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## Oregon's Sanctuary Stage

Giving Voice to the Voiceless

BARBARA SELLERS-YOUNG



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# Oregon's Sanctuary Stage: Giving Voice to the Voiceless

Barbara Sellers-Young,<sup>1</sup> York University, Canada

*Abstract: Artists often talk of a sense of community, a place that creatively engages a sense of social cultural history that is deeply tied and inseparable from their local environment. The phrase community art is a practice at the intersection of the artist and the neighborhood that emphasizes collaboration between the artist and community. Projects most often take place as a means of revitalizing a community or providing an opportunity for community members to engage in a creative process. Without advocating a specific political stance, Oregon's Sanctuary Stage has integrated the practice of theatre with that of place and sanctuary. This is not limited to a concept of sanctuary as "an escape from," it is instead, entering into an act of self-discovery and self-understanding in relationship to other members of a local community and its environment. This article discusses Sanctuary Stage's process of theatre making as an example in which the stage space becomes a sanctuary for the sustainability of individual and community identity, and thus, influences the cultural and political context of a community.*

*Keywords: Micro-Community, Collaboration, Sanctuary, Stage, Oregon*

## Introduction

The James Irvine Foundation published in 2011 a report titled "Getting in on the Act" that documented a new direction in the artistic community with roots in the political activism of the 1960s.

We are in the midst of a seismic shift in cultural production, moving from a "sit-back-and-be-told culture" to a "making-and-doing-culture." Active or participatory arts practices are emerging from the fringes of the Western cultural tradition to capture the collective imagination. Many forces have conspired to lead us to this point. The sustained economic downturn that began in 2008, rising ticket prices, the pervasiveness of social media, the proliferation of digital content and rising expectations for self-guided, on-demand, customized experiences have all contributed to a cultural environment primed for active arts practice. This shift calls for a new equilibrium in the arts ecology and a new generation of arts leaders ready to accept, integrate and celebrate all forms of cultural practice. This is, perhaps, the defining challenge of our time for artists, arts organizations and their supporters—to embrace a more holistic view of the cultural ecology and identify new possibilities for Americans to engage with the arts. (Brown and Novack 2011, 4)

Essentially, the Irvine report was documenting the consequence of an intense political engagement in which many visual and performing artists in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia became committed to creating art that represented the identity and expressed the concerns of a community. In terms of theatre, this activist performance form is an extension of the engaged theatre of German director and playwright Bertolt Brecht (1893–1956) and the performance methods of Brazilian Augusto Boal (1931–2009) whose performances broke the fourth wall of the proscenium and encouraged the stage as a space of community dialogue (Green 2001). As Cohen-Cruz points out, "theater is not a self-contained entity but rather gains meaning in context, integrated into people's lives" (2006, 14).

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Barbara Sellers-Young, School of Art, Media, Performance and Design, York University, 4700 Keele St, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada. email: basyoung@yorku.ca

This essay traces Dan Stone and Tinamarie Ivey's evolution of an approach to theater in Oregon's Willamette Valley that builds on the performance theories of Brecht and Boal that they refer to as "sanctuary theatre" or in terms of its company name, Sanctuary Stage.<sup>2</sup> The Merriam Webster dictionary (2019) notes that sanctuary is a political concept derived from the Latin *sanctuarium*, with a history primarily associated with worship. There is an assumption that houses of worship are a sacred site of spiritual refuge that provides safety, shelter, protection, and in some cases asylum for those who enter. The humanitarian purpose of sanctuary has historically been to provide a source of help, relief, or comfort to displaced persons due to political upheaval. More recently, sanctuary has expanded beyond its association with churches to include spaces of emotional, physical, and psychological safety for displaced people. These can include refugees, homeless people, those with mental impairments, individuals suffering from a natural disaster, or a terminal illness. Non-profit organizations seek to provide an opportunity for those in sanctuary to have the time and support necessary to resolve their specific situation. More recently in the United States, some cities and states, including Oregon, have enacted sanctuary legislation that provides a safety zone for immigrants (Wilson 2017).

Stone and Ivey's development of sanctuary theatre considers the process of creating performance as sites of physical and emotional safety that provide an opportunity for a micro-community, defined by Stone and Ivey as a minority group that shares a similar identity—ethnic origin, religious practice, gender identity, sexual preference, employment, etc. This definition used by Stone and Ivey is distinct from micro-community as a small-scale habitat or social media site on the internet. Stone and Ivey's concept of micro-community assumes that an individual can be a member of a larger community, such as a city, and at the same time be a member of an affinity group. One of the attributes of Stone and Ivey's approach is that it creates via a theatre performance a dialogue between a micro-community and the larger community.

The goal of sanctuary theatre is to provide an opportunity for a micro-community to discover their voice and place that voice on stage. Ultimately, this application of sanctuary has two aspects, the initial micro-community conversations or story circles and the final production for the entire community. In a time period when sanctuary has been primarily associated with conflicts over immigration between the federal government of the United States and city and state governments, the practices of the sanctuary theatre provide a discursive framework for appreciating diversity within the context of community.

In sanctuary theatre, "There is an extraordinary power in the foundational idea of transforming spectators into 'spect-actors' who become active subjects in the theater rather than passive observers, thereby giving power, authority, and responsibility to the audience" (Brady 2001, 1). Thus, in this process, members of a micro-community come together in an environment of emotional and physical safety to express concerns or issues through an artistic medium and related process. This results in a collaboration in which members of the micro-community evolve the script and create the scenic/costume design and the musical accompaniment as well as participating in audience engagement discussions following the production.

Productions of Sanctuary Stage act as a catalyst to create a dialogic bridge between members of the community—artists and non-artists—and the related social, cultural, political, and/or economic issue. In each instance, the goal is for members of the micro-community to find a means to express in performance the issues they face in their daily lives, and thus create a dialogue between their micro-community and the larger community in which they live. Sanctuary Stage is therefore a space of theatrical sanctuary for the discovery of divergent voices and is distinctly different from community-based theatres that provide performance opportunities for amateur directors, designers, and actors (Shaughnessy 2012; Taylor 2003).

Award winning artists Dan Stone and Tinamarie Ivey have brought their version of this activist theatre to Oregon through their company Sanctuary Stage; a company they started when both were

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<sup>2</sup> This essay is based on interviews with Dan Stone and Tinamarie Ivey and on attending the productions of Sanctuary Stage from 2013–2018.

living in Northern California. Involved in theatre from when they were young, the husband and wife team met when they were taking classes with Dr. Ron Argelander, the former chair of the Experimental Theatre Wing at New York University and who taught experimental performance at California State University, San Bernardino. Argelander encouraged Stone to start a Student Original One Act Play Festival. Stone's plays *Boxes* and *Lunchpails* won awards at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. Ultimately the couple decided to move to northern California and attend Humboldt State University for their MFA degrees. After graduation, Stone and Ivey each took advantage of other opportunities. Stone studied with noted Commedia dell'arte master Maestro Antonio Fava. Ivey studied with MICHA, the Michael Chekhov Association, and worked at Los Angeles' Cornerstone Theatre Company as an assistant director with Michael John Garces, who is currently the artistic director of Cornerstone Theatre (Kuftinec 2003).

In Eureka, California, Stone and Ivey took on the artistic management of the Eureka Theatre located in a 1931 art deco era theatre. There they produced a series of performances that became known throughout the region for innovative pairing of texts by Beckett, O'Neill, commedia scenarios and others. Following the experience at the Eureka Theatre, they developed their own performance space at St. Bernard Theatre where they staged a sixteenth century commedia scenario *Love is a Drug* that they developed through improvisation. They also partnered with Los Angeles' Cornerstone Theatre in a summer residency program in the development of *Jason in Eureka*, a sight specific original play based on the community of Eureka. In 2009 they initiated The Logger Project.

The Logger Project provided an opportunity for Ivey to apply her experience with Cornerstone to evolve a process of collaboration in participation with the logging community. She initiated a series of conversations that would bring to light the issues being faced personally by the loggers as they dealt with the changing context of the logging industry. She listened to the memories of the community members from a 90-year-old cook who had fed hundreds in the logging camps to a group of "tree huggers" who wanted to prevent logging. The mediated dialogue that took place in the emotional safety of the meetings provided an opportunity for "tree huggers" to discover that loggers were poets and sculptors who actually revered trees for the spirit that lived within them. The process therefore explored points of common understanding that were integrated into the production and provided a stepping stone to the evolution of building a deeper level of cross community appreciation.

In 2010, Dan Stone was offered a teaching position at Linn-Benton Community College in Oregon's Willamette Valley, sometimes referred to as the I-5 corridor as it links Oregon's major cities from Portland on the Columbia River to Eugene, home of University of Oregon at the southern end. Stone and Ivy visited Oregon and were entranced by the mountains on three sides—the Cascade Range to the east, the Oregon Coast Range to the west, and the Calapooya Mountains to the south—as well as the extensive agricultural land that includes 500 wineries, extensive orchards of apples, filberts, and fields of seed grass and herds of sheep. They were also intrigued by the small towns that existed at the edges of the eastern and western ranges, many with active amateur theatre communities whose yearly seasons include plays by Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. Stone and Ivy purchased acreage outside of Corvallis, Oregon that would allow them to maintain a large garden, bee hive, and a deep relationship to the land.

They were also determined to bring the concept of sanctuary theatre with them. With a designation as a cultural outreach component of Linn-Benton Community College, they have built a program that in part takes place on campus in a course focused on creating the framework for sanctuary theatre and have also undertaken community-based projects. Their website states:

Welcome to Sanctuary Stage, a community outreach program of the Linn-Benton Community College Performing Arts Department. Our projects focus on creating original plays through Devised, Applied and Community Engaged Playmaking platforms. We strive to promote diversity, social justice and awareness. Our projects often focus on, but not limited to, the stories of micro-communities found within the greater Willamette Valley Oregon. (Sanctuary Stage 2016)

Each project undertaken by Sanctuary Stage has a set of community partners who act as liaisons, and in some cases, co-producers and members of the micro-community who participate in the process of the development of the production and work either backstage or onstage during the actual production.

### *Un Carol de Independence*

The mayor of Independence, Oregon, John McArdle, approached Stone and Ivey about creating an original play focusing on the lives, experiences, and challenges of Latino families. Sanctuary Stage's engagement with the Latino families of Independence culminated in *Un Carol de Independence*, a variation of Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*. The production united Stone and Ivey's concept of the sanctuary theatre with Oregon's position as a sanctuary state.

Oregon's path toward becoming a sanctuary state is a consequence of the presence of Latinos in Oregon since the sixteenth century. This includes the Spanish coastal explorations from 1542 to 1603 which continued into the eighteenth century (Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010). In fact, Juan Perez reached the Oregon Coast in 1774 to become the first European to describe Yaquina Head and make landfall in present-day Oregon (Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010). Following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, Latinos came north to work as cattle herders and mule packers who often carried supplies for the US Army. During the twentieth century Latinos have consistently come to Oregon to work in the fields and orchards as well as for the railroads (Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010). Some eventually decided to stay, and today there are approximately 500,000 Latinos living in Oregon. Of the 10,000 people living in Independence 35.3 percent of them are Latino (May 2011; Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010).

Despite Latinos' contributions to Oregon's economy, their reception has not always been positive and there have been many incidences of overt discrimination (May 2011). As an agricultural community, Independence has had a complex history between the town and those who worked in the fields that surround it. In fact, the move toward becoming a sanctuary state is a result of such an encounter. It began at the Hi Ho Restaurant in Independence, Oregon, early on January 9, 1977, when several police officers approached four Latino men. The officers without a warrant interrogated the men about their citizenship. Delmiro Trevino, a United States citizen, was placed in the middle of the restaurant and further questioned while the patrons watched (May 2011). Trevino later filed a class action law suit that challenged his public humiliation. Ultimately the Oregon State Legislature in July of 1987 enacted a sanctuary law that was reaffirmed in 2017. The original law (1987) states:

No law enforcement agency of the State of Oregon or of any political subdivision of the state shall use agency moneys, equipment or personnel for the purpose of detecting or apprehending persons whose only violation of law is that they are persons of foreign citizenship present in the United States in violation of federal immigration laws. (Oregon's Sanctuary Law 2017)

The 2017 evolution of the law (HB 3464) separated the local officials from the federal immigration authorities in terms of information sharing. It represented a historical revision of Oregon as a state which within its hundred plus year history had once enacted a set of state and city laws that restricted the presence of people who traced their ancestry to Asia, Africa, and Latin America (May 2011; Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza. 2010).

In collaboration with the City of Independence, Department of Latino Outreach, and residents of Independence, *Un Carol de Independence* was an opportunity for the community to engage in a conversation regarding the history and contribution of Latinos to Independence which make up 35 percent of the population. Mayor John McArdle's goal was to bring together the community of Independence to create a shared understanding of where the city has been and where it is going. A performance that provided a historical reference for one segment of the

population would encourage a more inclusive community conversation. Stone and Ivey's primary goal was to involve as many of residents of Independence and Polk county as possible to create a performance that expressed the history and culture of the Latino community. Within the conception of sanctuary theatre, this means engaging people who represent inter-generational relationships from a diverse range of professions, ages, cultures, and economic backgrounds. A secondary goal was to provide an example of a creative process that could be incorporated into future community arts projects in Independence, with specific reference to those community dialogues that examine issues of social justice. Fundamentally, Stone and Ivey have based their approach on the extensive research noted by the Irvine Foundation that indicates that community engagement in the arts and the creation of original work results in giving participants a collaborative process that will help strengthen the community and promote respect through dialogue (Shaughnessy 2012; Taylor 2003).

The first stage of each project is a series of conversations to understand the community's history and the issues related to that history. This phase of the process takes place over months of story circles in which the members of the micro-community come together to listen to each other. These meetings also develop a relationship of trust among the participants in which people feel free to tell their stories without fear of judgement. These sharing circles build mutual support and respect that becomes fundamental to the process of creating the performance. Ultimately, the style of each production is guided by the shared stories and the interaction of the micro-community participants in improvisations based on the stories. As Stone and Ivey also note:

When working on this type of project structure can be a difficult thing. Do we create an entirely original play or do we adapt some kind of pre-existing story? This is one aspect of this particular project that has been elusive. There is so much robust information it has been challenging to find the right story. Throughout our workshops with our new ensemble, they were clear that they wanted people to see the past, present and future in regards to their lives here in Independence. How do we tell that story? What vehicle will allow us to go from past, present to future. The answer soon became very clear. We would use the structure of *A Christmas Carol* as the basis for our storytelling. (Sanctuary Stage 2016)

Performed by members of the Latino community, the bilingual play tells the story of Jose (76) and his family—daughter Lety (42), her gabacho husband Brad (45), and the granddaughters Isabella (17) and Julia (14). The story also includes a sympathetic local police officer Banuelos (30). The focus of the production is Isabella and her attempts for self-determination in a community that already seems to have prejudged her. The initial scene is the family's response to Isabella being brought home by Banuelos for starting a fight at the local mall. Isabella defends herself by decrying the fact that "Every time I go somewhere people think I'm going to steal something," or asks "How long are you in town for? Are you here till the end of the season?" This is a reference to Latinos as agricultural workers. Isabella shares that, "I told them my family has lived in Independence for over fifty years. I told him that my step-dad works at Western Oregon University and we are not seasonal pickers" (Stone 2016, 20). The family members who have all been through similar experiences throughout their lives are not sympathetic. Instead, they suggest that she appreciate the history of the family and opportunities they have helped to create for her.

That night begins the nocturnal visits that are a variation of *A Christmas Carol*. The first apparition is her maternal grandmother who tells Isabella of the visitors that will come and suggests she not be frightened. Ghost 1 takes Isabella back to the past of the agreement between Mexico and the United States during World War II for Mexicans to come and work the farms across Oregon. The ghost reveals to Isabella the courtship of her grandparents that took place in a blueberry field and the early life of her parents. The next ghost, Don Francisco, convinces Isabella to reconsider her attitude toward the folkloric dance she learned from her grandmother

and shows her a scene in which her step-father Brad reveals how much he cares about her happiness. The final ghost is Antonio her father who tells her:

Your ancestors made a lot of sacrifices for you to be where you are. You may not see it, but believe it or not, your life today is different because of them. You were born in Independence and that gives you rights and opportunities that your mom and me and your Abuela (grandmother) didn't have. (Stone 2016, 25)

As a final warning, Antonio shows what her future will be if she continues her negative approach to life, a lonely old woman. The final scene of the play reveals a transformed Isabella who has resolved her anger and attired in a traditional Jalisco dress is ready to go perform a dance at the fiesta.

The performance of *Un Carol de Independence* provided an opportunity for live theatre in a community that does not have a theatre company. The staging of the production and the designated community discussions following were held at the local Elks Lodge, a community group with a long history that is located on Independence's main street. Placing the production at the Elks Lodge, physically situated the Latino community's story in center of city's cultural life. The small space seating approximately one hundred people created an intimate environment in which the audience of Latinos and non-Latinos had an opportunity to appreciate the story of Isabella's transformation, and at the same time acknowledge the sometimes-fraught history of the relationship between United States and Latin America that serves as the impetus for the story. The feedback to Stone and Ivey was that they had, through the project, created a sanctuary that gave voice to a group within the community and provided a safe place for cross-cultural dialogue. The goals of Mayor McArdle were therefore achieved.

## Other Projects

Other projects of Sanctuary Stage follow a process similar to *Un Carol de Independence*. *Tango Mike* focused on veterans suffering from PTSD. It was created through interviews and story circles with veterans and their families along the Willamette corridor from Albany to Corvallis, Philomath, Lebanon, Salem, and Sweet Home. The story circles included all military branches who served in the Korean, Vietnam, and Iraq wars. Ultimately the production was set in Albany, Oregon on Memorial Day when Mike "Buddy" McIntyre and his family are celebrating the holiday with family and friends. Unexpectedly, Buddy's father Cooper who he has not been seen in fifteen years shows up. The two men grapple with their battles with PTSD and acknowledge how it has affected the relationship with their families. Following the production, the veterans shared with Stone and Ivey the positive experience it was for them to be able to share with the community how their experience in war impacted their everyday lives.

The project *Peace Be Upon You* focused on the Willamette Valley Muslim community and the relationship between Sumaiya and Chelsea, college roommates in a rural Oregon University who must put aside their differences as they navigate cultural and political challenges often based on stereotypes. The roommates discover that despite their different religious beliefs, they share similar problems as young women determining their identity in an increasingly complex global society. Thus, the process of the production of *Peace Be Upon You* created an opportunity for Muslim and non-Muslim communities to evolve an understanding of each other through the lives of college students.

Oregon is primarily known for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival located at the southern part of the state next to the California border in Ashland, Oregon. Although the Festival does a variety of plays from those of Shakespeare as well as contemporary and new plays, the Festival's framework does not provide an opportunity for local micro-communities to interact with a larger community to contemplate and thus grapple with issues. The objective of each production of Sanctuary Stage is not to stage a play based on the imagination of a playwright. Instead, the goal



is to involve individual micro-communities in a dialogue that creates a production which interrogates the issues that are facing the micro-community or in the case of *Peace be Upon You*, current local/global stereotypes. Stone and Ivey anticipate that each project “will strengthen inter-generational and cross-cultural relationships between those from different professions, ages, cultures and economic backgrounds.” However, their goals are not limited to the micro-community. Their experience has taught them that theatre evolved within a sanctuary of emotional and psychical safety contributes to “sustainability for future community arts projects within the city through the professional training in theater-making for community members, artists and social justice advocates.”

The ongoing dialogue established in the micro-community ultimately extends into the larger community from city, to region, to state. Stone and Ivey believe in teaching collaboration as a process and contribute to promoting productive dialogue which leads to tolerance and understanding. Sanctuary Stage’s unique position and contribution to the artistic life in Oregon in providing a theatrical sanctuary for a diversity of groups within the Willamette Valley has been acknowledged by the City of Albany and Lane Benton Community College. They were specifically awarded for bringing untold stories that promote diversity and social justice for which they received the 7th Annual Unity Celebration Award.

Artists often talk of a sense of community, a place that creatively engages a sense of social cultural history that is deeply tied and inseparable from their local environment. The phrase community art is a practice at the intersection of the artist and the neighborhood that emphasizes collaboration between the artist and community (Diamond 2007). Projects most often take place as a means of revitalizing a community or providing an opportunity for community members to engage in a creative process. Without advocating a specific political stance, Sanctuary Stage has integrated the practice of theatre with that of sanctuary. This is not limited to a concept of sanctuary as an “escape from,” it is instead, entering into an act of self-discovery and self-understanding in relationship to other members of the community. Stone and Ivy’s process of theatre making provides an example in which the stage space becomes a sanctuary for the sustainability of individual and community identity, and thus influences the cultural and political context of a community.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Barbara Sellers-Young:** Senior Scholar and Professor Emerita, School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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