REPORT ON THE UTRECHT COMMUNITY ARTS LAB’S
THEATRE RESEARCH/FESTIVAL
June 20 – 21, 2013

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On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the signing of the Peace Treaty of Utrecht, the Treaty of Utrecht organization’s Community Arts Lab convened an extraordinarily diverse gathering of scholars, artists, policy-makers, students and citizens to explore the possibilities and limitations of the contributions of performance to peacebuilding. The gathering included performances of rituals and theatrical works, workshops, discussions and debates, as well as generous opportunities to connect with old friends and meet new colleagues and potential partners for future projects.

The two-day gathering was hosted by the internationally recognized scholar of community theatre, the director of the Community Arts Lab, Dr. Eugene van Erven. (He is also a contributor to Brandeis University’s collaboration with Theatre Without Borders, Acting Together on the World Stage: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict.) Eugene and his staff were extremely competent organizers and welcoming hosts, advancing the field of art and social transformation by creating the space for the witnessing of groundbreaking works and for thousands of significant connections and conversations, both formal and informal. For the schedule of the program, please visit http://www.uu.nl/EN/informationfor/intstaffandvisitors/Current/agenda/Pages/Community-Arts-Lab-Festival.aspx.

It was truly an honor to attend the festival and contribute to the conversation. I was joined by others from the Acting Together circle, including Roberto Varea (co-editor of the anthology) of the University of San
Francisco and the official representation of Theatre Without Borders; Dijana Milosevic of Dah Teatar in Serbia, Dr. Kandasamy Sithamparanathan of the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka, David Diamond of La MaMa E.T.C. and TWB, and Ana Correa and Augusto Casafraanca of Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani. In attendance also were Pauline Ross, who wrote the preface to the second volume of Acting Together; and Hjalmar Joffre-Eichhorn, whose work in Afghanistan is described in Jo Salas’ chapter on Playback Theatre in the same volume. Many other leaders of the field, including colleagues James Thompson of the In Place of War project in the UK, Chen Alon of Combatants for Peace in Israel/Palestine, Teya Sepinuck of Theatre of Witness at the Derry/Londonderry Playhouse in Northern Ireland, and the community arts policy expert Francois Mataras, also contributed in significant ways to the event, which included reports on research, workshops and performances, book launches, concerts, etc. For me personally, the opportunity for direct exchange with each of these scholars and artists was in various measures uplifting, challenging, educational, and useful in practical terms as well.

Several highlights stand out for me:

- **Performances.** The virtuosity and sophisticated political sensibilities of Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, as evidenced in their performance Adios Ayacucho was breathtaking. In Theatre of Witness, Protestant and Catholic citizens of Northern Ireland performed their own stories and relationships to profound effect. The Henry Girls music was compelling, and one could see Eugene van Erven’s curatorial genius at work when they performed along with community groups from Utrecht. (Excerpts from performances at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pP7VTNRKF4&feature=player_embedded)

  Perhaps the most powerful moment of performance for me took place on the bus trip from the conference site to the outskirts of the city, to witness the results of a Utrecht-Guatemala theatre exchange among young people. To all appearances, our bus was pulled over by two Dutch police officers, who demanded that we fasten our seatbelts and that one of the theatre-goers (the most dark-skinned person on the bus) produce his travel documents. Led by the intrepid Mexican actress/performance artist/activist Violeta Luna, those of us who were international travelers insisted on joining him in leaving the bus. A few moments later we came to understand that this scene was all part of the performance, to sensitize us to events that are not so unusual in Guatemala. The short performance made a deep impression on those who witnessed and participated.

- **Conversations.** In the course of three days, I was able to engage in professionally significant conversations with dozens of colleagues and students, old and new. These exchanges led to greater critical perspective on my own work, and also to ideas or potential future collaborations, particularly in relation to the 2014 gathering in Istanbul of the Arts and Peace Commission of the International Peace Research Association. Taken together, these candid exchanges created a picture of both the vulnerabilities and the resilience of the larger field of arts and social transformation.
• **Presentation and Screening of *Acting Together***: The theatre/research festival allowed me and *Acting Together* colleagues to share our work with international students, artists and scholars. Roberto Varea, Dijana Milosevic and I led a workshop that included theatre activities, readings from the *Acting Together* anthology, and screening of clips from the documentary and toolkit. On the second day of the festival, I had the opportunity to screen our full 54-minute documentary to an audience of 40 – 50 conference participants. Of the many questions asked following the film, one stands out for me because I didn't have a ready answer: “What is the common aesthetic among the peacebuilding performances featured in *Acting Together*?” I emphasized in fact the diversity of aesthetic sensibilities, ranging from ritual, community-based and artist-based expressions, reflecting very different aesthetics as well as very different ideas about the relationship between arts and social change.

While at the festival, we were able to distribute copies of our new multilingual version of the *Acting Together* documentary to colleagues in The Netherlands, Germany, Israel/Palestine, Colombia, Peru, Sri Lanka. We are looking forward to feedback about its reception in these various places.

![Participants in a theatre/mapping exercise led by Dijana Milosevic of Dah Teatar. Acting Together contributors Roberto Varea and Dr. Kandasamy Sithamparanathan flank the group on left and right, respectively.](image)

• **Witnessing the flourishing of investments in community and in relationships.** In our film, *Acting Together*, Dr. Eugene van Erven notes that art critics who are trained to identify excellence in final productions might miss the aesthetic
excellence of the processes entailed in community art productions. In the June 20 and 21 theatre research/festival, and in the community arts celebrations that followed, one could experience the results of collaborative relationships that had been built over many years— with local governing officials; with local community groups; with local, national and international artists, scholars and students. The whole event benefitted from participants’ sense of being well cared for, of being valued for their distinctive perspectives and unique creative contributions, of their eagerness to share ideas and artistic works across differences in style, culture, class, nationality, language, etc.

On the final evening, parades from 4 corners of the city brought 1500 young people of Utrecht to converge on the conference site, carrying puppets and banners. A free dinner served to the young people and the theatre festival participants, followed by an extravaganza concert that combined humor, virtuosity, inclusion, pageantry, music and dance. Such an event could only have occurred through artistic, social, political and financial collaborations cultivated over time. One would not have to be a connoisseur of community art to understand that we were witnessing, participating in and co-constructing an event of virtuosic brilliance, an event that highlighted the vibrancy and energy of local, national and international cross-cultural, cross-generational and cross-disciplinary community. The power of people’s creativity, the release of energy and pure joy, were undeniable and inspirational, leaving us with glimmers of hope for the future of our war-weary world.

- **Books.** It came as a total surprise to me that conference participants were handed free copies of books at the conclusion of the books launches. *Community Arts Dialogues* (2013, and *Community Art Power* (2011) written and edited by Eugene van Erven, respectively, each accompanied by a DVD, are important volumes documenting the evolution of community arts and exploring key questions of evaluation, funding, dynamics of power, etc. We also received *Bread and Salt: Stories of Artists and Migration*, by Francois Matarasso, with images by Bill Ming. All three are beautifully produced and illustrated books, filled with candid storytelling and rigorous, creative scholarship. They will extend the reach of the conference many times over; I intend to incorporate them into my syllabi in the upcoming year.

Public funds from the Consulate General of The Netherlands in New York supported the costs of international travel for both me and Roberto Varea (whose report on his participation and observations of the theatre research/festival are attached). We were asked to comment on the role that The Netherlands plays in debate and research on theatre and peacebuilding, and in community arts more generally. With the 2013 gathering, and the seven years of concentrated work leading up to it as part of the 300th anniversary of the Peace Treaty of Utrecht, the Netherlands has placed itself—at least temporarily—at the center of the growing international community of practice. The combination of local work, international exchanges and cultivation of the global field makes a leadership role for The Netherlands in these areas indisputable. Speaking as an American, and as someone who has
benefitted enormously from the work of the Community Arts Lab, I can only express the hope that the inquiries that have powerfully begun there be supported to continue and flourish. Roberto Varea joins me in expressing deep appreciation to the Consulate General of The Netherlands in New York for making my participation in the research/festival possible.

There is much to follow up on from the festival in Utrecht, and I am looking forward to continuing conversations, exchanges and collaborations. When I left the festival, I traveled for a couple of days to a new program in Expressive Arts, Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation at the European Graduate School in Saas Fe, Switzerland. I brought stories from the festival to the faculty and students there, along with the Acting Together resources. After watching the film, a member of the faculty commented that he found the various Acting Together cases to be animated by an aesthetics of kindness. I realized that this was an answer I could have given to the questioner in Utrecht, who asked about what common aesthetic animates peacebuilding performance. And, completing these reflections, I feel that this phrase could sum up much of my experience in Utrecht as well. While conversations were challenging and rigorous inquiry was upheld as a value necessary for advance the field, the predominant sensibility was one of inclusion, curiosity, hospitality and kindness. It was truly a pleasure and an honor to be included in such a gathering.