

Hospitality Project culminates with Stranger Festival

By Michaela Dwyer (<http://www.dukechronicle.com/staff/michaela-dwyer>) | Thursday, February 23 2012



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Last Thursday, a group of Duke undergraduates, Theater Studies faculty, a Durham community member and a Skyped-in California Institute of the Arts professor hunkered down around a large table in the Bryan Center design studio.

Laptops, notepads and small buttons emblazoned with the word “stranger” dominated the table space. Group members sounded off with an eclectic range of comments and questions: “Michael’s got a great round of people for the event downtown at 9:00.” “The notion from Derrida that hospitality is this untotizable sum of several acts,” “What about the stranger cakes?”

This Friday, the Hospitality Project, a year-long investigation of relationships between Duke and Durham, culminates with a day-long performance-based festival appropriately titled “Stranger: A Festival In Search of Hospitable Acts.” Made possible through a partnership between Duke Theater Studies and the Duke Center for Civic Engagement, the Festival is a collaboration between Duke

students, faculty members, Durham residents and community leaders and the Portland, OR-based Sojourn Theatre company.

Last year at this time, conversations about the project began between students in Assistant Professor Nina Prieur’s Performing Social Justice class, as well as with Torry Bend, set designer and assistant professor of Theater Studies, and Shannon Scrofano, Sojourn Theatre artist and faculty at CalArts.

“The first meetings were, ‘Let’s talk about the obvious—that Duke and Durham don’t converse at all,’” Bend said.

But those involved quickly realized that the relationship wasn’t so easy to categorize, and neither were the terms most used to describe it—such as ‘engage’ and ‘engagement,’ two buzzwords thrown around gratuitously within the Duke community.

“‘Engagement’ is an incredibly potent word; we have a tendency to overdetermine [its usage] now,” said Jules Odendahl-James, Theater Studies instructor and dramaturge. “We say ‘engagement’ and we all have our own little idea of what it means, but we think we have the same idea.”

From there the discussion shifted toward the notion of ‘hospitality,’ and, more generally, hospitable acts both large and small. ‘Hospitality’ brought a more pointed focus to the project, but still presented a challenge.

“Because we’re rooted in the South we [have a notion of] hospitality that has to do with business. Also there’s a notion that hospitality is ingrained in us in the South in a particular way and yet commodified in a particular way. And it’s almost an impossible theoretical position,” Odendahl-James said.

The group opened their discussion into the Durham community through dinner conversations this past fall. They began with fundamental terms of hospitality: a home, or an equivalent welcoming space. Then they pondered hospitable relationships: what it means to receive an offer and to reciprocate it. The group recalled how varied the responses were. Some participants supported an optimistic notion of hospitality while others found it oppressive, in alignment with their personal traditions and values. Odendahl-James identified a specific tension at which the group arrived: hospitality as the ultimate act of generosity or an artificial performance of it.

“Southern hospitality [brings about] notions of inequity and performative behavior as cover-up for a truth,” Scrofano said.

At this point, Sojourn Theatre provided their unique community-based theater experience to help the group flesh out a satisfying artistic response to their conversations about Duke, Durham, ‘strange(r)ness’ and hospitality. Formed 12 years ago and made up of 12 core artists, Sojourn describes their work as “a rigorous practice that blends metaphor with public reality to bring strangers together amidst experiences where the ethical possibilities of imagination are placed alongside the communal muscle of responsibility.”

Sojourn’s work was attractive to the group in its unique approach to both performance and community interaction. The company’s method involves long-term community residencies, or, as Odendahl-James said, “encounters,” during which artistic or theatrical practice enters into a dialogue with the social, cultural and political trajectory of the community itself.

“Communities are big things; there’s constant development and you never know what’s going to happen,” Odendahl-James said. “To be able to extend over a long period [during which] you might have crisis and recovery and development and transition, and to see all of those things writ large, is ethnographic fieldwork. I think Sojourn is really trying to model performance on democratic participation, and in that sense the theater’s going to look really different and the practice of the community meeting the artist is also going to be very different.”

Much of the Hospitality Project’s work has centered around discussing these experimental approaches and conceptualizing how they might manifest in a community performance event. Emphasizing the desire for open-endedness, the group—and especially the Duke students—formulated possible community partnerships that would contribute to an interactive creative work, stressing the importance of honest dialogue. For the students, the project also presented an opportunity to experiment with theatrical form.

“In a way, the project departs from very spatial, temporal performances that will only live on in the mind,” sophomore Michael Oliver said. “[This project] is important because of its emphasis on creating situations where you have dialogue and interaction. When you sit down and just watch a performance, there are little opportunities for dialogue. You’re there to watch what someone has to offer. Not a single event in this project has that. There’s no audience; there are just participants.”

Within the last few months, the group decided on the event-based form their project would take—a day-long festival split into ten ‘Hospitable Acts.’ On Friday, students will work with their community partners to enact each of these events. Oliver will direct a ‘mural truck’ through Durham that invites visual and textual contributions. Junior Kim Welch will ride the Bull City Connector throughout the day, hosting a conversation about her observational findings during the ‘Epilogue’ of the Festival. On the CCB plaza downtown, sophomore Jenny Sherman and freshman Mao Hu will present photographic works by students of the English Language Learners program at the Kenan Institute for Ethics as well as stage a ‘Naturalization Interview.’

Working out of established community relationships, the students experienced a great deal of autonomy in the process of piecing together the Stranger Festival.

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"By thinking of themselves as co-artists creating something...there can be collaboration on a number of different levels," Odendahl-James said. "It's been impressive to see students not only say, 'these are the communities I want to work with' but 'this is a new experience I want to have intellectually.'"

The interactive nature of the project has led students to increasingly map their own involvement in Duke-Durham community networks.

"[The project has allowed us to] see how open and easy the network is," Scrofano said. "Once you're willing to go into public space—Durham is a great public space; it's very alive. On the day [of the festival], it's about making that literal, letting [participants] be in all those places and spaces."

This idea of inhabiting various spaces throughout Durham echoes the fundamentally open nature of the project itself. So far, the group has only been able to rehearse for the conditions under which the festival will exist, which leaves a lot to Friday's particular social (and meteorological) temperament.

"I'm so interested in the accidents," Scrofano said. "A [successful] encounter shifts the top layer of your sands and puts a new question inside of your day."

As Oliver said, the Stranger Festival is the result of a "performative process that allows us to bring different circles and spheres of interaction together that don't usually intersect." With a premise so steeped in adaptability, the project has been, more than anything, an exploration of social and artistic imagination.

"It's a profoundly different way of approaching work—it can feel less goal-driven and therefore perhaps less of 'what's the impact,'" Odendahl-James said. "And it's scary, being the ethnographer and producer and performer. It's a challenge but also a possibility, one that's worthwhile in a different way than focusing on a text that's already written."

"Stranger: A Festival in Search of Hospitable Acts" will take place Friday from 8:30a.m. to 9p.m. throughout Durham. A schedule of events and their locations can be found online at www.thestrangerfestival.org.



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NO STRANGERS HERE

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DURHAM - At the Urban Ministries of Durham Friday afternoon, Teddy climbed a ladder and wrote "Stay true 2 yourself" on a canvas stretched on both sides of a truck. Teddy was expressing his thoughts about Durham on The Mural Truck, which made stops at locations all around the city as part of The Stranger Festival.

In the morning, the truck visited Central Park School for Children, where art teacher Lucia Marcus' class drew animals on the canvas. Students in her class had been studying the idea of community, and had decided through democratic process to draw animals on the canvas. Marcus drew an antelope, with the words, "Art is alive at Central Park School." Her students drew owls, turtles, dolphins and other animals.

Jonathan Hemingway, who works in maintenance at the school, wrote "TROSA," in tribute to the organization the helps people with substance problems. Hemingway said the organization helped him get off drugs and find stability. "They do a lot for the community," he said. "That program, it helped me. By them helping me, that's how I was able to come to Central Park School."

By the time the truck reached Urban Ministries, the bottom portions of the canvas were filling up, and people who wanted to draw or write messages had to use ladders to get to a clear part of the canvas. "Keep Durham funky," one message stated; still another, "Housing food for all people." At Urban Ministries a man who called himself Jay wrote, "A house divided - it's broke." A woman named Tamara wrote the initials "C.P.R.," representing her children. She explained that by writing CPR she also was adding life to the mural. Under the initials she wrote, "My kids are my life."

The Mural Truck was one of many participatory events taking place about the city Friday. The festival, also called Stranger: A Festival in Search of Hospitable Acts, was a collaboration of the Duke University Department of Theater Studies, the Duke Center for Civic Engagement, and Portland, Ore.-based Sojourn Theatre, which promotes "arts-based civic dialogue," according to its website. The festival asked residents to ponder the meaning of hospitality, what it means to be a welcoming place.

The Mural Truck was the brainchild of Duke sophomore Michael Oliver, who saw the mural as a way to bridge the gaps between the different areas of Durham through art. "We're trying to cross a lot of different thresholds" and unify them "on one equal plane and see what is created," Oliver said. "This project has been a great learning experience for me."

Another part of the festival was called Open Letter, and on road signs and other places envelopes with the words "Read Me" were posted. In one letter, the writer praised Durham for its friendliness. Another letter stated, "The most radical act of hospitality would be the ending of homelessness, hunger and poverty in Durham."

At CCB Plaza on Corcoran Street, three tents made up the exhibit Points of Entry, which explored the immigrant experience. One tent contained an exhibit of photographs taken by refugee students ages 4 to 16 who also attend English classes through the Kenan Institute for Ethics. The older students took photos of their communities and aspects of their lives that were important to them, said Jenny Sherman, a Duke student who teaches in the program. Younger students generally took photos of family members. While she hesitated to give the photos a common theme, each was a snapshot of one person's idea of home, she said.

In another tent, visitors could fill out an "Application for Certificate of Citizenship," which was a modified version of the test immigrants seeking citizenship receive. Duke student Mao Hu interviewed each applicant - asking basic civics questions, and other questions intended to provoke thought about who we welcome. Tania Dautlick said she was not sure of the goal of the exercise, but kept an open mind. "It did give me the experience of feeling out of my element, and a little uncomfortable," Dautlick said. "In the end, it really did connect with me."

Participants with the truck and the tents were given buttons with the word "Stranger." At Urban Ministries, a woman asked Jay O'Berski, a teacher in Duke's theater department who was helping with the truck, the purpose of the buttons. He explained that while we may think of ourselves as strangers, we all have much in common.

O'Berski complimented those gathered at Urban Ministries for being so receptive to participating. Anthony Gainey, who wrote "welcome to Durham" on the mural, thanked the truck organizers for "the chance to express ourselves."

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