



60/50 Theatre Project:
Collaboration, Citizenship, and the Faculty Dramaturg

By Daniel Smith

The Department of Theatre at Michigan State University (MSU) was approached in the fall of 2013 about coordinating one of its season slots with Project 60/50, a yearlong series of events commemorating the 60th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Project 60/50 began as two staff members from the Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives inspired our season selection committee to produce an original play based on the history of inclusion at MSU. It was to be written by one of our faculty members and sponsored by the Office of Inclusion. Performed by a cast of 13, *60/50 Theatre Project* opened in September 2014 and was seen by approximately 900 audience members.

The final script consisted of 26 scenes in a range of styles, with a combination of fact and fiction. Characters included historical figures and allegorical types. Playwright Rob Roznowski includes an explanation of this strategy at the beginning of the manuscript:

DISCLAIMER: The show is called a fictional documentary (a term coined by dramaturg Daniel Smith) because it is based on facts augmented with much artistic license. These are for the most part real figures and real events but the

dialogue, motivations and situations have been compressed, altered, convoluted for theatrical impact. Any misrepresentation is entirely unintentional.¹

Roznowski previously used a similar approach to history in his play *Comfort Food* (2012), inspired by the Michigan State University Library Special Collections' extensive holdings in cookbooks. As in *Comfort Food*, Roznowski employs juxtaposition as a significant narrative strategy in *60/50 Theatre Project*. For instance, one scene depicts campus leaders speaking to each other across boundaries of time, each in the moment before attending an important first meeting. The two most recognizable for audiences were Clifton Wharton, the first African-American president of MSU, and Lou Anna K. Simon, the first woman to serve as Provost at MSU (and current President of the University). "Bucking Broncos" juxtaposes the 1994 O. J. Simpson traffic chase with the important work of MSU Safe Place, a shelter for victims of domestic violence. Another scene addresses conflicts between mothers and daughters about education across multiple generations and cultures. The script ends with an exhortation to the audience to "Join the Conversation," a tagline of Project 60/50.

In this paper, I consider the collaborative process of *60/50 Theatre Project* as a model for theatre programs to perform citizenship in the university community. My particular focus is on the role of the faculty dramaturg; as a citizen of the production team, my function was primarily to provide research support and to facilitate collaboration. As a faculty member involved with the production, my role shifted toward thinking about my own citizenship and the Department of Theatre's citizenship in the University community and in the Greater Lansing community. My role as a faculty dramaturg meant that I was providing context for the

¹ Rob Roznowski, *60/50 Theatre Project*, Unpublished ms., 2014.

production not only in rehearsals and design meetings, but also for wider audiences including other units on campus and several media outlets.² As Geoffrey Proehl has explained, the role of the dramaturg is fungible, and the tasks of dramaturgy may be carried out by members of a production team who are not given the title “dramaturg.”³ My experience working on *60/50 Theatre Project* suggests that simply by virtue of being a faculty member as well as a dramaturg, the faculty dramaturg is perceived primarily as a teacher.

As with any theatre production, collaboration occurred at multiple levels throughout the process. For the purposes of this essay, I will divide collaboration into four categories:

1. Institutional Collaboration with the Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives and with University Archives and Historic Collections
2. Investigative collaboration with the playwright and design team before rehearsals began
3. Artistic collaboration with the cast and director during rehearsals and throughout the run of the show
4. Curricular Collaboration with the Center for Integrated Studies in the Arts and Humanities

There was, of course, significant overlap among these categories. The most innovative aspect of collaboration was the “top-down” model instantiated by the Office for Inclusion and

² I was interviewed by several journalists and by MSU’s Brand Management Office. See: Bridget Redman, “‘60/50 Project’ Explores MSU’s Civil Rights History,” *Lansing State Journal*, 17 September 2014, <http://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/entertainment/arts/2014/09/17/project-explores-msus-civil-rights-history/15792301/>, 1 February 2016.

Brittanie Chludzinski, “60/50 Theatre Project Welcomes Conversations about Rights,” *The State News*, 21 September 2014, <http://statenews.com/article/2014/09/6050-theatre-project-welcoems-conversations>, 1 February 2016.

Michigan State University, “MSU 60/50 Theatre Project,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbXhUbc-KW8>, 1 February 2016.

³ Geoffrey S. Proehl, *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility*, Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008.

Intercultural Initiatives with regard to Project 60/50. Rather than seeking a way to engage with wider university initiatives through already-planned programming, the Department of Theatre developed programming specifically for this initiative at the request of an overarching university entity.

Institutional Collaboration: Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives

Collaboration between the Department of Theatre and the Office for Inclusion offers an unusual and exciting model for contributing to university initiatives. Described as “A Community Conversation on Civil and Human Rights,” Project 60/50 was intended to be a yearlong series of discussions with the following mission statement:

A nation that undergoes change can be volatile. In the United States today, society is much different than it was 60 and even 50 years ago. The difference is, in large part, due to a Supreme Court decision handed down in 1954 making it illegal to segregate public schools based on a person's race. Ten years later, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (CRA of 1964), which outlawed major forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, and religion. The CRA of 1964 ended unequal application of voter registration requirements and racial segregation in the workplace, and by facilities that provided public accommodations. Combined, these two major events rocked the nation, upsetting its foundation as people of all races were forced to adjust to a different way of living. Conversations among people from different races and cultural backgrounds was then and continues to be difficult when the topic is about civil and human rights issues.

Although Project 60/50 is anchored by these two pieces of historical legislation, conversations today are by no means limited to the issues that prompted them. The nation's struggle for civil rights continues and the Project 60/50 initiative will continue to offer everyone with a broad spectrum of opportunities to engage in conversations that can enrich our lives, garner greater understanding of and respect for our differences and make the world a better place for us all.⁴

⁴ “Mission/Introduction,” <http://project6050.msu.edu/about/mission-introduction.html>.

Our department season selection committee was interested in this collaboration; initial plans were made to produce a scripted play that would address issues of inclusion by achieving diversity in casting. Meanwhile we would develop programming to connect that production to Project 60/50. After a meeting with Therese Randall Brimmer (Publicist for Project 60/50) and Audrey Bentley (Community Outreach Coordinator, Office for Inclusion), the season selection committee was energized and excited to make a contribution to Project 60/50. Faculty member Rob Roznowski pushed us to think bigger by proposing the creation of an original play that would engage with the history of diversity and inclusion at MSU in particular. Though Roznowski is primarily a teacher of acting, he has written a number of plays and volunteered to write the play that he proposed.

Once this decision had been made, research for the new play began in earnest. Roznowski completed much of the initial dramaturgical research on his own. One of the earliest points of inspiration was a photograph of the women's class of 1907, including the first female African-American graduate of MSU: Myrtle Craig. She became a character in the play, describing her experience as a woman in a class of all women and inventing back stories for other women in the photograph with her. Ultimately portrayed by undergraduate Briana Bougard, Craig became an iconic representation of the play in promotional materials.



Briana Bougard as Myrtle Craig (Photo: Stephanie Pickard)

Another anchoring image for the production was the Rock. Like other Midwestern campuses, Michigan State is home to a large rock that students paint. Usually the Rock is painted to advertise events that are happening, but it has also been the site of memorials, marriage proposals, and political statements. The MSU Rock is located just outside the Auditorium Building where the Department of Theatre is housed. Roznowski wrote a contemplative monologue for the Rock, personified as an old man:

When my wife left me she got this treatment to look younger. A chemical peel. Thought of getting that. You know to peel away the layers of discontent...

But then I would peel away the good times too. The proposals. The invitations. The celebrations. I want to keep the good layers. I want the puffy ones to see that even after terrible tragedy I can be used for healing not just for escalations of tension. After 9/11 they painted the most beautiful messages on me...

When that young girl they call Princess Lacey died. It was really lovely. I don't want to lose those layers. I guess you gotta keep it all. The good and the bad. All the stories.⁵

This focus on local citizenship was especially salient for theatre majors because most of them walk by the Rock every day. However, the Rock is significant to MSU students and alumni in

⁵ Rob Roznowski, *60/50 Theatre Project*, ms., p. 35.

general; rituals have developed for staking claim to the Rock in order to paint it and guarding it after it has been painted.⁶ The Rock monologue was easily transportable because it required only one performer. Undergraduate actor Kara O'Connor performed this piece at several Office for Inclusion Project 60/50 events.



Kara O'Connor as the MSU Rock (Photo: Stephanie Pickard)

Ultimately, Roznowski's "fictional documentary" imagines histories of citizenship at MSU. What does it mean to be a citizen of this community on the banks of the Red Cedar River? As Michigan Agricultural College (1909) morphed into Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science (1925) and eventually became Michigan State University (1964), how has Spartan citizenship changed over time? Some characters in this play express their school spirit by wearing green and white, painting the Rock, or cheering at football games. Other characters enact social responsibility by raising their voices in protest and demanding changes in university policy on a variety of issues. Roznowski defines inclusion broadly: race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, social class, and political ideology are all discussed in this play.

⁶ Jennie Russell, "Exhibit: The Rock," *On the Banks of the Red Cedar*, <http://onthebanks.msu.edu/Exhibit/1-6-1D/the-rock-at-msu/>, 1 February 2016.

In April 2014, a public reading was shared with students and faculty to offer feedback and guidance for the next round of revisions. True to the spirit of respectful dialogue envisioned by Project 60/50, student perspectives were incorporated into the script, with one character (played by Laura Chall) commenting on being offended by a scene in the play. Other new scenes were developed over the summer to deepen and complicate the representation of inclusive citizenship in the MSU community.

My role as dramaturg in the script development process included research in the MSU Archives, responding to drafts of the play, and responding to what I saw in rehearsals. Art Borreca's essay "Dramaturging New Play Dramaturgy: The Yale and Iowa Models" has long inspired my dramaturgy practice.⁷ Borreca distinguishes between the "empathic facilitator" model espoused at the University of Iowa and Yale's "in-house critic" model. In my own work, I tend to begin as an empathic facilitator, working closely with the playwright, and then I move toward the in-house critic model as rehearsals continue. For *60/50 Theatre Project*, my inner in-house critic emerged earlier than usual, and my inner-empathic facilitator crept back in during rehearsals. One major point of contention was the ending of the play; Roznowski was insistent that the students should immediately facilitate a conversation at the end of every performance, and that this should occur as part of the play. Based on my experience leading post-show discussions, I argued that this would feel coercive to audience members. I also suggested that having untrained students lead post-show discussions was not a good idea. In the end, we

⁷ Art Borreca, "Dramaturging New Play Dramaturgy: The Yale and Iowa Models," *Dramaturgy in American Theatre: A Source Book*, Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997.

compromised. I convinced the playwright to include a curtain call, and he persuaded me to help teach the students how to lead post-show discussions.

Collaboration in Design

Diversity was paramount in choosing a team of designers among undergraduate and graduate theatre students: undergraduate scenic designer Ceejay Libut hails from Saipan; graduate costume designer Rainie Jiang is from China; graduate media and lighting designer Hernando Claros is originally from Colombia. Sound designer Kendall Kotcher and props designer Mike Geeter also made important contributions to the production. Assisted by undergraduate stage manager Megan Molloy and me, director Christina Traister facilitated a design process that emphasized the theme of citizenship at MSU. Libut's flexible set design was anchored by iconic MSU sites including the rock and the red brick and arched windows of the auditorium. Jiang and Geeter employed a color palette of varying shades of school colors—green and white—for the costumes and props. Under the supervision of theatre faculty member Alison Dobbins, Claros conducted videotaped interviews with students and faculty to enrich the production. Dobbins and Claros also collaborated with the College of Communication Arts and Sciences to create a documentary film as a record of the production.

The projections created for the media design represent another unique aspect of collaboration among dramaturg, designer, and institution. Claros developed the projection design based on extensive research in the University Archives and Historic Collections. I spent several days with him in the archives. Since Project 60/50 was a university-wide endeavor, archivists had already pulled several files that were deemed relevant to the initiative.

Therefore, it was relatively easy to find images that related to named historical figures like MSU President John Hannah and MSU's first African-American football player Gideon Smith. Claros wanted more general images to convey a sense of dormitory life, which proved a bit more challenging. As dramaturg, I found yearbooks to be a particularly useful source, and the Archives had many yearbook images available as separate photographs or negatives.

Collaboration and Casting

My involvement in the audition process helped me to understand how the director planned to approach the play. At my suggestion, students were asked during the initial audition to share a personal story regarding inclusion or exclusion they experienced at MSU. These stories took the place of contemporary monologues we would have otherwise heard. This allowed us to look for students who might be comfortable leading post-show discussions, something the playwright insisted was important. In this way, the audition process provided an opportunity for the team to incite dialogue about diversity. From these auditions thirteen students were cast in the show. In addition to Briana Bougard and Laura Chall, the cast included Taylor Blair, Elijah Noble El, Kendall Kotcher, Yifan Luo, Ipshita Moitra, Kara O'Connor, Jake Samson, Jeremy Stevens, Christi Thibodeaux, Maggie Turbett, and Melanie Wong. The group included three African-American students, one Asian-American student, one South Asian student, and one Chinese student. Two students in the cast identified as queer. Director Christina Traister used group discussions and acting exercises to create an ensemble in which students felt empowered to share their thoughts and concerns about the script and to bring their individual perspectives as full collaborators in the process.

A significant and impactful aspect of *60/50 Theatre Project* was its approach to casting. Each member of the ensemble portrayed several characters, and some characters were of a different race or gender than the performer. This practice is indebted to the work of playwright/performer Anna Deavere Smith, who crosses race and gender lines in her verbatim performances of interviews, thus raising questions about gender and race as social constructions.⁸ This complex, challenging, and sometimes controversial decision about casting had important impacts on both the student performers and audiences. Throughout the rehearsal process, student actors were immersed in the history of Civil Rights at MSU and beyond. Students were asked to play living people as well as famous historical figures, which required research. Actors were also educated on the 60/50 Project in order to facilitate discussions with audiences at each performance. At the opening night performance, discussion of this casting practice dominated the panel discussion organized by Christina Traister and moderated by me. Several audience members and panelists pointed out the success of this strategy in forcing them to think about race, gender, and sexuality in new ways. A post-show discussion followed each performance; most were facilitated by the undergraduate actors.

⁸ For a discussion of Anna Deavere Smith and this model of casting, see: Debby Thompson, "Is Race a Trope? Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity," *African American Review*, 37.1 (Spring 2003), pp. 127-138.



“I Was There”: Jake Samson as Man #1, Elijah Noble El as Woman #1, and Melanie Wong as Man #2 reflect on their recollections of Gideon Smith (Photo: Stephanie Pickard)

Curricular Collaboration

As a faculty dramaturg, I was well-positioned to increase *60/50 Theatre Project’s* impact on curriculum. As the lead instructor for the Department of Theatre’s Integrative Arts and Humanities course, I required 325 students to see the production and write reflection papers on what they saw. I suggested the theme of citizenship as a topic for the paper. A useful aspect of this assignment was asking students to reflect on their own values as citizens of the MSU community. This personal connection helped them to connect with the material and fulfill one of the learning goals of Integrative Arts and Humanities courses: “Recognize the responsibilities and opportunities associated with citizenship in a democratic society and an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world.”⁹

In reading the IAH students’ papers, I was struck by how many of them mentioned ways in which they empathized with characters whose situations were different from their own. For example, Scott Wasserman wrote:

⁹ “Integrative Studies,” <http://cisah.msu.edu/about/integrative-studies/>, Accessed 1 July 2015.

A first example of a character who engaged with the idea of citizenship was the blind girl who had to follow the lead of the audible street guidance. Everyday, walking around campus, I hear the walk signal tell me that I can cross “Farm Lane,” and sometimes it can even come off as annoying. However, this was an eye opening scene because I cannot imagine trying to navigate from lecture hall to lecture hall, without being able to see where I am walking. Being a citizen at Michigan State University means that you are willing to help those that are vision impaired and also be kind and welcoming to the disabled as well. (Student work, cited by permission)

Another student, Jaztan Teen, commented on the cross-racial and cross-gender casting:

The best part of *60/50 Theatre Project* was that a black man’s role would be played by a white woman, and a Chinese male would be played by an Indian female, and so on. In my opinion they did this to make a mockery of how ridiculous it is to focus on race and to put things in the opposite point of view. (Student work, cited by permission)

Approximately one-third of the production’s audience—the students—completed this reflective assignment on *60/50 Theatre Project* and citizenship at Michigan State. In this case, my status as “faculty dramaturg” was ideal, because my “faculty” identity was able to help bring in an audience, while my “dramaturg” identity helped me to contextualize the production more effectively for these students.

Conclusion

A major criticism of the production was that it was too sunny, too optimistic, and too much a celebration of diversity and inclusion without overtly representing struggle and protest. The play tended to show the Civil Rights triumphs of university administrators without representing the flaws and failings of faculty and administration. Was this a result of presenting a play that had the imprimatur of the Office for Inclusion as well as the Department of Theatre? Perhaps as artists we shied away from some potentially difficult dialogues. Still, the

collaboration was extremely fruitful for both parties. This “top-down” model of collaboration increased visibility for both units. More crucially, my work on this production has helped me to articulate the importance of my role as a faculty dramaturg. In working as dramaturgs on department productions, it is neither possible nor desirable to break out of our roles as faculty. Rather, the faculty member and the dramaturg within us must work symbiotically, resulting in a faculty dramaturg who functions as a teacher and a citizen.