

Sojourn Theatre
Case Study by Molly Sturges
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Sojourn's theatrical projects contribute to civic dialogue by engaging the public in issues that affect our daily lives. Such dialogue is an essential part of a democracy, as it allows for the sharing of diverse perspectives, and can lead to more multi-faceted, humane, and realistic views of issues and each other. As a company, Sojourn is purposeful in incorporating civic dialogue into the arts experience – both while creating and presenting works. They seek to serve as a catalyst, and to provide a forum where the public can both participate in and witness the examination of critical issues of our time.

Excerpt from Sojourn's 2010 Operational Support Packet

As our country becomes ever more polarized, Sojourn Theatre is playing the role of bridge builder in its ability to draw out and engage multiple perspectives. They are exploring how creative interaction can be part of civic engagement in ways that result in deeper understandings and connections across our communities.

While ballet, symphony, and regional theatre are well understood by arts funders and advocates, innovative companies like Sojourn are constantly in the position of educating partners, audiences and leaders about the meaning and value of their work. Despite repeated major successes they continue to be misunderstood and overlooked by major cultural institutions.

This paper looks closely at Sojourn Theatre to help illuminate its process, structure, and contributions, both artistic and civic. In later discussion, emerging issues are explored that will guide arts advocates, foundations and cultural leaders in supporting and elevating innovative boundary-crossing ensembles.

An Introduction to Sojourn Theatre

In 2000, Sojourn's artistic director, Michael Rohd, initiated the formation of a new theatrical ensemble dedicated to the exploration of the artist's relationship to audience, site and place. Moving away from product-oriented, text-based theatre, Rohd turned towards the cultivation of a form of *civic theatre*-a theatrical practice based on the creation of spaces for civic engagement around contemporary issues. Sojourn's creative practice challenges presenters, funders, artists, partners, and the community to renew notions of what it is to engage in, and support, contemporary theatre of social and artistic import.

Nine years later Sojourn is now a committed ensemble of nine artists based in Portland, Oregon, with members also currently in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City.

Sojourn has created 24 original works and has become internationally recognized for their creative process and the caliber of their artistic contributions.

Approximately sixty-five percent of Sojourn's work focuses on *civic theatre* projects that are deeply rooted in community. Activities belonging to this type of work include intensive community research and mapping, personal and group interviews, and extensive partnership cultivation. The remaining third of Sojourn's work consists of adaptations of classic tales and scripts developed by the ensemble in studio settings. This work immerses audiences in choreographed intermedia environments. Here Sojourn takes creative risks in the artistically-driven spectacles they create. Sojourn relies on both streams of work to compliment and inform one another, giving the artists a chance to take on new challenges and gain fresh insights. Additional Sojourn activities include residencies, touring and conference presentations.

The Creative Process: Collisions, Interactions and Participation

With all of our programming, we offer spaces for individuals, organizations and even populations in the community who may not often connect around certain content to come together, forge new relationships, and grapple with complicated civic matter in innovative, productive ways. It stems from our desire, as citizens and artists, to not just make art about democracy; we seek to make art that is part of how democracy functions.
Sojourn Annual Report

Sojourn creates spaces for democratic moments, encounters, and interactions. Sojourn's democratic intentions manifest as they bring people together across boundaries and borders, to engage in conversation, to give voice to opinions around issues, to express agency, to listen to one another, and eventually to make decisions.

Unlike an ensemble that creates new work in an insular setting and then presents the finished piece to an audience, Sojourn typically nurtures a wide range of relationships throughout every stage of their process. They are constantly evolving methods and strategies for connections, interactions and forms of participation.

Their creative process rests on several key elements:

- Identification of core questions
- Ensemble-based work
- Site-specificity
- Building cross-sector partnerships
- Interdisciplinary artistic practice
- Commitment to continued professional exploration

Identification of Core Questions

Sojourn's work is based upon a sustaining interest in process, content and collisions of communities. This inquiry has grown a body of work that explores difficult questions about what it is to be American and the challenges that people and communities face in relation to one another. The company is driven by core beliefs that lead them to examine the values that bring Americans together, and that keep them apart.

In general Sojourn's work begins with a central inquiry that informs the shape and design of the research, development and performance of the piece. Sojourn productions have engaged issues such as democracy and war (*The War Project: 9 Acts of Determination*), education (*Witness Our Schools*), civic life (*One Day*), business ethics / personal responsibility (*GOOD*), healthcare modalities / traditions across cultures (*Throwing Bones*), and urban development / civic planning (*BUILT*).

In 2005-2006 when the ensemble started *The War Project* they began with a central theme leading to a central question. They were not interested in making a show about *whether we should be at war in Iraq*, but rather, *how as a nation do we decide what to kill and die for?* As Sojourn framed their conversation about war, they sought out as many perspectives as possible from many different communities and groups. Their interest was in a multiplicity of perspectives and ideas so that they were not just expressing narratives.

Ensemble-Based Work

Sojourn is an ensemble-based company that relies on a well-developed ensemble of artists. Led by artistic director Michael Rohd, the ensemble consists of nine artists, seven creator/performers and two production/design/technical artists. While Sojourn is headed up by a charismatic artistic director, each member is unique and crucial to the development and evolution of Sojourn's work. The structure of the company supports ensemble-based methods of creating original work through periods of development and collaboration. Focused time together as an ensemble is central to Sojourn's notions and experience of successful work.

Site-Specificity

Sojourn is one of the most practiced site-specific companies at work today. They have cultivated a specific set of skills and affinities related to this practice. Artists respond, create, and react to a wide set of parameters informed by place. Site-specific artists are always creating anew. They welcome surprise and challenge. They are in constant conversation with the many elements of a specific site whether it be a hospital, the state capitol, or a car dealership. This conversation with place informs every element of the development and performance of a work.

Building Cross-Sector Partnerships

The contexts within which Sojourn develops original work are constantly changing. Sojourn regularly builds community partnerships outside of arts communities, for example:

- *Witness Our Schools*: Partnerships between The Oregon Historical Society, The Oregon Department of Education and the Oregon State Legislature
- *GOOD*: A partnership with the largest family-owned car dealership in the Pacific NW, Portland Business Alliance, and Portland General Electric
- *Throwing Bones*: A partnership with a School of Nursing, a center for refugee services, a hospital, a health insurance conglomerate and several musicians from South Africa
- *BUILT*: A partnership between The Portland City Office of Planning, Sisters of The Road Homeless Shelter, architecture firms and development firms
- (upcoming) *Nursing Home Projects*: A partnership with The Center on Age & Community (with Anne Bastings), nursing homes (TBA), Alzheimer's support and advocacy groups, National Endowment for the Arts and other civic and medical research funders

Cross-sector partnerships define Sojourn's approach and are essential to their creative process. Through these partnerships Sojourn demonstrates a commitment to bridge-building. Cross-sector partnerships also serve as an adaptive strategy that has proved useful during times of economic challenge. Benefits of such partnerships include support in developing project resources, accessibility, audience development, outreach and marketing.

Increasingly Sojourn is reaching out to people with political authority to create impact and moments of change. It is not uncommon for them to partner with civic bodies such as state and city offices and business partners.

Building cross-sector partnerships has proven to be a cornerstone of Sojourn's success. It is not clear if this approach will translate, over the long-term, into on-going funding for partnership development or even substantial early stage funding for additional projects.

Interdisciplinary Artistic Practice

Increasingly Sojourn is engaging other artistic disciplines. They have recently invested substantial energy and time into collaborations with media makers (*The Race, On The Table*). The desire to grow artistically and to explore new mediums is critical to their evolution as innovative artists. Such growth and collaboration requires time and support in order for artists immerse themselves in the medium to find personal and group relationships and creative insights.

Commitment to Continued Professional Exploration

In an effort to evolve as an ensemble of artists, Sojourn regularly seeks to learn from colleagues and ensembles from a wide range of disciplines. Artist teachers and mentors have included Ping Chong, North American Cultural Laboratory, Eric Rosen, Amara Tabor Smith, Mike Barber, and Obo Addy. Recent learning collaborations with professionals in other fields include Ethan Seltzer (Chair of Urban Planning, Portland State University) and Carol Morse, Pacific General Electric Foundation. Two ensembles, Rimini Protokal and The Builders Association, which work with integrated media have provided consistent inspiration.

Creating an Organization to Support Sojourn's Civic Theatre

As Sojourn has grown over the years, so has their understanding of how to create an organizational structure that can support their focus on touring, civic theatre projects, and residencies. What follows is a discussion about the evolving process of finding a structure that supports and reflects their values and practices.

Existing Organizational Structure

The nine ensemble members of Sojourn are largely under their own direction. Currently the company's administrative, fundraising, financial and marketing activity is carried out by Managing Director Alisha Tonsic with support from Michael Rohd and other ensemble members.

Sojourn identifies as a family of artists that operates with a small board of directors that advises the company on policy matters, provides fiscal oversight and supports Sojourn's work in communities. Additionally they are supported by a Resource Council that serves as advisors on a number of legal, financial, artistic, and community-specific issues.

As a project-based company that creates and undertakes projects of varying scope and size, Sojourn's annual budgets ebb and flow. A large-scale project with multiple community partners requires significantly more support than a smaller scale project that is completed within a few months. Budget shifts reflect the cycles involved with researching, developing, and producing original work. Recent annual budgets have ranged between \$100,000 -- \$250,000.

Cultivating a Home Base

From the beginning Sojourn was interested in operating from a home base and traveling to collaborate with diverse communities and learn from mentors and colleagues. Portland, Oregon became a supportive home base with an ever-growing web of support from audiences, funders and collaborators. This seasoned support structure provides a wide range of resources: inexpensive or free rehearsal space, equipment, and access to networks as well as financial support.

Over time Sojourn has cultivated personal relationships that give them access to civic bodies and institutions such as officials in City Hall and the Oregon State Legislature. One example of this is Sojourn's relationship to the current Mayor's lead advisor on arts and culture. Sojourn had created a large-scale benefit when she held a previous position at a voter registration and advocacy group. As a result of this collaboration, Sojourn is in a series of conversations with her about upcoming projects.

Though the majority of the ensemble members, and Sojourn's administrative core resides in Portland, over the years members have relocated to New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. The company is also now on the road more than ever before. They continue to value and develop their home base in Portland despite the fact that they are often

developing work in other places or touring. This sense of home is essential to their experience of well-being.

Creating a Structure that Works: Balancing Flexibility and Institutionalization

At any given moment Sojourn is working in multiple communities. With increased traveling they needed to create a structure that was flexible and adaptive. In 2008, this need was addressed by a move away from previous organizational forms that closely resembled small institutional theatres.

Sojourn found that a traditional model failed to support the group-oriented structure, or to meet the demands of the economic downturn and a dynamic program calendar. They found that their attempt to sustain themselves as a traditional theatrical institution put at risk many of the elements and values that motivate them.

Unlike many non-profits and small theatre groups who have had to streamline their operation in the face of financial crisis, Sojourn began this process before the recent economic turmoil. This has allowed them time to plan their *survivability*, as opposed to moving into such changes during a crisis mode. During this time they made substantial changes that eased financial challenges:

- They ended their studio/office lease in Portland
- Managing Director position was reduced from full-time to half-time in fall of 2007
- Michael Rohd accepted a position as a visiting professor at Chicago's Northwestern University

Many artists are finding similar benefits through teaching positions that allow them to develop their own work while carrying a flexible teaching load. By securing his salary and health benefits through Northwestern, Michael is able to donate in-kind his intensive work as Sojourn's artistic leader. His flexible schedule allows him to remain artistic director at Sojourn and travel between Portland and Chicago regularly as well as bring ensemble members to Chicago (with Sojourn responsible for raising most of these funds) to work on projects in a lab-like setting. The position at Northwestern looks stable into the near future, as Michael has been offered a tenure-track position.

Even with modifications to their organizational structure, and the strategies they implemented to cope with financial changes, Sojourn had their most prolific year in 2008. The company completed three large-scale productions, participated in a major arts festival, undertook a residency, participated in conferences, toured shows and worked in five cities.

Overall, Sojourn successfully adapted to a shifting economic landscape in the U.S. Due to the quality and social relevance of their work, their growing reputation, and Michael Rohd's increasing emergence as a leader and unique contributor to his field, Sojourn is rising.

Keeping Core Values Alive in the Ensemble

Sojourn's commitment to diversity of participation and expression is evident in the wide range of community collaborations they develop, as well as the cultivation of a working community. That community includes ensemble members, board members, associate artists and collaborators that span a wide range of backgrounds including age, ethnicity, race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and area of origin.

Sojourn's commitment to dialogue and communication within the ensemble contributes to their success. Sojourn works hard to walk their talk. Some of their valuable and successful practices have included:

- Committing to collaborative problem-solving and an on-going process of clarifying and articulating values within the ensemble
- Committing to healthy tension and disagreement within the ensemble
- Bringing people from outside the family of artists to push the ensemble towards new growth areas
- Being conscious that the ensemble's articulation of values and goals impacts their ability to create productive partnerships and do meaningful work

Emerging Issues, Needs and Challenges

What follows are a series of short discussions about a range of emerging issues, needs and challenges Sojourn is currently dealing with.

Engaging Civic and Cultural Issues

I am interested in learning more about how civic decisions are made and trying to insert the artistic process into it. I believe that within moments of art-making there is a unique kind of imagining that occurs. I would like that imagining to be present when leaders are trying to create a vision for the future. I believe that it is our responsibility, as artists, to try to figure out how imagining can occur, and in this context that means understanding the practicalities and pragmatic needs of civic decision-making.

(M. Rohd in conversation with M. Sturges, May 2009)

Sojourn recognizes the pressing need to educate civic, business, education and cultural leaders in the history, tradition and potential of arts-based dialogue. They believe that only through education and advocacy will arts-based dialogue eventually become valued by larger institutions.

Michael would like to see arts advocates and artists traveling and presenting outside of the arts establishment in order to instigate more cross-sector gatherings. Other approaches could include cultivation of celebrity support, engagement of politicians, a substantial web presence, school education, and campaigns and conferences to further educate and catalyze interaction.

Sojourn has made significant inroads in their home city of Portland where they feel their work is understood and appreciated by growing numbers of people. Still Michael acknowledges that broad support would have come quicker had there been a campaign that educated leaders and that connected arts companies doing this work with civic and social bodies. Without support from arts advocacy organizations much of this education falls to the ensemble, which is already strained by the extended process required by civic theatre.

Supporting Artists in Early Phases of Projects: Re-Valuing Research and Development

Funders don't typically view research and development (R & D) as being a significant part of production costs. As a result Sojourn notes that project-based financial support often kicks in after seven months of a project. This requires ensemble members to donate substantial amounts of time to the early stages of the project. By appropriate valuation of the importance of the early stages of work and R & D, the reality of the project's scope can be more accurately accounted for. To create a sustaining model of support for Sojourn, research and development must be seen as vital to the overall process of developing work.

Re-Aligning Cost Structures with Sojourn's Creative Process

Sojourn has found resourceful methods for sustaining and growing their work. These include strategies for supporting ensemble work, identifying the need for core organizational support, and a proposed solution to supporting and sustaining community partnerships

Methods for Supporting Ensemble Work

Sojourn currently uses different strategies to bring the ensemble together to create work. Increasingly theatre and university residencies provide a solution through dedicated space, financial support, and technical support. Other methods include fundraising specifically for supported ensemble time in Portland at a temporary studio.

Working at home and working on the road are different. Ensemble members working away often find effective focus that enables productive use of their time. On the other hand, ensemble work developed from their home base means that most of the ensemble members can be nourished by their home lives; they have varied resources available to them because they are known and cared for by a community of supporters. Finally, in their home base, though they don't work out of a set studio, they are able to make their own rules and are not required to conform to union rules, as may be the case in collaborations with union theatres.

As Sojourn grows and travels more, the logistics of bringing the ensemble together must take into account the maturation of Sojourn artists. They need to maintain healthy lives and balance families, mortgages, and day jobs. While residencies provide some solutions, Sojourn struggles to encourage some partners to see the value of bringing the whole ensemble to develop work.

Increasingly regional theatres are commissioning Michael to create work for other ensembles and groups. Typically this level of support allows him to travel alone or with one other person. Michael feels there is a lack of education and understanding about how much the partnering ensemble or organization would benefit from interaction with a full ensemble. Regional theatres are interested in the kind of “process” he uses in developing work but typically want him to do it without his ensemble due to cost. For Michael this is problematic. Sojourn is an ensemble-based company. Participation of the full ensemble in workshops and residencies is ideal for a high level of artistic excellence. Additionally Sojourn is in need of on-going blocks of supported time together to develop new work. Michael knows that the presentations, residencies and workshops that he leads alone as an artistic director brings the company additional support, but he has an on-going concern implications of insufficient supported development time for the full ensemble.

Part of this challenge may be due to the fact that Sojourn is often exploring new artistic terrains. For example, for years they created poetic documentary work that, had they continued working on it, would likely have evolved into a kind of identifiable *product*. The fact that Sojourn is constantly growing and evolving may make it even harder for established arts institutions to understand and even identify the scope and value of the full company’s work.

Providing Operational Support

Sojourn needs time and energy for human relationships. Nurturing relationships insures Sojourn’s capacity to sustain. In order to do this well, the ensemble requires a managing director on full-time salary with benefits and a part-time development manager. Michael describes general manager, Alisha Tonisc, as the ‘heart of the company.’ Currently Alisha manages the grant paper-work, leaving most of the funder relationships to Michael, with other ensemble members picking up some aspects of the work. To support Sojourn in a manner that ensures their well-being and continued innovation the full ensemble require full-time salaries and health insurance

Supporting Community Partnerships

Because Sojourn’s contexts are constantly changing, the level of energy that is required for on-going coordination, networking, and connecting is substantial. Research and development in this practice implies maximum engagement in a wide range of relationships including people, institutions and spaces. With multiple projects, workshops and residencies occurring within a year period, the time and energy spent on community resource work is significant and urgently needs to be addressed. A full-time staff person whose focus is on community partnering and pre-work with communities is essential for Sojourn. Having one person to focus fully on relationships will ensure sustainability through an on-going web of networks and support.

Evolving New Technologies into Interdisciplinary Artistic Practices

Recent projects (*The Race*) and an upcoming project (*On the Table*) have inspired in-depth collaborations with media makers. In *The Race*, web-based interactive video became a mode to cross distances between constituents. A global chorus consisting of

people from many different countries participated live, real-time in the performance through structured but open segments. Michael recognizes that real-time web-based interactive performance is a way to catalyze spontaneous encounters.

Currently Sojourn is researching how to use interactive technology as a way of facilitating moments of exchange, as a means to expand moments of knowing. They see the power of co-authored story-building as an opportunity for meaningful connection between strangers.

The effort to create collaborations that produce cutting-edge installation interfaces within a theatrical construct requires substantial collaborative time between technology experts, the artistic director, the ensemble and project participants. There are only a few companies in the USA that have access to the equipment, and paid artist time to explore, research and develop new technology-based theatre practices, and the opportunity to collaborate with technologically skilled partners.

For Sojourn to evolve in this area they need access to state of the art equipment and supported time for their artists and technological experts to explore new applications and possibilities. Sojourn currently relies on borrowed equipment and donated time and they have achieved much with few resources. They have the conceptual brainpower and imaginations to be working with top-notch technical conceptualists to manifest many exciting projects but they are severely limited by resources. Ultimately Sojourn would like to see live performance collaborations at university-level virtual labs, and technology companies such as Microsoft and Google.

Supporting Innovation

The general practice of support in the arts is based upon repeating an artistic success and it becoming the foundation of a career. How do funders support artists who are not replicating and commodifying their successes but who are pushing forward and experimenting without necessarily being able to state the value of the work while in the midst of it?

The way in which we understand and support innovators such as Sojourn first requires us to identify the right questions to ask. These questions are revealed by stepping outside of the paradigm that equates art and entertainment, and listening to the tried and true experiences of the artists themselves. It involves asking them what they need to be successful and what support they most need. In the case of Sojourn it also requires us to consider the artist as researcher who not only produces work, but spends a great deal of time and energy evolving the questions and strategies that inform their work.

Building Upon Sojourn's Successes

Sojourn is extremely adaptable and despite being small and non-traditional they have persevered when small companies have closed their doors. The very fact that they do exist after nine years speaks to their commitment, ingenuity and integrity.

Funders and partners have played a catalytic role in Sojourn's success. Sojourn has received a wide range of support that has significant impact. These include

- an Animating Democracy exemplar award in 2005 for \$150,000 over 2 years which allowed Michael to go on salary for the first time;
- The Oregon-based Meyer Foundation in 2004 provided \$80,000 over two years for capacity building and allowed Sojourn to hire Alisha Tonisc as managing director;
- On-going PGE funding support in Portland persuaded other conservative foundations to support and value Sojourn;
- The Wentworth family provided their Subaru dealership in which to build a show, giving Sojourn cachet in the business community;
- The MAP grant for *Witness Our Schools*, seen as a "blue-chip" grant in the funding world (meaning that other foundations often follow suit);
- Being invited to perform at the State Capitol -- a seminal moment for arts-based dialogue in Oregon.

For Michael success as a company means continuing to make new work and surviving organizationally as an entity that supports this family of artists working together. It is about being able to continue making work that they are proud of, work they are learning from, that has community impact and contributes to the overall field.

Ideally in the near future we will find Sojourn's full company at work in their lab/studio or out on the road engaging a wide variety of communities on new work or touring established work. We will find them doing what they are doing now, but supported by salaried full-time positions and health insurance. Their studio would demonstrate their growing collaborations with technology specialists and media makers; their office would house a full-time administrative manager, a development director and a community resource staff person.

It is compelling to imagine the potential benefit to our communities and world if Sojourn's work was indeed properly supported. At a time when connection and meaningful dialogue is so desperately needed, it is easy to imagine Sojourn's particular form of engagement as an inspiring and motivating force in many communities across the globe. We can hope for an emergent civic discourse around essential questions, difficult challenges and collective imaginings that will help us guide our way forward.

Molly Sturges is the co-founder and artistic director of Littlelobe, an artist-run non-profit devoted to collaborative intermedia projects and community justice and healing. She regularly develops and performs music projects, leads workshops and works as an artist-in-residence in the US and abroad. Molly has completed commissions for wide array of projects including music for dance, silent film, new opera, circus, immersive intermedia projects, arts and health projects and sound installations. Recent commissions have been for The European Union Festival of Culture, The Santa Fe Opera, The NM Arts and Social Justice Committee, The Stockton International Arts Festival (UK) and Dance City (UK). Sturges performs regularly and leads several creative music ensembles. She has been an artist-in-residence with The Santa Fe Opera for six years where she is the artistic director of Lifesongs, a collaborative project with hospice patients and people living in long-term nursing facilities. In 2008 Molly, together with Littlelobe co-founder, Chris Jonas, was awarded the United States Artist Simon Fellowship in Music.