

# COEXISTENCE INTERNATIONAL AT BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

## Strengthening the Contributions of Theatre to the Coexistence Field (Strand 5) Concept Paper

### Introduction

This concept paper, “Strengthening the Contributions of Theatre to the Coexistence Field”, describes a collaboration between two entities: 1) Coexistence International at Brandeis University, and 2) Theatre Without Borders (TWB). It builds on on-going work that has been taking place at Brandeis University within the Slifka Program in Intercommunal Coexistence, in an inquiry into creative approaches to coexistence and reconciliation.

“Strengthening the Contributions of Theatre to the Coexistence Field” is one of five strands of work being undertaken by Coexistence International. It will be convened by Dr. Cynthia Cohen of the Slifka Program in Intercommunal Coexistence at Brandeis University, and Roberta Levitow (theatre director, dramaturge, Visiting Professor at Bennington College and co-founder of Theatre Without Borders) and Ruth Margraff (New Dramatists alumni playwright, Fulbright All Disciplines: New Opera Award to Greece and TWB core member).

### Background

In conflict regions throughout the world, theatre artists work with communities in ways that contribute to coexistence, reconciliation and peace. Their work creates platforms on which inter-group relationships can be built, difficult issues can be engaged, losses can be mourned and new futures can be imagined. Theatre artists serve as listeners and witnesses, as mediators, as educators, as disseminators.

Within the large field of theatre, including both theory and practice, both scripted and non-scripted forms, ranging from community-based projects to world-class productions, and including work directly or in-directly aimed at creating collaborations amongst conflict participants, there exist enormous resources for efforts at strengthening relationships across difference, rebuilding trust in the aftermath of violence, and, in general, nourishing a culture of peace.

Conversely, within the field of coexistence theory and practice organizations and networks working at local, regional and international levels are resources that can support theatre artists working in conflict regions. There is knowledge about how to facilitate the dialogues that are taking place while developing projects, during rehearsals and following productions. Organizations exist that have on-going relationships in communities that could extend the impact of theatrical works more broadly throughout society. There are conceptual frameworks – for instance, about the cyclical nature of conflicts, the importance of ritual to peace building efforts, the educational dimensions of reconciliation, the dynamics of power in asymmetrical conflicts – that are proving useful to theatre artists as they work to describe, assess, extend and strengthen their work and as they find themselves in situations where artistic interaction alone is insufficient.

This collaboration is designed to strengthen the contributions of theatre to the coexistence field by providing opportunities for practitioners and scholars in the peace building and theatre fields to learn from each other and to reflect on and document their practice. We also intend to create an anthology

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that will be of use to both practitioners and to students. Our intention is to strengthen this area of work and also to add to its visibility and credibility.

**The Players**

Coexistence International at Brandeis University is a new initiative funded through a gift of the Alan B. Slifka Foundation, housed within the Slifka Program in Intercommunal Coexistence, itself a program of Brandeis' International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. CI envisions a world in which people of different religions, races, ethnicities and cultures relate with respect and recognize their interdependence, where diversity is embraced for its positive potential, and where equality is valued and actively pursued. Its mission is to strengthen the field of policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations and networks promoting coexistence at local, national and international levels.

CI has recently completed a strategic plan, committing itself to advocating for a complementary, inter-disciplinary vision of the coexistence field that includes not only practitioners and theorists working directly on coexistence (i.e. conflict resolution practitioners, coexistence facilitators, mediators, etc.) but also those working in related disciplines, such as humanitarian aid, sustainable development, cultural work, democracy education, etc. Art and cultural work are understood to be among these related disciplines, whose work can affect the quality of inter-group relations and who could benefit from stronger linkages with those working in the core of the coexistence field. CI's strategic plan includes four other strands of work: (i) networking those who are thinking about the field at a meta-level; (ii) strengthening coexistence policies; (iii) working with funders; and (iv) work within a particular, yet-to-be decided geographic region.

Theatre Without Borders is an informal group of individual theatre artists around the world, who are working to support international theatre exchange. It functions primarily as a volunteer, virtual community that shares information and builds connections between individuals and institutions that share this interest. TWB understands itself as 'a container for creating connections and sharing knowledge, information and skills.' It maintains an active website, disseminates information alerts, and works on issues of translation. TWB also hosts both virtual and in-person dialogues on theatre, cultural activism and building peace. Artists involved with TWB are working in the United States, Afghanistan, India, Ghana, Romania, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Bosnia, East Africa, China, Serbia and Montenegro, Mexico, Cambodia, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Turkey, Belarus, Russia and Iran, among many other countries.

Creative Approaches to Coexistence and Reconciliation is a multi-faceted inquiry based in the Slifka Program in Intercommunal Coexistence at Brandeis University. Through action/reflection projects, fellowship programs, courses, residencies and events, this inquiry is generating theoretical and practical knowledge about the contributions of cultural work and the arts to peacebuilding efforts. It is directed by Dr. Cynthia Cohen.

Conveners: Roberta Levitow and Ruth Margraff of TWB and Cynthia Cohen of the Slifka Program in Intercommunal Coexistence at Brandeis University are jointly convening "Strengthening the Contributions of Theatre to the Coexistence Field."

**Goals and Activities**

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Within CI's strategic plan, artists and cultural workers are seen as one example of a related discipline. For CI, this strand of work provides an opportunity to strengthen the coexistence field by linking with and building coexistence capacity within a related discipline. For TWB, this initiative provides resources and some structure for its already-begun exploration of theatre and peacebuilding.

During the next three years, we envision hosting gatherings of theatre artists (and others working in the theatre field), peacebuilding practitioners, and scholars from both fields. These gatherings will provide opportunities for exchange of both theory and practice. They are intended to strengthen artists' awareness of themselves as coexistence workers and to introduce them to a new knowledge base. They should also contribute to an expanded view of coexistence work and peacebuilding practice.

By the end of this period (i.e. by June 2008), we are committing ourselves to producing an anthology that documents our learning from this process and provides a resource for students and practitioners in the fields of theatre art and conflict resolution/coexistence/peacebuilding. We also intend to produce a handbook for policy-makers on the contributions of the arts and cultural work (more broadly) to coexistence.

In subsequent years, the anthology and handbook would be used as resources to raise awareness about the contributions of theatre, and of the arts in general, to coexistence. We imagine these volumes lending credibility to this area of work, and having an impact on both arts and peace curricula. We will also incorporate learning from this strand of work into new initiatives, focusing on other art forms. We intend that within ten years, funders and policy-makers will have increased their awareness of the key contributions that cultural work and the arts make to coexistence, and that their awareness will translate into more resources available to support this area of work.

**Activities to Date and Planned**

In reality, this strand of work on theatre and peacebuilding pre-dates CI's strategic planning process. It began in April 2005, when TWB invited Cynthia Cohen to participate in its founding symposium. There, she articulated the importance of theatre to the large project of peacebuilding, and, in particular, to the cultivation of the moral imagination. Also at that time, she and Jonathan Fox, the founder of Playback Theatre and the co-director of the *Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts* fellowship program at Brandeis, convened a conversation group on theatre and the moral imagination.

As a result of the high level of interest in exploring the intersection of theatre and peace, TWB and Brandeis jointly convened a Theatre and Peacebuilding Dialogue, which met in May 2005, in New York. This group formulated a set of questions, and invited colleagues from around the world to engage with these (and other) questions through their own dialogues on the relationship of theatre and peacebuilding. As of October, such conversations are beginning in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Belarus, India, Israel, Iran, Sri Lanka and Romania.

More recently, in September 2005, a second Theatre and Peacebuilding Dialogue was convened by TWB and CI in New York. The event took as a starting point Cynthia Cohen's chapter "Creative Approaches to Reconciliation" and invited five theatre artists to reflect on their own practice in that context: Dijana Milosevic of Dah Theatre in Belgrade, Serbia; Naum Panovsky, Theatre Director and

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College Professor, Macedonia; Jonathan Fox, founder of Playback Theatre and director of the School of Playback Theatre; Joanna Sherman of Bond Street Theatre, United States; and Catherine Filloux, playwright and Fulbright Scholar, United States. The conversation expanded to include representatives from Yale University and New York University as well.

An additional conversation is being planned for January 16 – 29, 2006, at the California Institute for the Arts in Los Angeles, in conjunction with a series of lectures, demonstrations, panels, roundtables and art-making workshops, entitled ‘Arts in the One World: A Consideration of Genocide.’ The series has been conceived by Erk Ehn, Dean of the Cal Arts Theatre School and a founding member of TWB, who brought students from Cal Arts and the University of Iowa to Rwanda in June 2005, for a focused examination of artmaking within the context of mass violence. The premise of the series is that “a way forward through violent times requires the persistent practice of hospitality and conversation across borders. The art of the near future is the art of hospitality.” The January events are being organized in affiliation with TWB, which will advise, strategize and help implement the project.

**Next Steps**

- 1) Plan for continuing the theatre and peace dialogue in the context of the Cal Arts event in January.
- 2) Theatre and Peace dialogue to be planned for Boston-area theatre artists with help from Scott Edmiston, Brandeis Office of the Arts, a participant in the September 23 gathering in NYC. Event is tentatively planned for Winter 2006.
- 3) By December 1, 2005, submit to the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) proposals for workshops, panels, performances, etc., at the International Peace Research Association Conference to be held in Calgary, Canada, June 30 – July 3, 2006.
- 4) Formal participation at IPRA. The event should be planned to bring together practitioners and scholars from the Theatre and Coexistence fields, if possible including people who will play important roles in conceptualizing and contributing to the anthology.

For additional information on this area of CI’s work, or about CI more generally, please contact Jessica Berns, CI Program Manager ([jberns@brandeis.edu](mailto:jberns@brandeis.edu)).