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An Insight Approach to Theatre and Artistry: A Journey of Discovery

In this essay, I trace a journey of discovery into Insight artistry that has been unfolding for over a decade both for me and for my colleague Chukwuma Obasi. In the course of this journey Chuk and I have discovered that we are Insight artists and practitioners of Insight artistry. We have also discovered what it means to use those terms – and to say that in addition to creating Insight art, our aim is to help other artists and creatives do likewise.

For both of us, this has been a journey of what Bernard Lonergan might call artistic self-appropriation. It is the story of how the two of us, both artistically drawn to theatre and the performing arts and yearning also to foster social and racial justice, have sought to meet the demands of both these callings by allowing the Insight approach to conflict analysis and peacebuilding to progressively and cumulatively inform our artistic practice.

This quest has led us to work together on a series of theatrical experiments: *Under the Veil* (2009) *Cadence: Home* (2012) *Uniform Justice* (2014) *There's Something About America* (2013 – 2016) *Rocco, Chelsea, Adriana, Sean, Claudia, Gianna, Alex* (2019) and *ACCORD(ing)* (2020). Our roles have differed. I have served as creator, producer, and artistic director. The authorial I in this essay is mine. Chuk has been a writer, performer, director, producer and artistic partner in creating these works. Looking back, it surprises

me to recognize how many inverse insights we have had to grasp and overcome along the way.

The term "inverse insight" is Lonergan's, and it names the moment of recognition you experience when you finally face the fact that you are headed down the wrong track, that the way you're framing what you're doing is wrong-headed.[1] If experience has taught me anything, it's that there will be more inverse insights to come. Nevertheless, in what follows I retrace the journey of discovery – the self-correcting process of deliberating, evaluating and deciding – that marks our journey so far. My hope is that this informal history of insights, oversights, and inverse insights may be useful to fellow travelers, so I begin by sketching two key influences that helped me to take my initial bearings.

One early influence was academic, the other theatrical. I studied the foundational philosophy of Bernard Lonergan and the Insight approach to conflict analysis at George Mason University, [2] and I trained in Insight mediation with Cheryl Picard at Carleton University. In the process, I learned four key things. First, I learned to pay specific attention to the way people are using their minds when they engage in conflict behavior rather than to focus exclusively on the incidents and issues that trigger this behavior or to speculate on the more abstract causes for it.[3] Second, I learned that as a matter of conscious

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[1] For Lonergan on inverse insights see, Bernard Lonergan, *Insight.* Ken Melchin and Cheryl Picard introduced the term into their analysis of conflict in *Transforming Conflict Through Insight.*

[2] For an introduction to the Insight approach to conflict analysis, see Jamie Price, "Explaining Human Conflict: Human Needs Theory and the Insight Approach," in *Conflict Resolution and Human Needs,* edited by Kevin Avruch and Christopher Mitchell, (New York: Routledge, 2013) pp. 108-123, and "Method in Analyzing Conflict Behavior: The Insight Approach" *Revista de Mediacion,* 2018, volume 11, pp 1-9.

[3] For an excellent introduction to Lonergan's foundational philosophy, engage with Mark D. Morelli, *Self-Possession: Being at Home in Conscious Performance* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Lonergan Institute, Boston College, 2015).

performance, 'conflict behavior' is the course of action we carry out when we decide to protect or defend ourselves from a threat we discern in our current circumstances. Third, I learned that it is difficult to alter or control our conflict behaviors once they get rolling. The problem is that they are not spontaneously self-correcting. Once we commit to defending ourselves against a felt sense of threat we tend to feel *certain* that our circumstances warrant a protective response and *righteous* about our decision to commit to it. Finally, I learned that a good Insight mediator can help people transform their conflicts through the subtle art of helping them to open their minds to their own conflict behaviors: by asking targeted Insight questions that slow down their mutual rush to judgment, that foster their curiosity about the decisions and actions of the other, and that prompt reflexive awareness of their own certainty and righteousness.[4]

I never wanted to become a mediator. I wanted to create art. Nevertheless, the example of Insight mediation helped guide my first formulation of the artistic experiment I wanted to undertake: If we could bring to the stage the intrinsically dramatic character of conflict behavior – and if we could effectively engage audience members in that performance – couldn't we potentially slow down their rush to judgment, foster their curiosity about others, enhance their reflexive awareness of their own certainty and righteousness, and open up the possibility for new insights and new courses of action? I certainly thought so, but my question was: How? What kind of theatrical performance piece should this be, and how would we engage our audience?

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[4] Cheryl Picard, Center for Conflict Education and Research, Insight Mediation Coaching Program, Carlton University, Ottawa, Canada. Fall, 2006. See, Kenneth E. Melchin, and Cheryl Picard, *Transforming Conflict Through Insight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

Orienting my formulation and pursuit of these answers was my background in theatre. For prior to entering graduate school, I worked for eight years acting, writing, directing, and managing targeted efforts to harness the magic of theatre for social change: five years with the Star Theatre Program in New York City and then three years in my service placement with the Peace Corps in Vanuatu (2000-2003). But since there are a least four well-travelled approaches to using theatre and the performing arts to improve the world, it will help clarify the course of my journey if I sketch their basic focus and orientation. Each of these approaches has influenced my own journey. By distinguishing them, and by tracing my own discoveries in relation to them, I hope to clarify what I now call Insight artistry can contribute to efforts for social change.

The first and most venerable tradition – traceable from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to Shaw's *Major Barbara* to Guerilla Theatre to Larson's *Rent* – can be accurately referred to "issue-based theatre." Issue-based dramas are advocacy oriented. Their objective is to influence the thoughts and attitudes (and thereby the actions) of audience members by immersing them in a compelling drama that communicates the artistic creator's response to a pressing social issue: war, poverty, human dignity.[5]

In the second approach, artists and playwrights carry out documentary-style research to create what I call "exposure theatre." These performance pieces expose audience members to the dramatic, typically baleful consequences of major political and economic policies. Verbatim dialogue is a common feature of documentary style, exposure theatre. The one-woman, character portrayals of Sara Jones fit into this category, as do

[5] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata,* Athens, Greece 411 BCE; George Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara,* 1907; Guerilla Theatre, San Francisco Mine Troupe and Peter Berg; Jonathan Larson, *Rent,* New York Theatre Workshop, 1993

Aftermath, by Blank and Jenson, about the plight of Iraqi refugees after the American invasion in 2003; and *Sweat,* by Lynn Nottage, about the deleterious impact of factory closings on family structure and race relations in the U.S.[6]

A third approach is "theatre of the oppressed," especially as exemplified by the Forum Theatre of Augusto Boal. These performance pieces characteristically seek to engage the audience in an experience of social and political oppression with the aim of transforming their characteristic response to it. Theatrical enactments involving role plays enable audience members (spect-actors) to explore and practice new ways of responding to the exercise of repressive power.[7]

Finally, there is "edutainment," which is the approach to theatre for social change I learned in my time with Star Theatre. Like the other approaches, edutainment is concerned with social issues and consequences, but the primary goal is to create entertaining interactive theatrical experiences that set the stage for audience members to have safe, informed, and personally illuminating conversations about key life decisions they are currently confronting. At Star our target audiences were high school and middle school youth and we created edutainment pieces about important matters of personal health and safety: HIV/AIDS exposure, sexual abuse, and gender-related bullying.[8]

Upon finishing my graduate studies, I was keen to bring the Insight approach to bear on my experience in theatre. As indicated in my title, this has been a journey of discovery. So in what follows, I will focus less on the performance pieces we have created and more on

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[6] Sarah Jones, *Bridge and Tunnel (2004)*, *Sell/Buy/Date (2016);* Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, *The Exonerated (2002) and Aftermath (2009)*; Lynn Nottage, *Sweat (2015)*

[7] Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed or Forum Theatre*, Game for Actors and Non-Actors, (*New York, Routladge,1992).

[8] STAR Theatre, Cydelle Berlin, NITESTAR Theatre, Y-PEER Handbook for the United Nations

what we have discovered about developing the approach to creativity and change we now call Insight artistry.

Step One: *Under the Veil*

In 2008, I created TÉA, which originally stood for Theatre, Engagement, and Action. In my first project, I partnered with Intersections International, a multi-faith peacebuilding organization in New York City to create a theatrical experience that would address the background state of fear, suspicion and hostility that had settled in as a cultural and political habit in the wake of 9/11. The result was *Under the Veil: Being Muslim and non-Muslim in New York (post 9/11).* Chuk emerged as a leading performer and writer on this piece, and he soon joined me as Program Assistant for TÉA.

My aim in *Under the Veil* was to create a performance piece that would spark curiosity among audience members – the curiosity needed to transform the conflict behavior straining the relations of non-Muslim Americans and their Muslim-American counterparts. So with the help of Cydelle Berlin, my mentor at Star Theatre, I gathered a company of talented, socially committed artists and formed my first TÉA Company. I trained them in conducting "Insight conversations," the methodology we used to conduct the community research we needed to create the characters, themes, and scenarios of the piece.

In mediation training with Cheryl Picard, I had learned about asking Insight questions. For TÉA, I adapted this style of inquiry to my own purpose, which was not to foster conversation between conflicting parties in a mediation session, but rather to carry

out Insight-based community research with individual community members. We wanted to understand the impact of 9/11 on a broad range of New Yorkers, and we wanted to deepen our understanding of the decisions these individuals were making and how they were using their minds to do so. So together, we arranged and conducted over 40 personalized Insight conversations with Muslims and non-Muslims living in the greater New York area. We spoke with women in hijab and women who chose not to wear a headscarf. We spoke with the Imam for the New York Police Department, a Sikh, a Muslim police officer, a Latina Muslim whose parents converted to Islam when she was a kid, Muslim students attending college in New York, military veterans, non-profit leaders, and many more.

When we asked our Insight questions, our goal was not simply to understand *what* a particular individual was thinking about 9/11 and its impact, but also to discern *how* they were using their mind to draw the conclusions they had drawn and to make the decisions they had made. Thus, each Insight conversation opened with the following set of questions: What has been the principal impact of 9/11 for you and your family? What decisions do you find yourself making that you might not have made before? What are you hoping to achieve as a result of these decisions? What second thoughts, if any, did you have?

On the basis of these conversations we devised a two-act play incorporating music and spoken word. We created 14 independent but thematically linked dramatic scenes that brought to life 27 distinct characters, including Solace, our clairvoyant street poet and master of ceremonies. Settings ranged from subways, to bars, to airports, to park benches, to living rooms, to television studios, to employment offices. Each scene concretized the drama of cares and threats – curiosity and certainty – compassion and righteousness – that divided Muslim and non-Muslim Americans in the wake of 9/11: What is behind the

decision to wear a headscarf? What is it like to be detained at the airport? What might motivate a commitment to jihad? How does religiously based job discrimination play out? Each performance segued immediately into the Third Act – an Insight conversation with the audience about the characters and themes and issues raised by the play. I will discuss the Third Act more fully below.

As the theory of change guiding the Insight approach makes clear, conflict behavior can be transformed if the person engaged in it is able somehow to rethink their behavior: to become less elemental and more discerning in their felt response to the situation, and to become more open and conscientious in deciding to defend against it.[9] As I indicated above, the certainty and righteousness that drives our conflict behaviors is the major obstacle to changing our minds about them. Thus, in creating *Under the Veil,* my aim was to give audience members a compelling and entertaining opportunity to reexamine any felt sense of threat they might be experiencing in the wake of 9/11 and to reassess any righteousness and certainty that might be driving their decisions to engage in conflict behavior.

In putting together this piece, I drew on three of the traditional approaches to theatre for social change. By focusing on the problem of Muslim/non-Muslim relations, I aligned myself with the issue-based approach that seeks to influence attitudes and perspectives on a pressing social issue. By devising the content for our piece – characters, themes, dramatic incidents – from our Insight conversations in the community, I took a page from the documentary style techniques employed by exposure theatre. Finally, in the tradition of edutainment, we created a dramatic pastiche of political, cultural, and interpersonal decisions that constitute the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in

[9] See J. Price, "Method in Analyzing Conflict Behavior," p. 6.

New York, post 9/11. Taken together, the artistic result was a diverse, rich, nuanced, and entertaining performance piece that I hoped and anticipated would trigger insights and raise questions for audience members not readily available to them otherwise.

I also made the artistic decision not to attempt to dramatically resolve this post 9/11 conflict situation on stage. At the time this seemed best, because I knew that if any conflict transformation were to happen as a result of the play, it would have to happen in the minds and hearts of the audience members, not on the stage. To foster this possibility, I created the Third Act. Drawing on my training as an Insight mediator and my experience in facilitating post-production discussions with Star Theatre. I anticipated that the characters and the dramatic scenarios portrayed on stage would lead the audience members to be mindful their valuing of their own Muslim/non-Muslim relations, that it would lead them to ask: "what is significant for me about this particular scenario?" As part of my remarks before each performance, I tried to enhance this focus by asking audience members to notice the moments of the play they found emotionally significant – and to remember the feelings that arose within them. I even suggested they jot down a note or two on their program, so that they could remember them, when it came time for the discussion in the Third Act.

I structured the Third Act as a post-performance Insight conversation about the show, facilitated by me and other members of the company. I anticipated that by posing targeted Insight questions to audience members after the performance, I would be able to shift the focus of their curiosity from the drama on stage to their own decisions and actions. In particular, I hoped I might be able to help audience members become more personally aware and curious about any certainty and righteousness they might be experiencing about

Muslim/non-Muslim relations. To my consternation, the Third Act did not work out as well as I had anticipated. Ultimately, I had to conclude that it didn't work well at all, my first inverse insight.

What had I missed? First, I had underestimated the strength and influence of post-performance "talkbacks" on audiences in New York and American theatre more broadly. I was hoping to establish a salon-type post-performance atmosphere and to facilitate a focused, interactive conversation sparked by the audience's engagement with the cares, threats, and decisions of the characters developed on the stage. What happened was that many of the people who spoke asked questions of the kind that I regularly hear at talkbacks: What inspired you to develop the play? How long did it take? How many of the actors are Muslim? What challenges did you and the actors face in devising the play? Most of these questions and comments were appreciative of course, but they demonstrated that most audience members had left the aesthetic world engendered by their experience of the play and entered the practical, common sense world of the post-performance talkback.[10] Once the lights came up, the dramatic space was redefined, and the actors appeared in a row seated on stage, it was difficult for most audience members to sustain their immediate connection to a theatrical experience that invited them to imagine new possibilities for Muslim/non-Muslim relations, post 9/11. I tried everything I could think of to sustain the ambience of the play in the transition to the Third Act, but it was clear that most audience members still found themselves invited into different roles in a different space for a

[10] I owe my ability to differentiate these patterns of experience to Lonergan's distinctions among "aesthetic, intellectual, practical, and dramatic" patterns of experience. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 286.

seemingly different theatrical purpose, and they drew upon their experience of traditional talkbacks to engage.

Second, I had failed to appreciate the affective and cognitional distance I was asking my audience to travel. I had failed to appreciate the degree of difficulty involved in the reflexive challenge I had set for myself and for my audience members. There was a cognitional mismatch between *Under the Veil* and the Third Act, and I hadn't recognized it. On the one hand, the characters and themes in the scenarios dramatized in *Under the Veil* explicitly engaged the *knowing* and *valuing* of the audience members: What is this? Is it so? What is the significance of this? On the other hand, the Insight questions I posed to them in the Third Act explicitly addressed their deliberating and deciding: What did I do? What made that a good thing to do? What was I going for? What could I do differently? By inviting them to participate in the Third Act, I had introduced a performative disconnect into their experience of the play.

I attribute this second oversight to my familiarity with edutainment theatre and the practice of Insight mediation. When we devised dramatic scenarios for Star Theatre, we always focused on high-stakes moments of *deciding and acting*. Whether the performance piece addressed bullying, or sexual abuse, or exposure to HIV/AIDS, the dramatic questions were always, 'Given these circumstances, what are my options? What is the best thing to do? Will I commit to it?' These scenarios brought to life on stage the dramas of decision and action experienced on a daily basis by the young people who comprised our audiences. Thus, when we made the shift from a dramatic performance to facilitated dialogue following the performance, it was not difficult for our young audience to sustain their

immediate connection to the world engendered by the play, to move to a consideration of the dramas of their lives, and to contemplate new options for decision and action.

But *Under the Veil* was different. Despite similarities in theatrical style, I now recognize that we devised a play that addressed the presumptions of threat that audience members might be bringing to the question of Muslim/non-Muslim relations, not their patterns of deciding and acting in response to it. In other words, I had created a play that invited audience members to engage in a new world of valuing, but I had linked it to a post-performance experience more suited to reflection on deciding and acting. It proved too far a reach.

In making this assessment, I neither discount the artistry of *Under the Veil* nor minimize the creativity and commitment of the wonderful artists who worked with me to devise it. *Under the Veil* was uniformly well received. We had a performance run at La Mama Theatre in New York City, and over a two-year period, we mounted the play at numerous universities and performance venues in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington DC. But my struggle to integrate the Third Act with the experience of the play revealed to me that my desire to create theatrical performance pieces informed by the Insight approach was far from realized, and that I had a decision to make.

Step Two: *Cadence: Home*

My experience with *Under the Veil* convinced me of three things: I should stop experimenting with post-performance formats; I should create a dramatic experience that

would on its own heighten curiosity and reflexive awareness; I should target either the valuing or the deciding of my audience members, but not both. I had come to recognize that just as Insight practitioners employ different sets of questions to understand the constrained deciding and reactive valuing that give rise to conflict behavior, so the theatrical approach to each of these operations would be different too. Acts of deciding launch us into action, and the related Insight questions reveal the drama intrinsic to the performance: What am I hoping to achieve? Do I commit or let it go? Do I succeed or do I fail? Am I being constrained or am I free? Likewise, acts of valuing register our felt sense of our circumstances, and the related Insight questions reveal the drama intrinsic to this performance: What is the significance of this? What is at stake for me? Is this a threat or is it welcome? Am I being reactive or mindful?

So which theatrical path should I take? On the one hand, I could create a theatrical experience that would enable audience members to explore alternatives to the particular patterns of conflict behavior dividing and oppressing their community – gang violence or community-police relations, for instance. I could gather a company of artists, make sure they were trained in Insight and improvisational theatre, and create an Insight Improv experience that would interactively engage audience members in the clash of deciding and acting driving conflict behavior in their community. In taking this path, I would draw on the theatrical wisdom and techniques of improvisational theatre and theatre of the oppressed.

On the other hand, I could create a theatrical experience that would enable audience members to become more mindful and open in valuing individuals and groups currently viewed with suspicion, caricature, and hostility. I could gather a company of artists, carry out extensive Insight conversations with the range of individuals caught up in a conflict

situation, and devise an Insight performance piece that would present an unflinching, true-to-life portrayal of the relationships, threats, and behaviors of the individuals caught up in the situation. I could do this while also infusing the characters and their encounters with others with the curiosity, emotional rigor, and reflexive awareness they (and the audience members) need to confront and transcend the misunderstanding, hostility, and fear that drives the way they treat each other.

Both paths offer interesting artistic challenges, and while I remain tantalized by the possibility of Insight Improv, the decision was not difficult for me. This professional fork in the road revealed to me that I feel called to create theatrical experiences that help to dissipate threat rather than transform concrete patterns of conflict behavior. It thus became clear to me that in addition to my academic and theatre backgrounds, a third influence was informing my quest to create Insight theatre: I am more drawn to building peace than I am to resolving conflicts. This influence guided my commitment to serve in the Peace Corps as well as my choice of Insight theatre projects.

As understood by Insight practitioners, "peacebuilding" is what we are doing when we work to create social, cultural, and interpersonal conditions that mitigate the emergence of threat and foster a more open, curious, and mindful approach to others.[11] The opening line of the legislation that authorized the Peace Corps in 1961 makes the connection clear: "to promote world peace and friendship through a Peace Corps."[12] Moreover, as I learned from Aristotle's classic analysis of friendship in the *Nicomachean*

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[11] See for example, Jamie Price, "Method in Peacebuilding," in *Peacemaking: From Practice to Theory,* Volume 2, edited by Susan Allen Nan, Zachariah Cherian Mamphilly, and Andrea Bartoli, (Santa Barbara, CA: Prager, 2012), p. 610.
[12] Peace Corps Act, Public Law 87-293, in Laws of the 87th Congress, Title I, Section 2, p. 683.

Ethics, the 'friendship factor' in any given relationship – be it based on pleasure, bloodline, usefulness, or virtue – lies in the act of valuing the other person in their own terms and for their own sake.[13] It seems to me that friendship in this sense should be far more widespread than it is, for who doesn't welcome being understood on their own terms, for their own sake?

Insight practitioners are oriented by Lonergan's foundational insight into human affairs: we are spontaneously curious about our world and about each other unless some combination of bias and threat subverts our desire to know and blocks our willingness to understand and assist each other.[14] In my role, I determined I would try to build peace by creating a theatrical performance piece that released the spontaneous capacity of friendship within its audience members – in the case of *Cadence: Home*, between non-military civilians and American veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As before, I recruited a talented and diverse company of TÉA artists, and we engaged in Insight conversations with more than 40 veterans who had recently returned to New York City from Iraq and Afghanistan. We spoke with vets from all branches of the military, including female vets and gay vets. We also spoke with their mothers, girlfriends, friends, schoolmates and fiancées. We were again aided immensely by our partnership with Intersections International and its executive director, Bob Chase. Through the veterans outreach program run by Interections, we were able to arrange Insight conversations with veterans we would not otherwise have been able to reach.

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[13] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* Translated by Martin Ostwald, (New York, Pearson, 1962) Chapter 8.
[14] See Bernard Lonergan, "Healing and Creating in History," in *A Third Collection,* edited by Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 100-109.

Each Insight conversation opened with a set of Insight questions that targets the valuing of the vet we were speaking to: If you could have the conversation about your military service that you would like to have, who would you like to speak to? What would you like to speak about? What would you hope might be better as a result of this conversation? What is the cost of not having it?

In the process, we learned that whether or not a particular vet was succeeding or struggling with the details of their transition to civilian life, they uniformly spoke of feeling misunderstood, patronized, and misrepresented in their encounters with friends, family members, and the general, non-military public. They spoke to us about the disturbing gaps that opened up for them in their felt sense of themselves as individuals, as military, as comrades in arms – and the alienated feelings of threat that marked their contemplation of their future and their place in society.

As Insight analysis makes clear, conflict behavior does not automatically follow upon a felt sense of threat. It requires the further decision to defend oneself against that threat, and numerous vets we spoke to had pointedly and sincerely determined *not* to respond defensively to their experience of being caricatured and misunderstood. Donovan, a central character in the play, came to represent these vets. Others, of course, decided to defend: some were aggressive, some withdrew, and some sought simply to mask or medicate their pain. Austin, Ethan, and Lisette came to represent these vets. But to the degree they were defending themselves from an experience of threat to their sense of role and self, they found themselves pitted against a blithely oblivious non-military public – often including their friends and family members – who in their own incurious and limited

ways quite earnestly proclaimed their willingness to "support the troops" and to "thank them for their service" whenever they got the chance.

Company members brought these and other insights back to the rehearsal room, where we developed a strategy for sharing the content of our Insight conversations and identifying characters and themes for the show. The company member who had carried out an Insight conversation would take on the role and story of that particular vet, and the rest of the company would in turn carry out a group insight conversation with that person. In this way, we deepened our own friendship with the vets and non-military civilians we encountered.

The creative result was *Cadence: Home,* a one-act play with an original score for piano, drums, guitar, and trumpet that opens and closes on a memorial service for the character, Scott Matthews, a U.S. Marine who died heroically in a roadside ambush while serving in Afghanistan. We described *Cadence: Home* in our publicity material as a play about the inner and outer journeys of eight men and women – four of them veterans recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan – linked by their relations to each other, to their fallen friend, and by their struggles with the futures they fear, the ghosts that haunt them, and the decisions they make as they strive to reconnect with their lives, their loves, and their former selves.

We premiered on Veterans Day, November 20, 2012, as a site-specific performance piece in the sanctuary of Metro Baptist Church on West 40th Street in New York City. We filled the space with candles and lilies and memorial pictures of Scott Matthews. Ushers greeted audience members, thanking them for coming to Scott's memorial, and distributing theatre programs printed to look like church service bulletins. Audience members took

seats arranged in two rows on three sides of the playing space, making it possible to see the characters, the scenes, and each other up close through out the show. By immersing them in the narrative and action of the play, we sought to the focus their attention, direct the flow of their curiosity, and orient their relationships to the characters. Music came up, the lights went down, and Donovan – an officer in the U.S. Air Force – opened the performance by welcoming everyone to the memorial.

Donovan, Nate, Mattie, and Scotty were boyhood friends. Donovan and Scotty enlisted. Mattie lionizes Donovan's role in the military and minimizes his own courage and commitment. Nate blames Donovan for Scotty's death and refuses to have anything to do with the memorial. Donovan struggles with the transition from his role and responsibilities in the military to a new job in the radically different organizational culture of New York's financial sector. Lisette is Mattie's housemate and friend. She is a veteran trying to be a writer who self-medicates to deal with her experiences as a woman in a combat unit in Iraq. Austin survived the ambush that killed Scotty and blames himself for Scotty's death. His shame and agony at being alive make it impossible for him to talk to Angela, his fiancée, about any of it. At a certain point, she finds the situation insupportable. Ethan, also a veteran, can't leave his apartment. He lost Naima, the love of his life, in the ambush that killed Scotty. She was an Afghani working as a translator for the U.S. military, and Scotty died trying to save her. In his delirium and grief, Ethan conjures a female form of Mahatma Gandhi that bears a striking resemblance to Naima.

Cadence: Home is an engaging, probing, theatrical experience. It also reflects our thoroughgoing attempt to use the Insight approach to guide the creation of a theatrical performance piece. We drew upon the Insight approach in researching, devising, and

writing the piece. We brought a concentrated, reflexive awareness to our development of the characters, their motives, and their dialog. We created a theatrical piece that expressly distinguishes between the data of sense and the data of consciousness of its characters.[15] The result is a theatrical experience that enables audience members to experience and understand the valuing and deciding of veterans and non-military civilians negotiating the difficult, conflict-precipitating transitions in roles, relationships, and personal identities that mark their cadence home from war. *Cadence: Home* released the spontaneous capacity for friendship in its audience by making it possible for audience members to understand these characters in their own terms and to value them for their own sakes.

Because *Cadence: Home* was designed differently from *Under the Veil,* we did not offer a post-performance equivalent of the Third Act. As a result, I have no hard data and comparatively little anecdotal evidence on the impact of the play on audience members, or on how the friendship we generated bore fruit. I can report, however, that the play was well received by the veterans and non-military civilians who attended. Word of mouth was good, and we played to standing room only houses at the end of the run. As a result, I am confident that a goodly portion of our audience members expanded or even reoriented their valuing of veterans recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. By so doing, I think it is fair to say that *Cadence: Home* fulfilled the basic aim of issue-based theatre, but without slipping into partisan advocacy or the didactic tone that characterizes much of the genre.

Validation of this approach to Insight theatre model emerged a year later with a commission from the Mayor's Innovation Team in Memphis, Tennessee, to develop an Insight theatre piece addressing the enmity and distortion in the relationships of

[15] See J Price, "Method in Analyzing Conflict Behavior," pp. 3-4.

community members and police officers in South Memphis. I served as the Artistic Director on the creation of *Uniform Justice,* which was produced by Intersections International, and written and directed by Chuk Obasi, my creative partner on *Cadence: Home. Uniform Justice* was performed in collaboration with Hattieloo Theatre in Memphis, at the New West Theatre in Cleveland, and the Fringe Theatre Festival in New York City and as a staged reading at various community venues in New York and New Jersey.

I remain pleased with the results of *Cadence: Home*, but for me, the most formative assessment of the play came in a conversation with my friend, John Gould Rubin, following one of the final performances of *Cadence: Home*. John, the founding director of The Private Theatre is a widely respected theatre director in New York City. He said to me, "Vieve, I enjoyed my experience tonight. You have created an excellent play – but I think your Insight methodology has the potential to create a theatrical experience that is even more interesting and innovative than the one I experienced tonight. Why don't you put *that* on stage?" "I'm trying, John," I replied. So we went out to dinner, and in the course of our conversation I came to realize that despite all my efforts to put Insight on stage, the theatrical experience provided by *Cadence: Home* was theatrically quite traditional. It found this irritating, but also motivating, so I asked John, "How about helping me figure out how to put Insight on stage?" He agreed.

Step Three: There's Something About America

I would now classify *Cadence: Home* as a work of Insight art. By this I mean that I include it among the many works of art that draw explicitly upon the interiority of its

characters to engage and entertain its audience. Even without the benefit of reading Lonergan or working with the Insight approach, artists have always been in touch with their interiority, and their art reflects their interior awareness and insight. In the case of *Cadence: Home*, audience members come to understand the agony of self-estrangement experienced by Austin as he struggles and fails to connect with his fiancée, Angela. They experience the personal cost of Donovan's decision to absorb and carry the anxiety and the anger – the fawning and the aggression – that his return home triggers in Mattie and Nate, his boyhood friends. In this way, and at depth rarely explored in contemporary culture, *Cadence: Home* puts audience members in touch with the interior dynamics of the conflict behaviors that stress the relationships of veterans and non-military civilians in America today.

Nevertheless, *Cadence: Home* is also a rather traditional example of issue-based theatre structured by a rather traditional narrative. Friends go to war; not everyone returns; this loss creates havoc within existing relationships; this tumult sets the stage for a combination of self-transcending and self-destructive behavior. To be clear, I have nothing against traditional theatrical formats and narrative structures, and I remain proud of *Cadence: Home* as a work of Insight art. My point is that I was now possessed of an inverse insight: the recognition that my efforts to combine theatrical performance with the Insight approach were being constrained by the traditional theatrical model I was using to create the art itself.

I do not think that I could have recognized this constraint without the benefit of the Insight approach, and specifically, without having gradually come to appreciate the distinct set of experiential claims that ground it. One, we engage in conflict behavior because we

think it is the best way to respond to the threats we perceive. Two, we voluntarily make changes in our conflict behavior if and only if we change our minds about how best to respond to these threats. Three, we voluntarily change our minds if we become consciously present to the way we are using our minds – and if in doing so we discern that our use of our mind is flawed or incomplete. Four, if we in fact discern that our conscious performance is flawed, we experience a spontaneous urge – a tug – to correct our performance.[16] Whether and how we actually respond to this tug is part of the drama, tragedy, and transcendence of being a human being.

In sum, there is an experiential nugget at the heart of the Insight approach: we are spontaneously tugged to become more curious when we become aware we have new questions to ask, to become more critical when we catch ourselves in the rush to judgment, and to become more conscientious when we become aware that our current actions are rash. This is the transformative flow of consciousness released by Insight practitioners engaged in mediation and community-police relations, and my intended aims remained equally high. I wanted to create performance pieces that would foster the intrinsically entertaining and dramatic experience of releasing the flow of ones curiosity, of changing one's mind, of making peace with a foe, oneself included.

But doing so called for a new effort. With *Under the Veil* I realized that my efforts were constrained by the structure of the Third Act, and that I needed to focus on the performance itself. With *Cadence: Home,* I realized that my efforts to create an Insight performance were constrained by my reliance on traditional theatrical formats, and that I had yet to create a performance piece that put audience members explicitly in touch with

[16] Jamie Price, "Method in Analyzing Conflict Behavior," p. 6. See also Kenneth Melchin and Cheryl Picard, *Transforming Conflict Through Insight*, chapter 4.

the tug and flow of their own consciousness. The difference was that for the first time, I had no idea about how to proceed, and that my primary task was to figure it out. It took me about three years to achieve the breakthrough I was seeking, and I'm still working on it.

John and I had decided to work together. To create a less traditional performance piece, and to foster a less traditional theatrical experience, we knew we needed a less traditional theatrical focus as well. Thus, instead of focusing on a particular social conflict or cultural issue (Muslim/non-Muslim relations; veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan; police-community relations in south Memphis) we set ourselves the theatrical challenge of exploring the drama of polarized thinking that lies at the root of all conflicted issues in America today. We decided we wanted to capture the inner drama – the struggles, the tensions, the successes, the failures – of Americans using their minds to make decisions and to foster personal relationships under the constraint of an explicitly polarized cultural milieu. As such, we were not so much concerned with discovering *what* Americans think about polarization, or in creating a play about the polarized positions they might be espousing. We wanted to dramatize the inner experience of being polarized in America, and to bring that experience to our audiences. We wanted to figure out how to create a theatrical experience that would enable audience members to discover for themselves how they use their minds when operating in polarized circumstances. We dubbed this effort, "There's Something About America," and what followed was a three-year process of community research, aesthetic development, and artistic experimentation and creation.

First, John and I gathered a diverse and talented Company of artists, including a composer, movement director, set designer, lighting designer, and videographer, in addition to actors and a number of Insight specialists. As before, I arranged to train the

Company in the Insight approach and the art of the Insight conversation. We began with a two-week intensive that enabled the Company to develop a common language, a common understanding of our goals, and a common base of self-appropriation. Of course, we had no idea we were embarking on a three-year process. Inevitably we lost some of these Company members along the way. But many stayed the course, which was a tribute to their dedication, the power of the Insight approach, the friendships that developed, and the intrinsic significance of the project.

Once trained in community research, Company members carried out scores of Insight conversations with people from many walks of life and regions of the country. As before, we opened each Insight conversation with an orienting set of questions and let the conversations unfold from there: When you think of the social and political polarization of people in America today, where does your mind go? What strikes you the most? What feelings come up for you? What constraints do you feel? What is at stake for you personally, practically, socially? What decisions have you made that directly reflect the polarization of the country? What did you achieve?

Individual responses varied of course, and as a concrete matter, Company members engaged in Insight conversations ranging from gun control, to assisted suicide, to gay rights, to police violence, to domestic violence, to teaching the Book of Genesis in science class, to the tiny house phenomenon, to the legitimacy of using a belly putter in a golf tournament. In each case, however, company members sought to discover how the individuals they engaged were using their minds: what decisions they made, what they found significant, the threats they experienced, the gaps they were trying to address, the

goals they were hoping to reach, how it worked out for them, and how they experienced themselves in the process.

With this research to draw upon, we engaged next in an extended process of discovery and development. We aimed to identify the performance aesthetic that would enable us to put the drama of polarized consciousness on stage in such a way that audience members would experience themselves reflexively mirrored and revealed to themselves. For over a year we met one weekend every month, and many Wednesday evenings, to engage in an extended set of what we called Insight Design Labs. Working collaboratively with the Company, we experimented with various techniques, styles, technologies, and scenarios in our effort to dramatize the movement of polarized consciousness in a way that would spark self-recognition and heighten the conscious self-presence of our audience members.

Over time, our experimentation diverged into two tracks: one focused on movement and gesture as the primary mode of communicating interiority, and the other focused on verbal and linguistic modes of communication. In one track, Bronwen and I worked with the Company to devise a visually compelling and experientially precise iconography of Insight movement and gesture that traced the expansion and contraction of polarized consciousness and its transformation. In the other, John and I worked with the Company to explore a range of verbal carriers and expressions of interiority.

For example, we created Claudia, a thirty-one year old playwright living in New York City who had made the decision some thirteen years earlier to give up her newborn daughter for adoption. The dramatic arc we created for Claudia enabled us to explore one of the characteristic dilemmas of living in a polarized cultural milieu – the intrinsic

difficulty of discerning and making authentic decisions in the face of polarizing cultural norms, expectations, and habits of mind. We explored the interiority of this dilemma in ways that were primarily verbal. We had Claudia write a play about her decision, and drawing upon the grand tradition of "the play within the play," we presented a key scene from Claudia's play staged as a casting call. We had the sudden appearance of Claudia's daughter, Desiree, throw Claudia existentially back into her original decision and open up a new one: did she want to meet or get to know her biological child? In conversations with friends, with Desiree's adoptive mother, and with Desiree herself, Claudia becomes consciously present to the way she is using her mind. Our hope was that our audiences would follow her there.

The point, again, is that the communicative carriers we explored with Claudia were primarily verbal. This was not the case in our development of Clara, with whom we explored a comparable interior dilemma, but with image, movement and gesture. The advantage of words was that we could use them to establish context and to clarify meaning. Our challenge was that in using words to express and communicate interiority, we were inevitably talking about consciousness or calling attention to it. Image, gesture, and movement were more direct, visceral, and evocative.

Clara is a woman who suddenly appears to the audience, elevated on a narrow platform reminiscent of a gangplank. Clara can't bear to look at herself in the mirror at one end of the platform. She doesn't tell us this; the distress in her movement communicates it directly. Ultimately, Clara walks the plank. She falls into what the audience experiences as a "sea of shoulds" – a mosh pit composed of the Greek Chorus who whisper and hiss at her,

barely audibly but cacophonously and judgmentally: “You should” “No” “You must” “You can’t” “You have to” “You should have.” Clara collapses to the floor.

In both movement and word, then, we discovered a number of theatrically effective ways to differentiate *what* our characters were concerned about from *the way* they were using their minds to care about and respond to their circumstances. We worked hard to bring the two communicative strands together, and I was hopeful we would succeed. But time and opportunity were not on our side, so our work in the two strands eventually emerged as the two distinct performance pieces, as noted below.

One source of our difficulty lay in the fact that we had created lots of interesting, dramatic parts, but we had no clear idea about how to structure those parts into a whole. We’d established at the beginning that we didn’t want to employ a traditional narrative or theatrical format. But the question remained: how would we bring dramatic unity and coherence to a piece that was by design untraditional? We anticipated the needed framework would emerge organically from our Insight Design Lab process, and in the end that proved to be true. But as we approached the time to begin workshopping the piece, it was not at all clear to us what the requisite framework might be. We had toyed variously with setting the piece within a radio talk show, or framing it with a dramatized graphic of the Insight Loop, or anchoring the geography and relationships in the piece to the 9/11 memorial in New York City, or repurposing the visual iconography of a Punch and Judy show. None of them worked.

In the end, however, the breakthrough discovery came at a workshop reading of the piece at The Actor’s Studio in New York in April 2015. Audience response revealed to us that we didn’t need an overarching narrative or an explicit framing device for the piece, not

beyond what we already had. What did we have? According to our audience members, we had a piece that was interesting, coherent, and engaging. What gave our piece its coherence? It was our attention to the interiority of the characters and our way of portraying them that enabled the audience members to track the decisions and actions of the characters without difficulty or confusion.

What had we done? We had developed the dramatic arcs for seven reflexively aware characters, each of them dealing with different issues, but each of them seeking to find themselves and to work out their personal and professional relationships in the context of a political and social culture laced with polarizing positions and habits of mind. We had divided the dramatic arcs of the characters into scenes that highlighted the character's performance of a particular operation of consciousness – their acts of valuing, deliberating, evaluating, and deciding. We then sequenced their scenes, weaving the arcs of the characters with each other so that the collective flow of their conscious operations – and thus the pattern of their collective decisions and actions – reflected and tracked with each other. By looping together the conscious struggles of the seven leading characters in the piece, we created a dramatic carrier for the audience. We had created a non-traditional theatrical format for a non-traditional work of Insight art – a set of characters whose conscious performances put the audience members in touch with the way they used their own minds to deal with the polarizing circumstances in their lives.

The reading at the Actor's Studio marked the formal end of There's Something About America, a milestone in my journey to discover an Insight approach to theatre and artistry more broadly, and the launch of three distinct but related initiatives. One is the formation in 2017 of the Insight Artists Collective, a group of artists and creatives

committed to advancing the practice and development of Insight artistry. The second is the production of *Rocco, Chelsea, Adriana, Sean, Claudia, Gianna, Alex* at HERE Arts Center in New York City in March 2019. This is the performance piece originally workshopped at The Actor's and the fruit of the verbal communication strand of our work in There's Something About America. The third is the production of *ACCORD(ing)* at Burning Coal Theatre in Raleigh, North Carolina, in June 2020. This performance piece is the fruit of the movement communication strand of our work in 'There's Something About America.'

It's difficult to summarize a journey spanning more than a decade and marked by the necessity to transcend multiple inverse insights. But it boils down to this. Chuk and I have shared a journey of artistic discovery with many splendid and creative artists. We began with an attempt to artistically address the major cultural and political challenges of post-9/11 America by combining an approach to edutainment theatre pioneered by Dr. Cydelle Berlin with an approach to conflict mediation pioneered by Dr. Cheryl Picard. Through the process of trial, error, and theatrical experimentation detailed above, we find ourselves now on the threshold of the new journey – a journey grounded by the practice of Insight artistry – the happy fruit of our ongoing efforts to ground the transformative magic of live performance with the Insight approach.