOR: Escucha bien, y ponga atención. ¿Le dañaste la propiedad por causa de rabia cuando ella no quiso pagar la suma establecida entre los dos? Si mientes, puedes estar acusado del crimen serio de perjurio.

ERNESTO: Ella no me quiso pagar nada. Ella dijo—
JUDGE: Yes or no.

TRANSLATOR: Sí o no. (*Pause*)

JUDGE: Did you do it?

TRANSLATOR: ¿Lo hiciste? (*Omar stands in the spectator area.*)

OMAR: Sí. Yo lo hice.

JUDGE: You need to sit down, or I'll have you removed from my courtroom. What did he say? (*Jimmy stands.*)

TRANSLATOR/JIMMY/OMAR: Yes. I did it.

JUDGE: All right, I'm calling sec—

Everyone in the spectator section stands. Loreto, Lalo, Pedro, Ramon, Teresa, Jorge, and Yolanda are among them.

LOS JORNALEROS EN LA SALA DE JUSTICIA: ¡Sí! ¡Yo lo hice!

A security guard enters. He seems confused.

JUDGE: All right. We need to clear the— (*The whole space resonates with voices.*)

TODOS LOS JORNALEROS: Yes! I did it! (94-5)

As the play comes to a close, Ernesto is released and reappears. Meanwhile, Javier, trying to cross the border, dies on his journey through the desert, [Photo 3] yet Rosenda arrives at the day laborer site looking for work as all continue in their struggle to find gainful employment.

Many of the actors in the production are themselves undocumented day laborers which posed concerns regarding their safety. Kurup wrestled with the issue of keeping his actors safe and even at one point considered doing mask work. However, in the end, Kurup states that "everyone stepped onstage bereft of mask and presented and represented themselves wholly and in this defiance that skirted their own personal safety a piece of art was created that made the invisible, visible, with full knowledge of the dangers of that visibility." In the climactic scene, the actor playing Ernesto, Juan José Mangandi Pérez, is particularly poignant as he states his case before the judge with a sense of urgent honesty. This actor's graceful presence as Ernesto, is filled with a sense of dignity gained through hardship. These men and women who volunteered to be part of the production not only make their stories visible but also reinforce the realities of the play.

Someday

The Bootleg Theater, a converted warehouse, houses the audience sitting on opposite sides of the central playing area painted in a meditative patchwork of blue and green.

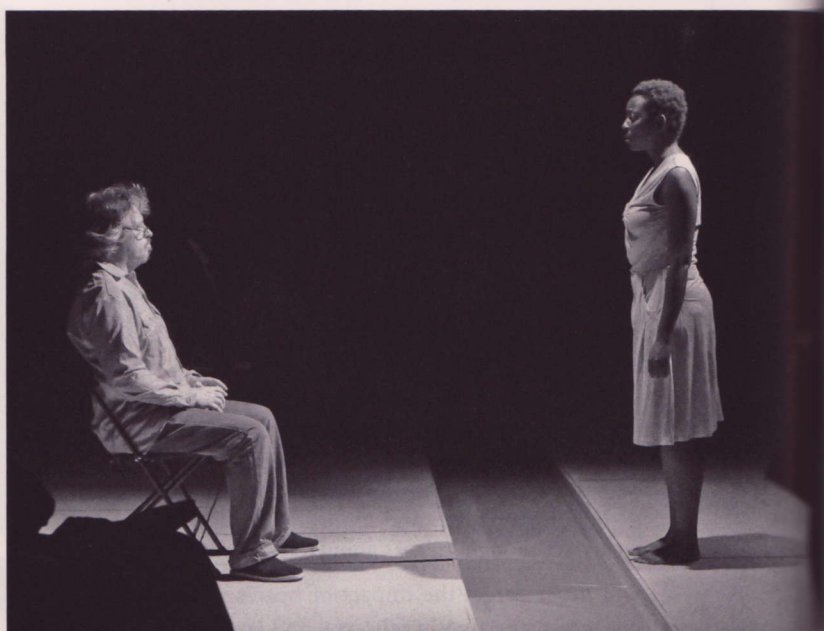


Photo 7: Photo Cornerstone Theater Company, *For All Time* (2009). Berkley Heinz (Jonathan Jerald) faces Declarations (Yolanda Hester). Photo: John Luker

As the lights rise and the original music by John Nobori fades in, contemplative instrumental variations accompany the movement of the entire cast across the stage in Myatt's *Someday*, directed by Garcés. Ruth, an African American woman with cerebral palsy, finds a Caucasian baby in a dumpster near UCLA. [Photo 4] When she brings the

Photo 8: Cornerstone Theater Company, *For All Time* (2009). Lead Chorus (Xavi Moreno) galvanizes the ensemble. Photo: John Luker



infant to the hospital and says she wants to adopt it, she learns how difficult and unlikely that might be. This sends her on a quest to have her own child. Sam and Anne, a biracial couple, attempt in vitro to start their own family. [Photo 5] When that process fails, they seek an egg donor, which proves costly and complicated, as Anne, an African American, prefers a Korean-American donor and Sam, of Indian descent, initially protests stating the child would look nothing like them. These two storylines intertwine as both women see the same fertility doctor, a sincere yet humorous character whom Myatt periodically presents as a God-like figure in these patients' lives. [Photo 6] In the end, neither woman is able to conceive due to economic and relational challenges. Myatt highlights the many avenues individuals seek to reproduce and the influences of economics, race, and class in the process.

Throughout the play, Myatt punctuates the action with the reading of actual letters written to the Women's Reproductive Rights Assistance Project, which provides funds for women to obtain abortions who otherwise would not be able to afford them. Garcés positions these women in various locations in and around the audience, as the letters portray women from all walks of life, including a college student, an abused wife and a religious teenager. Myatt's placement of the letters offers a poignant counterpoint to the struggles of the main characters while continuing to highlight the role economics play in a women's right to choose.

For All Time

In the middle of the stage at the Shakespeare Festival/LA, a narrow rectangular pool of water separates two sides of the playing area for the production of *For All Time*, written by KJ Sanchez and directed by Laurie Woolery, Cornerstone's Associate Artistic Director. This water becomes a symbol for separation, connection, division, and rebirth for the characters in this piece, which examines how criminal acts, the judgment process, and the system of incarceration affect the social, familial, and economic arenas in Los Angeles. The play was created in partnership with Families to Amend

...potent reminders of the timelessness of violence and the endless need for justice.

California's Three Strikes, The California Institute for Women, Partnership for Re-Entry Program, South Asian Network, and All Saints Church in Pasadena. Sanchez intersperses stories of incarcerated individuals, victims' families, survivors of violence, activists, public defenders, and advocates, and includes excerpts from Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the Greek tragic play cycle written in the fifth century BCE. *The Oresteia* excerpts stand in counterpoint to

the contemporary stories and provide potent reminders of the timelessness of violence and the endless need for justice.

Sanchez's non-linear narrative perhaps mirrors the fragmented lives of the individuals she highlights in her play. Talena and Margaret, two incarcerated women, discuss the issue of Talena's upcoming parole hearing. Heinz, an incarcerated man, undergoes his parole hearing in front of the Presiding Commissioner and Public Defender. [Photo 7] A group of women whose children or spouses were murdered attend a support group to heal. A group of men, some of whom were formerly incarcerated, discuss the process of leaving prison. Numerous individual testimonies intertwine and intersect so that the audience receives each ongoing storyline in pieces that slowly build to a conclusion but with frenetic intersections that create a vibrant theatricality. Augmenting the action is an intense female voice exclaiming lines such as, "One thousand four hundred nineteen and a wake up!" (3) which we later learn is a prisoner counting the days until she is up for parole again. [Photo 8]

The water flowing across the stage underscores a particularly poignant moment in the production when a character named Facts Brother, played by Marcenus "M.C." Earl, recounts his incarceration in the same facility where his younger brother is also being held. He movingly relays how he hasn't seen his brother in many years and yearns to be reunited with him, but because they are housed in separate prison populations, it seems nearly impossible for a reunion to occur.

FACTS BROTHER: A few weeks later, I had to go to the infirmary. And I'm with this guard, God Bless her soul... I don't even remember her name... but this guard, she always called me by my name, always treat me with respect, I have to wait in this room before I can be seen. And then I see, they're bringing my baby brother in too. They're gonna put him in the room next to mine. (An officer enters with Ronnie.) Officer Avila, Officer Avila, please, please put us in the room together?

OFFICER AVILA: I'm not supposed to do that. You're level one and he's level three and the last time they put two brothers together, they tried to kill each other.

FACTS BROTHER: But that ain't us, I love my brother. Please, it's my baby brother and I ain't seen him in seven years. (42-3)

As the guard grants his request and the brothers are to be reunited, Earl and Ronnie, played by Joshua Lamont, step into the water from opposite ends of the stage and walk slowly toward each other, as their shoes and pants became submerged in this symbolic cleansing. When the brothers unite through tears and embraces, Woolery's staging of this merciful moment amidst a sea of sadness reinforces the complexities of the justice system and the human need for connection, which never ceases to exist, regardless of one's station in life.

Touch The Water

As the audience approaches the Bowtie Parcel in the Rio de Los Angeles State Park, they can view the lush vegetation on the banks of a gushing Los Angeles River, upending notions that this river is always barely a trickle meandering in between cement embankments. With two bleachers positioned at almost a ninety-degree angle, audience members face a spare scenic design consisting of a door frame, a small pool of water, and a platform, with the L.A. River in the background. As the sun sets, *Touch the Water* by Julie Hébert, directed by ensemble member Juliette Carrillo, begins, accompanied by a small but vibrant folk-rock band. Created in collaboration with numerous organizations including the Friends

of the Los Angeles River, Frogtown Arts Walk, Army Corps of Engineers, and several artists, activists, anglers, and authors, Hébert's play offers a musical, comedic, tragic, and highly theatrical consideration of life along the L.A. River. The cast of characters includes those who live near the river, those who lost siblings or children in the river, activists, anglers, a spirit, a chorus of fauna comprised of a crow, heron, mallard, raccoon, and catfish. Even the late French writer and director, Roger Vadim, is a character. [Photo 1] Vadim opens the play, sashaying center stage, as he proclaims, "Touch the water, man, that's the instruction from the gods, touch the water where you live or you will not know where you are" (1). He then ushers in a plan to save the L.A. River when he encounters Luis Otcho-o, an ex-convict who lives on the riverbanks. After Vadim exits,



Photo 9: Cornerstone Theater Company, *Touch The Water* (2009). Isa Pino (Page Leong) communes with a spirit, Maniisar (Laural Meade). Photo: John Luker

Luis soon communes with an indigenous spirit, Maniisar, a Tongva girl (staged as a puppet) who died in the river, as well as Ridley, a sea turtle who has been sickened by pollution in the river. As the three sing, Laural Meade, Maniisar's puppeteer, manipulates the ethereal spirit puppet as her haunting soprano melody joins with the rough, Tom Waits-esque voice of Luis, played by Kurup. Meanwhile, Isa Pino, Luis's neighbor, mourns the death of her little brother, Rana, who was shot by a gang at the river three years prior. She also calls upon the spirit and animal world to grant her solace. [Photo 9] Luis and Isa confront each other until Luis reveals he didn't stop the gang member from killing Rana because he himself was too drunk and scared. Isa

forgives Luis and finally sees Rana existing peacefully in the spirit world.

Hébert's play evokes the confluence of native Angelenos, scientists, government workers, animals, and supernatural beings whose lives intersect with the power of the river. Carrillo captures this intricacy in a particular moment of stunning theatricality. Isa first watches Rana walk away into the spirit world toward the upstage playing area. A short time later, Isa and the audience see Rana, illuminated by a spotlight, waving on the other side of the Los Angeles River. Carrillo's unexpected theatrical use of the opposing river bank, coupled with the audience's witnessing of Rana literally crossing over to the "other side," highlights the strength and vibrancy of the river to support, heal, and thrive.

On Caring for the Beast

Cornerstone includes one show in each cycle written, directed, and performed only by Cornerstone's professional ensemble. *On Caring for the Beast*, written and directed by Kurup, delves into the lives of six individuals who deal with how notions of injustice affect one's body and spirit. Alissa is a reporter interviewing Narayan, a doctor who committed torture in an unnamed country. As Alissa gets more and more invested in her story, she begins to test her own pain threshold. She and her boyfriend, Sean, experiment with electric wires to see how far the pain will push them. Meanwhile, Charlie has an unnamed illness in which his muscles atrophy causing him constant pain while his lover, Art, tries to do anything to alleviate his partner's suffering. Mae, the owner of the apartment house where all these individuals live, is a type of shaman and, through her access to the spirit world, attempts to intervene in the lives of her tenants to bring an end to their suffering.

Produced in the Rosenthal Theater at Inner-City Arts, a vital arts education center in the heart of an economically challenged area of downtown Los Angeles, Kurup's play asks his audience to consider the notion of the darkness within and outside oneself. The bare set with three distinct playing areas that are often illuminated by evocative videography provides an amorphous landscape through which the characters connect to each other and other planes of existence. Alissa's descent into pain begins as she delves deeper into Dr. Narayan's tales of torture. While the details are harrowing, Narayan emphasizes that he now must live in the truth.

NARAYAN: I was asleep in my own nightmare. I was asleep 'till I awoke. You have to wake to your nightmare before you wake from it. You have to wake to the truth.

ALISSA: Which is...?

NARAYAN: That truth is the most corrosive substance in existence. It dissolves all barriers. Nothing can stand up to it. Everything melts in its presence. (*Beat*) And I can feel it melting my very skin without the benefit of anesthetic and yet I can no more deny its call than refuse the call to breathe.

ALISSA: And what is this call?

NARAYAN: To undo all that I have done. To acknowledge that it was wrong. When that realization hits you there's no turning back. (63-4)

[Photo 10]

Kurup stages a climactic moment in the second act when Mae, played by ensemble member Page Leong, stands atop a platform as she channels Kali, the Indian deity of benevolence and destruction. Her voice amplified and distorted, Leong extends her body to assume goddess-like dimensions just as Alissa and Sean reach the height of their pain experimentation, Art tries desperately to heal Charlie using a laying on of hands, and in repentance for his torturous deeds, Narayan proceeds to remove his

tongue, signified by a red ribbon. As the supernatural and natural worlds collide, Kurup's stirring production evokes the lengths to which individuals will go to eradicate the injustice of physical suffering. [Photo 11] While this play was not created using Cornerstone's community-based theatre methodology, the ensemble show allows the company members to consider their own responses to issues of justice.

3 Truths

As the security guard finishes his opening monologue in the California Plaza amphitheatre, lights shift to an African American actress adorned in a regal headdress. She commiserates with a teenage girl as both light candles



Photo 10: Cornerstone Theater Company, *On Caring For The Beast* (2009). Alissa (Bahni Turpin) interviews Narayan (Amro Salama).

Photo: Ricardo Miranda

in a church, and thus continues Iizuka's *3 Truths*, the Cornerstone bridge show directed by Garcés. The bridge show is an original play inspired by the cycle's theme and elements from each of the cycle's plays. From *For All Time*, Iizuka connected to the *Oresteia* and decided to adapt the entire ancient Greek play cycle to a modern day Los Angeles world. Of this choice, Iizuka remarks,

There's something deeply resonant about the familial struggles in the *Oresteia* that provided a root system for the play. There's a danger of getting mired in the philosophical discussion around justice, but at the end of the day, you're talking about men and women, parents and children, brothers and sisters who are struggling to deal with the impact or aftermath of a violent crime, an imperfect criminal justice system, or unjust immigration policies. (Interview)

This three-act epic bridge show also uses the device of the three questions to frame each act. In Part One, an

adaptation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, which chronicles Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War and his eventual death at the hands of his wife, Clytemnestra, Iizuka examines the life of Cleodora and her husband, Ray, who has just returned after ten years in prison for gang-related crimes. In a direct address, Ray recounts how he picked up a mysterious woman, Cassandra, on the side of the road on his way home. As played by Juanita Chase, Cassandra performs a haunting dance amidst grief-stricken wails that exemplify the character's haunted otherworldliness. Framed by the question, "What is my truth?" Iizuka creates a linear narrative that comes to a climax when Cleodora kills Ray and Cassandra in retribution for Ray abusing and killing their young daughter Ignacia before he went to prison. Garcés stages this first act in the contained playing area of the amphitheatre stage, mirroring the straightforward trajectory of the tragic tale. [Photo 12]

In Part Two, Iizuka adapts Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, which recounts Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's son, Orestes's return from exile to seek revenge for his father's murder. In *3 Truths*, Orozco, Cleodora and Ray's son, has been living in Jalisco, Mexico, and returns to L.A. to seek revenge by killing his mother at the end of the act. Iizuka also creates a character Augustus, a homeless man who communes with the spirit world and whose prognostications function as some sort of ancient oracle intersecting this modern, urban world. Driven by the question, "What is your truth?" this act is more frenetic, textually and directorially, mirroring the notion that someone else's truth can be a disruptive challenging combination of stories. The act begins with a stirring theatrical moment in which Garcés stages Augustus's entrance from a nearby platform above and outside the amphitheatre. Peter Howard, an ensemble member since

Cornerstone's inception, intensely captures Augustus's seer-like qualities as he stands atop a staircase and exclaims with a booming vocal incantation:

AUGUSTUS: Change one thing, you change it all. Everything is interconnected. Everyone is interconnected in a vast metaphysical system, a divine, celestial ecosystem. The past and the present. The present and the future. A stranger you never met. A child yet to be born. A child killed before his time. You change one thing, you change it all. (31)

Then, Augustus descends the staircase and begins to wade through a shallow pool adjacent to the amphitheatre—also part of California Plaza's permanent structure. This character's transgressing of social norms wonderfully complicates the world of the play by injecting the supernatural and a sense of righteous lawlessness into the narrative. [Photo 13]

In the evening's final act, Iizuka adapts Aeschylus's *The Eumenides*, which follows Orestes's torment by the gods for killing his mother, and his subsequent trial by citizen

jurors to decide his fate. Fueled by the question, "What is the truth?" Iizuka and Garcés create a courtroom to formally present the evidence for and against Orozco's crime. Garcés stages the act in a concert reading style perhaps to mirror the formality of a trial proceeding and the presentational fixedness of the larger sense of truth. With two lecterns downstage, the entire cast sits upstage and observes the trial, with individuals occasionally testifying for or against Orozco. Andres Munar, the ensemble member playing Orozco, palpably embodies the exhaustion, bewilderment, and frenzied passion, which fuel his character's journey. In addition, Iizuka includes stories of other victims seeking justice and addresses other crimes examined in the play, such as

Photo 11: Cornerstone Theater Company, *On Caring For The Beast* (2009). Mae (Page Leong) channels a spirit for Alissa (Bahni Turpin).

Photo: Ricardo Miranda



the death of Augustus at the hands of a young man, Miguel. In the end, all those on trial are proven neither innocent nor guilty. [Photo 14]

Throughout *3 Truths*, one experiences the echoes of the other cycle plays. Orozco crossing the border back into the U.S. recalls the journey of the immigrant characters in *Los Illegals*. In Cassandra's only monologue, she reveals she had a child who was eventually adopted by a gay couple, thus reflecting the world of reproductive rights in *Someday*. Augustus railing against the pollution of the Los Angeles River highlights the world of *Touch the Water*. The exploration of the physical effects of human darkness resonates with *On Caring for the Beast*. Finally, the extensive exploration of criminal acts, incarceration, and the justice system draws largely from *For All Time*.

Another echo resonates in the casting of *3 Truths*. For audience members who saw many of the *Justice Cycle* plays, watching the actors in the bridge show also creates a sense of ghosting—the reverberation of all the characters a particular actor played, as conceptualized by Marvin Carlson—infusing the roles in *3 Truths* with additional power. Two of the main roles exemplify this aspect of the experience. Ensemble member Bahni Turpin, who played Cleodora, also played a woman trying to conceive in *Someday*, a woman up for parole and a mother of a murdered child in *For All Time*, and a journalist experimenting with pain thresholds in *On Caring for the*

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Beast. Therefore, notions of conception, incarceration, victimization, and experimentation hover around the periphery of Turpin's performance of the Clytemnestra role. Munar who played Orozco also played a young man from Mexico who tried to immigrate to the U.S. but died in the desert in *Los Illegals*. Thus, Munar's Orestes role recalls the extreme measures a man will take to seek freedom in the U.S.

In addition to impacting the community members, ensemble artists, and audience members, the *Justice Cycle* also yielded experiences for Cornerstone that highlight their commitment to the communities they serve. Garcés states, "Part of our mission is being a cornerstone for art-making in the communities in which we work, that the project ultimately fosters other things" (Interview). Teatro Bravo in Phoenix, Arizona, subsequently produced *Los Illegals*. While some Cornerstone shows have been produced on college campuses in abridged form, the Arizona production was the first time a Cornerstone script had been remounted by a professional theatre company in its entirety. Furthermore, an abridged version of the play was given a reading at the National Day Laborers Organization conference in Washington D.C. Most significantly, several



Photo 12: Cornerstone Theater Company, *3 Truths* (2010). Orozco (Andres Munar) threatens Cleodora (Bahni Turpin).

Photo: Gary Leonard

of the Cornerstone *Los Illegals* cast members formed their own theatre company, Teatro Jornalero, which performs theatre pieces at day laborer sites throughout southern California. Housed at the Cornerstone offices and recently supported in part by a substantial grant from the Ford Foundation, this collective of Latino theatre artists is forging new paths in their communities, utilizing the tools they first gained in the Cornerstone production.

act of mercy. Sarah Gonzales, a graying inmate with a long, Native American-style braid down her back, rose from her front row seat and handed Earl some tissues. He grasped them and went on without interruption. When Earl and Joshua Lamont performed the embrace, the audience broke into sustained applause. In L.A. the scene always elicited quiet sniffles Earl said.



Photo 13: Cornerstone Theater Company, *3 Truths* (2010). Augustus (Peter Howard) prophesies.

Photo: Gary Leonard

During the production of *For All Time*, several of the women interviewed were unable to attend the performance due to their continued incarceration. Therefore, Cornerstone decided to bring the play to them and was granted permission to mount the production at the California Institute for Women, a minimum to medium security prison in Corona, California. Mike Boehm, a journalist from the *Los Angeles Times*, accompanied Cornerstone for this prison performance and reported:

In a monologue delivered through tears, actor Marcenus "M.C." Earl, himself an ex-convict who served time for a 1995 bank robbery, told of two long-separated brothers who were able to meet and embrace in a prison cell, thanks to a guard's

As Sanchez reflects,

No drive-by art here... that's what Cornerstone gets more than any other organization I've ever worked with. They don't drop a community once the work is done. Because that's the one and only truth—that for us, it's an artistic expression, it's a questioning, an examination if you will, but for them... it's their LIFE. (Interview)

Cornerstone Theater Company's *Justice Cycle* is one of the rare examples when a U.S. theatre company singularly commits to telling its communities' stories, making a sustained effort to listen to the citizens of its city and partnering with professional artists to create compelling



Photo 14: Cornerstone Theater Company, *3 Truths* (2010). Allison Yee (Serena Lin) defends Miguel (Joel Jimenez).

Photo: Gary Leonard

theatre—theatre which not only challenges but invites audiences into lives and worlds they may never otherwise have the opportunity to witness. The productions also have a powerful effect on their creators. Hébert, a Peabody award-winning writer and director for theatre, television, and film reflects, “My experience with Cornerstone and the Los Angeles River community was the most moving artistic process I have ever been part of. The power of creativity and public ritual was never clearer to me.... It was a profound and humbling experience” (Interview). The truth about Cornerstone’s *Justice Cycle* is that it provides a model for vibrant twenty-first century theatre, one that amply reflects the diversity, complexity, and beauty of an ever-changing U.S. society. Garcés emphasizes,

When the plays work best they honor a multiplicity of truths and ideas with a strong point of view but without relinquishing the ambiguity of the fact that there are many stories that make up a community and that they are irreconcilable. And so the truth of a community is that we acknowledge and live in that irreconcilable place... and that we continue to do the work of trying to create civil society out of those contradictions. (Interview)

The theme of the company’s next play cycle is hunger. One hopes that many more audiences will experience Cornerstone’s compelling work and have the opportunity to reflect upon their own irreconcilable appetites and desires in the years to come.

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