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Theatre's On-Screen Persona

Cornerstone Theater's Highland Park Is Here: Stories from a Changing Barrio

Sarah Kozinn

Cornerstone Theater, a pioneering community-based theatre company with almost 40 years of experience, did not set out to cast, rehearse, and stage a show about Highland Park—a northeast neighborhood of Los Angeles—completely online. Bringing people together and activating "place" have always been central to Cornerstone's work. The company chooses performance locations that are significant to the community for whom and with whom they are performing. The site specificity as well as the community outreach and events hosted by the company are a dialogic device for creating the play and strengthening community. Moving a production entirely online eliminates essential tools from Cornerstone's community-building arsenal, but like so many theatre companies this year whose plans for in-person performances were stymied, they had to pivot.

My relationship to this project began as a community partner. I am a professor in the Theater & Performance Studies Department at Occidental College, located in Highland Park, and Cornerstone Theater Artistic Director Michael John Garcés was our 2020 Wanlass Visiting Theater Artist, and playwright Mark Valdez was the Edgerton Playwright in Residence. *Highland Park Is Here: Stories from a Changing Barrio* (*HPIH*) was part of the department's fall season. After rehearsals began with Occidental College students, Highland Park community members, and members of Cornerstone's ensemble, Garcés, who was directing, invited me to act in the show. From this vantage point I witnessed the company grapple with the transition. Could Cornerstone create a "Cornerstone" show, a performance that centralizes the community building and engage-

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ment process, in the physical placelessness of virtual space? Could the process of making *HPIH* produce community when the margins of performance, those gaps between being onstage, getting to and from the theatre, and the interactions that happen sometimes silently among castmates, crew, designers, and audiences in the performance and rehearsal space, are no longer available? Could actors rehearse exclusively on Zoom and still become an ensemble?



Figure 1. Paper stick puppet of Andrés Santos on the corner where he sold elote *for over 30 years in "El Corrido De Santo, Elotero,"* Highland Park Is Here: Stories from a Changing Barrio*, 19 November–24 December 2020. (Screen capture by Sarah Kozinn)*

HPIH started as an ambitious pursuit by its playwright, Mark Valdez, an artist, organizer, Highland Park resident, and former Associate Artistic Director of Cornerstone, to investigate "What is Highland Park?" Highland Park is a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in northeast Los Angeles that has transformed so significantly that in 2015 NPR did a limited podcast series on it called *York & Fig* (The first episode was titled "Gentrifiers"). Valdez's play went through multiple iterations. Cornerstone collected stories from residents for over a year, meeting people through community outreach to local churches, schools, and organizations. They also drummed up participation through story circles (see Roadside Theater 2018) and through casual conversations the playwright had with people living in Highland Park. Prior to Covid-19, Valdez worked with Garcés to build the performance as an ambulatory piece taking place inside people's homes. During the stay-at-home order, they reimagined it as a potential walking tour with different routes an audience could follow through the neighborhood, staying outside to watch scenes unfold, and then later they thought it might work as a performance installation in storefronts along Figueroa Street. Both of these ideas still posed the risk of having people clump together, potentially exposing them to the virus. With Los Angeles's case numbers continuing to skyrocket through the summer, the company decided to do the entire performance virtually. Valdez used the groundwork he laid in these earlier iterations to transition the play.

HPIH was composed of 11 widely differing fictional short pieces that Valdez composed using material from interviews and story circles as inspiration. Many of them included characters speaking in both Spanish and English, ranging in style and tone. They included "El Corrido De Santo, Elotero," a Mexican-style ballad about a local *elote* salesman, performed as a puppet show with paper cutouts from photographs that were attached to sticks (designed by Lynn Jeffries; fig. 1); and "The Optimist," a solo piece set in 1988, centered on a Chicana teenager (Jayleen Chavarria) dancing in her bedroom while talking to the camera about life and the music she loves (fig. 2). To solve for scene transitions, Valdez, Garcés, Jared Mezzocchi (Creative Director of Virtual Performance), and sound designer John Nobori adopted cinematic and televisual strategies. Because there was no curtain to go up or down or lights to dim, scenes transitioned one to the next by fading out and fading in with music and title cards over scene-specific background images and montages. This strategy set the tone for the next piece and kept the play moving.

The idea of having multiple narratives weave in and out of each other came to Valdez after a year of interviews and story circles revealed experiences that were vastly different. He found that the best way to capture

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Figure 2. Jayleen Chavarria in "The Optimist," dances in her bedroom. Highland Park Is Here: Stories from a Changing Barrio*, 19 November–24 December 2020. (Screen capture by Sarah Kozinn)*

this spirit was through a mosaic of short plays that used the participants' stories as jumping off points for the plays' creation: "No one story dominated, and the mosaic of all them made it feel like Highland Park [...] I realized that that's how we needed to structure the play: many short plays, many glimpses, some of them complete and some not. But in their juxtaposition and placement, hopefully, they could reveal something unexpected about who we are and how we got here" (Cornerstone Theater 2020). Because of the limited attention span for online performances, the piece was divided into two chapters streamed on YouTube on alternating nights during the weekend of 19 November 2020. One part was titled "Llegamos" and the other "Moments and Movements." Audiences could watch one night or both, and all tickets were free. After "opening weekend" *HPIH* was available to be screened on Vimeo through 24 December.

The pieces in "Llegamos" were loosely connected through their relationship to place and housing, whether being displaced by the rise in rents or feeling displaced by the changing face of the neighborhood. One of the central characters in "Llegamos" and "Los Ultimos," Josefina (Alejandra Flores), shares the screen with her younger selves (Rebecca Bermudez and Daniela Naranjo) as she recounts stories about her family and her connection to her family house. Mezzocchi's video editing placed Josefina in front of a video of her house. We see cars drive behind her as she recounts her memories of this home, and her younger selves appear on screen, sometimes slightly transparent, like apparitions. The effect is a layering of video feeds, appearing as if all three actors were in the same place at the same time. This technique of bridging feeds was used in all the multicharacter pieces. "Modern Multiples" was a reperformance of an interview with Chicano artist Richard Duardo (Alejandro Chavez) about growing up in and around the neighborhood gangs and finding a refuge in his arts activism. Duardo had been a member of the gang Little Cypress Park before developing his activism. The scene was shot like an interview, cutting back and forth between the interviewer (Dolores Chavez) and Duardo, each framed inside a picture of a 1980s-style TV set, and then periodically cutting to characters enacting moments from his past to help theatricalize the stories he was telling. In "Luchando con la Vida," Oscar (Kenny Ramos) is at a crossroads, represented by actors dressed in the same costume playing the voices in his head. The opening shots were filmed on location at an intersection on Figueroa. The camera moves down the street while focusing on each "voice" standing on a different corner, looking directly into the camera. The scene changes to a nondescript black interior where the conflict between each voice is played out to choreographed movements with all the characters appearing to be in the same virtual space (fig. 3). This scene combines two different ways of capturing the performance: using Zoom for the interior scenes and then a video camera to capture the actors on location. In "I Fought the Law," shot more cinematically than the others, Lisa (Marita De La Torre) sits at a table at a bar, looking at her laptop, and pours through apartment listings trying to find an affordable rental in Highland Park as she talks about her history with community activism when she moved back into the neighborhood in the 1990s. The lights in the bar are low, and the camera stays trained on her as she weaves together her shock at apartment prices and her history with the neighborhood.

The second chapter is a more contemporary glimpse at Highland Park. It opens with

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Peter Howard playing Charles Fletcher Lummis (1859–1928), an activist for historic preservation and Indigenous American rights, on location standing in front of neighborhood murals and graffiti as he speechifies about the necessity of preservation. Juxtaposing his historic language with contemporary street art shines a light on what some might dismiss as "low art" but are actually the artifacts of this community and deserve preservation. In "Love and Real Estate," a group of Occidental College alumni who have started a communal living house interview perspective tenants for their vacant "additional dwelling unit" on Zoom. A white vegan couple from New Orleans tries to prove they are more suited for the house than the lesbian couple with the child savant, while the applicant born in Highland Park refuses to compete. This piece parodies the kind of white liberalism that is becoming more of a force in the neighborhood.



Figure 3. From left: Ebony McConico-Garcia, Cecille Forsyth Rios, Kenny Ramos, Gabriel Rodriguez, and Richard Tom. Kenny (center) and the voices in his head in "Luchando con la Vida," Highland Park Is Here: Stories from a Changing Barrio, *19 November–24 December 2020. (Screen capture by Sarah Kozinn)*

The "Optimist" and "El Corrido de Santo, Elotero," mentioned above, are also a part of chapter 2, as is "Amore Eterno," a beautiful, slow-paced piece in which Elia (Blanca Gutierrez) builds her Día de los Muertos altar for the inmates at the California Men's Colony as part of their Victim Awareness program so they can witness her pain at the loss of her best friend to gang violence. Elia directs her stories to the camera with her altar behind her, and shows us the photographs, candies, and mementoes that she has brought for her tribute. The last piece "Now I'm Not Alone" came from Occidental students' stories and takes place at a Zoom meeting for a student club, Oxy Students for Highland Park. The audience sees the Zoom meeting as the students argue over politics, but their honesty transforms into a joyous group dance. Each person dances alone in their Zoom frame, yet synchronized with the others, ending the play with an ode to the uniqueness of this neighborhood.

Throughout the production and rehearsal process, everyone involved maintained that this performance was a "play," but as we got closer to the performance date, there were more and more blows to the integrity of this piece's theatre-ness: In addition to performing in isolation, participants also lost the experience of liveness: the show had to be prerecorded so that Mezzocchi would have time to edit and upload the scenes. He finished mere moments before the opening/launch. The ontological markers defining this performance as "theatre" were challenged on all fronts.

After the show "closed" I asked Garcés what *HPIH* was. Theatre? Film? Something else? He replied,

> I wanted it to be something that felt like theatre [...] I do think that our stylistic choices for the most part were pretty theatrical in the sense that they were not trying to do the things that films do [...] So what do I think I made? I don't think it was theatre. [...] But I do think that we created a very theatrical—almost more like a theatrical installation online is what I would call it. (2020)

Cornerstone had to reverse engineer a theatrical performance, making something that was never onstage legible to an audience as theatre—or at least theatrical. One way Garcés accomplished this theatrical texture was by using recordings that included flaws: "We try to do these takes with warts and all so that the audience would have that sense of that lack of perfection, making it feel more real and more live" (2020). To make something *feel* like theatre required simulating elements of

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performance that audiences would recognize *as* theatre (see Hunter 2019). For example, some of the takes that made it into the final performance included slight stumbles over words and the normal verbal hiccups that can catch an actor in the midst of a sentence. Something too clean would read as cinematic, not live. Mezzocchi also edited together the footage from individual cast streams, making actors from across the country look like they were in the same space.

Even though we were edited to appear as if we were in a shared space, the challenges of acting like we were together required a different set of tools. Regardless of whether we are in real space or virtual space, when we perform we are always negotiating between states of being. We are, of course, ourselves, and then we are also performing the character—Richard Schechner's "not-me" but also "not-not-me" ([1985] 2010:112). But when actors stage a remote virtual performance from inside their own homes, the states of being compound because the states of "me" are multiplied. In my own home I play multiple roles, so the "me" that I'm not-not when I inhabit a role is already manifold: At home I am parent, partner, professor, actor, and character. My performance space is also between states of being: my bedroom, my office, my rehearsal space, my audition studio, and my stage. There is no spatial delineation or time to transition between states. All I can do is change my virtual background. So even when it is "showtime" I may have to sneak offscreen to open the door for my dog or tend to a crying child. I do not have the luxury of being free of these obligations, nor do I want to neglect them. The immediacy of the dog scratching at the door or the baby crying are present in a way that my castmates are not, but it is my job to make it seem like they are and not let them know what is going on off camera.

In order to do this, my attention has to be on how I am perceived by the camera. I was in "Los Ultimos," and in a climactic moment of the scene my character must calm Josefina. In order for it to read to the audience that I am with her and speaking to her, I have to turn profile to my computer camera and deliver my lines to my bedside lamp, which is the correct sight line, but a poor substitute for a scene partner (fig. 4). The somatic ways of knowing if the tactics I am using are affecting my scene partner are absent. I have to depend on myself, sneaking glances at the screen to make sure I am in the correct position, and when I am facing forward, I have to speak into the camera so the sight line looks correct. My focus has to be mostly on myself in order to appear like my focus is on the ensemble.

As I watched myself on screen, transposed into a virtual landscape next to my castmate, I thought of an article by Slavoj Žižek:

> What Virtual Reality provides is reality itself deprived of its substance. In the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing, my screen persona, the "you" that I see there, is always already a decaffeinated Self. (2007:55)

Žižek's "decaffeinated self" is a kind of simulation of self. While Jean Baudrillard writes that simulation is like exhibiting a symptom with no underlying illness, making it in some cases hard to discern from the real thing ([1981] 1994:3), Žižek's analogy suggests that the screen persona has lost the quality essential to it: its caffeine. In many ways performing online with our screen personas interacting with other screen personas to simulate a live experience for the audience, but without the possibility of kinesthetic response of bodies in shared space, did make the experience feel "decaffeinated": theatre void of its essence. Without the marginalia of the theatrical experience, the potential of what happens between, before, and after curtain up and curtain down, the places surrounding being on and off stage where we fill in and deepen our experiences together, the process often felt solitary.

This does not mean the performance was art-less, but that those experiences in the margins elevate the art aesthetically and affectively. Cornerstone's process can be what Sonja Kuftinec has called an "enabling device" (2003:72) that invites cross-conversation in order to collaborate through ideological differences, but in the Zoom rehearsal room casual conversations across our respective boxes were hard to come by.

While the lack of margins was an impediment, the self-view was an obstacle. In that

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same article, Žižek wrote about the *Time*'s Person of the Year cover from December 2006 featuring a mirror that reflected the reader's image back to them. The cover read: "You. Yes, you. You control the information age. Welcome to your world" (*Time* 2006). The "You" was housed in the middle of a Mac-like desktop, centered on a screen within a video player evoking the YouTube layout. The *Time*'s choice alluded to the democratization of information represented by sites such as Wikipedia and YouTube. Anyone could act like an expert. Žižek responded that instead of signaling one's part in the collective, the mirror obscures it: "First, the obvious irony, everyone who looks at the *Time* cover does not see the others with whom he or she is supposed to be in direct communication. They see the mirror-image of themselves" (2007:54).



Figure 4. Sarah Kozinn calms Josefina (Alejandra Flores), edited to appear as if in the same room. "Los Ultimos," Highland Park Is Here*:* Stories from a Changing Barrio*, 19 November–24 December 2020. (Screen capture by Sarah Kozinn)*

In 2020 we saw a similarly momentous paradigm shift with our exponential need and reliance on digital communication. When I hover over "hide self-view" and then balk before clicking it, I can't help but conclude that now more than ever we are performing for ourselves. It's not quite onanistic, but there is an element of self-pleasuring. In our Zoom rehearsals, my self-view was a reference point, and unlike onstage where I can shift my performance in accordance with an audience's or my castmate's response, from inside my bedroom/performance space the only cue I get is from looking at my screen persona. I have no castmates or audience to immediately affect—it's just me. And while I was soothed by knowing we were making something, the cold-turkey exit from rehearsal with a click of a button, or worse, a wifi failure, left me with theatre withdrawal. Instead of quenching a thirst for being together, we were left parched. Garcés: "I got to say after a lot of rehearsals, I turned off the screen and I'd be like, 'I'm still in this room.' I think we amplify the existential feeling of just being isolated from the world" (2020). This oscillation between feeling a part of something and then completely disconnected and alone may be the condition of virtual theatre. Yes, there was something curative in knowing we were making art in our shared isolation. While community, the kind that Cornerstone is known for creating, may not have been forged in the same way, the process was a respite. It showed us what was waiting on the other side of the year... or more.

While watching the show stream I could see the viewers' comments populate the right side of the screen. Some were lovely, some were harsh, and some were nonsensical. But it was feedback from our unseen audience, a reminder that they were out there. It was nothing like live, in-person performance, but we got a taste of it. Garcés: "I think what it did expand was people's possibilities for community at this time. I think it reinvigorated their hope." That is the thing about this experience: It points to possibility while just missing *being* the possibility itself. It was theatre's screen persona, void of its essence, reminding us that something beautiful is in the offing.

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