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CORNERSTONE THEATER is a national traveling company and the first one of its kind in the nation. Founded by Bill Rauch and Alison Carey in June of 1986, its purpose is to bring the experience of innovative theater to a variety of American communities. Living and working in towns for two to four months, CORNERSTONE works alongside dozens of local residents to stage epic productions complete with original music. With largely local casts and crew, these shows reflect the spirit of wildly diverse parts of America, give towns a running start in the establishment of their own community theaters, and guide CORNERSTONE in its discovery of an aggressively American theatrical aesthetic.

THE COMPANY IN PORT GIBSON, MISSISSIPPI

Clockwise from bottom center: Mary-Ann Greanier, Donal Logue, Christopher Moore, Alison Carey, Bill Rauch, Benajah Cobb, Peter Howard, David Reiffel, Paul Bostwick, Ashby Semple, Lynn Jeffries, and Amy Brenneman. (Not pictured: Catherine Patterson)

ACT 3, SCENE II

JUNE 1989

Dear friend,

Driving north from Port Gibson, Mississippi for holiday break last December, we kept ourselves busy during the long highway hours: stuffing, folding, addressing and stamping our last letter to all 1,800 of you. As we sat comfortably on our uncomfortable vinyl bench seats, little did we suspect that in less than two short weeks the trusty van in which we were working would be stolen from 14th Street in New York City, never to be recovered.

It was a rental and a borrowed car, then, that carried us back from our holiday break to Mississippi. On the way, we stopped off in Virginia for two mid-winter performances of MIDSUMMER: our first ever hometown appearance at McLean's Alden Theater, and a reappearance at the site of 1987's THE PRETTY MUCH TRUE STORY OF DINWIDDIE COUNTY. At least one Dinwiddian was challenged by MIDSUMMER's raciness: *"Some people were enchanted by your show. I was not. Please take me off your mailing list."*

It was on this brief tour that we realized that we are now in the flattering position of being the first theater of our kind in the nation rather than the only. While we were in Miami, a group of recent Yale graduates had contacted us about starting a company modeled on Cornerstone; two years later, the Open Door Theater came to see MIDSUMMER while gearing up for their own second residency in Meadville, Pennsylvania.

It was also at this point that we said good-bye to development director Stephen Gutwillig, who is currently working in arts development in New York City. New York's gain, Cornerstone's loss.

With only a month and two days before ROMEO & JULIET's opening night, we pulled back into Port Gibson with some apprehension. We had first arrived in town the previous November, cast and rewritten the play, and then left for the holidays. After a month-long break, would cast members remember us? More to the point, would they remember their lines?

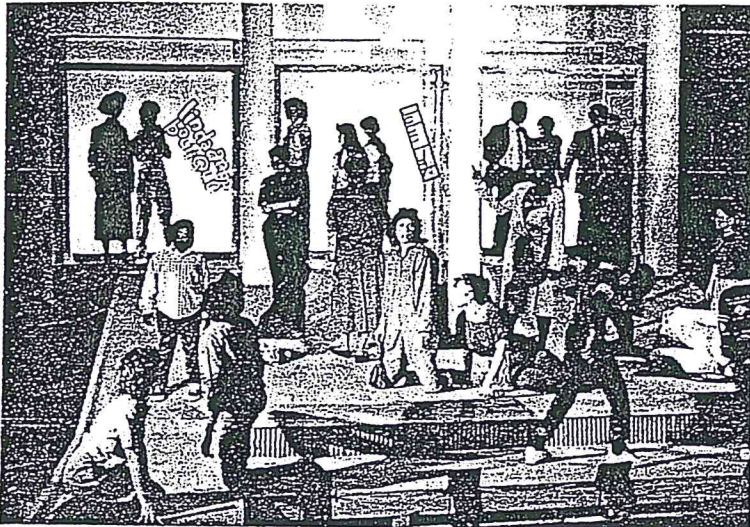
We're happy to report that they remembered both.

The split residency was not without its costs, though. The original set design involved scaffolding which was available and cheap before the holidays. Four weeks later, it was neither. Designer Lynn Jeffries went back to the drawing board a miraculous four times to compensate for varying problems: the lack of scaffolding, the crumbling walls and ceilings of the old Trace movie theater, and finally the proximity of opening night. As so often happens in Cornerstone, hardship did lead to good art--the final design was in

many respects more evocative of small-town Mississippi than the first--but not without the expense of dozens of lost rehearsal hours and many too many all-nighters pulled by technical director Benajah Cobb and lighting designer Mary-Ann Greanier.

Another curveball was thrown at us last-minute by nature and Mississippi Power & Light. Our winter in the Sunny South consisted of below-freezing temperatures and the first ice storm in decades. In the middle of a final dress rehearsal, with a torrential downpour outside, the lights and electricity went out. Over fifty of us groped our way into the Trace's small lobby for a group line-through of the play. Illuminated only by occasional flashes of lightning and with the usually-synthesized music sung a capella, this rehearsal had its own power.

The script that we lined-through that evening was the strongest argument to date that our adaptations of classics are new American plays. Juliet, played by Cornerstone actor Amy Brenneman, was youngest in the Capulet matriarchy (Lord Capulet became Juliet's stern grandmother) and attended the Capulet Academy. Romeo, played by 18-year-old high school athlete Edret Brinston, attended Montague Memorial High. As in Port Gibson, the play's private academy was attended entirely by whites, the public school almost entirely by blacks. Of course Romeo and Juliet had never met before the ball; they lived in the same town but were segregated by school.



A telling encapsulation of the production was the opening scene: behind a line of antebellum columns, a street fight breaks out between black and white students, on their way to their separate schools. On the verge of the first punch, the thirty-seven cast members freeze as a gospel choir belts out from a loft behind the audience that *"it's time, it's time, it's time, to forgive your enemies."* (This song was one of three written by local musicians to complement the fourteen written by Cornerstone composer David Reiffel.) As the music continues, the townspeople of Verona, Mississippi, still fighting but now in slow-motion, spill down the ramps of the set, past the screened-in porch that will later serve as Juliet's balcony. The chaos is finally silenced by the booming voice of the Mayor, who struts down the hanamichi (the long walkway which stretches from the back row of the audience to the stage) to reprimand her citizens for reviving *"blind hatred from decades long dead."*

Responses from post-show questionnaires, collected by our gutsy sponsor Patty Crosby, ranged from criticisms that we were *"stepping on Southern toes"* and that inter-racial marriage was *"Biblically forbidden,"* to the claim that every person in Claiborne County should see the production to *"learn we must live together in harmony."* Most black respondents cited the racial themes as the most important and uplifting of the show's aspects; most whites cited them as the most troublesome and offensive. There were blacks who resented Romeo being called a *"nigger,"* and whites who found that the Confederate flag on Tybalt's jean jacket made her character a cartoon. Some people made their feelings clear by staying away altogether, most notably Port Gibson's mayor.

On the whole, however, the response was overwhelmingly positive. On opening night, as throughout the twelve-performance run, the audience was racially mixed and sold-out; in fact, company manager Paul Bostwick had a small opening night riot on his hands, with a crowd literally banging on the doors demanding to be added to the packed house. We also had celebrities in that first audience. Farmer Ron Temple and his wife Gerry drove all the way down from Norcatour, Kansas to be with us for the first performance. In fact, over the course of the run we had over thirty out-of-town guests fly and drive in to see ROMEO & JULIET. We're happy that some of you have taken us up on our open invitation and remind all of you that it's always open.

Although audience members were of all ages, the play was especially popular with the teenagers of Claiborne County. As Mercutio, actor Christopher Moore became a teen idol overnight; one enterprising student began to sell copies of his picture in school hallways. Many characters' early speeches were rapped (we discovered that iambic pentameter was practically written for rap), but it was Mercutio's rapping of *"if love be rough with you, be rough with love"* that was chanted by the entire track team at Port Gibson High.

The famous *"Queen Mab"* speech was rewritten about *"Freddie Krueger"* (the razor-gloved horror movie fiend who comes to kids through their nightmares), thanks to the inspiration of high schoolers who were taught playwriting by founding director Alison Carey. This workshop was one of a series of five offered to English classes, all designed around ROMEO & JULIET and culminating in an open discussion about the production. These students also wrote to every one of our six hundred donors to thank them for helping bring Cornerstone to the area. We hope that most of the recipients of these letters were pleased, and understand that at least a few responded and now have Port Gibson pen pals.



pulled off miracles to pull off Romeo: at school before eight in the morning, work from three to five, training for track from five to six, a dinner wolfed down as he began rehearsal at six, and finally at ten or eleven, home where schoolwork and line-studying lay waiting. And this schedule was typical of all community participants who had school, job, or family responsibilities. The Herculean task of juggling almost fifty such schedules belonged to Donal Logue, who had arrived from Boston as temporary stage manager and who in addition to schedule juggler was cast telephoner, prop gatherer, ride giver, snack provider, and instant understudy.



After one performance an open discussion was held for cast and audience members, led by Shakespeare scholar and cast member Dave Crosby. After a light-hearted presentation of t-shirts, with many local participants agreeing *"if I had known how many hours it was going to take I'd never have gotten involved but it was worth every minute,"* the meeting got serious.

Before we go on we have to remind ourselves that Port Gibson is not the only divided community in America. Every community that Cornerstone has worked in suffers from division. The division may be racial, it may be religious, it may be economic, it may be based on education; it is most often a combination of these.

In fact, in Port Gibson blacks and whites worked together throughout our stay. In December, actor Peter Howard (who was playing Romeo's mentor, the Boston liberal Father Lawrence) organized a holiday concert where many of the town's white and black musicians heard each other for the first time ever. The ROMEO & JULIET rehearsal process was one of collaboration and unity, not one of racial tension. Many new friendships were formed though the play; some had existed before the play ever started.

On the night of the discussion, though, people spoke frankly about rarely-voiced fears. Amid accusations and tears and some deep, deep silences, questions were asked. Would the black and white children who were now playing together continue to do so after closing night? Would the town's private academy stay open? If not, or even if so, would the public school system become integrated? Or would whites eventually leave Port Gibson as had happened in a neighboring town? If not, would any future theater productions involve blacks and whites together? Everybody agreed on at least one thing: despite ROMEO & JULIET's success, the next show wouldn't involve racial conflict as its major theme.



We had taken two days off after the triumphant opening week-end (with most of us touring in New Orleans), and had returned to the drafty boarding house which we all shared, to face a tough couple of decisions.

For over a year, we had been planning to spend the months after the Mississippi project working alone as an ensemble. We would perform our previous year's touring show A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM by night while we completed our three-act epic THE MASKE FAMILY MUSICAL by day, and then tour MASKE in conjunction with our yearly fund-raising receptions. Although our new development director Catherine Patterson and her husband Chuck had set up donated housing and a discounted performance space in Richmond, Virginia, the money to pay salaries, production and touring costs was not pouring in at the rate that this expensive venture required. To proceed without compromising on the project would almost certainly mean putting Cornerstone into serious debt, something we had always been proud to avoid.

The decision: to cancel MASKE but proceed with a three-week run of MIDSUMMER in Richmond, to hold our receptions in early May instead of the usual mid June, and to then shut down shop for seven weeks. During this seven weeks, most of the company would be free to pursue outside work, while a few of us would administer Cornerstone from a farmhouse in rural New York state