

Cornerstone Theater

TURNS A NEW CORNER

By David C. Nichols Photo: Chris Kane

EVEN WITH SO MANY representative theatre troupes in Los Angeles, there is nothing like Cornerstone Theater Company. Since it first migrated here in 1992, the multi-ethnic, ensemble-oriented, community-minded company has drawn together the divergent cultures of this city (and the nation) so comprehensively that if Cornerstone had not come to LA, the city would have had to go to Cornerstone. With the launch of their *Justice Cycle* in June, this much-lauded company turns a new corner. Inspired by current events and dialogues that emerged during Cornerstone's previous cycle of faith-based plays, the *Justice Cycle* will present five world premiere shows conceived around the question of how laws shape and disrupt communities.

Those communities in this case involve illegal immigration, reproductive rights, incarceration and the environment. *The Justice Cycle*, like many a Cornerstone project before it, will incorporate true material from community dialogues and story circles initiated and facilitated by the company which will transpire over a two-year period. It begins with *Los Illegals* (working title), written by Cornerstone's new artistic director Michael John Garcés and directed by award-winning Cornerstone multi-talent Shishir Kurup.

The second play, directed by Garcés from a script by Julie Marie Myatt, derives from the reproductive rights residency in November. In June 2008 comes the incarceration piece, K.J. Sanchez's *Eye for Eye*, helmed by associate artistic director Laurie Woolery. The environmental residency staged by Juliette Carillo follows in November 2008, and the cycle culminates in June 2009, with Naomi Iizuka scripting a "bridge show" that brings all four communities and topics together.

Any Cornerstone community-based cycle is automatically a significant event but this one is doubly noteworthy. *The Justice Cycle* is the first major long-term project under Garcés, who came to Cornerstone after founding artistic director Bill Rauch announced his departure in January 2005. As Garcés relates, "I officially came to work a year ago, in April. I actually got the position in October of 2005. The plan was to have at least three months of overlap. However, when I was hired, I was already booked. I was able to get out of one or two jobs in that period but I couldn't get out of all of them. When I came aboard last April, I had to leave in May."

Garcés and Rauch had a week of overlap in March 2006 (and would eventually co-direct Jeffrey Hatcher's *The Falls* at the Guthrie that

autumn). "I would fly in for the day from New York. Throughout the whole time before I came, we were talking about what we might undertake, what we wanted to do."

Born in Columbia, the affable, enthusiastic Garcés has worked at major regional theaters across this country (and abroad) including two collaborations with another consensus-run company, Sna Jtz'ibajom, in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. That situation surely prepared him for the consensus-run Cornerstone. "Coming

to consensus is intense," says Garcés. "Consensus means we all consent—it doesn't mean we all agree. That's a crucial distinction. It's not about watering down an idea until we all like it. It's about bringing passion to the table, about putting your point forth, about listening to other people, and ultimately saying, 'Okay, I may not want to do that but I will buy your idea because you're so passionate.' It's about ownership. There's a real sense when we

make a decision that everybody is with that thing, which is great."

Such discussions kept coming back to "issues on people's minds, where we are as a country," Garcés recalls. "We kept coming up against these things we felt were in a crux moment because of legislation, Supreme Court decisions, how the environment was changing. Cornerstone had always come to issues through community. We thought what if we come to community through issues? We still wanted to create plays about community but [with] a different way of thinking about community. We entered from that perspective, and it's completely new for us, but we were all excited about it.

"At the time, I was working on a show at the Florida Stage, in Manalapan, next to West Palm Beach, hyper-wealthy....you cross over the inter-coastal and it's extremely poor. We'd rehearse in the poor section and we'd perform in the rich section. When we started talking about the *Justice Cycle*, I thought, the community I really want to work with is the undocumented communities that come here to do work and get caught in this legal situation that is really crazy, driven by this incredible economic engine in this country, and our need for labor. We have the demand; the supply is going to come, just like drugs. You aren't going to stop it."

Kurup notes, "Cornerstone has made me go into parts of the city I may not have gone into, and then later, sometimes years later, I'll drive past a site and remember, that's where we did this show.

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Cornerstone has made me an Angeleno.”

He believes that “the best work we do is when we take a huge subject and find a very specific viewpoint. Michael has written a nice script, a loose adaptation of Calderón de la Barca, an ‘I am Spartacus’ kind of play. Loose enough to incorporate changes as we find out what people have, skills or talents you don’t discover until rehearsals start.

“In preparing this piece, we’ve spoken to people who applied for jobs with their birth name on the resume. Didn’t get the job. Then, they would submit the same resume for the same job, only with a different, Anglo-friendly name, and they’d be called in. Nothing changed but the name. Imagine someone with a Welsh name having that happen to them.”

Kurup continues, “There’s the tension between illegal and undocumented workers, and the underdocumented, who have some of the papers they need, not all of them, between those workers who go to formal, committee-run sites and those who stand out on the street. We don’t ask for anybody’s status in these story circles. Cornerstone always runs the risk of an environment where the people we cast from the community may or may not show up. But I’d say, 80 percent stay. When the show’s done, time and again they tell us, ‘I would do this again in a heartbeat.’ Each time is as scary as the last time. Each time, I don’t know if this time I won’t get killed. There are just exacerbations to what we do. And the hurdles that end up coming your way? Those are the gold.”

Managing director Shay Wafer is clear on

Director Shishir Kurup, Associate Artistic Director Laurie Woolery, Manager of Community Partnerships & Audience Engagement Nico Lang, Artistic Director Michael John Garcés, Managing Director Shay Wafer

what’s required to handle the hurdles: “Patience, flexibility, an openness to process, willingness to journey into new and different environments; remaining grounded in the fact we are a theatre company and artist first and not a social service organization. Seeking the ‘value in the valley’ and to always err on the side of generosity.”

Nico Lang, the company’s manager of community partnerships and audience engagement, acknowledges the challenges in approaching undocumented workers, yet observes that, “We could have just parked at a Home Depot, walked up to people and started asking questions. We may have even gotten some people to talk to us that way. But we wanted to be as gracious and respectful as possible. It was essential that our entrances and introductions to the workers and their advocates come from the organizations that support them, like The National Day Laborers Organizing Network.

“The trust just would not have been there if we had acted alone. This is a community used to assaults by the media. We were very mindful of that as we set about building this piece. One of the great blessings to us on this project is that, once that trust was established, these men and women have proven to be amazingly motivated to tell their stories, and take a very proactive role in getting this piece on stage. They’re remarkably brave. They’re activists simply by nature of their own daily lives. It’s very moving.” ■