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The Up: A Dialogue Between Detroit and Theatre

Mary Elizabeth Anderson
Wayne State University

> Great social transformations mark both an end and a beginning. In the structural changes of the past twenty years, Americans have struggled to define which elements of their lives have been destroyed forever and which are in the process of being created. Swiftly fading from mind are the industrial prosperity that was guaranteed by U.S. dominance in the world economy and a shared middle-class way of life that was accessible by work and skill.
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> - Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*[1]

Like many urban environments in the U.S., and especially the country's "rust belt" cities, Detroit has, for decades, experienced a level of decline and demoralization associated with the de-industrialization of the domestic economy. Yet Detroit is set apart from its counterpart cities like Buffalo, Cleveland and Pittsburgh based on its statistics: the city lost 25% of its population between 2000 and 2010;[2] approximately 1 in 3

[1] Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3.

[2] Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), *Quickfacts: 2010 Census Data for City of Detroit Neighborhoods* (2010).

residents lives below the poverty line, making it the poorest city in the country;[3] and 82% of the city's residents are African-American, with 1 in 2 African-American children living in poverty.[4] Chronically under-resourced public schools, "food deserts," corrupt city officials and blighted landscapes featuring ruins and brown fields are the subject of consistent national and international attention. What's more, Detroit is uniquely susceptible to the scrutiny of estranged national and international media outlets that regularly circulate "coverage" that implicitly (and often *explicitly*) blames the city's population for these environmental problems.

Wayne State University's *Performance/Exchange* program uses applied theatre to engage K-12 students and their teachers in creating spaces of "dialogue and problematisation" that test and queer the circumscribed boundaries imposed by such top-down narratives.[5] Based on the principles of Transformative Learning[6] theory and an

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[3] Detroit Kids Data. *Quick Facts* (2011). http://www.detroitkidsdata.org/dkdquickfacts.htm

[4] "Kids Count in Michigan," *Kids Count in Michigan Databook* (2010). http://www.milhs.org/kids-count/mi-data-book-2010.

[5] Hazel Barnes, "Inhlanzi Ishelwe Amanzi – As Fish Out of Water: Finding Authentic Voices in a Multicultural Student Production," *Research in Drama Education* 4.4 (1999): 161.

[6] Transformative Learning is an educational theory and set of practices that actively seek to promote substantial social, behavioral and convictional growth among adult learners. According to Jennifer Garvey Berger, "[a]dult developmentalists believe that to begin a transformative journey is to give up an old perspective, to actually lose a sense of the former world before the new world is fully articulated" (338). Jennifer Garvey Berger, "Dancing on the Threshold of Meaning: Recognizing and Understanding the Growing Edge," *Journal of Transformative Education* 2.4 (2004). Drama educators are quite familiar with the extent to which theatre offers students an opportunity to create an imaginary world and embody the circumstances of a fictional character. To this extent, one might argue that all instruction in theatre has an inherently transformative potential. My own practice is informed by a direct application of the theories informing Transformative Learning (TL), extending the imaginative work that students conduct in the classroom, studio and theatre into imaginative work as it pertains to real-world circumstances.

"ambivalent" relationship to the notion of sustainability,[7] *Performance/Exchange* trains teaching artists in theatre to co-create stories about Detroit through devised ensemble work and collaborative playwriting. The ensemble's first formative production, *The Up,* was workshopped in the Detroit Public Schools and staged in a community garden in the Woodbridge neighborhood. Through place-based exploration and dramatic interpretation, research into the city's past and its relationship to current environmental challenges was transposed into an alternative myth of Detroit, presented to school-age children in interactive episodes. In drawing new creative-non-fictional lines across place, *Performance/Exchange* aims to challenge the dominant sources of coverage produced about, but rarely for or by the city.

Theatre's Place in Detroit

A survey of the Broadway touring, Small Professional Theatre and University productions available to Detroit audiences for the 2010-11 season suggested a scene not necessarily any more evidently "Detroit" than "Indianapolis" or "Wichita." *West Side Story*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Les Mis* came in with New York casts; *A Strange Disappearance of Bees* and *A Lesson Before Dying* played at the Detroit Repertory Theatre; and my Department's own Hilberry Theatre season included *Hay Fever*, *Richard III*, *The Misanthrope*, and *Cider House Rules Parts 1 and 2*. While all of the seasons were carefully selected and thoughtfully produced based on a number of place-specific factors, the theatre made in Detroit is rarely ever explicitly about the city, itself. The making of a theatrical production and the exchanges between artists and audiences that

[7] Aidan Davison, "Contesting Sustainability in Theory – Practice: In Praise of Ambivalence," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22.2 (2008): 191-99.

take place during the theatrical experience are already so incredibly site-specific, few feel the need to make work that is about place, itself. And this is the rather reasonable premise upon which most regional theatre is made across the country.

Detroit does have its share of converted post-industrial art spaces and small, experimental theatre ensembles. These locations and groups are itinerant in nature, and often appear on a by-project basis. There was a wild burlesque *Alice in Wonderland* in 2009 at the Russell Industrial Center, a multi-storied former auto body supplier that is now used for studios, performances and a weekly bazaar. The Magenta Giraffe theatre company might be found producing *No Exit* on the second floor of the Park Bar or *Dutchman* in a black box theatre called The Furniture Factory. Here again, however, there is a focus on staging works that are primarily about themselves, and more incidentally in Detroit.

The work that comes closest to being site-specific or place-based comes in the form of youth theatre and community engagement projects run by local arts professionals and teaching artists. The internationally acclaimed MOSAIC Youth Theatre trains its Detroit ensemble members to perform at a very high level, often telling their own stories, and regularly touring nationally and internationally. Other groups such as Matrix Arts and individuals like Tyree Guyton have built strong, ongoing community arts programming that focuses on specific sites and histories within the city. Wayne State has had one or more theatre touring companies performing in the schools for decades.

Within this landscape of conventional theatre practice, however, there seemed to be a missed opportunity for the theatre. We were making plays in the intact remains of Detroit and people were attending those plays. But the other parts of Detroit – the other

remains, the pieces not intact, the rows of houses burned and missing, the extremities of violence and abjection – this rarely made it to the stage; wasn't even permitted to gird the grounds of the theatre. While I didn't know how one could effectively go about engaging these other aspects of the city, it did feel important to investigate a method of theatre-making that at least engaged with aspects of the city's place-based reality.

Transforming the Tour – The Development of Performance/Exchange

In March 2009, it became clear that our department would need someone to direct and coordinate the student touring production for the following academic year. Our tours in the past, which included projects like *No Fear Shakespeare, Movin' Theatre* and the *Black Theatre Touring Production*, had been run by both graduate students and faculty members, but there was no one in place to lead these efforts for the coming year. The tour's mission up to this point was multi-faceted and, ultimately, conventional: it showcased the talent of our BA and BFA students to K-12 public school students in an effort to enrich their existing curriculum and inform them about opportunities to study theatre at the college level. The tour also gave Wayne State students the experience of performing for a longer run in multiple locations. In the years when Wayne State and the local schools had a more substantial budget for such endeavors, the touring production was able to fully costume its cast and transport a set to schools throughout the region. Exposure was high, as hundreds of children would pack into gymnasiums and auditoriums to watch the tour's productions at each school.

Now, however, even with subsidies for high-need schools underwritten by Huntington Bank, the tour was not able to generate enough funding to sustain itself.

Furthermore, without a budget for production support, there was growing suspicion that the tour was no longer an effective vehicle to showcase undergraduate talent or attract young people to our Department's programs. At the same time, the national conversation on outreach and education had turned towards an "engagement model" for community arts and theatre-in-education. The previous model of the conventional touring production as a vehicle for "outreach" was being supplanted with a new model of an ensemble-in-residence that would foster artistic collaboration between Wayne students and public school students. Whereas the former tour would reach thousands of students each year with a glimpse of what we do, the newly formed ensemble would reach about 150 students each year, who would have a higher number of contact hours with our student artists and who would learn performance skills as part of the experience.

My training in this type of engagement model came from my work as an ArtsBridge scholar at California State University, Sacramento and University of California, Davis. The ArtsBridge America program, founded by Jill Beck at the University of California, Irvine in 1996 and now located in colleges and universities across the U.S., places university arts students in K-12 classrooms to develop and deliver age-appropriate arts instruction in their area of expertise.[8] Curriculum is designed in partnership between the ArtsBridge student scholar and her assigned K-12 classroom

[8] ArtsBridge America might be best defined as a research-based service-learning unit that operates within a number of colleges and universities in the U.S. Its original mission was to bring arts experiences to under-resourced public schools by placing training university students in the arts to become teaching artists, and placing them in K-12 classrooms to facilitate learning experiences in the arts. At the peak of its funding, ArtsBridge was running over 30 programs in the U.S. Currently, the number is somewhere between 12-14. See Liane Brouillette & Maureen Burns' "ArtsBridge America: Bringing the Arts Back to School," *Journal for Learning through the Arts* 1.1 (2005).

teacher. A mentorship and exchange is fostered between arts students with an interest in education and classroom teachers with an interest in the arts.

Applying this model to our Wayne State context, I partnered with three Detroit-area teachers, who, among them, taught students in grades K-12. I would work with my BA and BFA students September-December to devise a new play about Detroit, and then we would bring pieces of the play into the classroom to workshop with the students January-April. Rather than presenting a finished product to the students, we would show them a work-in-progress, and invite them to make their own work-in-progress. The idea was that we would have a performance/exchange, in which we would share an abbreviated version of our most current work, and then teach the school-aged students how to make their own short works of theatre using our ensemble's devised approach.

National Stage

At this early stage of the redesign of the tour, it seemed most appropriate to devise a performance that engaged the myths that are told about the city. Detroit, it seems, is frequently confronted by "heartbreak and hope" stories about itself, told from competing angles. There are stories told "on top" of the city, often by writers and reporters far-removed from the location. There are stories told from "inside," which suffer from a lack of perspective of a different kind – a kind of extreme localness in which the problems of place interrupt the ability to effectively compare or contrast at the national level. And there are the stories submerged beneath the surface of the place, some too difficult to discuss, others too obvious to dismiss. The city suffers from, among other things, the authoritative power of imposed directional metaphors that tacitly inform these stories.

"Coverage" from news agencies documenting both the positive and the negative in the city lives "on top" of the place, reflective of the high-rise building and helicopter locations from which the stories are often told. "On the ground" reporting is not necessarily any more accurate. Observations from inside the city cannot resist the effects of double-vision, as the place harbors both evidence of decline and decay as well as indications of rebirth and revitalization; often they are right up next to each other. The weight of the city's own past, the conflicts of which have been left to fester, unmanaged and unresolved, have the power to effect a pronounced, immobilizing gravitational force upon all life that remains here.

These myths, which largely operate as impositions when it comes to Detroit, represent a confluence of fact and fiction, a mix of past and possibility. In fact, so much telling of and telling on Detroit occurs at the national level, that many Americans feel that they know the "truth" about the city without ever having visited. Fueling this production of mythology about the place are a host of anecdotes – about unions and crime and schools, about the 1967 riots or rebellions or uprisings, about corruption. When Detroit is thrust into the spotlight, forced to perform on the national stage – for instance, in the stories of decline and rebirth published regularly by the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine* – the results typically only help to reinforce the city's status as mendicant. Though "local voices" are almost always featured, they typically reflect such exaggerated social positions and archetypes (i.e. the delinquent public official; the martyr for a "cause"; the hipster "upcycling" the city into art) that even the positive "spin" ultimately has a somewhat deleterious effect.[9] Even documentaries designed to highlight the "untold

[9] See John Patrick Leary's "Detroitism," *Guernica* (January 2011). http://www.guernicamag.com/spotlight/2281/leary_1_15_11/ Accessed 30 November 2011.

stories" about the city's past end up as polemics.[10] Insofar as cities are both "artifact and world of artifice," Detroit's artifactual, material circumstances (whether documented as being a bit better or a bit worse than before) are consistently channeled back into two paradigms of artifice that are convenient for national audiences: Detroit as tragic "lost cause" or Detroit as heroic "comeback" city.

The 2010 *Dateline NBC* special on Detroit, "City of Heartbreak and Hope,"[11] offers a significant example of the way in which stories about the city are permitted only to be either tragedies or heroic dramas. Although, according to *Dateline*'s Managing Editor, Aretha Marshall, NBC producers spent "nearly a year"[12] working on this program, which was narrated by well-known television journalist Chris Hansen as part of the program's "Hansen Files" series, local leaders interviewed for the program were "devastated when they saw the finished product"[13] because of perceptions of a significant imbalance in the coverage. With an awareness of the problematic politics of telling Detroit stories from the "top down" or from the "outside in," NBC leveraged a series of disingenuous claims of authenticity for the program in order to evade scrutiny: Hansen

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[10] See Kyong Park's *Detroit: Making it better for you* (2000). http://vimeo.com/9609460; George Steinmetz and Michael Chanan's *Detroit: Ruin of a City,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005); and Florent Tillon's *Detroit Wildlife* (2009). http://florent-tillon.fr/detroit-wildlife-florent-tillon.html

[11] "City of Heartbreak and Hope," *Dateline NBC*. Aired 18 April 2010. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/36665950/ns/dateline_nbc-the_hansen_files_with_chris_hansen/t/america-now-city-heartbreak-hope/ Accessed 20 November 2011.

[12] Aretha Marshall, "Detroit Journalist [sic] Respond to NBC Dateline Report" (2010). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUtqkysN1Mk&feature=related. Accessed 30 November 2011.

[13] Vickie Thomas, "Detroit Journalist [sic] Respond to NBC Dateline Report," (2010). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUtqkysN1Mk&feature=related. Accessed 30 November 2011.

referred to Detroit as his "hometown" and that this story, for him, constituted a "return"[14] (despite the fact that he actually grew up in the suburban cities of West Bloomfield and Birmingham, far-removed from the circumstances of the city of Detroit); producers "had people who were here *living* … following people"[15] (as if to suggest that residing in the city temporarily constituted some sort of extraordinary sacrifice, in this instance); and the program featured prominent local officials who were filmed personally escorting Hansen and his camera crew to meet and chat with locals (thereby implicitly condoning everything that was said, even though the show was heavily edited).

In one of the most outrageous and controversial moves in its storytelling, *Dateline NBC* knowingly overemphasized an otherwise novelty story about an eccentric elderly man who shoots raccoons in the suburbs and sells them in the city to suggest that Detroit residents have been reduced to eating raccoon meat. Communications director for Detroit's Mayor Dave Bing, Karen Dumas, points out the way in which such programming renders long-term damaging effects:

> We are not perfect, nor do we desire to be portrayed as such. But, we also find no value in being incorrectly painted as a city whose residents must resort to hunting raccoons for food. It is this image that contributes to fueling decisions to not return, invest or remain in our city.[16]

Dumas' view, which reflects the feelings of a number of people within the city who expressed their outrage in locally-publicized news conferences and colloquia, is informed by a sense of betrayal: "For the access and assistance given to your organization and staff

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[14] Hansen, "City of Heartbreak."

[15] Marshall, "Detroit Journalist."

[16] Karen Dumas, "Detroit Mayor's Office Responds to Dateline," (2010). http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/36669035/ns/dateline_nbc-the_hansen_files_with_chris_hansen/t/detroit-mayors-office-responds-dateline/. Accessed 30 November 2011.

to research this story, the outcome was disappointingly shallow."[17] While in her response to criticism Marshall emphasized (once again) that her team spent "nearly a year" on this story, she failed to accept responsibility for producing another negative account of the city.

Jerry Herron explains that this type of coverage is no accident, but rather is by "design."[18] Through interdependent processes of remembering and forgetting, Detroit's absences and vacancies are mobilized to account for themselves on the national stage. Readers and viewers outside of Detroit (*even only a few miles outside of Detroit*) find reassurance in tales that separate themselves and their circumstances from what has eventuated inside *this place*. Detroit has become an "other," conveniently dissociated from the perceived "whole" of the rest of the U.S. The city's discouraging facts are methodically "applied to construct a border that will separate Detroit from everything else in this country… as a means of separating things we want to believe from things we want to believe aren't relevant because they apply to somebody else."[19] This spectacle is produced and reproduced to render Detroit as a "borderama,"[20] an island adrift from the national imperative of opportunity. As a result, the city-as-disaster is effectively "naturalized:"

> [T]he disaster here has been so spread out over time that it begins to look not like a disaster at all but something else, something natural, as if this condition were to be expected. The city has so spectacularly succeeded at

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Jerry Herron, "Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.4 (2007): 669.

[19] Jerry Herron, "Borderland/Borderama/Detroit." *Distributed Urbanism: Cities After Google Earth* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 78.

[20] Herron, "Borderland," 63-86.

> being its apparent self that it has become virtually unremarkable in any practical way. There's nothing to be done about such disastrous human problems—at least not here. Not in Detroit. And that is the real story—the one that doesn't make the news, because it isn't news any longer; disaster hasn't been news for a long time here.[21]

Detroit's environment is consequently defined not only by the actual, material degradation of its structures, abandoned without resources to deal with the industrial pollution left behind. It is also defined by the psychological "naturalization" of these processes of degradation – as if the decline and decay of the city is the fault of its citizenry. Or else it is seen as a kind of inevitable moral duality (combined with an archetypal "not-in-my-backyard" mentality): if the U.S. can boast and sustain cities like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, then it must pay the price for these successes with a place like Detroit (as long as *I* don't have to live there).

Transposing Myths: Working Up

My research thus turned to the transposing of myths that are told about the city. I would identify themes in the extant myths in order to generate material for a new, dramatized myth of the city that incorporated elements of Detroit's known problems with aspects of the fantastical and the ridiculous. I would observe what stories and tropes existed so that my actors could tease them out and turn them over in the generation of a new play. In this sense, working in opposition to the many "top down" narratives which dominate the popular interpretation and evaluation of the city, we would be "working up" as a practical engagement with Detroit-as-place, "from the desires and fears that animate our sense of home to questions about the moral reach of our technological relations."[22] To

[21] Herron, "Detroit: Disaster," 665.

this extent, we would attempt to interpret the way we felt about living in the city and moving through the city, as the home of our work, in order to better understand why and how Detroit was such a consistent, unresolved paradox in the national imagination. What was it about life in this place that produced such anxiety at the national level? What was the relationship between the imbalanced treatment of Detroit and other patterns of inequity, historical and contemporary? Characterized by exploration and a freedom to interpret (to *move*) information, our work was to understand how we relate to each other in the city and what patterns characterize our interactions. In this instance, Transformative Learning theory was significant, as we were able to position the city as a "disorienting dilemma" – that experience in the learning process when the learner is confronted with something that she doesn't understand, and which has the power to disrupt pre-existing frames for understanding.[23] If effectively positioned as a disorienting dilemma within the learning process, investigating Detroit in this performative context could contribute to a kind of "catastrophic disorganization" of the existing narratives about the city, leading students and audience members to a "transformative edge," a precipice of alternative storytelling.[24] Once we arrived at this place of dilemma and transformation, it would be our responsibility to disentangle or "unmoor"[25] those rigid fixtures of understanding that limit the narrative possibilities inside the city.

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[22] Davison, "Contesting Sustainability," 196.

[23] Jack Mezirow, "A Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Education," *Adult Education Quarterly* 32.1 (1981): 3-24.

[24] W. G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Bureau of Study Counsel,1968): 52, in Berger, "Dancing," 338-9.

[25] Naila Keleta Mae, "A Pedagogy of Justice," *Canadian Theatre Review* 147 (2011): 42.

The Up was our attempt to create an alternative myth about the "fall of Detroit." Workshopped in conversation with about 120 Detroit school children ages 8-13 from the Spain School and Roberto Clemente Elementary and 30 high school students from the Detroit suburb of Warren, *The Up* staged the story of an epic confrontation and ill-fated love between the "lost horses of *Detrot*" and an invading population of entrepreneurial, carrot-growing rabbits from "*French Canadia*." In our development of the concept for *The Up*, we attempted to apply a dramaturgical consciousness to analyze the personal and national scripts that are written about life in the city of Detroit. Eugenio Barba's ideas of an "organic dramaturgy" characterized by a "confusion of contagious materials" were crucial to this process.[26] In this application of Barba's dramaturgical consciousness of "kaosmos, chaos-cosmos, confusion-creation"[27] to texts that would not otherwise be considered "scripts," *per se*, we hoped to give attention to the power of the word, and the power of narrative and of myth-making as they have been productive of the city's environment and identity. This we did as a means by which to try to disentangle Detroit from its own psychology of failure – to extricate Detroit from its responsibility as a national disgrace as a means to establish an agenda of reconciliation. Reconciliation – of these competing narratives, and their damaging, demoralizing functions – I believe is necessary for any sort of future for the city. For the past twenty years, in earnest – and really, for much longer than that – the city has been robbed of its agency. Acted upon, as a "beast" of a city, the national storytellers have robbed Detroit of the radical interrogation that it offers, reducing the city to a representation of a mendicant child.

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[26] Eugenio Barba, *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House* (New York: Routledge, 2009): 56.

[27] Barba, *On Directing*, 138.

Sentimentalized for what it allegedly "was," Detroit is rarely, if ever, permitted to live in the present tense. Appropriately, this examination of the scripts that define the city constituted a "journey through the vast country of memory" which "confronts us with the confusion between the feelings of the present and those of the past."[28] This attention to the gap between the past and the future places us most immediately in the present.

Our investigations took on this idea of "beast" directly. What emerged was a story about horses – the wild horses of Detroit whose horsepower civilized the city and took it to great heights, and whose obsession with material objects led to a sudden collapse. While the horse/car association would be an obvious reference point at the beginning of our devising process, the specificity of the horse's actual, historical obsolescence post-automobile was equally as important as the shift towards animality, in general.

By locating the responsibility of the beginning and end of Detroit – renamed in our story as *Detrot* – among a group of fictional horses, it seemed that we could wrest our site-fiction from the existing narrative traps of "tragedy" and "heroic drama," exploring an alternative ur-narrative of place. Rather than exploring what *actually*, *factually was* in Detroit's past, the shift towards animality in our explorations opened up the possibility of considering what could have been or what still is, culturally and behaviorally. Early drawings that I made of potential scenes in the play included depictions of a horse riding a bicycle through an abandoned city, stopping to get off his bike and stare up at the abandoned building that was once his high school. If a hipster drives to Detroit to take photographs of the ruins, it has the look and feel of inappropriately romanticized nostalgia and naivete. If a horse ruin-gazes, we can actually look at what ruin gazing is –

[28] Barba, *On Directing*, 173.

where it comes from, what human impulse it reflects. In this sense, the animality of the characters invited us to discover new layers of the humanity within our city.[29]

In our early devised work, all of my actors were horses, exploring both the high times of their great society, as well as the shift in the cultural climate that led to the collapse of the material wealth that they knew. Accordingly the horses ate, drank, danced, sang, and coveted. We spent a great deal of time trying to work out whether one day everything was gone, or whether there were a series of shifts, either natural or man-made, that raised suspicions and set off a chain of events that led to the collapse.

While visiting the Cranbrook Institute of Science in the Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills one evening, I discovered the second key element of our site-fiction. On a 2'x 3' table, sitting waist-high and covered by a clear plastic cube was a miniature model of the city of Detroit, as it appears today, undergoing a violent upheaval from a glacier. The text read something to the effect of "Glaciers formed this land, and they could return." Here was that perfect storm, that natural disaster that could account for the collapse of the horses' society. The Institute of Science display contained elements of both profound accuracy and insane delusion. I thought to myself: little children come to this museum, this vestibule of truth-telling that displays bones and rocks and interactive science experiments. And among all of this material is this bizarre and thoroughly unreasonable suggestion, dynamized by way of a model, that the Detroit that remains today, just down the road from Cranbrook, is under threat from a massive sheet of ice, which promises to uproot all of the city's buildings. I returned to the rehearsal room to

[29] Most recently, criticism of the commodification of Detroit's abject circumstances in the forms of "ruins porn" and the reckless "ruins gazing" of visiting flaneurs has been taken up by John Patrick Leary in his *Guernica* article "Detroitism."

share the news – the horses were under threat from a glacier, but the actors would have to work out whether the glacier was real or just a myth, itself.

The ensemble improvised scenarios leading up to a storytelling session in which each actor narrated their own version of the glacier story, which resulted in the following origins story:

> Horse 1
> The glacier deposited this fertile soil into the region now called Michigoose. It carved out deep lakes and smoothed out large, fertile areas, making a great place for horses to live. That's what this book means when it says, "A Horse, A Horse, My Kingdom for a Horse." The glacier did all that work to make a perfect place for us horses.

Accumulating all of the possibilities related to the horses' imminent downfall, we determined that a series of harsh winters, coupled with an economic recession, had made the horses fearful. The thing that had helped them prosper was the thing that turned against them and was after them:

Horse 1
The case of the cold – at first – was highly debated.

Horse 2
It was terrible. Everybody shouting.

Horse 1
Life became harder.

The horses' fear led to unreasonable projections about the cause of the cold, and the population became increasingly vulnerable to fear mongering; the myth of the oncoming glacier began to take a foothold within the horses' psychology, and the society made plans to go underground, the only place they could hide from the glacier:

Horse 1
The glacier was coming … there was no denying it and nowhere to escape. North, south, east, west, the glacier would find us.

Horse 2
The glacier would chase us all over the earth, but we soon realized the glacier could not chase us BELOW it…

Horse 1
So we went below, abandoning our beautiful things in the Up and set up life in the Below … sending up one worthy horse a year to patrol to look for the glacier.

Around this time in the development of our narrative about the horses, it became clear that we would need a second population of animals that might represent a complication to the existing situation. Many news stories were appearing at the time, in the local and national press, documenting the return of wild animals to the city of Detroit. After years of increasing commercial and residential vacancy in the city, much of the land was "returning to nature," with wild plants populating hundreds of acres and making for an excellent new (old) habitat for the wild animals that were now crowded out in the overdeveloped suburban sprawl. This was another opportunity to engage an actual human/animal parallel in our story. As younger generations of people have returned to Detroit – in modest groups, but steady, still – they have taken up jobs and hobbies in the city's "new" green and creative economies. Young people come here and work in the urban gardens and farms, conduct non-profit work and develop community arts projects. What if the second population of animals to arrive in *Detrot* had similar "hip" prospects?

The second population of animals in the play thus revealed themselves to be wild hares who, overzealous and uncareful in their agricultural development, had overtaxed the soil in their own native "*French Canadia*" and were on the prowl for a new world in which they might grow their gardens:

Rabbit 1
The soil in French Canadia was long the envy of the soil-loving world … until recently…. Our carrot production outstripped the fertility of our soil.

As experts back home try to restore the soil, the rabbits have seen fit to
send out expeditions to search for new fertile lands.

Discovering *Detrot* completely abandoned, the rabbits fill the city's empty skyscrapers with multi-storied carrot gardens:

Rabbit 3
We found this place.

Rabbit 1
Amazing. Fertile … already developed.

Rabbit 2
And completely and conveniently abandoned!

The rest of the narrative elements fell predictably into place from there. An unexpected love develops between a hare and a horse; the horses discover the rabbits' delicious carrots; the horse king discovers the rabbits using the land that is rightfully "his;" and there is a great chase between "The Up" and "The Below" that culminates in a confrontation:

Rabbit 1
You stole a carrot.

Horse 2
You tried to steal our city.

Rabbit 2
You left it.

Horse 2
We just moved downstairs.

Rabbit 3
You weren't using it.

Horse 3
Because it was dangerous.

Finally there is a reconciliation of each society's competing myths of place. The Horse King, overcome by emotion as he stands atop the city's soil (rather than under it) for the first time in years, and expresses his commitment to cooperate on mutually-agreed-upon terms, partly inspired by the lyrics of the rock band *Queen*:

> Horse King
> My fellow horses … and rabbits. We may not know what's coming or going. We may not know what lies ahead … whether carrots are the question or the answer. It's the terror of knowing what this world is about. I turned away from it all like a blind man. Sat on a fence. It didn't work. But – look at us here, now – we're back, Detrot! We've been given another chance. And it's gonna take a whole lot more than the fear of an old glacier to keep us down ever again. We're gonna give love one more chance!

Once scripted, *The Up* and our ensemble's methods for devising were taken to Roberto Clemente Elementary in Southwest Detroit, the Spain K-8 school in midtown Detroit, and Lincoln High School in the Detroit suburb of Warren, where our Wayne State actors continued to craft the work in response to an active audience. The final performance was staged in a community garden in the Woodbridge neighborhood, which lies on the western-most edge of the University's campus.

Beginning Again

While the *Performance/Exchange* actors and I were largely just relieved that our audience members for *The Up* – young and old – could follow our story at all, perhaps even more significant than the story, itself, were the interactions that the non-conventional performance venue enabled. I would like to think that what we made in the garden was good theatre. But I am mainly encouraged to think that perhaps what we made was (strangely) … relevant theatre? If theatre in Detroit, at large, helps to maintain

the delicate psychological balance in the city, then perhaps *The Up* encouraged a healthy kind of psychic disruption – not one that is meant to destroy or threaten or jeopardize, but one that is meant to remind us that we are more resilient than we might think, more clever, maybe even more bizarre. Our story, designed to be suitable for children, but with the hope of having appeal for grown-ups, is not overtly political. But it is an interrogation – just one without an expectation of a specific response. Rather, it asks a series of questions and proposes a set of ridiculous possibilities as a means to engage Detroit's defining paradoxes and to cultivate an environment of sustained ambivalence towards the city's present and future.