Chapter 11

Performing the Past, Rehearsing the Future

Transformative Encounters with American Theater Company’s Youth Ensemble

Caitlin Kane

If there was a time I’d go back to in my life, I’d go back to day one of doing Greensboro: A Requiem—a stormy day in June, meeting up at Next Door Café and reading the whole script in the noisy café where we could hardly hear one another. I didn’t know what I was getting into. It felt like another play with high schoolers in it. Looking back at it now, the process had a huge impact on my life and shaped my thinking about one of the most important social problems we face in America today.

—Michael Sandoval

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This chapter was written in memory of PJ Paparelli, Cesar Cauce, Dr. Michael Nathan, William Sampson, Dr. James Waller, and all the men, women and children who have lost their lives to state-sanctioned violence. Caitlin would like to express her deepest gratitude to the members of American Theater Company’s Youth Ensemble and members of the Beloved Community Center who made the
production of Greensboro: A Requiem discussed here possible. She would not be the scholar or artist that she is today without their ongoing support and inspiration.

In this chapter, Caitlin examines the ways in which an intergenerational collaboration between Chicago public high school students and a collective of seasoned civil rights activists allowed for a cross-temporal retelling of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. The essay argues that the members of the ensemble and their counterparts at the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro exemplify the potentialities of the public humanities outside of academia. Both groups used the documentary process to reexamine Greensboro’s often forgotten history and its implications at a time when Black Lives Matter was rapidly gaining national recognition. These collectives dreamed into being visions of what a more equitable and just world might look like and then worked to embody those visions in the microcosm of their communities. “Performing the Past, Rehearsing the Future” considers what these processes of envisioning and embodying alternative futures through theater and activism might tell us about the potentialities of the public humanities within and beyond academia.

On the evening of June 17, 2015, a young white man entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and took part in almost an hour of Bible study before pulling out a handgun and firing at members of the congregation. He killed nine people, including the pastor. ¹

Halfway across the country, I was seated at a crowded table with two teaching artists and eleven Chicago public high school students, discussing the distinctions between the civil rights movement and Black Lives Matter. The news of the shooting would not hit social media until later that night, but when we returned the next day for another evening of research and table work, the tenor of our conversation turned quickly from unbridled enthusiasm about the project at hand to righteous anger about the state of our nation.

The eleven students crowded around that café table were members of American Theater Company’s Youth Ensemble, a two-year tuition-free college preparatory program that combined professional acting training with individualized college planning. Underlying these professional aims, the program served primarily as a space for young artists and activists to explore and deepen their commitment to working toward social change. In pursuit of these intersecting goals, the program culminated each year in a production of a documentary play that engaged the ensemble in both a professional production process and the study of a social issue that concerned them.² This intensive process, which was the highlight of the ensemble’s year, involved
a multi-day research trip, six weeks of rehearsal, and two weeks of performance. On that rainy night in June, we had just begun to prepare for the ensemble’s production of Emily Mann’s *Greensboro: A Requiem*, a documentary play that examines the miscarriage of justice following the 1979 murder of five young activists by members of the Ku Klux Klan. The ensemble, our artistic director (the late PJ Paparelli), and I (then the director of the program) decided to produce *Greensboro* because the play allowed us to examine the history of racial and economic oppression in the United States from the perspective of the massacre’s survivors, most of whom were members of a multiracial, antiracist collective that, in many ways, resembled the ensemble itself.

Our focus on racial and economic justice that summer was not happenstance. The 2014–15 school year had already been a year of too much loss, too many deaths, and too little action on the part of those in power. That fall, the Black Lives Matter movement gained national recognition when Darnell Moore and Patrisse Cullors organized a “freedom ride” to Ferguson, Missouri. There they joined local activists in protests against the murder of a

![Figure 11.1 Members of the American Theater Company’s Youth Ensemble, graduation 2015.](image-url)
young, unarmed black man named Michael Brown Jr. by a white police officer (Garza). Two months later, Laquan McDonald, a seventeen-year-old high school student, was shot sixteen times by a Chicago police officer on the southwest side of the city, effectively bringing the fight for black lives home for many members of our ensemble and staff. For much of that academic year, similar stories of black men, women, and children being killed by police inundated the national news, while gun violence in Chicago seemed to soar, impacting far too many friends and loved ones.\(^3\) This state-sanctioned violence repeatedly found its way into the discussions at our biweekly workshops, and the consistency and urgency of those conversations led to our unanimous decision to produce *Greensboro: A Requiem* that year.

We had spent much of the spring semester anxiously preparing for the production when, that May, less than a month before rehearsals began, PJ Paparelli, our artistic director, mentor, and friend, died in a car accident. The news left the ensemble, members of our staff, and much of the Chicago theater community reeling, and for a moment the future of the theater company seemed to be in peril. On June 17, we had just begun to regain our footing, when the news of the Charleston shooting broke. For the second time in as many months, the play’s director, Kelly O’Sullivan, and I met to discuss whether we should move forward with the production. The shooting had inspired vigils and protests across the country, but in many southern states, including North Carolina, there were threats of white supremacist counter-protests. We were scheduled to leave for our research trip to Greensboro four days later, and parents who had already been worried about their children’s emotional well-being were now concerned about their physical safety.\(^4\) Taking those concerns seriously, we consulted with other members of the theater’s staff, our contacts in Greensboro, and the ensemble members themselves before finally deciding to continue with the trip and production as planned.

In that moment, our collective sense of purpose was threatened by an overwhelming sense of anger and despair. The Charleston shooter’s ties to white supremacist organizations and stated desire to prompt a “race war” tied the omnipresence of racially motivated violence in 2015 directly to the Greensboro Massacre in 1979 and, in so doing, left many of us feeling that the racial and economic injustices that had inspired our production were insurmountable (Block). Documentary theater felt like a woefully inadequate mode of response to the rampant racism surrounding us, and we were all—staff and ensemble members alike—suddenly and profoundly uncertain of whether we had the capacity to contribute to social change in any meaningful way. In light of these uncertainties, our decision to produce *Greensboro: A Requiem,*
rather than another documentary play with similar themes, proved to be fortuitous. Our study of Emily Mann’s process and the play’s impact on her public partners restored our faith in documentary theater’s capacity to serve as a form of corrective historiography. At the same time, our interactions with members of Greensboro’s Beloved Community Center—the collective of seasoned civil rights activists whose story the play tells—placed that year’s events into perspective and challenged us to reconsider the aims and practices of our activism. Ultimately, our engagement with the documentary process established an environment in which we, as students and professionals, could recognize ourselves as engaged citizens who had the skills necessary to contribute to an informed and empathetic public.

Engaged Artistry: Making Sense of Insurmountable Problems through Documentary Plays

Emily Mann has never shied away from difficult subject matter. As a playwright, she is primarily known for her works of “theater of testimony,” which use direct quotations from archival documents, public records, and interview transcripts as the primary source of their language. In order to craft each of these works, Mann spent years conducting research and interviews, transcribing those materials, and then sculpting that content into dramatic form. Through this methodology, she crafted a series of plays that confront challenging and often controversial subjects, including the Jewish Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and various acts of hate-based violence. Greensboro: A Requiem, which premiered in 1996, was the last play that Mann created using this methodology, and it is one of her most dramaturgically and narratively complex works. In it she uses the remembrances of dozens of individuals to address the miscarriage of justice that occurred in the trials following the Greensboro massacre when appeals to emotion—particularly race-based and anticommunist fear—overrode readily available factual evidence. Mann uses theater as a form of critical historiography that works to simultaneously restore faith in objective facts while also addressing the ideological forces that so often distort the ways historical events are remembered. Her plays also serve as powerful reminders of the ways documentary theater can help make sense of seemingly insurmountable sociopolitical issues and highly contested narratives.

On the morning of November 3, 1979, members of the Communist Workers’ Party—a diverse collective of young activists committed to racial and economic justice—gathered at the Morningside Homes public housing
complex in Greensboro to protest the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and its violent intimidation techniques, which they believed were thwarting their efforts to organize unions in local textile mills (Dawson, 37). The spirited but peaceful rally quickly became violent when members of the KKK and American Nazi Party drove through the neighborhood and shot into the crowd, killing five people and injuring nine others in only eighty-eight seconds. The Communist Workers’ Party had acquired the necessary permits for the rally and had, therefore, been guaranteed police protection, but when the shooting began there were no police officers on-site (Mann, 279). It would later become clear that members of the Greensboro Police Department and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms had prior knowledge of the threat but did nothing to prevent the violence (Jovanovic, 6). In its immediate aftermath, the massacre garnered widespread media attention on both local and national levels. The narrative of the day’s events, however, quickly became distorted as the Communist Workers’ Party’s radical, leftist views became equated with the violent white supremacist ideologies of the groups that attacked them. Early reports rightly described the November 3 attack as an ambush, but by the end of the first day of reporting, members of the media had begun to label the event as a “shootout” (Institute for Southern Studies, 14). When the Iran hostage crisis began the following day, national

**Figure 11.2** Poster for American Theater Company production of *Greensboro: A Requiem.*
media shifted their attention away from Greensboro, leaving many of those reports uncorrected. On a local level, misrepresentations of that day’s events worsened as Greensboro city officials worked to minimize negative media coverage, which they worried would tarnish Greensboro’s reputation. In their attempts to distance themselves from the violence, the city claimed that Greensboro was “the innocent victim caught in the middle of extremist groups’ ideological warfare” (Jovanovic, 7). They went on to argue that outside actors were to blame for the violence and called into question the racial motivations of the confrontation. Within a week of the massacre, local Greensboro papers had begun to place the blame for the violence on members of the Communist Workers’ Party by suggesting that the protestors use of “Death to the Klan” as a rallying cry incited the Klansmen’s and Nazis’ violent response (Institute for Southern Studies, 14–15).

These misleading reports bred widespread confusion that was only compounded by the trials that followed. In the first criminal trial, six members of the KKK and American Nazi Party were charged with first-degree murder. In spite of ample evidence, including video provided by multiple news agencies, the all-white jury declared the defendants not guilty, because the jurors believed that the Klansmen and Nazis had acted in self-defense. In a federal criminal trial in 1984, another all-white jury found nine defendants not guilty because the jurors did not believe that the prosecutors had proven that racial hatred motivated the murders (Jovanovic, 13). Finally, in a civil suit, five of the shooters, a police informant, and two members of the Greensboro Police Department were found liable. Some considered this unprecedented decision to be a victory because it was the first instance in our nation’s history in which the KKK, the American Nazi Party, and members of a local police force were found jointly liable in a wrongful death suit (Beloved Community Center Board of Directors, 2). However, none of the perpetrators paid reparations to the survivors and their families, and the city continued to deny any wrongdoing.

As the events of November 3 were being misconstrued and neglected in the media, survivors, grassroots activists, and artists came together to preserve the historical record and demand justice for those whose lives had been prematurely ended or irreparably altered. This process began with the trials, continued through the formation of the Beloved Community Center (which I discuss in the next section), and culminated in the work of over one thousand Greensboro citizens who came together to conduct the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the United States. Emily Mann wrote Greensboro: A Requiem in the midst of this process: after the legal system had failed the survivors but before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
had begun. Mann’s play brings together the voices of the survivors, their legal representatives, city officials, and members of the KKK, including a key police informant, to retell the story of the massacre. They play’s form allows Mann to simultaneously hold the perpetrators accountable while also scrutinizing the systems and ideologies that failed to incriminate them in the first place. Theater scholar Carol Martin, therefore, situates Mann’s play within the tradition of documentary trial plays, which she suggests have “created a forum apart from the legal justice system in which to examine justice itself.” She goes on to argue that “[t]he difficulty here is that the resulting theatre is not necessarily more truthful than what formal legal processes yield.” While Martin makes an essential point, her use of a legal/theatrical binary and “truthfulness” as an indicator of theatrical efficacy underestimates the political potential of documentary theater. Because theater and law are seen as two distinct entities, theater is afforded only a secondary role in the construction of culture, one in which it can, at best, serve as “a powerful critique of our system of justice” (Martin, 115). The process of collectively examining and critiquing the justice system, however, is not merely an intellectual exercise.

When artists, historians, community members, and audiences come together to engage in the type of critical analysis of history that plays like Greensboro: A Requiem facilitate, we are often asked to imagine alternative responses and outcomes to the issues at the play’s core. When we acknowledge the work’s potential to inspire this sort of collective envisioning, we can embrace a more capacious understanding of the ways documentary theater contributes to social change. Instead of reading performance as separate from, and perhaps secondary to, the process of shaping society and writing history, I would therefore argue, as Athol Fugard preemptively notes in his introduction to a collection of Mann’s plays (Mann, xi) and Spoma Jovanovic highlights in her subsequent analysis of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation process (Jovanovich, xv), that Mann’s play actively contributed to the memorialization and rectification of the Greensboro Massacre. In both the process of its creation and in its publication and national tour, Greensboro: A Requiem generated awareness about the events of November 3, 1979, held space for local and national dialogue, and countered mainstream narratives about the root causes of the massacre. In so doing, Mann’s play advanced the work of countless activists and community organizers committed to redressing the harms caused by both the massacre and its aftermath. Together these activists and artists altered many of the narratives surrounding the massacre, resulting in better living circumstances for the survivors and victims’ families.
In our study of Mann’s play, the ensemble, Kelly O’Sullivan, and I were struck by Mann’s ability to bring clarity to the many contradictory accounts of the massacre and its aftermath, but it was not until we learned of the profound effects that Greensboro had on her public partners that we were able to recommit to our faith in the political potentiality of the documentary form. Our mentor, PJ Paparelli, had been a documentary playwright himself, and we knew through his work that documentary theater can often make a lasting impact not only on its creators and audiences but also on the individuals whose stories it endeavors to tell. Following his death, however, we had lost sight of those potentialities, which often remain wholly invisible to audiences unless those public partners, like Mann’s collaborators in Greensboro, make the work’s impact known. We took these lessons with us as we prepared for our research trip, which not only confirmed that Mann’s play had benefited the individuals with whom she created it but also introduced us to a collective of experienced activists who provided us with a new set of tools for remaining politically active in the face of hardship.

Active Citizenship: Embodying Change at the Beloved Community Center

[The trip] was one of the first times I realized the significance of what we, the ensemble, were doing. It changed my perspective on the role of theatre. Now I see theater as a platform for furthering discussion, whether it be pleasant or painful, rather than something simply for entertainment. It became clear that putting the play together with the sole purpose of entertaining would be a huge disservice not only to the story we were sharing but also to the people [to whom] the story belonged.

Matt Gomez-Hidaka

On a hot Sunday afternoon, just a few days after the Charleston shooting, the ensemble and our staff joined several survivors of the massacre in the gathering space of the Beloved Community Center (BCC) in Greensboro. Upon our arrival, Reverend Nelson Johnson and Joyce Johnson, codirectors of BCC and former leaders of the Communist Workers’ Party, were finishing their preparations for the first of several dialogues that they would facilitate between the ensemble, survivors of the massacre, and other local activists and leaders. They welcomed us into their space and encouraged us to use the time before our first conversation to look at the archival photos that line the walls of the BCC. Those photos chronicle nearly sixty years of civil rights activism by the center’s members, many of whom are survivors.
of the massacre and characters in Mann’s play. The ensemble delighted in seeing images of the individuals they would be portraying and marveled at the myriad forms of resistance that those photographs document. We knew from our prior research that, for a city of its size, Greensboro has a remarkably robust and consistent history of civil rights activism, but the BCC archives brought that history to life and drew our attention to the resilience of the many activists and community leaders we would meet during our trip.⁶

Figure 11.3 Ensemble members at the Beloved Community Center, Greensboro.
At this point in the process, we knew the story of the Greensboro Massacre well. In the weeks leading up to the trip, we had studied Mann’s play and read dozens of articles about the tragedy closely, but we soon learned that those materials had provided us with an incomplete understanding of the massacre itself and the collective of activists who had been targeted by the violence. Over the course of four days, we spoke with over a dozen individuals, each of whom recounted their own version of the massacre and provided us with a richer understanding of its lasting effects. These conversations were held across Greensboro at the Beloved Community Center, in individuals’ homes, and at relevant historical sites, including the abandoned textile mills where the Communist Workers’ Party conducted their labor organizing, North Carolina A&T (where some of the survivors first engaged in activism), and the site of the massacre. While each of these conversations deepened our understanding of the play and the massacre, I want to focus here on our ongoing dialogue with Reverend Johnson, who is both a pivotal character in Mann’s play and the person with whom we spent the most time. His story of persistence in the face of incredible personal and political hardship put the challenges we had experienced that year into perspective and dramatically altered our understanding of how social change comes into being.

In Mann’s retelling of the massacre, Reverend Johnson is the most prominent figure in the Communist Workers’ Party. While his story serves as one of the primary narrative arcs in the play, most of his lines provide the audience with factual information about how the massacre and its aftermath unfolded rather than personal details about the impact of these events on his life. In one of the final scenes in the play, Emily Mann’s “interviewer” character addresses these gaps in the narrative by telling Nelson, “You know I realized there’s a whole chapter that I missed and that’s when you went from post-November 3rd and went into the ministry, what that thought process was” (322). In response, Nelson speaks briefly about his faith and then describes some of the challenges he faced in the aftermath of the massacre: “In the early eighties, I really was so rejected around here that—I think I shared with you—once I went to get a job, and the guy went to call the police; I sat in the courtroom, everyone got up and moved to the other side of the court. I listened to radio talk shows when people said they wished I had been shot, and all this kind of stuff. And my children had to listen to it” (323). Over the next several pages of the play, Nelson tells us about the intimate relationship between his faith and his activism, but it is clear that a great deal has been left out about the twelve years between the massacre itself and his decision to cofound the Beloved Community Center in 1991.
Over the course of our trip, many of those gaps were filled by our conversations with Reverend Johnson and his wife, Joyce Johnson. Through their stories, we came to better understand both the persecution that most members of the Communist Workers’ Party faced after the massacre and the particularly harsh treatment that Johnson and his family experienced as a result of his history as an outspoken advocate for racial and economic justice. Reverend Johnson told us that he was a few years younger than most of the ensemble members when he participated in his first sit-in with two friends in Littleton, North Carolina, at the age of fifteen. He remained politically engaged through his college years at North Carolina A&T, where he led the Greensboro Association of Poor People. During his time there, Johnson developed a reputation with the Greensboro Police Department as a “dangerous” political figure for his involvement in Dudley High and North Carolina A&T University disturbances in 1969. Later, Johnson joined the Workers’ Viewpoint Organization (the direct precursor to the Communist Workers’ Party) after his studies of African liberation and Marxism alerted him to the intimate relationship between economic and racial injustice (Jovanovic, 23–24). Throughout the 1970s, he remained an outspoken presence in Greensboro and developed increasingly tense relationships with city leaders, including Mayor Jim Melvin, who used a misdemeanor charge from Johnson’s civil rights organizing to label him “a dangerous man with a proven police record” (Waller, 274). Because of these existing tensions and Johnson’s strident response to the violence on November 3, he and his family faced especially brutal harassment and mistreatment for years after the massacre. In the face of these challenges, Reverend Johnson and his wife eventually decided to leave Greensboro with their two young daughters and did not return until Johnson entered the seminary in 1989. While Johnson admits that these circumstances led him to reconsider his approach to advocating for social change, his commitment to the fight for racial and economic justice has not wavered.

I do not remember, or have a record, of anyone asking Reverend Johnson how he has sustained his activism in the face of these hardships. I imagine someone did and that I simply failed to note his response, but it is also possible that none of us asked because his approach to remaining engaged seemed so clear. In every moment that we spent with Reverend Johnson, he treated us, and everyone else with whom he interacted, as full members of the beloved community that he has committed his life to cultivating. In other words, he practiced what might be considered a “politics of prefiguration,” which Rebecca Solnit describes as “the idea that if you embody what you aspire to, you have already succeeded. That is to say, if your activism is already democratic, peaceful, creative, then in one small corner of the world these things
have triumphed. *Activism, in this model, is not only a toolbox to change things but a home in which to take up residence and live according to your beliefs, even if it’s a temporary and local place*” (Solnit, 81, my emphasis). In a moment in which many members of our ensemble and staff were confronting a deep sense of uncertainty regarding the possibility of social change, Reverend Johnson and many of the other activists and community leaders we met in Greensboro provided us with a different means of assessing the success of our efforts. In a 2008 interview about this shift in his thinking, Johnson stated, “If we as a community can actually embrace a vision and set of principles to which we are faithful, then that is our victory in life” (Johnson Purpose Prize Winner). During our time in Greensboro, we learned that this shift in focus did not mean that Johnson or the other members of the Beloved Community Center had given up on a vision of radical change. Instead, they had altered their approach to fighting for that change in order to make their ongoing activism more sustainable. Of the many lessons that we took back with us to Chicago, this model for prolonging and nurturing one’s activism by committing to living one’s values and cultivating a community of like-minded people had the most profound impact on the ways in which ensemble members approached the rehearsal and performance process.

**Reclaiming Agency through Research and Rehearsal**

At American Theater Company (ATC) we always go the extra mile. We dive deep into places that might lead us nowhere, but we’d rather know there’s nothing there than wonder if we are missing a crucial part of our piece. The research that goes into our documentary plays [is] the foundation for our production. ATC creates an environment where people want to learn more about what was going on. . . . The research process is what keeps us informed and searching for more. It’s what leads us to question ourselves and others.

Madison Pullman

As Madison Pullman suggests in the epigraph above, the research process did not end with our trip to Greensboro. Instead, we asked the ensemble members to engage in two forms of intensive research throughout the rehearsal process. On the one hand, every ensemble member was responsible for developing a nuanced understanding of each of the individuals that they played in the production. For most, this meant delving into the lived experiences of at least three people from a wide range of ideological backgrounds and identifying corresponding physical and vocal choices that distinguished
between those characters. On the other hand, our director, Kelly O’Sullivan, proposed that we begin each rehearsal with a conversation about the contemporary resonances of the play. Over the course of the rehearsal process, each ensemble member was therefore responsible for leading two or three discussions about compelling news items or contemporary works of art that they believed could contribute to or be elucidated by our production of *Greensboro: A Requiem*. This research was intended to inform the rehearsal process and production, but the daily practice of sharing and discussing this material ultimately enabled us to reclaim our sense of agency as members of and contributors to an informed public.

In the script of *Greensboro: A Requiem*, Mann frames the conflict between the Communist Workers’ Party and the Ku Klux Klan, American Nazi Party, and various government agencies as a conflict between the multiracial—but predominantly black and white—members of the Communist Workers’ Party and the white men of the KKK and American Nazi Party (Mann, 254–55). This depiction of events is mostly accurate and potentially necessary for the dramatic clarity of an otherwise complicated narrative, but it posed a particular casting challenge for the six actors in the ensemble who fell outside of that racial binary. This challenge was heightened by the sheer number of roles for white men in the play. The 2014–15 ensemble included no white men and only two white women, so moving forward with the production demanded that several members of the ensemble portray individuals whose views were not only opposed to their own but whose views were also intended to incite violence against people whose race, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation matched the performers’. Before deciding to produce the play, we therefore held a frank conversation about the implications and challenges of these particular casting decisions. The ensemble unanimously determined that the story was compelling enough to take on these challenges and move forward with the production. When it was decided that three young people of color—all of whom identify as either Asian American or Latinx—would play the majority of these roles and that the two white women in the ensemble would primarily portray women in the Communist Workers’ Party, with one exception each, there was a general consensus regarding the dramatic expediency of this choice and awareness of the many political and social questions that it raised. Maintaining a consistent group of actors portraying members of the KKK, American Nazi Party, and antagonistic members of government agencies facilitated audience comprehension of a fast-paced, dense theatrical text. However, this casting choice placed an exceptional burden on that group of performers of color who would be required to develop intimacy with some of the most challenging content of the play.
In a series of interviews that I conducted two years after the production, I asked the members of the ensemble who had portrayed white supremacists about how researching, rehearsing, and performing those roles had affected them. In their responses, they consistently described the process of developing those characters as personally and politically transformative. Marcel Dizon told me that “delving into the psyches of Klansmen and American Nazis” had “stuck with [them] . . . and . . . driven [their] current political mind-set.” Similarly, Michael Sandoval stated, “The process had a huge impact on my life and shaped my thinking about racism in America.” Liv Shine, a young white woman who played a character identified as a young “skinhead” in the play, compellingly articulated the value of taking on such a challenging role: “It was a great education for me to step into something that I wanted to ignore, that so many white people want to ignore because that’s easy and comfortable. It was uncomfortable. I felt gross. I felt apologetic. But now, I always remember [that white supremacy is] in me. That’s in my blood.” In each of these comments, ensemble members clarify the connection between their artistic practices and their political engagement. By researching and embodying the white supremacists in Mann’s play, these individuals were compelled to confront their own relationships with racial privilege. At the same time, they became intimately familiar with white supremacist ideologies and were able to use this expertise to refine their understandings of racial inequality in this country. Over the course of the rehearsal process, each of these ensemble members became more outspoken not only about this history of racism but also about the sociopolitical forces that continue to perpetuate racist ideologies today. Like Mann, they used thorough research into individuals’ personal narratives and beliefs to elucidate broader sociopolitical issues. In so doing, these ensemble members refined their ability to make nuanced, evidence-based contributions to conversations about race in the United States and deepened their commitment to doing so.

Alongside this character-based research, the ensemble and our staff engaged in daily conversations about the contemporary resonances of the play. These conversations were sparked by a range of materials, from news reports to hip-hop tracks and clips of movies, all of which were used to illuminate some element of the work’s urgency in our particular sociopolitical moment. On the surface, there was nothing spectacular about this daily practice. It was part of the culture of the ensemble and served largely as a means of maintaining our commitment to an artistically and personally demanding project. Over time, however, it became clear that these conversations were reaffirming the lessons we had learned from Reverend Johnson.
and the members of the Beloved Community Center. The ensemble, in a collectively written note to the audience, described those lessons as follows: “The survivors we interviewed taught us that the fight ends when we lose hope. Because we live in a world where information is at our fingertips, it is easy to become disillusioned by violence, fear, and injustice. [The members of the Beloved Community Center] have been fighting for 36 years and haven’t stopped yet. . . . By committing to this show, we the Youth Ensemble are taking on the responsibility of hope . . . and are more than willing to bear the burden of continuing to fight for our communities.”

Our daily conversations became one of the methods that we used to generate and sustain this sense of hope. By dedicating the first twenty minutes of our days to acknowledging and addressing the omnipresent realities of racial and economic injustice, we began to develop a daily practice of activism. Instead of thinking about activism solely in terms of large-scale movements, we created an environment that encouraged us to take action on a daily basis, in whatever ways that we could. Committing to those small steps undermined the overwhelming sense of despair and frustration that had characterized the early days of our process and allowed us to re-embrace the multitude of ways in which theatrical practice, in general, and documentary practice, in particular, can contribute to social change.

Months earlier, when I proposed *Greensboro: A Requiem* to the ensemble, I had convinced myself that the story of this often-forgotten moment in history would inspire our audiences to reexamine their attitudes toward race and class. It is possible that some members of the audience did exactly that, but in focusing on the impact of the final product, I lost sight of a truth that every theater practitioner knows. Theater, like most forms of activism, contributes to social change in subtle and unpredictable ways that are often invisible to those involved. More often than not, its most significant and tangible effects take place in the rehearsal room long before audiences arrive. In the case of this ensemble, that was undoubtedly true. The *Greensboro: A Requiem* production process contributed to enacting social change by creating the opportunity for each of us to show up day in and day out to be with one another, confronting our pasts, celebrating our differences, generating empathy, and seeking new ways to be in this world. Though it was never perfect, being in the rehearsal room with the ensemble always meant striving to change the world by striving to change ourselves. We worked to make the world a better place by modeling the possibility of a radically kinder, more inclusive, more thoughtful world than the one that existed outside of our rehearsal space. The most lasting effects of our production of *Greensboro*, then, were forged through the creative process and can be seen not in their
effect on the audience but in the artistic and activist work that members of our ensemble and staff remain committed to today.¹⁰

Notes

1. On Wednesday, June 17, 2015, at Emmanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson were killed in the name of white supremacy by a white man who openly admitted to attempting to incite a “race war.” Their murderer has since been convicted and sentenced to death. Jason Horowitz, Ashley Southall, and Nick Corsaniti, “Nine Killed in Shooting at Black Church in Charleston,” New York Times June 17, 2015.

2. The term “documentary play” or “documentary theater” is generally used to reference theatrical works crafted largely, if not exclusively, from primary source materials, such as public records or personal interviews. For more on the form, see Attilo Favorini, ed., Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theatre (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1995), 1–25; and Gary Fisher Dawson, Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, 89 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

3. In the summer of 2014, Eric Garner and Michael Brown were both killed in controversial confrontations with police officers. National protests coordinated in part by Black Lives Matter, which had been cofounded by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrice Cullors a year earlier, drew national attention to the murders and spurred a national debate about the prevalence of anti-black racism and the regularity of extrajudicial killings by police officers in the United States. Between July 2014 and July 2015, the extrajudicial killings of Michael Brown Jr., Samuel DuBose, Ezell Ford, Eric Garner, Brendon Glenn, Freddie Gray, Laquan McDonald, Natasha McKenna, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and Christian Taylor, among others, resulted in public protest and in demands for greater accountability in policing and the criminal legal system. Daniel Funke and Tina Susman, “From Ferguson to Baton Rouge: Deaths of Black Men and Women at the Hands of the Police,” Los Angeles Times, July 12, 2016.

4. Each summer the ensemble traveled to the site of the documentary play they were producing in order to re-interview the community members whose stories they would be telling through their theatrical performance. This unique practice was instituted by PJ Paparelli, a documentary playwright himself, who believed that seeing the physical sites of these plays and meeting the individuals represented is an essential ethical and pedagogical practice. Among other benefits, it encouraged the ensemble to confront the reality of the stories they were about to tell, pushed them to reevaluate any stereotypes they might have had about people whose views differed from their own, and reminded them of the inherent limitations of the documentary form—the people they portray are infinitely more complex and human than a play can ever capture. The cognitive dissonance created by this realization allowed the ensemble to create more fully developed, nuanced characters on stage and to speak to their audience about the ethical complexities of the documentary form.
5. The Beloved Community Center was formed in 1991 by two survivors of the Greensboro Massacre, Reverend Nelson Johnson and Joyce Johnson, and two local faith leaders, Reverend Barbara Dua and Reverend Z. Holler. A “community-based, grassroots oriented organization rooted in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy of proactive struggles for racial and economic justice, democracy and beloved community,” the center is “committed to grassroots empowerment, especially among minorities, within the context and spirit of forging a beloved community for all resident[s].” Beloved Community Center Board of Directors, “Beloved Community Center Tenth Anniversary Retrospective 1992–2002,” Beloved Community Center archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

6. For a concise overview of this history, see Joseph W. Groves, “Greensboro, NC Local Organizing around Forty Years of Struggle,” Beloved Community Center archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

7. Throughout this section I distinguish between our in-person conversations with Reverend Johnson and his character in the play by using his character name, “Nelson,” to refer to the dramatic representation of him.


9. Marcel identifies as gender-nonconforming and uses “they” and “them” pronouns.

10. Kiah has lobbied for more diverse seasons and leadership in her university’s BFA theater program by crafting a list of diverse directors and educators who would be suitable for the program and engaging in conversations with the administration about this issue. Eddie has bravely spoken out against horrific racial prejudice on his campus and contributed to organizing aimed at changing that culture. Liv has begun teaching spoken word poetry in the same schools that brought her to activism and art in the first place. Lawren and Tevion have each performed in multiple professional productions, each of which engaged with issues of gender and/or racial inequality. I could go on, listing a relevant accomplishment for each ensemble member, but I am less concerned about those individual accomplishments than I am in awe of the continued efforts of this ensemble. I don’t doubt that this group of young people would be doing this work regardless of their experiences with American Theater Company and their interactions with the Beloved Community Center, but I do hope that both experiences contributed to deepening their understanding and intensifying their commitment, and I will always be grateful for all that they have taught me.

**Works Cited**


Dizon, Marcel. Interview with author, April 6, 2017.


Pullman, Madison. Interview with author, April 5, 2017.


Shine, Liv. Personal Interview with author, April 7, 2017.
