The common green / common ground
Performance Project

The Personal, the Political, the Gardens, and NYU

Cindy Rosenthal

RUKAYE: (Singing) When I come to my garden, I feed my spirit. (Speaking) This garden makes me want to stay in the neighborhood. I want to raise my family on 122nd Street because of this garden.

—from scene 6, common green/common ground (Peck 2001c)

Gardens are totally about faith. When you go to a nursery and you buy a little Japanese maple that’s in a four-inch pot and you’re telling me about how much shade this tree is going to give you and, oh, the leaves will be so pretty, and I’m looking at the thing, it’s three inches tall, and I’m thinking, “Boy, oh, boy, these people have faith in the future.”

—Topher Delaney, gardener and landscape designer (2001)

As NYU students, we’re connected to an institution that is the largest landowner in lower Manhattan. It’s gentrifying the East Village—which is one of the reasons why the community gardens are being destroyed. […] But NYU was giving us money to do this play. How could we live with ourselves?

—Dhira Rauch, student facilitator/performer (2001a)

We learned that lesson early on. There’s a difference between saying “Fuck the power” and saying “How can we use the power?”

—Savannah Shange, student facilitator/performer (2001)
It’s early autumn, 2002. Just about a year has passed since September 11th, and recovery, rebuilding, and memorializing are underway. The city has a new mayor, Mike Bloomberg; John Sexton is New York University’s new president. In spring 2001 (not so long ago), the time was right for dancing and singing in the streets about planting. This is the story of a community-based performance project that was instigated at New York University, with the support and cooperation of five New York City community organization “project partners.” Entitled common green/common ground, the 90-minute performance celebrated New York’s green spaces and community gardens and advocated for their continued support and survival. The music/theatre/dance piece was performed at four outdoor sites in three boroughs during April and May 2001. The script was pieced together from the stories of gardeners and activists, from improvisations based on these stories, and from research into the relationship between NYC government and community gardens. The 43-member cast featured gardeners performing their own stories in collaboration with NYU students and faculty, NYC schoolchildren, and theatre professionals. The director and principle choreographer was Sabrina Peck, who has worked extensively with Cornerstone Theater of Los Angeles. The project was the brainchild of NYU associate professor Jan Cohen-Cruz, who was the on-site inspirator and producer from start to finish, and is a long-time community-based theatre practitioner and scholar.

As a PhD graduate of NYU’s Department of Performance Studies, and a native New Yorker, I’m familiar with the often uneasy, unstable relationship between New York University and the long-term residents in New York City’s historic downtown neighborhood, Greenwich Village. Inherent tensions and complexities at every level and phase of the common green/common ground performance project sprang from the competing agendas I found among the myriad project participants: NYU administrators and faculty, project artists, NYU students, theatre professionals, community and environmental organizations, gardeners and garden activists, NYC schoolchildren and their parents. These competing agendas, perspectives, and voices drew me into the research and writing of this article. I’ve conducted dozens of interviews with spectators, participants, and support people, I’ve witnessed rehearsals and performances, and I can say that the aesthetic and emotional response to this project—in terms of the performance/production values—has been overwhelmingly positive. Participant reports on the creative, evolutionary process of the piece have been mixed, but all the participants I spoke with were happy to have been involved in the project.

The political efficacy of the piece, which was an important goal, is far less clear. At this time, no garden has been saved as a result of common green/common ground, nor have any of the policy changes demanded by students in the project been enacted. But vital “seeds have been planted.”

Germinations

On 19 April 2001, the first page of the Metro section of the New York Times featured an article headlined: “The Villain of the Village? As N.Y.U. Edges Out and Up, Neighbors Put Up a Fight” (Arenson 2001). NYU was (and continues to be) at the center of a contentious battle for real estate in Greenwich Village and adjoining neighborhoods. The specific focus of the New York Times article was NYU Law School’s intent to tear down a set of historic townhouses on West Third Street (including one where Edgar Allan Poe once lived) and erect a 13-story classroom and office building. The uproar was driven by the aesthetic concerns of the middle and upper classes who populate the West Village. The Community Board wanted to keep “the look of the Village” according to Jim Smith, chairman of Community Board 2 (Arenson 2001:B8). The Poe house is down and the Law School building is under construction.
But just a few blocks away, in “Alphabet City,” the section of the East Village between Avenues A, B, C, and D—once a predominately Latino/a neighborhood—the lower-income families who have held on through rapid waves of gentrification over the last two decades are most concerned about a deteriorating ethnic/community identity and a lack of affordable housing. Unlike the predominately high-income West Village, the East Village is a dense mix of high and low incomes. East Village gardeners have been particularly vociferous anti-NYU neighbors. Residents planted community gardens on abandoned city-owned lots in the 1970s in what were often low-income neighborhoods; these lots have gone up significantly in value in the last two decades. Over the past few years several gardens between Avenues B and C have been bulldozed by the Giuliani administration in its drive to raise money for the city via real estate development, purportedly for affordable housing. In official city records the gardens are often referred to as “vacant lots.” Housing that has been erected in the spaces that once held gardens usually falls into the “80/20” category: 80 percent of the apartments are set at market-rate rents, and 20 percent are set aside for lower income families. Some East Village garden activists—Jennifer Whitburn (2001) and J.K. Canepa (2001b) among them—regard NYU as an institutional monolith whose greed and lack of sensitivity continues to destroy the neighborhood’s historic landmarks, ethnic cultures, and overall quality of life.

Jan Cohen-Cruz: Bringing the Work Home

Cohen-Cruz recognizes that as an NYU professor in the Drama Department of the Tisch School of the Arts (TSOA) with a community-arts focus, she is caught in a double bind. She is intensely aware of NYU’s mixed reputation among locals. Some residents regard NYU’s presence in the neighborhood in a
positive light, pointing to the cleaner, safer look and feel of the East Village, while others seethe as the university encroaches on more and more neighborhood space. “Sometimes I cringe as I walk through the East Village and see the number of NYU flags up on buildings,” Cohen-Cruz told me (2002). She is invested in showing “that not everyone who works or studies at NYU shares the same point of view about development” (2001a). “There have to be limits to growth.” Her vision for “the garden project,” as it was called early on, was multifaceted, based in part on her belief that “NYU has so much to gain by being a good citizen in the neighborhood” (2002).

There were several motivating factors driving Cohen-Cruz through common green/common ground’s arduous yet satisfying 18-month process. The springboard for the project was her interest in taking on Cornerstone Theater’s model of play production with TSOA students. Her involvement in the 1999 collaboration between Touchstone Theatre and Cornerstone Theater on the production of Steelbound, a community-based performance that “voices the story of a geographical community [Bethlehem, PA] dealing with the loss of steelmaking as the basis of its economy” (Brady 2000:51) was what inspired her to plan a large-scale urban community-based performance with her students at NYU. “Although I’d done community-based art for years—I do a number of projects with students at NYU where they are doing community-based workshops—I had never tried to do this before” (Cohen-Cruz 2001b).

“The model that was the most tenable was a combination of professionals and nonprofessionals,” Cohen-Cruz told me. “Ours is a professional production. There’s no point in going to TSOA and doing something that’s not that” (2001b). To guarantee a professional-quality production, Cohen-Cruz asked Cornerstone director Bill Rauch to direct common green/common ground. When he was unavailable she turned, at his urging, to Sabrina Peck, a NYC-based director/choreographer long associated with Cornerstone Theater.

But why community gardens? “Part of my motivation was guilt,” Cohen-Cruz admitted. “Haja Worley of the Project Harmony garden is an old friend of mine. He is central to this play” (2001b). Cohen-Cruz first met Worley in the early 1970s when she led a workshop in New Jersey’s Trenton State Prison where Worley was an inmate. “He was a politically committed person and a wonderful actor as a young man,” (2001c) Cohen-Cruz remembered. Cohen-Cruz, who is white, described a “turning point” that she and Worley, who is black, shared years ago in their work at the prison. Race and class issues had a profound impact on “the more challenging deck of cards he was dealt since then” (Cohen-Cruz 2001b). Their paths crossed again nearly 20 years later, and by the mid-1990s they had restored their close bond; Cohen-Cruz’s Tisch students began, on a regular basis, to do arts workshops with neighborhood children in Worley’s community garden on West 122nd Street in Harlem.

These community internships instigated by Cohen-Cruz in Project Harmony’s Joseph Daniel Wilson Memorial Garden were first set up through TSOA’s federal AmeriCorps program. Later they became a fundamental component of Cohen-Cruz’s popular Urban Ensemble class at Tisch. Cohen-Cruz explained “the guilt factor” in choosing gardens as the focus for her community-based project with the students:

In 1997 Haja and his wife Cyndy [Nibbelink-Worley] oversaw a big community garden that was under threat, and they lost it. I was so busy run-
common green/common ground

Who, What, Where, and When

Cindy Rosenthal

common green/common ground is comprised of 14 scenes (plus a prologue and an epilogue) that flow together without significant scene breaks. The piece was performer-driven, with actors in charge of changing the minimal sets and props throughout the play. Percussionists William Cantanzaro and Dionisio Cruz sat offstage right; they were joined at different times by highly skilled student actor/musicians: Joy Lynn Alegarbes on accordion, guitarist Ariel Harman, djimbe player Dhira Rauch, and oboist Maria Elena Lopez-Frank.

The scenes track the evolution and transformation of city green spaces/gardens from vacant, garbage-strewn lots into lush, vital, community havens. Four locations linked to the four performance sites were selected as the focal points of the script: The Point in the South Bronx (performance date: 28 April 2001); La Plaza Cultural in the East Village of Manhattan (performance dates: 5 and 6 May 2001); Project Harmony’s garden in Harlem (performance date: 12 May 2001); and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (performance date: 13 May 2001). The setting for the opening scene is Project Harmony’s Joseph Daniel Wilson Memorial Garden, on West 122nd Street. Cyndy Nibbelink-Worley and Haja Worley, the founders of Project Harmony, are the central figures in this story. Actress Suzanne Baxtresser played Nibbelink-Worley, who broke her hip as rehearsals began. Worley, a gospel singer, was featured in the performance; he boomed forth the opening refrain of the first musical number in a rich baritone: “In the beginning...”

The next two scenes were set in an unspecified garden in Brooklyn. Rosa Jenkins, Horace Young, and Toby Sanchez are the adult gardeners/performers in this story, which builds on the “creation of a garden” theme begun in the opening Project Harmony section. Although their own gardens are located in three far-flung neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Jenkins, Sanchez, and Young garden together in the context of the play. The next Brooklyn scene was performed by the seven Brooklyn youths (ages 9–13). The energy and positivism embodied in the young gardeners’ story—working together to nurture a seed and help it grow into a thriving plant—introduced the “thriving gardens” thematic thread of the piece.

Director Sabrina Peck conceived of using the trickster deity of the Afro-Caribbean religion Santería as a device to hold the stories together. Just before Haja Worley’s entrance in the opening number, NYU student Savannah Shange entered as Elegua. As a trickster, she cast a spell on the proceedings, working the audience with twinkly eyed bravado. Peck wove this motif through many scenes, connecting the growth of seeds, gardens, and green spaces with the help and inspiration of the natural spirit world. Elegua provided a spark for community growth as well. Shange instigated interactions among adult gardeners and the youths; in the scenes at The Point, Elegua called on the powers of other Santería orishas (deities) Ogun and Oxun to help with the transformation and rebirth of the waterfront.

The first scene at The Point tells the story of Majora Carter, a young woman who successfully campaigned against environmental racism in her South Bronx neighborhood and spearheaded the clean up and renovation of the Hunt’s Point waterfront. Scenes set at The Point featured members of the Upstage Dance Company, teenage dancers from the South Bronx.

The fourth location was the East Village; this section tells the story of the destruction of the Esperanza Garden. Several scenes chart the obstacles for city gardeners struggling to preserve gardens. Seeds of political activism and radicalism are planted; gardeners across the city join forces in the face of Giuliani’s steadfast opposition to gardeners’ claims to the land they had been stewarding for decades. A lengthy scene, based on several gardener/performers’ accounts of their final, failed demonstration supporting the Esperanza Garden, is the climax of common green/common ground. Peck employed the trickster’s magic again to provide the necessary release and the hope that leads to rebirth; the Brooklyn youth inspired the adults to proclaim that they do “have a right to the tree of life.” At the end of the play, the full cast from the four locations entered and joined together, singing in solidarity about their rights to green open space in the city.
ning the AmeriCorps project, being a parent, doing my job—I never did anything to help support their garden. I always felt bad about that. Suddenly I felt: here’s a way I could give real support—the struggle isn’t over. I felt that there was something I wanted to do and I hadn’t done it. I could do it now. (2001b)

In fall 1999 Worley and Nibbelink-Worley said yes without hesitation to Project Harmony’s participation in “the garden project.” Worley then made the initial contact with his colleague Majora Carter of The Point in the South Bronx, which led to the involvement of the Hunt’s Point community and the expansion of the project beyond Manhattan, an important goal for Cohen-Cruz. Like Project Harmony, The Point is a member of NYCEJA, New York City Environmental Justice Alliance. NYCEJA is a citywide coalition of grassroots organizations, low-income neighborhoods, and communities of color. The Alliance provides resources to its members in their struggle against environmental racism and was an invaluable educational resource for Cohen-Cruz and the NYU students. NYCEJA provided the legal and historical background concerning the struggles over green spaces in the city. NYCEJA eventually became a project partner for *common green/common ground*, as did the Brooklyn Botanic Garden’s GreenBridge Program, which provides resources for that borough’s community gardeners, and La Plaza Cultural, a garden, amphitheatre, and cultural center founded in 1976 by Latino/a youth on 9th Street and Avenue C in the East Village. The sixth project partner was NYU’s TSOA Drama Department.

A fundamental goal of the community project partners in *common green/common ground* was to strengthen the organizational ties among their groups. For Worley of Project Harmony, and J.K. Canepa of the East Village coalition MoreGardens! this goal was achieved. In their views, the citywide movement to preserve gardens and green, open spaces seemed stronger and tighter as a result of the community-building performance. In addition, Worley told me, he is especially invested in and committed to keeping the energy and talent of the NYU students and faculty an ongoing part of the scene at Project Harmony: “I hope the students will continue to work with the young people here. If it’s at all possible, I believe Jan will keep our community connected with her community-based art” (2001).
There is a continuing relationship between NYU and Project Harmony, but the year that followed the performances (May 2001 to May 2002) brought many changes—some anticipated, some not. According to Cohen-Cruz, the traumatic events of September 11th had a paralyzing impact on a number of NYU students and faculty, and brought many internship projects across the city to a temporary standstill. In addition, several of the students involved with common green/common ground graduated in May 2002, and senior year requirements and concerns re-shaped students’ priorities. One such Tisch student, Savannah Shange, had been actively involved in the Project Harmony garden programs from September 1999 until September 2001. With neighborhood children and their families, she led acting and writing workshops and participated in art projects; eventually Shange began to play a vital role in a citywide coalition of gardeners/activists, the New York City Garden Coalition. Nibbelink-Worley and Worley had recommended Shange as director of the Coalition, which was the first paid position in the organization. As Shange began her senior year at Tisch (September 2001) she focused on her goal of a graduate degree in education, which evolved out of her

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I Am Talking about a Garden

Horace Young

There is a place where love is in the air
Where you can flop down on a bench
Or pull up a rocking chair
Where you can be quite active or simply sit and stare
I am talking about a garden

Where food is grown to feed little tummies
And flowers bloom to please our mommies
Where nature makes smart guys of dummies
I am talking about a garden

Where little ones can safely play
And the elders can have some say
Where lightening bugs turn night to day
I am talking about a garden

Where squirrels dart by as if to fly
And the June bugs visit until July
Where imagination soars from the earth to the sky
I am talking about a garden

Where tree limbs stretch like angels’ wings
And God’s little creatures can laugh and sing
Where you can feel good about everything
I am talking about a garden

Where a man can work off his many frustrations
Where he can shove off his many creations
Where the language is universal all across the nations
I am talking about a garden
work with children at Project Harmony and in New York and Chicago public schools. Her student teaching schedule precluded her continued involvement at Project Harmony; she also stepped down from her post at the New York City Garden Coalition.

A new crop of Tisch students trekked up to Harlem, organizing a Halloween celebration in the Project Harmony garden during October 2001. Other Tisch students (again, none from the common green/common ground company) joined forces with East Village garden activists in the MoreGardens! Coalition during fall 2001, helping Aresh Javadi (an activist/performer in common green/common ground) coordinate events supporting garden preservation. Discussions are underway between Cohen-Cruz and Majora Carter about future projects linking Tisch students with programs in the South Bronx, and Ted Mack at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden is enthusiastic about again involving Tisch students in programs for children there. But no NYU students are on site at this time.

Tisch students’ community projects in East Village gardens during fall 1999 were an important research and community-building component of the first phase of the common green/common ground process. Cohen-Cruz is the founder and director of the Office of Community Connections at Tisch, which sets up internship opportunities for Tisch students. Cohen-Cruz explained:

I like community art because it always goes over boundaries. I love that it takes me and students out into the world. One of my credos in doing community-based work is to go someplace where I know I have a lot to learn. I knew I had a great respect for and curiosity about people who had found a way to take vacant lots, horrible places, and transform them into a wonderful place for their communities. I loved the diversity. I didn’t want to go into one more stinking lousy crummy community center falling apart and try and do a workshop with too many kids at once in a ridiculous room. Community gardens, sign me up! This kind of reciprocal relationship—I always encourage my students to think in these terms. The students who signed up for this project are students who miss a relationship to nature, who never felt quite at home in NYC, who say to me, as one student just did, “my life is vegetables, so I had to do this project.” [...] I believe that all people need a connection to nature. This cuts across race and age and class. Of course I believe in recognizing and respecting differences. But finding the balance between difference and common ground is very important to me. (2001b)

The Process: Growing Pains/Pleasures

Cohen-Cruz invited me to watch one of the all-day group rehearsals at NYU on 21 April 2001. This was the Saturday before the first performance of common green/common ground. The opening would be at The Point, a community cultural/arts center on the newly developed waterfront area in the South Bronx, which was still under construction. The Point was common green/common ground’s only non-garden performance site. One section of the play that I saw in rehearsal that day was a movement/dance piece performed by members of The Point’s teenage Upstage Dance Company and NYU students. Peck choreographed this section to the voiceover of Bronx resident and activist Majora Carter, who told the story of how she “discovered the Bronx River” and began to raise consciousness and money in order to open up the waterfront for locals in the South Bronx. Carter, an actress and director, grew up in the neighborhood but had never seen the Bronx River as a child (“no access!”). Peck recorded Carter’s voice, along with the responses of several of the young dancers from The Point. Peck’s choreog-
“Finding the Bronx River”

scene 4 of *common green/common ground*

CHRISTINA: *(Standing up)* Majora lived just a few blocks from the Bronx River but she had never seen it.

LOZA: I see buildings and smoke stacks

JASMIN: mounds of garbage

JESSICA: smoke coming out of factories

SHERISSA: waste treatment facility

NAKIA: scrap metal lots.

MARIA EL: I know there must be a river behind all that—beyond all that—but I can’t see it.

CHRISTINA: Don’t go down there, Majora.

LOZA: It’s not safe

JASMIN: girls don’t go down *there*

JESSICA: there’s crack dens

SHERISSA: burned out buildings

NAKIA: pushers and pimps.

ALL: No way you can go down there, girl.

MARIA EL: There’s no access.

*(Percussion)*

MARIA EL: One day she was walking her dog past the chain link fences and the dumps, and he led her down an alley and around some buildings and...

CHRISTINA: And she saw the river *(each one slowly clears away the person in front to see).*

LOZA: She found it

JASMIN: the Bronx river

JESSICA: I had never seen the river

SHERISSA: I had never been to the water

NAKIA: I had never touched the water

MARIA EL: *(Joining the group)* There it is.

CHRISTINA: Majora decided that everyone in the neighborhood should see the river.

ALL: Let’s clean it up!
JASMIN: Wealthy neighborhoods are doing amazing things with their water-fronts.
ALL: Let’s make a park!
SHERISSA: With a boathouse, an ecology center, maybe even a little café.
NAKIA: A place where you can go canoeing
MARIA EL: and put on plays
CHRISTINA: and see the sunset
LOZA: and catch fish.
SHERISSA: So Majora got a grant,
NAKIA and MARIA EL: (Joining her) and lots of help from her friends at The Point!
CHRISTINA: They hauled out hundreds of tires
LOZA: acres of dry wall
JASMIN: yards of fences.
SHERISSA: They pulled things out of that river I couldn’t even describe
JESSICA: and they created a riverside park
MARIA EL: on a little strip of an abandoned street
NAKIA: in Hunt’s Point,
JASMIN: part of the new South Bronx.
CHRISTINA: And that’s the story of how Majora Carter found the Bronx River.

(Latin percussion takes them off.)

4. common green/ common ground performers from The Point in the scene, “Finding the Bronx River.” Left to right: Nakia Sanchez, Sherissa Jarvis, Jessica Travis, Jasmin Cirera, Christine deJesus, Maria Elena Lopez-Frank, and Rebecca Loza. (Photo by Cindy Rosenthal)
raphy in this section beautifully and movingly reflected the spirit, pride, and humor expressed in the young women’s voices. Jasmin Cirera, a ninth grader and Upstage dancer told me, “Looking at Majora, I wouldn’t have guessed she could have done all that” (Cirera 2001). As Peck explained it to me, “The young women at The Point connect with the content of what they are performing. In a sense, hey ARE the content of what they are performing. They are actually reenacting it, as they tell Majora Carter’s coming-of-age story” (Peck 2001a). Participating in or witnessing this “real” enactment, the truth–full connection between performer and the performed story (“invested through and through in what they are doing”) lends power to this kind of “believed-in theatre,” according to Richard Schechner (1997:90).

I watched Sabrina Peck staging the final number, “Tree of Life,” that afternoon. She seemed to have boundless energy, and was everywhere at once, with a big resonant voice, and a wide-open face. She waved her arms gracefully, modeling the movements of the song. “We are warriors,” she told the multiracial cast of 43, which ranged in age from 9 to 75. “Each of us is strong enough to do what we must do.” Peck moved, sang, and guided the percussionists with ease and grace. “Okay, then you do two sets of eight,” she called out to the drummers. Peck’s smile beamed into every corner, as she circulated among the pockets of human energy scattered around the large rehearsal room. I was struck by how fully the NYU students were meshed into the larger group made up of children, young teenagers, and women and men in their 50s, 60s, and 70s.

Like other participants and project partners in common green/common ground, one of the things Peck strives for “is fostering connections between each member of our community and the work.” For Peck, her “key contribution” to the process is the way she relates to company members:

The challenge is to find a way to tell each of the stories of the various people in the communities involved in a way that does justice to the essence of that story. It’s about taking specific pieces of material and juxtaposing them, interweaving them so that the accumulation of meaning is larger than the sum of the parts—and so that the story can really soar, without the burden on any individual to carry it. It becomes a puzzle; I love to figure out how to put it all together, and in a way that is a smooth journey, because this puzzle is made out of people. (2001a)

Precisely because of the people involved, each with an individual sense of their piece of the whole story, the community-based performance process is always complex and can become fraught with tension as traditional ideas about authority, control, and the roles individuals play in the development process are reconfigured, according to Linda Frye Burnham (1998:210–12). The question, finally, centers on ownership. Whose story or story structure is it anyway? Peck’s or the communities’? Cohen-Cruz is well aware of the complexity, but in the case of common green/common ground she found most of Peck’s choices and decisions to be right on the mark, certainly as far as aesthetics were concerned:

The tension is between having a vision as an artist and having the kind of collective ownership that community-based art works have to have. I find that the latter wins out—to much. Some community-based art is less interesting aesthetically. They are marvelous as far as getting to hear from people you don’t usually hear from—a tremendous energy is released. Sabrina, however, has the training and the vision of an individual artist. [...] Sabrina has suffered a lot in this pull, this tension. The NYU students, who are deeply committed to the project, get really angry with her if
she’s not collective enough. It hasn’t been an easy project for anyone. But aesthetically, quite frankly—and this is really more Sabrina than anyone else—it’s one of the most interesting community-based plays that I’ve ever seen. Although all 43 people in the cast were involved in putting the script together, I can’t underestimate Sabrina’s role in creating a structure. (2001b)

The process may have been difficult and “not collective enough” by some students’ standards, but Cohen-Cruz, as a member of the Tisch drama faculty, recognizes that aesthetics count. As she mentioned earlier, a high-level professional production is a mandate at Tisch. common green/common ground spectators at each of the four sites expected a performance of quality. The spectators were a diverse crowd, whether you consider the crush of kids and block residents at the 122nd Street Harlem garden site, or the mélange of NYU theatre professors, neighborhood artists, and young families at the two La Plaza Cultural performances. The expectation of quality may have derived from participating in or witnessing drama studio work, attending mainstream or fringe theatre productions, and/or familiarity with the slick sparkle of television entertainment, but bottom line, offering a “good show” was a political necessity. If the goal was to reach these audiences—or any contemporary, Western, urban audience for that matter—and get them to join the cause, write the letters, vote on the referendum, etc., etc., the performance had to work well aesthetically.

As Cohen-Cruz notes above, the NYU students argued for a different set of priorities, and had difficulties with Peck’s creative control, especially throughout the latter stages of the performance process with the community. In Cohen-Cruz’s account, NYU students were responsible for the first draft and the infrastructure of the piece. By spring 2000 a core group of seven students was meeting regularly with Cohen-Cruz in the Office of Community Connections at Tisch to discuss “the garden project.” During fall 1999 several of the students had already become garden activists in their own right. On 15 February 2000, students Rebecca Lambrecht and Dhira Rauch (no relation to Cornerstone director Bill Rauch) were among the 31 protesters arrested for their involvement in the demonstration to save the Esperanza (Hope) Garden on East 7th Street and Avenue C. Despite frantic phone calls from lawyers in New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer’s office asking for a few hours delay in order to argue their case in court for a temporary restraining order, the garden was bulldozed by late morning. Project Harmony’s garden had been partially bulldozed, along with seven other Harlem gardens, on 19 June 1999.

Interviews and story workshops with gardeners and activists began informally in Rauch and Lambrecht’s dorm room in spring 2000, when the students turned on a tape recorder and East Village gardeners/activists responded to the question, “What are your best memories of being in the Esperanza Garden?” Three important themes or threads for “the garden project” evolved out of student–led work: the creation of the garden, the garden when it was thriving, and the destruction of the garden.

There are other projects and events in New York City and elsewhere that use art to imagine a new urban landscape. Earth Celebrations is a nonprofit organization conceived and directed by Felicia Young, an artist and NYU Performance Studies graduate. Evolving out of her interests in ritual and mythic theatre traditions of India and Lower East Side pageants at the turn of the 20th century, and her desire to do community art, Young focused on the plight of community gardens in the East Village and produced a large-scale pageant celebrating garden survival and community spirit. Since 1991 Young has helped organize Winter and Spring Pageants with the support of hundreds of community members as
well as volunteers from across the city (including NYU students). Young designs glowing lanterns, fanciful costumes, and large puppets representing flowers, insects, earth, fire, and water. Earth Celebrations pageants have become an East Village community tradition.

Wendy S. Walters’s analysis of Tyree Guyton’s installations (2001) points to another way art can imagine community survival. If Young’s pageants are a celebration of life, focusing on new growth, Guyton’s work “marks down” the decline of a neighborhood through “the death of objects” (65). His art is made up of the detritus of urban life, what is left behind, what is thrown away. Yet his work, too, is about transformation. Guyton’s Heidelberg Project (unlike commongreen/common ground) receives a lot of attention from (Detroit) city officials and community members, but much of the response has been critical. As a Detroit neighborhood deteriorates and buildings are demolished, Guyton’s bright dots of paint on dilapidated houses and industrial buildings are a sign of life, of community color, character, and spirit—a challenge to the city’s indifference. The small green garden-spots in NYC communities of color are signs of the struggle for environmental/racial justice too. commongreen/common ground and Guyton’s art project were both created to raise a protest.

Rauch told me that she and Lambrecht were “lucky to have gotten in with the community—a lot of people have issues with NYU” (2001a). Another member of the original core group of students, Chris Theine, became involved in the East Village garden movement in fall 1999. It was six months before the subject of NYU came up. In spring 2000 the garden leaders suddenly became wary of him. “They railed on him,” Shange recounted. “They said, ’Do you have any idea where you come from?’” (2001). Rauch told me, “Even though we were from NYU, it didn’t mean we represented NYU’s principles. But NYU was giving us money. How could we live with ourselves?”(2001a). Shange was direct, her agenda clear: “We learned that lesson early on. There’s a difference between saying ’Fuck the power’ and saying ’How can we use the power?’”

The question of patronage continued to plague some of the NYU students, and some of the garden activists as well. After the first performance of commongreen/common ground, Canepa told me, “There is a conflict inside me: Am I doing something to make NYU look good? Before and after the performances I want to say, ’Don’t be fooled. This is not a commercial for NYU.’ I haven’t done that yet. Maybe I will” (2001a). (She never did.)

From the beginning, Cohen-Cruz said, “We knew we had to deal with our own neighborhood [the East Village]. We had to deal with how we were implicated” (2001c). It was through Lambrecht’s efforts that Canepa and Javadi originally came on board. Brooklyn was another story, but an essential piece for Cohen-Cruz, personally, because she lives in Brooklyn. She says:

I also thought that the Brooklyn Botanic Garden would be a really interesting partner. They bring in people who aren’t necessarily concerned with community gardens, but simply love gardens. Given the criticism that activist theatre gets, that we’re always preaching to the converted, I thought what a great logical way we could be extending or expanding the audience. By the way, I don’t think that preaching to the converted is all bad. We all need to be re-nourished. (2001c)

Initially, in creating a script for “the garden project,” Cohen-Cruz chose to follow Cornerstone’s tried-and-true method, which was to adapt or re-vision an existing script to the given circumstances of a particular community and, in the process, to highlight specific questions/issues in the social/political framework of that community. Stefan Brecht, who controls the performance rights,
down Cohen-Cruz in her quest to use Bertolt Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Cornerstone Theater’s writer Alison Carey had previously been granted rights to the text. She speculated that in Stefan Brecht’s view, Cohen-Cruz had no track record; hers was not a professional theatre company. From Stefan Brecht’s perspective (Carey told Cohen-Cruz), a production of *Caucasian Chalk Circle* produced in New York would get the attention of New York spectators and press, therefore he wanted a theatre company of the highest caliber to perform it (Cohen-Cruz 2002).

Cohen-Cruz settled on Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* as the foundation for the script. But due to difficulties, once again, in getting the rights, combined with growing doubts in the minds of project artists, students, and gardeners about the relevance and usefulness of this narrative, this idea was dropped at the end of the summer of 2000.

It was decided that the group would construct its own story—under Peck’s leadership. With regard to the *It’s a Wonderful Life* script, Peck said:

> It felt a bit like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. I felt that ultimately it would be more powerful theatre and more relevant to the issues we wanted to talk about to develop an original piece based on their own contributions. This put a greater burden on me to shape an original work, but ultimately it’s a lot more satisfying. People are speaking from their own experience, or from other cast members’ experiences. (2001b)

But with an artist/leader from “outside” the community garden realm taking on the “burden”/responsibility of shaping an “original” piece, questions arise about who really controls this performed “reality.” These questions are similar to those Richard Owen Geer discusses in his account of his collaboration with the Colquitt, Georgia, community in *Swamp Gravy*; and to Sara Brady’s critique of *Steelbound* (see Geer 1996; Brady 2000).

“Getting” and communicating the “real” story was Peck’s métier and gift, according to many of the gardeners. When I rode the subway uptown after a performance at La Plaza Cultural, gardener/performer Pearl Young, a 70-something stroke survivor from the Project Harmony group, asked me one question about the show, “Did you get the story?” For Young the story was about community—and about strengthening ties between folks by bringing them together in a garden. Young, like Rukaye Overo and Rosa Jenkins, were cast members who fit Brady’s description of the “random citizens” she felt were missing from the cast of *Steelbound*. According to Brady, that cast was composed only of “dominant voices,” leaders of the community. She posits that only “outgoing leader types” would “agree to audition for a play.” In *common green/common ground*, this was not the case. As Overo tells it, working creatively and putting herself “out there” was a new experience for her, and one that changed her life:

> My participation in *common green/common ground* has empowered me in many ways. I’m reaching out, finally taking piano lessons, something I’ve
wanted to do. I’m going to look for a community theatre in Harlem that I can get involved with; I feel as if my long-term goals are connected to the garden. I want to raise my family on this block, just as I said in the play. (2002)

From Cohen-Cruz’s perspective, although Peck’s efforts were aesthetically successful, Cohen-Cruz, like the students, had a problem with some of Peck’s directorial methods, with the way she forced some of the stories into a “workable,” aesthetically “effective,” dramaturgical frame:

I’m not a hundred percent happy with the process she put the kids [the Brooklyn youth, ages 9–13] through. She overdirects, for my taste. It’s a perfectly legitimate, respectable way to work. But I think if the kids had generated the material more themselves, had found more a relationship to what it is about growing things. [...] If it had been less about Sabrina’s cleverness, I would have been happier and the kids wouldn’t have rebelled, as they did at one point. (2001c)

The problem for Cohen-Cruz was the time pressure. Sabrina, “the outside artist, supplied the shape. [...] But I think the kids felt infantilized sometimes. More improv with the kids would have helped.” These kids, she explained, weren’t used to spending a lot of time on such a project: “They weren’t that invested” (2002). However, Cohen-Cruz told me that Sabrina’s idea to add the kids as a thematic structural element symbolizing growth, hope, and the benefits of nurturing a garden was:

Sabrina’s brilliance [...] now we had a through-line, a little story that also had to do with creation, thriving, and attack/destruction. [...] The sense of generations added to this cyclical dimension of the piece too. Many people can relate to that—what we pass on to other generations is important. (2001c)

Sessions at the four sites were facilitated by Cohen-Cruz, Peck, the expanding group of NYU students, and Peggy Pettitt, a community-based artist and teacher from Tisch’s Experimental Theatre Wing. Everyone I interviewed described Pettitt as “amazing.” At Cohen-Cruz’s request, Pettitt had returned from a Fulbright-supported leave in Senegal to spend a few months leading story-circles with common green/common ground participants. (“These create an environment of listening,” Shange told me.) The performance program credits Pettitt with “character development,” but from all accounts Pettitt was uniquely skilled as a facilitator and essential to the community-building process. Both Peck and Cohen-Cruz also highlight the contributions of musical director Michael Keck, and especially percussionist William Catanzaro, “who understands how music can help shape a scene, in ways that really support the actors,” Peck told me (2001a).

The musical score for common green/common ground is eclectic in style. “When I Come to My Garden” has the gentle, lyrical quality of a James Taylor folk song, Rebecca Lambrecht wrote this song as part of a garden project workshop at Tisch. Other musical numbers have an Afro-Caribbean beat. Much of the show’s music resembles gospel music in style, but the piece as a whole has the polish and vibrancy of Broadway musical theatre. All of the melodies and lyrics are original, except for the production’s theme song, which is also its rousing closing number, “Ain’t You Got a Right? To the Tree of Life.” Keck described this as a “freedom song, out of the ‘Pete Seeger folk song school.’ [...] It originates from the South, from the slave days.” One version Keck found in his files was attributed to author
Guy Carawan and adaptor Luci Murphy, but in Keck’s view, the song “is really owned by the community.” He often uses “Tree of Life” as a warm-up for community-based performance work. According to Keck, communities usually write their own verses, as did the common green/common ground company (2002). Cohen-Cruz explained that, following Cornerstone Theater’s practice and the rules for most community-based performances, anyone who showed up at the workshop sessions was cast in the show (see Geer 1996). This plan backfired with the Brooklyn schoolchildren however, when four times the number of children the directors could use came to the first workshop. Cohen-Cruz devised a children’s pageant for local children at each site and hired Jennifer Miller of Circus Amok! to choreograph their preshow processions, in order to harness the enthusiasm of the children and assuage the disappointment of the parents.

6. Rukaye Overo, Joy Lynn Alegarbes, and Savannah Shange sing “Tree of Life” in the “Project Harmony Beginnings” scene. (Photo by Ivo Stainoff)

7. Neighborhood children in the preshow pageant are led by stiltwalker Jennifer Miller at right and Jan Cohen-Cruz at extreme left. (Photo by Peter Robertson)
In January 2001, with only four months before the first performance, Peck was given the task of editing and scripting *common green/common ground*—gathering, selecting, and “focusing” hours of taped “story” interviews and reams of historical, statistical, and political research into a script. Peck and Cohen-Cruz, artistic leaders of the project, readily admit that they had little or no involvement or prior experience in the garden movement. “This was my introduction to the realm of community gardens and gardeners,” Peck told me (2001a). The NYU students I spoke with (Shange, Rauch, Esther Feinman) were concerned that Peck’s perspective on the materials “watered things down. […] Sabrina was more aesthetically minded, and we NYU students were more political,” Rauch told me (2001a). Unlike Rauch, Shange, and Feinman, “Sabrina had never done garden stuff or activism, and yet she was in charge of telling the story about gardens” (Rauch 2001a). Feinman told me, “I think Sabrina had a level of detachment from the material itself. Not that she wasn’t interested or committed to it. I think she detached from it and had to focus on making the play work, at whatever cost” (2001).

Peck was aware of tensions between her and the students. She described the NYU group as “amazingly talented and committed.” She realized that:

> they had expectations sometimes—“this is our play; we want to say certain things.” Whose process was this? My first obligation is to the community, to tell the stories they feel passionate about, and to make sure that the experience they have is guided, is supported, is rewarding. […] I think many of the students would have liked to see NYU in a stronger, clearer, more explicit role in the play. My feeling is that with one or two well-placed lines you can get a lot across. When you put together the whole fabric of the work, in order for the political issues to land, you have to develop the personal, the spiritual, and the communal. People in the audience have to feel what is important about the garden before they can get behind the issues. (2001b)

When all is said and done, *common green/common ground* ran up against the conflict of aesthetics vs. the experience of the participants. Is it better for the kids to feel they had ownership of their material? Or was Peck’s structural expertise the essential element that made the piece work, and ultimately connect with the audiences everyone wanted to reach? At La Plaza Cultural many spectators (including me) were visibly moved by the performance. There was a standing ovation, and afterwards spectators flocked to tables set up by local activists at the garden’s entrance where donation envelopes and flyers about upcoming rallies and demonstrations were distributed, and information about participating in a letter writing campaign was disseminated. The crowd was energized, excited. They loved the show. Many buzzed around the table: What was next? What could they do to help the gardens?

When in the winter of 2001/02 I checked back with garden activists from Project Harmony and MoreGardens!, the dust had begun to settle in the aftermath of September 11th, and gardeners were once again on high alert. Over 400 of the city’s community gardens were still in limbo. None of the signed petitions, the attendance at rallies, the political activism that *common green/common ground* sang about had born fruit; there had been no concrete policy changes. Gardeners at La Plaza Cultural, at Project Harmony, and at other gardens throughout the city, continued to fear the city/developer’s bulldozers. The temporary restraining order put in place by Judge Hutten (because of Attorney General Spitzer’s court actions in February 2000 could be lifted at any time. “The Mayor [Bloomberg]
Dear Mayor Bloomberg:

My name is Cindy Rosenthal. I write about theatre and performance in New York City and I’m an Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies at Hofstra University. I’m contacting you to learn your position on community garden preservation, on community-based planning, and on the status and future of open green space in New York City. I’m currently finishing an article for the performance studies journal, *TDR: The Drama Review*, on a series of community-based performances presented in gardens throughout three boroughs of the city last year, which centered on the plight of community gardeners in New York City. The primary goal of *common green/common ground*, a collaborative creative effort of garden activists, New York University students, and theatre artists, was to tell gardeners’ stories in order to raise awareness and, ultimately, effect policy change. Saving/preserving gardens was the theme, especially those under the Temporary Restraining Order, many of which are in lower-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color in the city, where access to green, open space is extremely limited.

Members of several community garden coalitions have told me they’ve contacted you in recent weeks, asking for support for gardens that are at high risk now. Some activists have expressed hope and optimism because of your views on human rights and health issues. They believe you will be receptive to gardeners’ goals and programs and willing to work with communities regarding planning and land use. However, plans for the gardens under the Temporary Restraining Order (how long the order will be in place, for instance) and your stand on issues related to urban open green space, community-based planning, and garden preservation remain unclear.

*TDR*’s readers are interested in hearing from you with regard to your position on community gardens in New York City. I am especially interested in your response to the following questions, which are of particular concern to those in the community gardens movement:

Would you support the development and implementation of a Community-Based Planning Process in New York City to move us from “top down” to “bottom up” planning processes? The city would direct City Planning and Operational Agencies to work with communities in researching and developing plans and would allocate funds for such planning processes.

Would you support legislation to amend the Administrative Code of the City of New York to set up a fair and equitable system for allowing communities to create new GreenThumb Community Gardens, either by granting them “park” status or by transferring them to a land trust?

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience and I thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Cindy Rosenthal, PhD
Contributor, *The Drama Review*
Assistant Professor, Theatre Studies
Hofstra University
holds the cards,” Hugh Hogan, Open Space Equity Director of NYCEJA told me. “We’re waiting to see what he does” (2002).

MoreGardens! activists spent much of January 2002 camping out on the floor of the Cabo Rojo Garden’s casita, huddled around a wood burning stove constructed from an oil drum. Nineteen gardens were still in jeopardy in the Melrose Commons section of the Bronx, where a large housing development is planned. Open green space is desperately needed here. Community Districts 1 and 2 in the South Bronx, where asthma rates are eight times the national average, have only .78 and .55 acres of open space per 1,000 acres (Lowe 1998).

Hoping to prevent a surprise bulldozer attack, Javadi and Canepa of MoreGardens! worked, ate, and slept in the casita most days and nights. They invited in local schoolteachers, families, and policemen to explain their cause, and held meetings with other Melrose gardeners, trying to convince them to maintain a united front, instead of squabbling. I attended one meeting at a Methodist church on Third Avenue and 158th Street in the South Bronx. The crusading spirit was flagging due to exhaustion and frustration. Javadi and other activists handed out petitions, helped organize future community gatherings, and wrote letters to other Bronx garden coalitions and to Bronx Council members for their support.

On a frigid Sunday afternoon in January 2002, I visited the Cabo Rojo encampment. I passed two other smaller gardens on the way—bright spots of green that, like Cabo Rojo, were walled in by mountains of concrete and brick. The ongoing noise pollution from planes in flight patterns to and from LaGuardia Airport was deafening. On the sidewalks leading up to the entrance gate I skirted around piles of broken glass and dog turds. Inside the garden, Javadi had constructed a 20-foot caterpillar. The wire-and-fabric-constructed caterpillar reminded me of the kids’ pageants of hand-crafted puppets and masks that preceded

8. “Nos Quedamos” (We’re Staying) proclaims the banner on the Cabo Rojo Garden casita, Melrose Commons, South Bronx, 2002. (Photo by Cindy Rosenthal)
the common green/common ground performances last spring. The warmth and optimism of the performances and the accompanying postperformance glow seemed worlds away from this battle scene that the garden had become. In the ongoing fight for the preservation of the gardens, during winter and early spring 2002, Cabo Rojo was on the frontline. The energetic, activated group from common green/common ground had learned its lesson and moved on.

Hogan, with Leslie Lowe and Emily Chan at NYCEJA, provided the policy background for Tisch students early on in the common green/common ground process. He explained the environmental justice perspective to me as follows:

There should be an acceptable minimum standard for open space. New York City has one of the lowest open space standards for its citizens of any metropolitan area in the country: only 2.5 acres per one thousand residents. Most gardens are in communities of color, which are sorely underserved in terms of access to green space. The gardens represent the single largest opportunity to bring to the parks’ inventory green spaces that are already being stewarded and have been stewarded for a great many years by local people. The infrastructure is already there. The ultimate question is: Is the city committed to providing open space in those neighborhoods that need it the most? (2002)

From Hogan’s perspective, “common green/common ground ended up being a healthy marriage between students’ investigations of substantive political issues regarding land use and garden preservation and finding a creative way of reaching people and telling the story” (2002). He viewed the lack of media coverage of the performances as a failure of common green/common ground, a lost opportunity to bring attention to the issues in “mainstream circles.” Overall, he said, “I was very impressed with the students’ interest in the issues” (2002). But their interest, however impressive at the time, did not have staying power, did not yield practical, political results.

Source materials for the common green/common ground script were derived from taped workshop sessions with gardeners and open space activists from the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem, and the East Village, from schoolchildren’s workshops in Brooklyn, and from sessions with the young women at The Point. Exercises, improvisations, interviews, and story circles began in summer 2000 and continued throughout the following fall and into the winter and early spring of 2001. Regular weekly rehearsals began in February 2001. The total number of participants involved in the project, including gardeners, Bronx River advocates, children, technicians, stage managers, choreographers, and dramatic writing students was about 135.

**The Project and NYU**

Director Peck underlines her primary responsibility to the audience. Student facilitators Rauch and Feinman assert that their primary responsibility is to the community. The students and Cohen-Cruz told me that there was ongoing dialogue about how much NYU should be referenced in the play. It wasn’t Peck who wanted to downplay the emphasis on NYU; according to the students, there was a consensus on this point. The students, Peck, and Cohen-Cruz agreed that
this “wasn’t a story about NYU after all, it was about community gardens and gardeners” (Rauch 2001a; Cohen–Cruz 2002). However, remembering East Villager Canepa’s comment—her wish that she had told the audience directly “this is not a commercial for NYU”—suggests a lack of consensus regarding the question of what more could or should be said about NYU.

There are only two times in the play where NYU is mentioned. In scene 10, “Questions: The Chorus of Obstacles”—which was conceived, developed, and performed by Tisch students in “studio” workshop sessions—a series of quick vignettes presents the challenges gardeners face in their attempts to preserve green space in the city. Voices called out “Big Institutions!” and TSOA undergraduate Joy Lynn Alegarbes appeared downstage center, displaying a clipboard plastered with a large NYU sticker. It was a quick, clear image, which perfectly fit the cartoon–bright style of this scene in common green/common ground. But in my view, much of the “Questions/Obstacles” section played like a collection of sound bites. A deeper political analysis, perhaps a sharper political/theatrical edge would have better served the cause, excavating the darker side of “Big Institutions.”

Dhira Rauch’s performance as Mayor Giuliani was a focal point of this section. Not quite a caricature, not an embodiment, her portrayal was very funny. Her performance brought to mind Brecht’s “not...but”—when s/he was onstage, the territory was made strange and the stakes were heightened. I viewed the mayor’s posturing and commentary with fresh eyes. From scene 10: Rauch/Giuliani: “In an unrealistic world people say that everything should be a community garden. But we have to live in the real world”—a Giuliani quote from the New York Times (Chivers 2000:B3).

common green/common ground fit into the TSOA “studio” rubric, through which the nine undergraduates were getting eight points of academic credit for “play building.” From a logistical standpoint, with weekly meetings/rehearsals at each of the sites around the city, combined with the regularly scheduled workshop sessions at NYU, common green/common ground didn’t fit the typical 16– to 20-hour, three-day-a-week studio course structure. From the students’ perspectives the rehearsal/production process was challenging and frequently frustrating on a number of levels. Although the focus was on making community art, Tisch students also had expectations of receiving the comprehensive, professional acting training they usually got in their studio courses. Shange and Rauch acknowledged that these expectations were not met. Shange explained:

Each of us was paying $35,000 for a conservatory education. What are you teaching me? It was a bitchy art student kind of thing. But it was real. This was a very different experience from working together with students in an acting class. (2000)

Given the time and personnel limitations of the project, acting exercises were not possible. Cohen–Cruz later realized that it would have been much simpler and easier to slot the project as an internship. “Expectations [for professional training] would have been lower” (2002). Tensions between the creative partners in common green/common ground often pulled in three directions at once. The student performers/facilitators, the garden community/open space activists, and the “outside” theatre artist Peck had conflicting and overlapping desires and expectations that complicated the process. For the community members, common green/common
ground was an opportunity for self-expression, a chance to work with professional theatre artists on presenting their stories about city gardening to audiences in their own communities. For this group, the performance project was a dynamic way to meld art with political issues near and dear to their hearts. The Tisch students signed on because they wanted to combine art with political efficacy. They often came in conflict with Peck because they saw her emphasis on aesthetics “watering down” the politics. But also, like the community gardeners, the students had self-expression in mind. They looked to Peck to systematically strengthen their skills as performing artists during the process. Peck, the director, was held responsible for satisfying the needs and desires of both the community participants and the students. Her job was to shape disparate materials into a professional production with a company made up of in-training and untrained performers. She was presenting her work in New York City, the locale of a high-stakes professional theatre community, and she had goals and expectations of her own. Her concerns and focus were fundamentally aesthetic, not political.
A History of the Eperanza (Hope) Garden

Cindy Rosenthal

On 15 February 2000, the Esperanza Garden, for 22 years a much-beloved community gathering place and green space on 7th Street and Avenue C, was leveled by a developer’s bulldozer, which was protected by a large city police force. The Giuliani administration argued that community gardens stood in the way of the city’s intention to build affordable housing. Community gardeners and their advocates argued that there are over 10,000 vacant city-owned lots, hence, this rationale makes little sense. New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer went to court that morning to get a preliminary injunction against the razing of the garden, but Judge Richard Huttner’s temporary restraining order came too late to save Esperanza. Spitzer declared, “This is an unfortunate display of the mayor [Rudy Giuliani] preventing the judicial process from operating” (in Chivers 2000). Spitzer and garden advocates maintained that the lots, part of the city’s GreenThumb program, should be considered parks, and should only be developed after a step-by-step legislative and environmental review process. GreenThumb, which has encouraged and supported gardeners’ efforts since 1978, was begun during Mayor Ed Koch’s administration to protect the city’s rights to the land, while ensuring that the land be well cared for (temporarily) by gardeners. Along with providing tools and technical assistance, GreenThumb set up a year-to-year licensing system that preserves the city’s right of ownership. Hundreds of lots under GreenThumb’s jurisdiction were transformed into thriving community gardens.

The furor on the morning of 15 February involved 150 people. Thirty-one were arrested, including dozens who had spent the night in the garden, and had chained or locked themselves into concrete blocks and fences, hoping to prevent Esperanza from being destroyed. Two NYU undergraduates, Dhira Rauch and Rebecca Lambrecht, were arrested, charged with trespassing, and held overnight for morning court appearances. They later participated in the creation and performance of common green/common ground. Rauch’s statement from that morning: “I guess I’m not going to make it to my 9:30 class,” became part of the script of the play. Garden activists Aresh Javadi and J.K. Canepa, who were among the last of the protesters removed from the site, also performed in common green/common ground.

Alicia Torres and her family and friends established the garden in 1977. The Garden of Hope (El Jardin de la Esperanza) was the site of children’s birthday parties and neighborhood celebrations over the years and was known for its profusion of sunflowers and roses (including a 20-year-old, 15-foot-high rosebush, still blooming during summer 1999). In a “last ditch” effort to summon the forces of nature to their protest, gardeners and activists erected a giant tree frog sculpture (el coqui) in the garden. According to Puerto Rican legend, this creature was meant to protect the garden and scare off attackers. This too was destroyed on 15 February 2000. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani granted permission to developer Donald Capoccia to build “affordable housing” for low- and middle-income residents on the Esperanza lot. As is often the case, the developer actually set aside only 20 percent of the units for low-income housing. The rest were to go for the much more expensive market rate. By February 2002, construction on the apartment buildings and retail spaces was nearly completed. A sign on the property announced “New Rentals” at “Eastville Gardens: One, Two, and Three Bedroom Apartments starting at $1,995.00 per month.” This rent was not affordable for most of the long-term residents in the neighborhood. The sign also advertised 5,500 square feet of commercial space, a fitness center, and a landscape garden on the site. In February 2002, the only sign of a garden was a sliver of land that once was part of El Bello Amanecer Borincano (The Beautiful Puerto Rican Dawn), another community garden, also bulldozed, which was around the corner on Avenue C. A vestigial tree was all that remained of the original garden in the razed lot.
Staging the Political

Because of its political content, the scripting and staging of scene 12, the “Destruction of the Esperanza Garden,” was one of the most difficult, emotionally charged sections for the company. Several members of the cast had participated in the 15 February 2000 demonstration against the bulldozing of Esperanza and had been jailed because of it (Javadi, Canepa, Rauch, Lambrecht). Others in the company (Feinman, Ariel Harman, Estelle Kattelson) since that time had become intensely involved in East Village garden activism. Rauch told me:

The East Village section was very emotional. We kept running it and running it and blocking it and we needed time to process what we were doing. To come at it in that way was weird. These are people who have lived it. You have to go from the inside out. The blocking will be there. I would talk to Sabrina all the time about it. We had some great talks. She learned a lot. (2001a)

And what did you learn from Peck? I asked Rauch. In her answer I saw that Rauch had synthesized Peck’s “playmaking” strategies into an awareness of the importance of maintaining the balance between community building and creating a structure in community-based theatre: “I saw she was able to see the whole thing at once. And she was able to listen to all of us. And she was able to keep going. She was always positive. She cared so much about the project. It was inspiring” (2001b).

For Esther Feinman, an NYU Gallatin graduate student, there were problems inherent not only in the lack of time, but also in the lack of sensitivity on Peck’s part:

I just see Sabrina focusing, focusing, whittling, whittling. People came in with material and she carved away at it. It was frustrating at certain points; sometimes I would find material that didn’t fit into our chosen focus about the play, conflicting stories about Esperanza, for instance. I think Sabrina was frustrated by the fact that we kept wanting to talk, which I felt was so important. Here we are, a university drama group, we can’t have the arrogance to say we’re telling the whole story, when we’re actually hearing from only two people, even though Aresh and J.K. are very important people in that movement. (2001)

But Cohen-Cruz reiterated to me, that above all:

Sabrina is really great with structure. After the “Destruction of Esperanza” scene, we asked, How does one go on? Sabrina knew we needed a spiritual component, that kind of release, and she suggested that we’d find the right element in Santar’a, an Afro-Caribbean religion. Rosamaria Roberts, a choreographer and an adherent of the spiritual practice, taught us dances of three of the orishas, the deities of Santar’a—Ogun, Oshun, and Elegua. I told Sabrina I was nervous
about including it, at first. It is such an important spiritual practice, I felt that it was dicey using it as a theatrical device or element. But the piece is so much about—as community-based performance often is—blurring life practices with art practices. In the same way, the communities have all opened themselves up to each other. (2001b)

Garden activist Canepa agrees, “All kinds of things, differences, boundaries, broke down in rehearsals. The bonds that were formed in making this play together are deep” (2001a).

Common ground was plotted and nurtured, seeds planted for future efforts
and activism. But questions remain to be asked and answered with regard to the performance’s efficacy. How effective was *common green/common ground* as political theatre?

After the performances Canepa marveled at the solidarity she felt with gardeners across the city: “We’re all so close now” (2001b). Emily Chan of NYCEJA affirmed that one of her organization’s agendas had been realized: “There is now a real tie between Project Harmony, The Point, and students and faculty at NYU. That has been the most rewarding” (2001). She understood Cohen-Cruz’s need to involve NYCEJA, “an outside agency,” as a project partner and acknowledged that although there were ongoing difficulties associated with the “bureaucratic nature of a large institution like NYU,” in Chan’s view:

> the actual performance was phenomenal. I saw it at Project Harmony, and it was packed, standing room only. It really told the stories from people’s hearts. I love that about the evolution of the performance. It came down to the people’s own stories. It was very powerful, young people with older people, generations together. It is rare and wonderful when people cross borough lines, cross neighborhood lines, and cross generations. The performance broke barriers. My sense now is that we need to be doing much more. Different kinds of media and advocacy at the grassroots level. Work needs to happen outside the meeting rooms. (2001)

A large share of the credit goes to Peck for her structural clarity, her “focusing.” The sense of *communitas* I witnessed/shared in the audience at La Plaza Cultural was very like what Chan felt at the Project Harmony performance. As an NYCEJA staff person she also recognized the ways in which the community-based performance process strengthened ties between disparate members of her alliance. Furthermore, Chan told me she believes that:

> The letter writing and postcard campaigns that NYU students, the gardeners themselves, the audiences at the performances, and the NYC school children engaged in helped raise awareness in [Governor George] Pataki’s office. Pataki’s people have come out and seen some of the sites. Unfortunately, none of them made it to any of the performances, as far as we know. (2001)

For Hogan at NYCEJA, the fact that none of the city politicians came to the performances and the lack of media attention garnered by *common green/common ground* were its failures. He also told me, “I thought the production would have been more explicitly political. But it was NYU performing after all, the Tisch School—and they can’t do that kind of stuff. Guerrilla theatre is for people who don’t have highly visible institutional connections. [...] There are many barriers to universities being really involved with social change movements in a profound way. It’s much more about individuals within the academy who can take theory and turn it into practice. (2002)
Community-based theatre is what you leave behind, Jan Cohen-Cruz teaches her students. During spring 2001 Dhira Rauch, Rebecca Lambrecht, and Esther Feinman were enrolled in Cohen-Cruz’s “Making Art, Impacting Public Policy” NYU course. For the course, Feinman constructed a detailed “candidate’s report card” on community garden policy positions, which she and other students sent to the NYC 2001 mayoral candidates. They received no responses to these, even with repeated telephone follow-ups. Feinman continued to be an active participant in the garden movement through summer 2001. She emailed me about an 1 August rally and demonstration in support of the MoreGardens! referendum, part of the “Vote for Gardens” campaign, which was targeted at raising awareness and changing legislation pertaining to green space and community gardens in NYC. By fall 2001 Feinman had moved to San Francisco to begin research on her master’s thesis. Feinman is looking at how community-based arts organizations in the Mission District of San Francisco both participated in the gentrification of the area’s Latino/a neighborhoods and resisted the gentrification of those communities. She said her involvement in common green/common ground allowed her “to get an intimate look at the relationship between art and activism,” which is what she is researching now (2002).

The initial plan for each of the performances, according to Cohen-Cruz and Chan, was to link each performance/site with a policy focus of some kind. Cohen-Cruz described her intention to create social advocacy via common green/common ground as “the beginning of a model that was not fulfilled.” Feinman blamed the lack of time for the failure of the project’s policy components: “If we had only started earlier on the policy stuff” (2001). In March 2001 Cohen-Cruz went into high gear as the show’s producer, coordinating the myriad details involved in producing five performances with 43 performers at four different outdoor sites in New York City. The ongoing organizational, logistical, budgetary, and technical issues inundated her. Her role in rehearsals—especially in script development—diminished greatly, as did her involvement in the policy components of the project. Looking back, Cohen-Cruz realized “the policy piece needed much more time.”

Other students in Cohen-Cruz’s “Making Art, Impacting Public Policy” class worked with Ellen Kirby at the Greenbridge Program of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden to devise a storytelling workshop with gardeners at the annual “Making Brooklyn Bloom” event. The students’ idea to mesh art and policy resulted in the creation of a “wishing tree” (inspired by one of Yoko Ono’s projects), which was covered with paper “leaves” on which people wrote their wishes for gardens. At The Point in the Bronx, other students worked with Nino de Simone on the “greening for breathing” campaign. In the East Village, in connection with La Plaza Cultural performances, a panel moderated by Brian Lehrer of National Public Radio discussed the impact of groundwater issues on the future of housing development in the East Village. It was suggested that the destabilizing effect of underground streams beneath La Plaza Cultural Garden made this site unsuitable for development. The hope was that this would help preserve La Plaza Cultural Garden, which remains at risk. Only 16 spectators turned out to listen to the four-person panel.

Nonetheless, Cohen-Cruz maintains that like the “candidate’s report card” that garnered no response, this too was a good art and policy learning experience because she and her students now know more about “what it takes to make an event”: Who are the people that must be invited, and what community organizations are crucial partners in a policy project? “You need to establish ties with a group that the politicians would have to respond to,” Cohen-Cruz declared. She
believes students are now aware of strategies that will work more effectively next time.

Cohen-Cruz is already envisioning the next time. We discussed her long-range goals. She would like to begin another community-based art project at Tisch in 2004, with a performance in 2005. But taking stock of the performances that took place in 2001, it is clear that this time, although the performance argued for social change, there wasn’t the needed follow-through and the policy piece failed. No gardens were saved. No politicians came to the performances. No policies have changed.

Cohen-Cruz said that the experience of working on common green/common ground motivated her to reexamine her own role “close to home.” She described her growing frustration with what she called “the top-down approach” of NYU: “NYU needs to consider neighborhood residents who are here for the long haul. I know it’s not a popular capitalist principle. But I would like to see NYU take the moral high road more often” (2002). With regard to the “bitterness” East Village residents feel about NYU’s real estate “gluttony,” Cohen-Cruz said:

I know it’s not simple for NYU, they have to provide housing for students, but there have to be community partnerships. When you are going to affect people’s everyday lives, you have to bring them into the decision making [...] which the NYU administration is not doing. (2001a)

In a phone interview with TSOA Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell, I asked about her response to the project as well as her take on the question of efficacy in relation to common green/common ground. Campbell was extremely enthusiastic about the performance she saw at La Plaza Cultural:

One of the most common ways to “diss” community art is to refer to it as less than other kinds of art, as if it doesn’t have the same standards, polish, production values as a professional presentation. What marked these performances is that the production level was very, very high. (2001)

The value Campbell places on a certain level of polish and professionalism is also very high. It is obvious that Cohen-Cruz understood where the bar was and knew that her community-based performance, like everything else under the Tisch banner, would have to measure up. Cohen-Cruz reported that the dean was very supportive during the preparation and rehearsal process. “She’s a policy person. [...] It’s the dean’s belief and mine too, that if you are a young artist, you need to know more than your craft. How do artists relate to the rest of society, what are the models for this?” (2001a).

Interestingly, Campbell pointed to the production’s critique of NYU as one of its greatest strengths:

The piece did not shrink from that. It cast a satirical tone [...]. This prevented the piece from glossing over the apparent contradiction in having NYU perform this in sympathy with the community, while institutionally being one of the, frankly, guilty offenders. (2001)

And what of NYU’s guilt, its complicity? Cohen-Cruz and some of the students discussed the possibility of a “real” collaboration between NYU and the community gardeners. In several interviews people suggested that NYU buy land and give it back to the gardeners. I mentioned this to Campbell, who back-peddled a bit. She explained that although there was soon to be a shift in NYU and NYC administrations (I was speaking to her before the new president of the
24 January 2002

Dear Dean Sexton:

My name is Cindy Rosenthal. I am an NYU alumna (PhD, Performance Studies, 1997), I write on theatre and performance in New York City, and I’m a full-time Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies at Hofstra University. I’m currently finishing an article for TDR, in which I analyze the creative process and the efficacy of a community-based performance, *common green/common ground*, which was presented outdoors in three boroughs last spring and was produced by garden activists in collaboration with Tisch School of the Arts faculty and students. The motivation behind creating this moving, music, theatre, and dance work with a multigenerational cast of 39 was to tell gardeners’ stories and to raise awareness about urban open space and garden preservation issues. The goal was to enlighten audiences through art and ultimately, hopefully, to effect concrete policy change.

At this point, it is clear that the production did not effect policy change, nor did it save a garden. One clear accomplishment of the project, however, was community building. Connections were strengthened and/or forged, not only between the NYU artists (students and faculty) and local gardeners and activists in NYU’s “home” East Village neighborhood, but with community gardeners across the city. During the rehearsal and performance process and in the nine months that followed, students, faculty, and administrators voiced the opinion that NYU needs to change how it deals with the community. Deans and Tisch undergraduates alike have stated that in the post–September 11 climate downtown it is even more essential that NYU respond to the needs of its neighborhood community when making decisions that impact the community (such as real estate development, which is essential to a growing, thriving institution of higher learning such as NYU). The hope is that the old “top-down” approach will be re-visioned in this new era with a new mayor and a new president of NYU.

For this last phase of my research and writing, I would be interested in your views on NYU’s role in the community. For instance, What is your response to community-based planning? In light of the East Village’s limited open and green space and the challenge of “saving” existing neighborhood gardens, what do you see as NYU’s responsibility with regard to an urban environmental ethic in its decision-making process in the future? Finally, because of NYU’s past, present, and future expansion and development, do you feel a special fund that would support community gardens in the East Village ought to be created by NYU to provide money for site development, maintenance, and programming?

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Respectfully yours,
Cindy Rosenthal, PhD
Assistant Professor, Theatre Studies
Hofstra University
University and the new mayor had taken office, which could bring about policy changes and new programs, the next few years would most likely be a complex, difficult time in both administrative spheres, and not a time when the garden issue would take priority. Needless to say, in the aftermath of the September 11th 2001 attacks, Campbell’s words have an even louder ring of truth. Much of the day-to-day and long-term planning and so many programs and policy decisions in New York City are on hold or focused on post—September 11th projects.

Campbell echoed Cohen–Cruz’s sentiments about the need for community-building:

One of the strong points of view that I hold is that we need to rethink a collaborative relationship between this institution and its community. NYU may be viewed as a “real estate monolith” by some, but in fact it is not; it is an educational institution that must expand and grow. But we can’t do it in a way that is flat-footed and stomps all over our neighborhood. It’s a moment for us to rethink this more broadly, with community gardens being a part of it. I think there’s a lot of room for that. The leadership of the university will need to take this on. (2001)

Campbell was less clear about what leadership role she herself might play. And with the fabric of the city badly torn, what lies ahead for the community garden movement at this moment is also unclear. Following this point, I sent a letter to NYU president–designate John Sexton (formerly the dean of the NYU Law School) to get his views on NYU’s role in the community and on community-based planning. I also sent a letter to Mayor Bloomberg, asking him to clarify his position on community gardens in New York City. To this date, I’ve received no response to either letter.

What is clear, according to Chan at NYCEJA, are “the links we established with NYU, with the students, with a new generation of really energized advocates—and this is vital, phenomenal, amazing” (2001). What is clear, according to Toby Sanchez, a Brooklyn gardener for almost two decades, are the benefits in using institutional support wisely and well—whether it’s from a private foundation, a city or state agency, NYU, or Brooklyn College (where she created an award-winning community garden with her neighbors):

If you take care of a garden, you have a commitment to the city—you have the feeling you wouldn’t drop a pin on the street. […] After the performances I wrote a letter to the Parks Department. I said, It’s a magical thing. You don’t want to destroy this. You want people to have this. (2001)

Like Sanchez, 21–year-old Shange has no problem with using institutions to get what she wants (“Let’s see how we can use that power”). She summed up common green/common ground and the political efficacy question as follows:

This wasn’t a huge political intervention in terms of the grand sense of beating city hall, capturing the media, etc. The real political interventions are those that are made with individual people. Many, many people came to the show, learned things they didn’t know before, and signed up with MoreGardens! That’s really important. But it’s also important that people like Rosa, and Pearl, and little Ayesha, and Renee are able to tell their stories and have their stories valued by an audience. Knowing how important your words are and your story is changes everything. (2001)
And so, back to the stories. ("Did you get the story?" Pearl Young asked me.) I got the story. The story told in *common green/common ground* concerns resurrection and rebirth after the destruction of the Esperanza Garden, the Garden of Hope. Did *common green/common ground* result in direct political action? No garden was saved, no legislation was enacted. But as in Augusto Boal’s forum theatre, a story was told that enacted alternatives and explored possibilities. However, unlike Boal’s staged stories that function as “anti-models” depicting victims, which are then replayed (and hopefully transformed) when spectators join in, the *common green/common ground* company managed to transform the story of the gardens’ destruction into a story of hope. *common green/common ground* may be deemed a success in terms of constructing a model of community solidarity and in cultivating alliances between institutions and activists.

Shange graduated in May 2002. During academic year 2001/2002, she taught in a public elementary school where she did performance projects and worked in a garden with her students. She plans to go to graduate school and use what she learns for “revolutionary pedagogy.” For her, “teaching is a political act.” She wants to focus on equity and social justice in the classroom, finding ways to foster connections between schools and the larger community.

Bruce McConachie wrote:

No performance by itself can alter the routines of everyday life, but community-based theatre can provide “what if” images of potential community, sparking the kind of imaginative work that must precede substantial changes in customary habits. (1998:38)

At NYU and at four “green spaces” in three boroughs of New York City, the seeds are planted.
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Cindy Rosenthal is an Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies at Hofstra University. Her essays have appeared in Radical Street Performance (Routledge 1998) and in journals such as Theatre Survey and Women and Performance. Current projects include co-editing an anthology, Group Theatres, with James Harding, which focuses on the work of eight radical theatre collectives of the 1960s–’70s. As a founding member of the Bread Loaf Acting Ensemble, since 1986 she has conceived, performed, directed, and produced original works in Middlebury, Vermont, and Juneau, Alaska.

Contacts

Where to phone or email to support community gardens and open space equity in New York City

NYCEJA: The NYC Environmental Justice Alliance
212-239-8882 <www.nyceja.org>

MoreGardens! Coalition
212-533-8019 <www.moregardens.org>

Earth Celebrations
212-777-7969 <www.earthcelebrations.com>