

Nuevo California: On the Border of Art and Civic Dialogue

Case Study: San Diego REPeritory Theatre

LYNN STERN

PREFACE

In 2003 the world premiere of *Nuevo California* at the San Diego REPeritory Theatre marked the culmination of an intensive three-year project that brought together citizens on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border to imagine their region’s binational future. The International Border Fence, a 14-mile metal wall that divides San Diego and its neighboring city Tijuana, served as the project’s springboard for cross-border dialogue on critical regional issues and the new play’s theme. San Diego REPeritory Theatre, together with project partners San Diego Dialogue, Centro Cultural Tijuana, and an ensemble of U.S. and Mexican artists posed a provocative civic question to Mexican and U.S. residents of the border area: “Tear down the fence or fortify it?” Their deliberations and responses gave birth to *Nuevo California*, a multidisciplinary multilingual theater piece of multiple voices and viewpoints that imagines border life with the fence—and without it.

The making of *Nuevo California* offers insights about how project partners employed community-based dialogue for the new play’s aesthetic development, and reveals how they grappled to create a theater piece that was both “multipartial” and “good art.” The project’s pairing of San Diego REPeritory Theatre and San Diego Dialogue also sheds light on the potential benefits and possible pitfalls in forging effective, mutually beneficial partnerships between arts groups and dialogue-focused organizations. Finally, as one of a handful of Animating Democracy-funded projects that features a cross-cultural dimension, *Nuevo California* offers a window on the rewards and challenges of conducting community-based art projects in a transnational context.



Judy Harper, San Diego Dialogue project partner, and a Border Patrol Agent look out over the border wall.

THE BORDER/LA FRONTERA: TEAR IT DOWN OR FORTIFY IT?

We didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us.
—Andrea Skorepa, Roundtable Discussion, San Diego (January 2001)

About San Diego REPeritory Theatre

True to the populist spirit of its street theater origins, San Diego REPeritory Theatre (the REP) has built a national reputation over its twenty-eight-year history as a professional regional theater with a strong commitment to community-

oriented work. Its mission—to present programming that “explores key spiritual, political, and cultural values vital to our community”—situates the REP at the nexus of San Diego’s civic life. It is a role that challenges the REP, in the words of co-founder and producing director Sam Woodhouse, to “constantly assess the vital issues of the day and to respond with work that strikes a responsive chord in our audiences and our community.”

The REP’s six-play season features an eclectic mix of classic and contemporary drama, comedy, and musicals, as well as new plays inspired by and reflective of the cultural and ethnic diversity of San Diego’s population. As resident company at the Lyceum, San Diego’s downtown theater complex, the REP functions as a self-described cultural “town hall” by hosting co-productions and festivals with local arts and civic groups.

Over the last decade, seismic demographic and economic shifts have transformed San Diego and the face of the REP’s “community.” Situated along one of the most active border crossings in the Northern Hemisphere, San Diego has morphed into an epicenter for burgeoning U.S.-Mexico trade, which in turn has fueled a massive influx of immigrants from all parts of the U.S. and Latin America in search of a new and better life. Rapid urbanization and a growing Hispanic population have multiplied exponentially San Diego’s social and cultural ties to its neighboring city, Tijuana. Woodhouse, a San Diego native, recalls the moment when he became conscious of a city wholly transformed by ebb and flow of the border:

Born and raised in Coronado, a mono-cultural small town located 20 minutes from the international border, in the mid-1990s I found myself in a dramatically changed San Diego. The city had often been characterized as ‘a big town made up of many small towns.’ The approach of the 21st century with the boom of information technology and the daily influx of people from the South was forcing the small towns to pay attention to the growing internationalism and multicultural face of San Diego. The impact of NAFTA and the emergence of Tijuana as one of the fastest growing and youngest border cities in the world were forcing San Diego to begin behaving as a major international border city.¹

Propelled by these powerful economic and demographic forces, San Diego has begun to re-examine from a regional perspective its relationship to the border and, most significantly, to Tijuana, with which the city’s present and future has become inextricably linked. A number of civic and business leaders have proposed the formation of a binational region that would leverage San Diego’s unique relationship with Tijuana. A more fluid border, they have argued, would enable San Diego and Tijuana to improve quality of life across borders and jointly address issues around shared natural resources.

Meanwhile, a metal fence stretching 14 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean was erected in 1992 along the U.S.-Mexican border to stem the nightly tide of immigrants and drug smugglers that swept across the border. The rust-mottled wall—built from steel platforms discarded from the Gulf War—stands as testimony to the United States’ renewed efforts in the mid-1990s to regain control of its borders. For many Mexicans and U.S. citizens, the fence has come to represent the last remaining bulwark against the tide of change that would diminish each country’s own national strength and unity. It has become the flashpoint for debate surrounding the region’s binational future.

¹ San Diego Repertory Theatre Final Report for Animating Democracy, 2002. Unless otherwise noted, quotes from key participants are drawn from SDR reports to Animating Democracy.

A Regional Theater’s Quest to be “Truly Regional”

San Diego’s swift transformation into a major international border city and the ensuing public debate around the region’s binational future spurred the REP to contemplate its artistic mission within a community in the throes of reinvention. For Woodhouse, questions and concerns raised by the emergence of a binational region posed a challenge to the REP to become a more “regional” theater:

Why is it that only 50 percent of San Diegans have ever crossed the border to Tijuana? Why is it that Tijuana residents believe that people in San Diego have no interest in the collective future of two cities which stand side by side? Why is it that, in a future that will be defined by a mix of cultural influences and values, my theater is continuing to do mono-cultural work? How can San Diego REP become a more truly regional theater?

The REP’s quest to become a “more truly regional theater” gave birth in 1996 to the Calafia Initiative, a binational initiative aimed at stimulating new works by U.S. and Mexican artists that speak to the region’s past and future. In its first three years, the Calafia Initiative sparked and nurtured fourteen works of theater, dance, and music that explored the distinctive nature of Southern California and Baja California. Several of these works were staged at the REP, including *Around the World in a Single Day*, a series of three plays about City Heights, a San Diego neighborhood where 78 dialects and 43 languages are spoken; and the world premiere of *Culture Clash in Bordertown*, a piece written and performed by Culture Clash based on interviews with 100 residents in San Diego and Tijuana. During this same period, the REP hosted ten Calafia Creative LABS that brought together U.S. and Mexican artists and citizens to exchange ideas for new works, share works-in-progress, and to talk about the issues facing the region.

The Fence as Focal Point

Building on the Calafia Initiative’s artistic successes, the REP embarked in 1999 on a long-term investigation of the region’s issues through the lens of the International Border Fence. The project, entitled “Nuestro Pueblo” (Our Town), would culminate in a new play about the region’s binational future. In the project’s first two years, the REP conducted research in Mexico and California to identify appropriate artists and partners.

To lead the project forward, the REP formed a core binational team of artists and organizations. That team included: Sam Woodhouse; Nanci Hunter, the REP’s Calafia Community Coordinator; Bernardo Solano, a Colombian-American playwright based in Los Angeles; Angel Norzagaray, Mexican playwright; Dora Arreola, Mexican choreographer and director of the theater/dance performance group *Mujères en Ritual*; and Judy Harper, binational coordinator for San Diego Dialogue (SDD), a regional policy and civic leadership institute that builds consensus on critical issues affecting the San Diego/Baja California region.

A number of individuals and organizations from both sides of the border served as consultants to the core team. They included: Jose Luis Arroyo, deputy director of Centro Cultural Tijuana (CECUT), one of Mexico’s major cultural centers and promoter of the border area’s arts and culture; Paul Espinosa, award-winning documentary filmmaker specializing in films about the U.S.-Mexico border; and Ethan Van Thillio, executive director of Media Arts Center San Diego (MACSD), a nonprofit group that supports media artists from the San Diego border region and produces the city’s annual Latino Film Festival.

To sharpen the project’s thematic focus, the core team conducted three artistic workshops with actors, dancers, and musicians in San Diego, Tijuana, and Mexicali. The team also hosted two Calafia Creative LABS with civic and business leaders to flesh out the complex economic, political, and human rights issues arising from the border. The team’s inquiry narrowed to an exploration of the International Border Fence as a tangible symbol that would drive the project and artistic work:

The Fence as a real physical being, as a metaphor, as a symbol, as a barrier, as a psychological force, and as an international line of separation became the dominant image from which all research, interviews, and creative work on the project sprang.

Framing the “Burning” Civic Question

In 2000, the Animating Democracy application process provided an important and timely opportunity for the core team to frame the project’s overarching civic issue and articulate artistic and dialogue goals. The team spent many hours formulating the “burning civic question” that would become the new play’s theme and springboard for the project’s dialogue component. Their deliberations crystallized the complex issues surrounding the International Border Fence into the following set of questions: “Should the U.S. and Mexico tear down the border fence and create a unified San Juana?” OR “Should we build the fence taller and stronger under the theory that ‘fences make good neighbors’”?

Artistic and Dialogue Interests

The primary artistic goal set forth by the core team was the creation of one multidisciplinary, multilingual production for presentation in the U.S. and Mexico—a piece that would illuminate multiple viewpoints about the fence and bring into sharper relief the complex, often conflicting opinions Mexicans and U.S. citizens hold about border issues. To imbue the new play with authentic, nuanced perspectives about the border fence, the project would employ community-based dialogue—field research, interviews, and dialogue events as well as community feedback on the evolving script—as the stimulus for the play’s aesthetic development. Thus, the community dialogue process would serve first and foremost as the driver for the project’s artistic interest in creating a “truer” play and, secondarily, as a catalyst for civic dialogue.

While conceived primarily as the “driver” of the project’s artistic investigation, dialogue activities were also intended to bring forth multiple viewpoints on the project’s civic issue as a means of stimulating public dialogue on both sides of the border. Through a range of dialogue events at venues on each side of the border, the project aimed to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders in the U.S. and Mexico: community leaders, policymakers, and ordinary citizens. It was also envisioned that the project’s dialogue activities would build among U.S. and Mexican participants a sense of civic identity and commitment to work together toward shaping the region’s future.

The core team also recognized that the pairing of the REP with San Diego Dialogue, a regional affairs group dedicated to advancing solutions to cross-border issues through policy level discussions and dialogue, presented a unique opportunity to test assumptions about the viability and value of partnerships between arts organizations and dialogue-focused groups. To that end, SDD project liaison Judy Harper, formerly of REP development staff, played a pivotal role in cementing the REP-SDD partnership. As a bilingual expert in dialogue with strong artistic sensitivity, Harper served as a “bridge” between the two organizations. Thus, the project was

well-positioned to shed light on the extent to which partnerships with arts organizations that incorporate artistic work as part of dialogue activities can enhance the outcomes sought by dialogue-focused organizations. Conversely, the project would also explore how the expertise and resources of an established dialogue organization can help arts organizations enrich the creation of artistic work that speaks to shared civic concerns.

THE FUTURE IS HERE/EL FUTURO ESTÁ AQUÍ: THE MAKING OF NUEVO CALIFORNIA

We are creating a play. Using the world of your imagination, this is the first question: One night you go for a drive in your car and find yourself beside the fence at the border. You get out and walk to the fence. To your surprise the fence whispers to you—what does it say?

—Dora Arreola, choreographer

The “Nuestro Pueblo” project’s provocative civic question—“Tear down the fence or fortify it?”—called upon Mexican and U.S. residents of the border area to visualize, in the here and now, what the region’s future might look like. Over a three-year period, the project set into motion a dynamic and complex artistic and dialogic process to stir and capture these “imaginings.”

Within the context of Animating Democracy, one of the project’s defining features is its binational aspect. It presented U.S. and Mexican artists and partner organizations a rare opportunity to collaborate creatively across the U.S.-Mexico border, invigorating the artistic process with a cross-cultural dimension that added new layers of richness and complexity, as well as real “barriers” of language and cultural differences. The project also defined the “community” in community-based dialogue within a broader transnational framework. Finding pathways to engage a broad cross-section of stakeholders in the U.S. and Mexico required the project team to make numerous logistical and cultural border crossings. In a sense, the ways in which “Nuestro Pueblo” met these cross-cultural challenges became a play in and of itself about what a borderless future might hold.

The Cast: Project Partners and Roles

To move forward the artistic process and dialogue activities, the project partners formed two binational teams: the “artistic” team, whose primary responsibilities were to craft and present the final artistic product; and the “dialogue” team, which focused on the coordination and facilitation of dialogue activities. While each team had distinct roles to fulfill, it is important to note that members of each team “crossed-over” to inform and shape the creative and dialogic processes. For instance, members of the artistic team served as facilitators in dialogue events, and members of the dialogue team provided input on the evolving script. The fluidity of these “border crossings,” both reflected and enhanced the dynamic interplay between the project’s artistic and dialogic dimensions.

The artistic team included: Sam Woodhouse, project director; Bernardo Solano, playwright; dramaturgs Angel Norzagaray and Nina Grunwald; Dora Arreola, choreographer; and Nanci Hunter, project coordinator. The dialogue team was made up of SDD, CECUT and MACSD. SDD was the key organizer of dialogue activities on the U.S. side; it brought to the project an extensive cross-border network of academic, business, government, and civic leaders; as well as

expertise in professional facilitation. From the Mexican side, CECUT served as the central point of contact for Mexican artists participating in the project. In terms of dialogue activities, CECUT hosted roundtable discussions, readings, and open rehearsals in Tijuana, drawing upon its network in the Baja California community to recruit diverse audiences of artists, civic leaders, and policymakers for participation in those events. CECUT also worked closely with the REP and SDD to insure that written materials used in Mexico had proper sensitivity to language. MACSD documented the project through video and photography and brought an extensive network of contacts in the Latino community on the U.S. side of the border.

A Binational Project Unfolds in “Four Acts” (2000-2002)

Within the Animating Democracy-funded grant period, the project was structured in four distinct phases, referred to by project partners as “Four Acts.” During each Act, the project partners integrated creative workshops and dialogue activities to advance the script’s development and, simultaneously, to stimulate exchange and debate about the project’s civic question among a broad cross-section of community members in the U.S. and Mexico. That approach set into motion an ongoing cycle of the “give and take” of creation, presentation, and discussion.

The project team employed a range of dialogue formats targeted to different audiences. The “Conversations with the Community” format consisted of a series of individual and group interviews, roundtable discussions, and site visits with regional affairs experts, social service agencies, community-based groups, and civic leaders, among others. The “Conversations” events captured a wide spectrum of perspectives from key stakeholders about the International Border Fence and provided the raw material used by the artistic team to shape the themes, plot, and characters of the artistic work.

“Conversations” interviewees were invited by the project partners to serve as “community dramaturgs” at work-in-process presentations and open rehearsals. The integration of “community dramaturgs” into the project ensured that key stakeholders viewed and provided feedback at key stages in the play’s development. “Town Hall Forums” brought together these “community dramaturgs” and residents of surrounding communities to view the work in progress and participate in post-performance dialogues.

The following summary highlights the key artistic and dialogue activities that took place during each Act:

Act One: “Conversations with the Community” (October 2000-April 2001). The coordination and facilitation of “Conversations with the Community” events formed the focal point of artistic and dialogue activities during Act One.

Nine “Conversations” were held in San Diego, Tijuana, and Mexicali with a broad spectrum of individuals and organizations, such as Mexican high school students; Casa de Migrante, a social service agency serving migrant populations; agents of the U.S. Border Patrol; the Chief of Police in Tijuana; and CUNA of Ensenada, a community-based organization representing the indigenous peoples of Baja California. “Conversations” were designed and coordinated by SDD with support from CECUT; at each “Conversation,” SDD provided professional facilitation and interpreters. At each event, a member of the artistic team posed a series of questions to elicit honest and imaginative responses to the issue of the border fence and its impact on the participants’ lives. “Conversations” questions included: “If this imaginary borderless region were a

person, how would you describe him/her?” “If you could change what people ‘on the other side’ think of you, what would it be?”

Both teams met to review the data and notes from the conversations. They identified key themes to explore in the script and began developing potential plot lines and characters. A process was established for Bernardo Solano to write the play and receive feedback from the team. That process enabled Solano to review many hours of video and audiotapes of actual interviews, roundtable discussions, and actor workshops from which he culled material that resonated most strongly to him as a playwright. The selection process was particularly difficult for Solano, who regretted that much of that wealth of material could not be included. Says Solano, “The tragic part of all this is that I was fully aware that I would be leaving out wonderful and telling stories of images—that’s how numerous they were.”

At the end of Act One, a first draft of the script was completed and submitted to both teams for review.

Act Two: “Community Dramaturgs” respond to the work-in-progress (April-June 2001). Act Two activities focused on preparations leading up to the project’s first workshop. The artistic team held auditions in San Diego and Tijuana to cast a binational ensemble of performers; a total of 11 actors were cast from three cities. Meanwhile, the dialogue team recruited audiences from those interviewed during Act One’s “Conversations with the Community” events to participate as “community dramaturgs” at the first public presentation.

Act Two culminated in the project’s first seven-day workshop held at the REP. The workshop’s final day featured the first public presentation of the work-in-progress in a “music stand” reading format. Community dramaturgs were present and invited to respond to the work. The dialogue team facilitated an hour-and-a-half conversation with the audience following the presentation.

Act Three: Open rehearsals in San Diego and Tijuana (July-October 2001). Act Three activities centered on preparations for the second workshop of the script and recruitment of community dramaturgs for the project’s first open rehearsals.

Both teams joined 10 actors to conduct a ten-day workshop, which led to the script’s third draft. Two open rehearsals in a “music stand” reading format were held in San Diego and Tijuana. The Open Rehearsal format presented the third draft of the script to community dramaturgs and followed by post-presentation dialogue sessions. E-mail responses from the audiences were evaluated by both teams and informed the script’s fourth draft.

Act Four: Town Hall Forums (November 2001-June 2002): During Act Four, project activities included the presentation of a seven-day workshop with 11 performers from San Diego and Tijuana followed by a public reading to a small group of invited guests including theater critics, social activists, and theater historians. The artistic team completed the fifth draft of the script and changed the new play’s title to *Nuevo California*.

At the conclusion of Act Four, the project team presented a ten-day workshop of the script's fifth draft to community dramaturgs. In addition, three "Town Hall Forums" were organized by SDD in San Diego, Oceanside, and Tijuana, all of which featured "music stand" presentation of the script followed by dialogue sessions. Town Hall Forums were attended by residents of the venues' surrounding communities.

The Final Act: Premiere of *Nuevo California* (June 2002-February 2003). The project's Final Act focused on pre-production preparations leading up to the premiere of *Nuevo California*. In terms of script development, playwright Luis Valdez was hired as consulting dramaturg. Allan Havis, playwright and University of California at San Diego professor, joined the artistic team to shape the final script. *Nuevo California* premiered at the REP's Lyceum Space Theatre on February 7, 2003.

The panoply of responses evoked by the project to question "Tear down the fence or fortify it?" manifests itself in a mosaic of voices and images that opens *Nuevo California*. The lines of the play's "choral prelude" are taken verbatim from the project's interviews. Elsewhere in the play, some of the characters are composites of many people encountered during the project.

Surprisingly, *Nuevo California* does not unfold as a docudrama; rather, the plot and main characters are pure fiction, and the action, as playwright Solano puts it, verges on "magical realism." Set in 2028, five years after a massive earthquake drops Los Angeles and much of Orange County off the continent, the residents of San Diego and northern Mexico find themselves on the edge of inevitable unification—they must work together to share water rights, power, sewage. The discovery of oil on indigenous lands in Mexico stirs the U.S. and Mexican governments to back the creation of a new binational state, Nuevo California.



Mexican-American Pope Felipe (played by John Champion) and Spanglish-speaking hip-hop visionary Sin Fin (Jennifer Chu) in *Nueva California*.

The play's main protagonist, Felipe, the Roman Catholic Church's first Mexican-American pope, leads the charge to tear down the steel cyclone fence that separates the two countries. A multiethnic, multiracial, and multilingual cast of characters voice conflicting points of view toward the borderless state. They include: a California avocado farmer turned councilwoman and a Tijuana entrepreneur who oppose the binational state; a Jewish American photojournalist who falls in love with a young mother from Tijuana whose son died trying to cross the border; an indigenous leader turned factory owner, who is Pope Felipe's primary confidant; and Sin Fin, a Spanglish-speaking hip-hop poet who embraces a borderless world. An Oprah Winfrey-like American television commentator narrates events. A White Bird portends Felipe's fate. Act one concludes with the assassination of Felipe.

In the play's second act, Felipe's spirit roams the region of Las Playas guided by three spirits of people—wearing Mexican Day of the Dead masks—who died crossing the border. They help Felipe make his peace with God by easing the troubles of others who have been hurt by the divisive wall. Meanwhile, there is a federal investigation of who shot the Pope, with Sin Fin as the primary witness pointing to the Faceless Man—a personification of hatred and prejudice—who later disintegrates in a confrontation with Felipe's

healed spirit. Finally, the White Bird guides Felipe across a border of another kind—to the other side of death. The remaining characters are left with the question of what to do next. The play ends with Sin Fin, the Spanglish-speaking visionary, dismantling the border fence, piece by piece.

There were different endings to the play in earlier drafts and readings. The question of how the play should end was a point of much dialogue, among the artistic team, and with community dramaturges and audiences at the open rehearsals. An early version had the whole cast joining in an agit-prop, musical theater-style dismantling of the fence together; ultimately, they felt this approach was too heavy-handed in point-of-view, and not believable in terms of the characters they had developed or the political realities of the region. Another idea included a bombardment of government helicopters descending to stop the people from removing the fence; but they decided this would be too pessimistic, as well as technically challenging. The final version in the stage production saw Sin Fin acting alone, while others looked on, unsure whether or not to take action.

The collaborative process by which the project team arrived at the play's ending involved consensus-building among team members and input from audiences. As Bernardo Solano describes it, the team, guided by audience reactions, settled on an ending that raised the fewest objections among team members:

Finding the ending to the play was one of the most difficult tasks we faced. But we found ourselves being guided by audience reactions to the various endings we tried out in each preview. One version Allan Havis would hate, another Sam Woodhouse would have an adverse reaction to, and another I loved, but had to admit was too pessimistic. In the end, we used the one that we as a group had the fewest objections to (not to mention what we garnered from audience reactions). Now if that isn't collaboration, I don't know what is.

OUTCOMES AND ANALYSIS

I was unsure at first as to how such disparate anecdotal comments could produce a play that had a rhythm to it. . . . It was difficult, given the parameters we put on ourselves (multi-cultural, multi-lingual, anecdotal, with music, movement, and headache of all headaches, comments from the peanut gallery). Who would'a thought that this could create anything but cacophony! But, wonder of wonders, it's happening. There is a story! I believe it is the initial process, the talented author, and the dialogue with artistic team that brings this to fruition. It has taken that mulling about of our collective thoughts, and the consideration of the comments from the [community] to ultimately ground this baby into a play. I'm not saying it's done, perfect. But it is a story and not just a string of dialogue garnered from a collection of interviews.

—Nanci Hunter, Calafia Coordinator

Artistic Outcomes

Overall, the project's artistic intent—the creation of one multi-disciplinary, multilingual work that illuminates multiple viewpoints and provokes dialogue around the project's civic question—

was fully realized on many levels. The project’s final artistic product, *Nuevo California*, was well-attended and recognized by the San Diego Critics Circle as an outstanding new play for 2003. The project’s use of intensive community dialogue to fuel the script’s development resulted in a play that voiced a remarkable range of perspectives about the border fence. In the words of one local critic, the play “reflect[s] all manner of different viewpoints, concerns and hopes regarding the possibility of uniting the region and what keeps us separate.”²

Dialogue as stimulus for play development

In view of the project’s artistic interest—to create a theatrical piece that evoked multiple viewpoints about the fence—the use of community-based dialogue as a stimulus for the artistic process proved to be a potent tool. Dialogue elements, such as the “Conversations with the Community” events, enabled the project team to cast a wide net across both sides of the border and draw into the creative process a diversity of perspectives and experiences about the fence that conventional theater-making might not otherwise capture.

Other dialogue elements, such as the community dramaturgs and Town Hall Forums, brought community members directly into the creative process. As Bernardo Solano points out, the audience/community injected fresh insights, ideas, and observations for the artistic team to mine and shape, all of which influenced the play’s aesthetic and content development:

On many occasions, our audience has provided an insight or cited a missed opportunity that we tried to address in the next draft. Another critical way our audience/community influenced the art had to do with style. Their responses to the ways that characters interact with each other, when they express themselves through song, and how, and many other facets of the style of the play had made us think hard about some of our choices and, in many cases, we have gone back to the drawing board.

In addition to serving as a mechanism for new ideas and feedback, the “community dramaturgs” format functioned as a self-reflexive “third eye” on the creative process. Recruited from the project’s initial “Conversations” events, these volunteer “participant-observers” represented a range of community members from both sides of the border—university professors, journalists, nonprofit leaders, and government officials, among others. The “community dramaturgs” were uniquely positioned to comment on the process by which the artistic team distilled the raw material from interviews into art. In some instances, community dramaturgs functioned as a kind of check-and-balance to preserve the authenticity and nuance of a snippet of dialogue garnered from the community that makes its way into the script. For example, one “community dramaturg” insightfully pointed out that a verbatim remark culled from the “Conversations” interviews sounded quite different on stage:

There was a remark I remember from the community discussion I attended and I remember thinking at the time that it was an interesting remark and one that nicely pointed out that not all borders are the same, not even all U.S.-Mexico borders are the same . . . On stage, the remark sounds convoluted, over-intellectualized, detached . . .

² Rob Hopper, San Diego Playbill, February 2003

On the other hand, Sam Woodhouse observes that those who volunteered as community dramaturgs had a tendency to respond to the work-in-process in an “agenda-driven” way, which contributed to spirited dialogue but not necessarily to rigorous feedback that advanced and supported “a great work of art.” In order for the dialogue process to be most helpful to a work of art, says Woodhouse, artists need to be skilled at framing the questions: “Artists in the [dialogue] process need to learn to ask the right questions of an audience to help that audience best influence the future of the work of art.”

Contemplating how the community dialogue process might be refashioned to provide rigorous feedback on the artistic process for future projects, Woodhouse suggests that a smaller, carefully selected cohort of community members that were more frequently involved in the artistic process over a sustained period of time would be more effective and instill a greater sense of ownership over the final artistic product. He envisions a small group of community members representing a range of perspectives and knowledge on a specific civic issue, who also have some familiarity with the artistic process. As Woodhouse describes, this group would regularly interface with the artistic team over the course of the project’s lifespan:

On the next project of this kind, I am considering recruiting a much narrower and smaller body of Dialogue Partners. I imagine a group of 20 to 30 people carefully and meticulously chosen to represent both diversity and knowledge and perspective on an issue or theme. I would then attempt to secure such a group who would live through the research and development process with the artists, interfacing with the artistic work on a regular basis over several years. I would use those people in such a Core Team as ambassadors to others, perhaps asking the Core Team to occasionally bring associates to the process to respond with a fresh and virgin eye. The key to this idea it seems to me is the careful selection of the Core Team, which would include the challenge of finding non-artists with some understanding of the artistic process. I believe this approach might create a greater sense of ownership than our process, which has interfaced with a tremendous number of people, most often no more than one to three encounters. In other words, next time out I would seek greater depth in the process built thru time and intimacy with a smaller Core Team.

Can a play of multiple viewpoints be provocative?

The project team adopted an artistic strategy of incorporating a range of diverse viewpoints into the play in order to illuminate the complexities and nuances of community members’ perspectives on border issues. This approach enabled playwright Bernardo Solano to achieve greater authenticity and multi-dimensionality in the play’s characters and plot elements, thereby creating a more thought-provoking work of art—one that would invite audiences to contemplate perspectives other than their own. “We made a concerted effort to include as many voices of differing opinions regarding the issues of the play,” says playwright Bernardo Solano. “Our feeling was that if we vilify certain characters, then we lose some of the very audience members we wanted to speak directly to and beseech them to perhaps see the world of the border in ways they previously had not seen it.”

The artistic team struggled with tensions inherent in creating a work that was at once “multipartial” and provocative. The concept of “multipartiality,” introduced by Dr. Patricia Romney at the November 2002 Chicago Learning Exchange, is one that psychologists and dialogue facilitators often use to embrace all views or positions impartially. Members of the Nuevo California artistic team expressed varying views on how to craft a “multipartial” play that

was “good art.” For Sam Woodhouse, the REP’s commitment to the project arose in part in response to U.S. citizens’ misperceptions about Mexico. “There are so many people in my town who think that Mexico is a horrible place,” says Woodhouse. “There is a personal motivation to be a provocateur.” While acknowledging the artist’s role as provocateur, choreographer Dora Arreola places emphasis on the artist as reflector of reality. “In addition to provoking, our work is to describe artistically the reality of the environment in which we live,” she says. “In this manner, the dialogue is both ways. It’s not about having a fixed position. It’s about points of view, not one point of view. Our job as artists is the description.” Woodhouse questioned how to build multiple points of view into a story without diminishing the work’s dramatic tension. “Can we walk a mile in different shoes as artists? [Even] if we are able to do that, we still have to write a story with a point of view. We will have to make a choice. Will we be able to present a dramatic story that has enough diversity where everyone gets their minute?” In terms of creating dramatic tension in the piece, Dora Arroela suggests that the opposite may be true. “If we take the position that the wall should be down,” she says, “we won’t reach the interesting point.”

In making artistic choices about the play, the artistic team also wrestled with their responsibility to honor the trust community members had invested in them by sharing their stories. As Bernardo Solano explains, “My background in writing community-based [plays] led me to always bear in mind what I consider to be an immense responsibility to the people who shared their stories and inspired the play in the first place. I personally might be offended by an interviewee’s perspective, but if I pass judgment on that person in the play, then am I betraying that person’s trust in me who told me their story in good faith? It’s an impossible dilemma for the artist in this kind of work, but that’s part of the challenge and what makes it so interesting.”

Interestingly, *Nuevo California* in its final form seems to find “common ground.” The play’s futuristic premise serves as a distancing device that allows audiences to consider different perspectives. Fictional characters with competing viewpoints about the fence express their positions. Yet the play’s closing image—the wall being dismantled—evokes unequivocally the point of view that the fence should come down.

Dialogue Outcomes

The project’s dialogue intent was two-fold: to stir the imagination about how to approach the artistic work; and to stimulate discussion among Mexicans and Americans about the concrete issues relating to the border. With the exception of the “Conversations” events, the dialogue formats (“Open Rehearsals,” “Town Hall Forums,” “Public Readings”) were identically structured: a work-in-progress presentation followed by a facilitated dialogue session. Thus, at all dialogue events the evolving script served as the springboard for public discourse about the project’s civic question. The dialogue events differed in terms of the size and composition of the audiences who were invited to attend.

One noteworthy departure from this formula was the project’s experimentation with “pre-show lobby” dialogue. As Bernardo Solano describes it, the actors appeared in the lobby in character, engaging audience members in dialogue while they waited for the doors to open:

One method resulted almost by accident. That was the decision to place many of the “testimonies” that resulted from our community interviews/roundtables before the action of the play starts. That is, actors—in the guise of characters—go out into the lobby and interact with audience members as if they themselves are here to see the

play. They engage them in dialogue, sometimes finding people of like-mind, sometimes openly challenging audience members' notions of the border. This served to break the fourth wall of the play before the play even begins and gets our audience actively involved in dialogue about issues the play is about to explore.

For practical reasons involving the actors, costumes, and timing, the “pre-show lobby” dialogue proved difficult to implement and was ultimately dropped. As Solano explains, the team also questioned whether this dialogue method may in fact preemptively “close off” audience members to issues to be raised by the play. Says Solano, “We were also concerned with ‘assaulting’ our audience and running the risk of alienating them and actually having the opposite effect of what we intended by closing them off to the issues of the play even before its official beginning. Whether we were right or wrong, I still lament the loss of the ‘pre-show.’”

Dora Arreola considers the “pre-show lobby” dialogue one of the project’s most intriguing innovations and worthy of further exploration. As she describes it: “This [the pre-show lobby dialogue] is a very powerful moment with a lot of potentiality to explore the possibilities of creating a work of art based in dialogue activities—a kind of “August Boal” theater.”

Art-inspired dialogue: imbuing civic dialogue with an imaginative edge

In terms of dialogue outcomes, the project revealed the multiple ways that an arts-based approach can enhance the civic dialogue process. This was vividly illustrated in the artists’ contributions to framing the questions for the dialogue process. The artistic team helped the dialogue partners formulate questions aimed at eliciting personal, metaphoric responses. In addition to the core question “Tear down the fence or fortify it?” the project team posed questions that summoned participants’ imaginations, such as:

- Describe the region as if it were a person (its physical, psychological characteristics).
- If you could change something that people on the other side think of you, what would that be?
- When you think of the region, what do you see, touch, taste, hear, smell?
- If the fence itself could speak, what would it say?

These questions not only brought forth a wealth of startling images and ideas for the artistic process, but they also influenced the tone and tenor of the dialogue by encouraging participants to look at the project’s civic issue in personal terms and from perspectives other than their own. The skillful framing of the questions was a key ingredient in eliciting candid and/or imaginative responses.

The project team also recognized that framing such “creative” questions required a “safe” environment in which participants felt comfortable to share their responses. As Sam Woodhouse explains:

Asking the right questions in a supportive and nurturing environment is of course essential. We found that often the most “off the wall” questions led to the most intimate, personal, subjective, and artistic responses. We also found that asking these kinds of questions required a “safe house” setting and if we reached too quickly for the personal, the dialogue would retreat to the shielded and formulaic.

Dialogue impact

In terms of impact, the project's dialogue activities heightened and expanded interest about border issues among a broader cross-section of U.S. and Mexican residents. As SDD project leader Martha Lima observes, the project's dialogue events engaged community members who may not have had previous exposure or interest in border affairs:

Although many audience members who participated in the Open Rehearsals were already interested or involved in border affairs, there were a substantial number of participants that were not. Those individuals seemed to have been genuinely intrigued and touched by the issues put forward in the play despite the fact that they may not personally have had much previous exposure to the issues. The experience has confirmed that fostering dialogue through art is a meaningful, practical, and effective way to engage the public in matters of regional importance.

Lima also notes that the project's arts-based approach to dialogue engaged SDD's constituency—business, civic, and government leaders—in a new, more stimulating way—one not easily achieved within the parameters of conventional civic dialogue practice:

Because “art” inspired dialogue occurs in a non-traditional and less formal setting, it may be less inhibitive and consequently more personal or passionate. In other words, the circumstances under which the dialogue occurs are new and unique and somehow may inspire more creativity than under traditional circumstances.

Dora Arreola observes that the project's concept—“provoking dialogue and making art”—was a wholly new one for Mexicans. “In Tijuana the artistic process [has never been] related to the audiences' ideas, opinions, or points of view,” explains Arreola. “[N]ever before [was] the audience motivated to participate in the writing process of a theater piece.” For Arreola, an arts-based approach offered a “safe” setting in which Mexicans could engage in civic dialogue about the complex and often painful issues about the border:

The fence is painful for Mexicans. For Tijuanaenses *Nuevo California* is a very confrontational play. We have strong propaganda to protect Mexican traditions, language, and culture [against] the dominant “American culture.” We have a very strong preconception and stereotypes about the people in US. But the way that we are showing the issues of the border in *Nuevo California*—many perspectives, in a multi-partial way with a complex language, complex characters, multiethnic cast— is a new discourse. Tijuanaenses got the idea that *Nuevo California* is a space for the exploration of differences between the two cities, a space to know the “other,” a space to [ask] the questions about what makes us good neighbors.

Arreola also points out that the project's dialogue component had great potential for impact in Mexico but there were not enough dialogue activities there. Two dialogue events—both well-attended—took place in Mexico during the project's first phase but there were no follow-up

dialogues to explore issues in greater depth. Says Arreola, “The Mexicans were so engaged—it is worth doing in the region, but the dialogue activities need to be more consistent.”³

The REP-SDD partnership: was it a good match?

The pairing of the REP and SDD was initially envisioned by the core team as a mutually beneficial partnering of an arts organization and professional civic dialogue group for collaboration on a shared concern: to promote public dialogue on the complex regional issues surrounding the border fence. SDD project liaison Judy Harper formed the lynchpin of that partnership; with expertise in both worlds of civic dialogue and the arts, Harper ensured that SDD played an active role in the artistic process and that the REP was involved in the design of dialogue activities. For instance, Harper guided the project team in framing questions for the “Conversations” events that elicited candid and/or imaginative responses—an approach that both enhanced the artistic process and invigorated dialogue among “Conversations” participants.

However, Harper’s unexpected departure for another job at the conclusion of “Act One,” changed the dynamic of the REP-SDD collaboration. Having no experience working with an arts group, SDD focused its participation on what it did best: organizing and facilitating roundtable discussions and the Town Hall Forum post-performance dialogue sessions. As Nanci Hunter describes it, SDD became the “support team” in creative matters; it located additional community dramaturgs for the Open Rehearsals and secured qualified facilitators for the dialogues that followed work-in-progress presentations.

Harper’s departure also exposed the fundamental differences in approach to dialogue that existed between the two organizations, as well as their divergent goals for the project’s dialogue. SDD’s policy orientation was quite different than the REP’s grassroots approach, as embodied by Judy Harper. Sam Woodhouse describes how Harper’s departure brought into focus the partners’ differing approaches to dialogue:

The impact of Judy Harper from SDD during our major research process was immense. Judy is a bi-cultural person who has lived in both the U.S. and Latin America, is fluent in Spanish, is a former member of San Diego REP development staff who helped me articulate the birth of the Calafia Initiative and, most importantly, cares passionately about the grassroots process of dialogue on a person-to-person basis. Once Judy left SDD for another job and we began working with the other staff at SDD, I found them far less passionate about our project and most significantly far less knowledgeable about how art and dialogue can effectively partner and lead to change. San Diego REP, Bernardo Solano, and the other artists on this project are populists if you will, people who live close to the street and make work that is very personal. My impression of San Diego Dialogue is that it is a research institution attached to a university that serves an important and valuable information and networking function for our two cities. For this project, SDD served us well as a source for contacts, networking, connecting into corridors of political and economic power, and marketing our Open Rehearsals to a new constituency. Once Judy Harper left SDD, I found the partnership lost a person who makes the political and research process a personal and cultural one . . .

³ Dora Arreola, personal interview, February 2004.

In terms of dialogue goals, the REP and SDD had different expectations of the project's civic intent. While SDD's organizational mission stressed the importance of policy change through dialogue, the REP's dialogue goal—to stimulate public dialogue on both sides of the border about the project's civic question—was more broadly defined and less solution-oriented. In assessing the project's dialogue outcome, Martha Lima acknowledged that *Nuevo California* was effective in raising awareness on both sides of the border about regional issues. However, Lima questioned whether the project's arts-based approach to civic dialogue would ultimately lead to the policy solutions that SDD was seeking:

It is difficult to say at this point in time whether or not San Diego Dialogue will partner with the arts on future projects. While art-based civic dialogue may be constructive and effective in increasing awareness of local and regional issues, it may not necessarily advance solutions to those challenges facing the region, which is San Diego Dialogue's ultimate objective. The ability of art-based civic dialogue to affect policy change is not fully known.

In the end, the partnership may not have fully realized its potential for civic impact, nor did it tap the potential for the play itself to be a generative opportunity for civic dialogue.

While Harper's departure likely affected how things played out, it is also clear that a more deliberate articulation of civic intents at the project's outset would have determined whether the two partners were the best match. As Sam Woodhouse sums it up, "The next time out of the gate I will spend much more time identifying shared goals and objectives with a dialogue partner."

One Play Unifying Two Cultures Becomes Two Plays

Though the binational project team intended to create one multilingual production for presentation in the U.S. and Mexico, the play ultimately evolved into two—one in English, one in Spanish. The challenges of cross-cultural work, coupled with time and financial constraints, made the goal of creating one play for both U.S. and Mexican audiences unreachable within the project's timeframe. In the end, only the English version of *Nuevo California* script was completed and presented in San Diego; the Spanish version was left unfinished. Thus, what was envisioned as a binational project evolved into one with a U.S. focus.

Language issues

Working in a bilingual environment proved a formidable challenge for the project team in conducting research and developing the script, as well as for the cast in presenting readings in both countries. Most Mexican and U.S. cast members had not worked in the other country before. Some spoke only their native language. While dialogue events were facilitated with professional English-Spanish interpreters, the creative workshops and rehearsals were not.

In this setting, monolingual artists—both Mexican and U.S.—faced the real life challenges of cross border communication. "Language has become a major issue for rehearsals," Woodhouse observes: "[The rehearsals] are conducted nearly simultaneously in two languages, challenging artists who are monolingual to learn to perceive and communicate in another language . . ."

While both Mexican and U.S. artists struggled together to find "common language," the fact that much of the project team's work took place on the U.S. side of the border privileged the team's

English-speakers and, however unwittingly, placed the Mexican artists at a disadvantage in terms of their ability to communicate ideas and participate in decision-making during the workshops. Dora Arreola notes that the challenges of communicating in a bilingual setting also prolonged the creative process. She suggests that the use of professional interpreters would have helped balance language inequities and enabled the project team to use workshop time more efficiently. Says Arreola, “[I]t would have helped to have professional interpreters to keep things more focused. We understood the subtleties in the particular language of theater, but it would have been helpful to have English-Spanish professional interpreters in the workshops.”⁴

With regard to Mexican and American audiences, issues of language played a decisive role in a project’s artistic outcome. At the work-in-progress presentations, open rehearsals, and public readings in San Diego and Tijuana, the project team confronted again and again the challenge of making a text-driven play like *Nuevo California* accessible to mono-lingual speakers on both sides of the border. As Sam Woodhouse explains, the project team decided to create two versions of the play—an English version and a Spanish version:

Audiences in the USA are accustomed to monolingual performance in English. Audiences in Mexico expect primarily Spanish. During our Open Rehearsals we challenged them to comprehend and enjoy a work that is multi-lingual. During the process we became committed to creating a work of theater that could play in two countries with NO CHANGES. We have now moved to the concept of two versions of the play: the English version and the Spanish version. The theme of our play is the uniting of a bilingual region. The play will be bilingual. But the difficulty of creating a text-driven work that can simultaneously reach people who speak only English, others who speak only Spanish, and others who are bilingual is beyond our current reach.

Could the project’s original goal of creating one multilingual production for presentation in the U.S and Mexico be realized at some point in the future? Sam Woodhouse believes it could, though such an endeavor would require placing greater emphasis on the play’s non-verbal elements. Animating Democracy staff member Andrea Assaf points out that the regional theater aesthetic sets up expectations of accessibility. She imagined that a multilingual play in a more experimental mode might help offset those expectations.

Logistical and financial obstacles

An intent of the project was to build among Mexicans and Americans a sense of civic identity and commitment to work together toward shaping the region’s future. From that standpoint, one of the project’s “missed opportunities” was the absence of dialogues designed to bring together Mexican and U.S. audiences at one venue. While acknowledging the logistical difficulties posed by the border, such as the “real life” obstacles Mexican audiences face in obtaining visas to enter San Diego, Dora Arreola points out that bringing together Mexican and U.S. audiences at one venue “was not in the vision of the project.” She thinks the U.S. partners may have had an expectation that Mexican audiences would attend the San Diego-based dialogue events, but they may not have fully understood the logistical and financial barriers faced by Mexicans. While there was a lot of promotion about the project and premiere in Mexico, potential audiences there faced an increasingly restrictive and time-consuming environment in

⁴ Dora Arreola, personal interview, February 2004.

terms of obtaining visas and documentation verification in order to cross the border to participate in San Diego-based events.

Creative partnerships across borders: mutual benefits and unrealized opportunities

The binational partnership forged among artists and organizations by the project point to the mutual benefits of cross-border creative collaboration. Indeed, both sides brought to the creative process a diversity of real life experiences about the border and aesthetic sensibilities that enriched collaboration and the artistic product. Sam Woodhouse describes one example of how the Mexican artists' personal experience of the border—which differed significantly from the U.S. experience—brought realism and emotional power to their artistic rendering of the fence as a physical object:

In workshops with the actors, we found that Mexican artists had the most to share with us corporally about the Border because Mexican artists live intimately with the Wall. Asked to physicalize what the fence, the boundary, the barrier did to their bodies, the Mexican artists did not hesitate to throw themselves physically into a state of contrition and opposition. For many of the U.S. artists and citizens, the Wall as a barrier was a fence to be avoided at all costs.

More broadly, Woodhouse's observation underscores the impact on artistic outcome made by artists/actors who have a stake in the very issues addressed by *Nuevo California*. In contrast to many of the project's union actors, for whom the border area had little consequence in their daily lives or who hadn't been a part of the community process, the actors/stakeholders demonstrated a greater capacity to imbue their work with authenticity and passion.

Dora Arreola notes that collaboration with U.S. artists exposed her to different perspectives on theater-making and, in particular, the potential of a community-based approach to art-making in a Mexican context:

I come from a very orthodox approach to experimental theater and dance research, and art-making—working in isolated places, far from the community. We get feedback from critics, and a few commentaries in very unstructured conversations with the audience/the community. Gradually, I understood the objectives of the project more and the potentiality of art (theater activities) for provoking dialogue, actions, and changes in my community, using art in many different ways, like options for education and cultural activities that involve dialogue to resolve community problems.

The decision to create two versions of the play marked a turning point in the project's binational dimension. The pressures of “getting the show up” for the play's San Diego premiere gradually took precedence and affected the aesthetic and content choices of the final play. Elements in earlier versions of the script that might have resonated with Mexican and/or bilingual audiences were cut. Subtleties in Spanish language were edited out in the end. In terms of content, there were originally two “Oprah” characters—a Spanish/Mexican and an English/American; in the San Diego version, these two characters were merged into one.

Another significant content choice in the script from its conception, says Arreola, was the assassination of the Pope. While the liberalism of this Pope's character may have been risky or

provocative for some American audiences, his assassination in Tijuana would be perceived as offensive to Catholic audiences in Mexico.

While conceived in the spirit of binationalism, Sam Woodhouse acknowledges that *Nuevo California* was in the end an “American-driven” project. *Nuevo California*’s evolution from a U.S.-Mexican project to a U.S.-focused one points out the extent to which the project lost sight of its unique binational aspect, and may have inadvertently reinforced the cultural, economic, and political inequities and stereotypes that divide the region—all of which the project sought to dispel. How to build and sustain equity in binational artistic partnerships is a key challenge for U.S. arts organizations engaged in cross-cultural, cross-border work. Perhaps greater consideration from the outset about how project resources could be allocated to offset economic inequities between partners would be worth further exploration. With the wisdom and learning garnered from *Nuevo California*, U.S. arts organizations can bring to future cross-border endeavors a greater awareness of such challenges and possible solutions.

Finally, did the project advance the REP’s goal of becoming a “more truly regional” theater? As the REP embarks on a new artistic project tentatively entitled “Restless Spirit,” a multi-year endeavor that will involve artists across the border and across continents—Latin America and North Africa—the answer is a qualified “yes.” The partnerships created on both sides of the border through the making of *Nuevo California*, says Sam Woodhouse, have certainly enhanced the REP’s capacity to create “regionally voiced” works. The REP’s future projects will build on those partnerships and refine its use of community-based dialogue to create provocative art that explores the region’s binational future. In view of the lessons learned from *Nuevo California*, the success of these endeavors will hinge in part on how the REP considers and accommodates cultural differences in the way it works with project partners.

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Lynn E. Stern is a New York-based writer and independent consultant with 15 years’ experience in the nonprofit sector. She advises philanthropic organizations and not-for-profit groups in strategic planning, program design, management and evaluation. Fluent in Russian, Lynn is a specialist in cultural exchange between the U.S., Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. She served as project specialist to the Ford Foundation’s Media, Arts and Culture unit where she oversaw its capacity-building initiatives in the arts, international creative collaboration and arts-based civic dialogue. She currently serves as consultant to the Foundation’s electronic media policy portfolio.