

# THE ART OF DIALOGUE

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ANIMATING  
DEMOCRACY

*I have to answer with my life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life.<sup>1</sup>*

There is a powerful movement afoot. Over the last twenty years, the focus of numerous scholars and practitioners has turned to the topic of dialogue. Dialogue has become the rallying cry of our day, and we see it taking place around the world: in the community dialogues sponsored by the Study Circles Resource Center, in the development of theory and practice at MIT's Dialogue Project, in the Seeds of Peace activities between Arab and Israeli youth, and in the open dialogues of family therapists in Finland.

While debate and controversy have been the norms, an increasingly diverse and conflicted world calls us to collaborate with one another in order to survive and share the planet as one humanity. Many forward thinking citizens of the world now realize that in order to create just and humane societies, all kinds of individuals and groups need to come together to talk about the important and controversial matters that affect their survival and progress. They are also aware that how we talk is important—dialogue must address issues of equity before it can be successful.

Dialogue, which has a long history among artists and cultural institutions, has also become an increasingly important concept in the arts community. In 1996 the Ford Foundation funded Americans for the Arts to study current activity and best practices among artists and cultural organizations whose work engages the public in dialogue on key civic issues. The Animating Democracy Initiative (ADI) was the outgrowth of that study.

The purpose of this paper is to describe some key ideas about dialogue. The hope is that artists and arts and cultural organizations will find this information useful as they endeavor to use art as a catalyst to encourage audiences and community participants to talk about issues that matter.<sup>2</sup> I will use several arts examples to illustrate the power and potential of art when it is combined with civic dialogue. The paper is organized around questions that arise when considering how to initiate art and civic dialogue work.

I begin with an example of an artistic production that did not take place. This example is one where art itself is the controversial element that sparked the need for a community dialogue.

## **A Tale of West Side Story**

*In the 1999–2000 school year, the music department of Amherst Regional High School in Amherst, Massachusetts, announced their choice for the annual high school musical. West Side Story was to be the first "non-traditional" musical performed at the school, where musicals such as Kiss Me Kate and Damn Yankees had dominated the repertoire. Finally the school would produce a musical in which people of color—Latinos specifically—would be center stage.*

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin (1990 *Art and Answerability*: 1)

<sup>2</sup> The issues that matter will vary by time and place, but may include issues such as water pollution, racism, gun violence, self-determination, etc.

*West Side Story had been suggested by several members of the community, and they were delighted with the choice. Other members of the community were not as happy. Unforeseen by those who had considered West Side Story a contribution to the multicultural efforts of the school was the vehement opposition which emerged from several Latino students and their families who viewed West Side Story as a racist play.*

*With the choice of West Side Story announced and the opposition becoming more and more vocal, the school community (and the wider Amherst community) disintegrated into bitter conflict that divided the community for many months, persisting long after the decision was made to call off the musical. Mirroring the warring behavior of West Side Story's two rival gangs, the Sharks and the Jets, the community fell into destructive battle. There were many casualties, not the least of which was the play itself. West Side Story was seen alternately as an extraordinary artistic production with powerful messages about the impact of bigotry, racism, and interethnic conflict, and as a play written by Anglos characterizing Latinos as gang members as they have stereotypically been characterized in U.S. theater.*

Had members of the community been able to come together in dialogue, they might have learned from one another's perspectives. They might even have created a process for community-wide dialogue and deliberation in which the complex and conflicting issues raised by the play might have been considered. Throughout this paper I will explore these possibilities further in order to shed light on how art and dialogue can occur in a proactive, planned way.

## **WHAT IS DIALOGUE?**

### **How is it different from other forms of communication?**

Dialogue is focused conversation, engaged in intentionally with the goal of increasing understanding, addressing problems, and questioning thoughts or actions. It engages the heart as well as the mind. It is different from ordinary, everyday conversation, in that dialogue has a focus and a purpose. Dialogue is different from debate, which offers two points of view with the goal of proving the legitimacy or correctness of one of the viewpoints over the other. Dialogue, unlike debate or even discussion, is as interested in the relationship(s) between the participants as it is in the topic or theme being explored. Ultimately, real dialogue presupposes an openness to modify deeply held convictions.

The citizens of Amherst were intentionally engaged. For most people, however, the goal was not to increase understanding or to open one's mind. Rather, the conversations among town residents and among the young people at the high school took the form of a polarized debate with two potential win/lose outcomes—to stage the musical or to halt its production. The suggestion to stage *West Side Story*, and to follow it with a post-performance dialogue about the issues of concern, was quickly defeated. Other possibilities were not envisioned or explored. For the most part, dialogue did not happen, although many town residents lamented its absence. The Amherst community fell into the trap of what Deborah Tannen calls “the argument culture”:

*The argument culture, with its tendency to approach issues as a polarized debate, and the culture of critique, with its inclination to foreground criticism and attack as the best if not the only type of rigorous thinking, are deeply rooted in Western tradition, going back to the ancient Greeks (Tannen 1998: 257).*

The relationships between residents of the town of Amherst deteriorated during the conflict. Neighbors argued at their mailboxes while picking up the mail. Letters to the editor of the local newspaper were vitriolic and full of diatribes. The teachers who had proposed the musical came under attack and were charged with racism, though one of them was black. Students argued acrimoniously in the high school cafeteria. The focus on “for and against” positioning, and the lack of attention to respect and relationship, were endemic.

Could things have proceeded differently? Were there other options? Had the community had awareness of the process and the resources to invest in it, engagement in civic dialogue might have provided an opportunity to transcend “the argument culture.”

## WHAT IS CIVIC DIALOGUE?

The Animating Democracy Initiative defines civic dialogue as “dialogue in which people explore the dimensions of a civic or social issue, policy, or decision of consequence to their lives, communities, and society.” Martha McCoy, executive director of Study Circles Resource Center, defines civic dialogue as “a face-to-face discussion among community members of matters of common concern and social/political importance” (McCoy 1997: 05). In *arts-based* civic dialogue, Animating Democracy adds, the artistic process and/or art/humanities presentation provides a key focus or catalyst or forum for public dialogue on the issue. Opportunities for dialogue are embedded in or connected to the arts experience.

The term “civic” refers to citizens, city or citizenship. This paper does not employ the term “citizen” in the formal or legal sense, but rather in the communal or societal sense of those who are members of a particular community. The civic dialogue described here *does* intentionally convey the necessity of respectful engagement with people and ideas, yet it rejects the notion of civility<sup>3</sup> that “suggests a superficial, pinky-in-the-air veneer of politeness spread thin over human relations like a layer of marmalade over toast” (Tannen 1998: 3). True civic dialogue is inclusive of people with different communication styles and allows for the expression of emotion. Because art operates at both visceral and cognitive levels, it provides rich opportunities to engage people in the examination of issues of societal concern.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY IDEAS OF DIALOGUE?

### Truth and the Contributions of Socrates and Plato

Perhaps the most well-known writer on dialogue in the western world is Plato (427–347 BC). Plato’s ideas are important because they are the origin or point of departure for almost all considerations of dialogue. Many people still consider Plato’s ideas the absolute word on dialogue. The dialogues with which we are most familiar (actually sometimes dialogues, sometimes debates) are examples of the Socratic method of Plato’s teacher, Socrates.

Often described as a form of educational dialogue in which a student’s knowledge is brought forth by the teacher’s expert questioning, the Socratic Method can also be viewed as an exercise in logic, and, arguably, an exercise in “being right.” Socrates sometimes convinces those with whom he “dialogues” that there are only two choices before them. Despite Socrates’ assertion that his wisdom consisted in knowing that he knew nothing, his rhetorical prowess and skill took the form of a kind of verbal jousting which aimed to lead the student to truth. The dialogues were strategic verbal encounters intended to outwit the “opponent” and establish the intellectual dominance of the teacher in relation to the student. In his book, *Fighting for Life*, Walter Ong has made this same observation. He “credits the ancient Greeks with a fascination with adversativeness in language and thought. He also connects the adversarial tradition of educational institutions to their all-male character” (Tannen 1998: 257).

The commitment to inquiry, as well as to justice and democracy, are much of what is remembered and celebrated about Plato and Socrates. The Platonic philosophy maintains that truth is discoverable, and that, once discovered, it is eternal and unchangeable. The idea that “nothing evil can happen to someone who is good” was one “logical truth” spoken by Socrates to his accusers in Plato’s *Apology*. It is a “truth” that we might contest today. While the arts share Platonic philosophy’s commitment to beauty and truth, our contemporary world presents new challenges to the ideas and the style of dialogue seen in the work of Plato. Today there is a lack of agreement about what truth is, with post-modernists, feminist theoreticians, and multicultural thinkers asserting that there are multiple and conflicting realities and truths.

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<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that George Washington cites respect as the first rule of civility. “Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect to those that are Present.” (Washington, circa 1744).

For the arts, there are other limitations to the usefulness of Platonic conceptions of dialogue. Socrates and Plato privileged logic in their conceptions of dialogue and saw intellectual logic as the superior way to accumulate knowledge and make decisions, and verbal rhetoric as a superior mode of articulation. Anything other than logic, they believed, involved too much emotion. Poetry, for example, was seen as negative because it tried to use emotion to sway people, while Socrates and Plato wanted people’s judgments to avoid the intrusion of jealousy, anger, and even compassion. Yet, emotion is an important aspect of artistic work and audience response. Aside from its cathartic qualities, emotion can stimulate people’s thinking as much as logic does.

The shortcomings of Platonic philosophy were evident in Amherst’s controversy over *West Side Story*. There was no *one* truth. There were multiple truths and multiple realities represented in the thinking and experience of different community members. Some saw *West Side Story* as a great work of art; others perceived the music and dance as poor imitations of authentic Puerto Rican cultural expression. For some the racial slurs in the piece—the term, “spic,” for example—were offensive. One Puerto Rican student at the high school said he did not want his younger siblings to be exposed to this language when they came to see the play. Other residents championed the piece as an indictment of racial prejudice and interethnic rivalries. Some stressed the fact that U.S. musical theater typically portrays Puerto Ricans in the role of gang members and criminals, while others were not cognizant of or focused on that reality. Some members of the community foregrounded the rights of freedom of speech and freedom from censorship, while others foregrounded the pursuit of social justice and the right to self-determination over works of art which misrepresented and stereotyped their ethnicity. From a multipartial perspective, there was truth in all of these positions, and from this perspective one can assert that “truth” is impossible to ascertain with certainty in a multicultural society where differences in experiences, perspectives, power, and resources abound.

Four post-Platonic perspectives on dialogue—the “dialogism” of Bakhtin, intergroup theory, the ideas of the “new” science, and the extensive writing and research of William Isaacs—can help us consider *West Side Story* (and other arts-based civic dialogue possibilities) from the vantage point of the considerable thinking about dialogue that has emerged since the time of Plato.

### **Polyphony: The Contributions of Mikhail Bakhtin**

The Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) is arguably the dialogue theorist most important to the arts because his work focuses on cultural production (the arts) and language (dialogue), and also makes use of musical terminology (polyphony, tact). Bakhtin’s work has been described as “a meditation on how we know” (Holmquist 1990: 18). Bakhtin’s study of the arts and dialogue led him to the theory of dialogism which he defined as the “open-ended possibilities generated by all discursive (conversational/theoretical) practices of a culture” (Stam 1988: 132). For Bakhtin, the discovery of truth was not a focus of dialogue, nor was a specific outcome certain. Rather, he saw the goal of dialogue as “responsive understanding.”

Several of Bakhtin’s ideas are essential to a contemporary understanding of dialogue. First, dialogism encourages us to recognize and examine the many and varied perspectives that exist in most situations. The multiple voices and perspectives revealed are not framed as either-or choices, but are all viewed as *potentially* correct. There is not just one idea or two opposing ideas to be debated, but many ideas to be heard and considered. Therefore, dialogue leads not to one certain outcome but rather to many possibilities.

Bakhtin’s dialogism stands counter to Hegel’s (1770–1831) philosophy of dialectics, which is based in dualism. An idea (the thesis) is challenged by an opposing idea (the antithesis), and the resulting struggle of opposite ideas is thought to lead to a new idea (a synthesis). In terms of two people, with his and her opposing ideas (thesis, antithesis), a verbal struggle reaches a consensus or compromise (synthesis).

The key distinctions between Hegelian dialectics and Bakhtin’s dialogics can be understood in this way: First, while the starting point of dialectics is “either/or” thinking, dialogics sees dialogue as multivoiced (what Bakhtin calls polyphony) and does not assume, as does Hegelian dialectics, that there are only two (usually polar opposite) perspectives. Second, Bakhtin’s dialogical thinking suggests no need to arrive at a synthesis or consensus, and therefore leaves open the possibility of multiple outcomes. This important distinction reflects a significant shift in thinking. Many arts and

cultural organizations, already working deeply within communities comprising people of different classes, races, genders, and backgrounds, recognize that the issues are never as simple as polar opposites. Indeed, they are often well positioned, through the eyes of artists and their creative work, to explore and imagine multiple outcomes.

Bakhtin was also clear about the role of change in dialogue, believing that dialogue always implies change. All understanding is active, and the goal of dialogue is “responsive understanding”—not understanding alone, but *responsive* understanding. In dialogue something must be said or done, not just understood. Most powerfully, Bakhtin asserts that we are to respond with our lives for what we understand through art.

Bakhtin’s literary examples for distinguishing dialectic and dialogics were the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, respectively. An example from contemporary art may help clarify the distinction: At a basic level, Anna Deavere Smith’s work, *Fires in the Mirror*, can be seen as a dialectic or dyadic representation. Two groups are central to the story: the Lubavitcher Jews and the West Indian community of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, New York, who were in conflict about the death of a young black child who was run over and killed by a Hassidic rabbi, and about the subsequent retaliatory murder of a young rabbinical student. Other voices, such as those of white Americans and other New Yorkers, are largely absent. The background of the U.S. power structure and the world politics that could provide the context for understanding how black West Indians and the Hassidim have come to live side-by-side in this small community in Brooklyn is also absent from the play. The framing of the issues by the two communities themselves leaves the viewer to consider which community was right in their understanding of the incident: the Lubavitchers who saw the death of the boy as a simple, albeit tragic, accident or the West Indian community who saw this “accident” and the response to it as another example of the power and racism of the Hassidic community in Brooklyn.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, Smith’s work *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, which deals with the Los Angeles uprisings that occurred after the arrest of Rodney King and the freeing of the officers who beat him, is much more dialogic or multivoiced. In *Twilight*, we hear the voices of members of the diverse jury, the multiple voices of the black community, the elite of Los Angeles, the Korean grocery storeowners, the politicians, the victims. In *Twilight*, we have a polyphony of voices competing to be heard, and we have both the present and historical relationships among the speakers—relationships that are both complex and at times unmanageable.

Another of Bakhtin’s essential ideas is that dialogue is systemic and relational. Bakhtin rejected the idea of a solitary self, believing that consciousness always evolves in the context of others. Thus, even in our own heads, there are a series of dialogues. These internal dialogues are not solely individual, rather they are the echoes of the personal and historical voices of the people and experiences that have shaped us. There is also the dialogue between oneself and a text, between oneself and artwork or artistic production. What is this production communicating to me? How do I respond to this communication? What dialogue occurs between these ideas and me? Finally, we also have the relationship between the parties who are in dialogue about the art. These parties can be engaged in a private conversation or the conversation can become larger and engage a community, thus becoming more civic in nature. What is important, Bakhtin asserted, is that there is always a relationship between the participants that coexists with the subject or topic at hand.

Like contemporary systemic thinkers, Bakhtin recognized that everything is connected. The contexts out of which dialogue emerges include the work of art and the lives of the dialogue participants. The work of art (painting, music, composition, theater piece, dance) and the individuals participating in a dialogue are also permeated by the social context. Meaning, for Bakhtin, arose from the relationships between dialogue participants as well as from the “the whole complex *social situation* in which it [the dialogue] has occurred” (Todorov 1984: 30).

Subsuming both Bakhtin’s rejection of dualistic thinking and his assertion of the relational aspects of dialogue, Michael Holmquist, a Bakhtinian scholar, writes: “It will be helpful to remember that [Bakhtin’s] dialogue is not, as is sometimes

<sup>4</sup> “One problem with polarized dualism is that areas of overlap or similarity are obscured as we look only for points of contrast. Aspects of an issue—or of a person—that do not fit easily into one or the other polarity are rendered invisible or unacceptable” (Tannen 1998: 219).

thought, a dyadic, much less a binary phenomenon. Dialogue is a manifold phenomenon . . . it can be reduced to a minimum of three elements . . . an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two. And these three elements do not exist just in a moment of time, but can (and often do) repeat and repeat. It is the relation that is most important of the three, for without it the other two would have no meaning” (1990: 38).

Polarized dualism was clearly evident in the *West Side Story* controversy. Puerto Ricans were characterized, by the press and by much of the white community, as monolithically opposed to the musical, while in fact there were many internal differences of opinion. These differences were characterized by: *generation* (older people who remembered the original production and how it had highlighted for them their own difficulties with racism and urban poverty; younger Puerto Ricans who did not share that history and had only a white Maria (Natalie Wood) and a Hollywood version of *West Side Story* to view); *place of birth* (Nuyoricans who lived a *West Side Story* experience; Puerto Ricans who were island born and did not have the New York urban experience); and *relationship to performance* (Puerto Rican students who were singers and dancers and really wanted the show to be produced, seeing for the first time a production that they could potentially star in; Puerto Rican students who opposed the musical and were, for the most part, students who were not performers and most likely would not have participated in the production of *West Side Story* or any musical at the high school).

Bakhtin’s ideas about power are also pertinent to a full understanding of dialogue. Reminding us of the power relationships between dialogue participants, Bakhtin recognizes that the language(s) used in dialogue are tied to beliefs and ideology, and that the languages (and the use of the languages) differ depending on social class. To describe the power relations that are embodied in language, he used the term “heteroglossia,” defining it “as competing languages and discourses: the dialogically-interrelated speech practices operative in a given society at a given moment, wherein the idioms of different classes, races, genders, generations, and locales compete for ascendancy” (Stam 1988: 121). In other words, not only do these different groups speak in different languages but they also compete to define the terms of the dialogue.

Bakhtin distinguishes the language of the dominant classes who want to have the sole right to define meaning, from the language of the oppressed who wish to appropriate language for the purpose of liberation. Dialogue, in his opinion, “becomes the space of confrontation of differently oriented social accents” (Stam 1988: 122).

To summarize, Bakhtin’s work is critical to arts-based civic dialogue. First, his definition of dialogic process pushes us toward thinking of dialogue in a more complex way, as he contrasts dialectic with dialogic. For Bakhtin, dialogue is not just a one-to-one experience with one or two contrasting ideas or one possible outcome. Second, through Bakhtin we become aware of the grand dialogical principle—the idea that relationships and connections (dialogue) exist between all living beings. Third, Bakhtin recognizes the ways in which dialogue is imbued with the struggle for power. Fourth, his related study of the arts and dialogue theory offers a direct opportunity to explore their connections. Finally, with regard to the question as to whether dialogue is about understanding or about change, Bakhtin is unequivocal—true dialogue necessitates change! Although Bakhtin’s work is highly theoretical and complex, it is also intriguing. Thinking *with* Bakhtin will deepen understanding about the role of art in civic dialogue.

### Exploring Group Differences: Freire’s Pedagogy and Intergroup Dialogue Theorists

Another major contribution to dialogue practice comes from the intergroup dialogue educators. Intergroup dialogue,<sup>5</sup> an approach currently practiced on college campuses and in many other settings,<sup>6</sup> emerges from two tributaries. One is the intergroup relations and cross-cultural movements where the work of scholars such as Gordon Allport and W.B. Gudykunst focused on the reduction of prejudice and the improvement of relations between individuals and groups. The second crucial influence is the critical pedagogy of social justice educators such as the Brazilian, Paulo Freire.

<sup>5</sup> President Bill Clinton’s Initiative on Race (1998) named the intergroup dialogue model as a promising practice.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Saunders and Walter Stephens are two practitioners who have used intergroup education methodology in community and organizational settings.

Freire's contributions are essential to intergroup educators.<sup>7</sup> Freire encouraged classroom dialogue, advising that when classes engage in dialogue, "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught, also teach. They all become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire 1970: 61). In addition, central to Freire's work was the examination of the role of oppression in the lives of subjugated, minority groups.

In this spirit, intergroup dialogue is a "face-to-face meeting between members of two (or more) different social identity groups who have a history of conflict or potential conflict" (Zúñiga et al. 2002: 7). Contemporary educators such as David Schoem, Nicholas Burbules, and Ximena Zúñiga teach courses on intergroup dialogue as a means of consciousness raising, bridging differences, and social change. Through a process of sustained facilitated communication, accompanied by a carefully crafted curriculum, over the course of a semester or two, students develop a sense of their own and others' identities, explore controversial issues, and develop an understanding and commitment to social justice. According to Zúñiga, the curriculum should integrate multiple perspectives through the use of: a) diverse bodies of knowledge, conceptual organizers and metaphors that encourage participants to examine their beliefs from multiple perspectives; b) biographies and testimonials from diverse social and cultural groups; c) critical examination of hegemonic views and Western values and paradigms; and d) the structuring and sequencing of course content to match participants' learning needs.

Intergroup dialogue pays particular attention to the identity of facilitators, seeking always to have facilitators who mirror the social identities of the groups involved in the dialogue. Intergroup dialogue is also characterized by the building of relationships among dialogue participants. In intergroup dialogue, inquiry is a focus that is invigorated not only by good questions, but *also* by a variety of structured experiential exercises that stimulate questioning, sharing, and reflection.

Though the practitioners and theorists have focused more on the pedagogy of intergroup dialogue, their work has generated findings that are significant for arts-based civic dialogue. Their practice and research reveals that: 1) people enter into dialogue *both* as individuals *and* as members of social identity groups; 2) power, privilege, and historical institutional oppression (recognized or unrecognized, acknowledged or unacknowledged) are threads weaving through all dialogue among diverse groups; 3) moving from polite or angry talk to meaningful engagement requires time and a carefully structured process which encourages questioning and reflection; 4) dialogue facilitators need not be neutral, but should act as catalysts whose questions and probes deepen the dialogue, and 5) effective dialogue involves thinking and feeling, listening and learning, as well as talking.

The intergroup perspective helps us to see that the boundaries between the private and the public, and between the personal and the civic, are quite permeable. One's private dialogues (as Bakhtin indicated) are suffused with group identity issues, intergroup experiences, and power dynamics.

In the *West Side Story* example, time for dialogue was lacking. There was one conversation with the students at the high school, but having only one meeting did not provide opportunity for sustained dialogue or deliberation; it only provided individual students with an opportunity to have their say. In serial monologue fashion, reminiscent of our talk-show culture, students heatedly and passionately expressed their opinions about whether the play should be produced. The school officials, needing to make a decision because they had either to stage the play or select a substitute, decided not to produce the show after this first meeting with students. If there had been time or if time had been allowed, a carefully structured process that encouraged questioning, reflection, and a deeper consideration might have occurred.

Power, presumed and actual, was a key part of the conflict. Members of the Puerto Rican community collectively asserted themselves visibly and vocally for what may have been the first time in the community. They saw power as traditionally being in the hands of the school system and the affluent white members of the community, and they

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<sup>7</sup> Freire's work is well-known to the artistic community because of his belief that art and cultural production are, unavoidably, regardless of intention, a reflection of social, political, and ideological conditions. The work of Augusto Boal stems directly from Freire's work.

determined to manifest their own power to stop the production. This they did, and there were many gains. A meeting was held with the local state senator who knew few of the Puerto Rican citizens in his constituency. Important connections were made at that meeting that would lead to increased advocacy and impact for the Latino community as a whole. The school convened a panel of experts to talk at an assembly about racism in the schools. Still, the outcome was experienced by many as a “win-lose” as opposed to a “win-win” situation.

Civic dialogue, if it had been achieved in Amherst, might have led to a different outcome. If intergroup dialogue methods had been used, there would have been an opportunity to explore the content of the play and attitudes about it, first within identity groups, and afterwards by dialogue within mixed groups.

*Working first with identity groups might have interrupted the polarization, because the differences of opinions within each identity group could have been discussed. Puerto Rican residents could have had the opportunity to explore common and differing social histories and perspectives, allowing this identity group to learn more about the diversity of opinions within its own community. The formation of identity-based dialogue groups among the white citizens of Amherst might have given them a clearer sense of how their own racial identity was shaping their opinions and would have provided the opportunity to recognize the diversity of opinion among white residents.*

Bringing art more into the center of dialogue, viewing the film of *West Side Story* or acting out particular scenes from the production might have taken place at the identity group meetings. Particular scenes might have been explored first in identity groups and later in mixed groups to help elucidate the multiple perspectives and interpretations of the film. For example, viewing the scene on the rooftop where, in the piece called *America*, the Sharks and their girlfriends argue about their perspectives on the United States, might have crystallized assumptions and interpretations fueling the conflicts about the production. The scene in the candy store when Officer Krupke displays his racism leading to the Jets protecting the Sharks against it might have offered the opportunity to talk about the way racist police often pit people of color and whites against each other. As it happened, little or none of the conversation during the controversy really centered on the particulars of *West Side Story*. Rather, global assertions and assumptions characterized the debate. Some of the disputants, in fact, had seen neither the play nor the movie. Reading materials, such as Alberto Sandoval’s (1999) article on *West Side Story* and readings about freedom of speech as it relates to artistic production, would have informed dialogue participants more deeply about the attitudes and positions taken by members of the opposing sides.

### **Wholeness: The Contributions of David Bohm and The “New Science”**

David Bohm (1917–1992) is the most well-known scientist in the field of dialogue. Drawing on his work as a physicist, Bohm turned to the study of dialogue in the last years of his life. He defined dialogue as “a free flow of meaning among all the participants.” Bohm studied the flow of meaning in dialogues that were usually leaderless and without a specific agenda. He believed that dialogues worked best when people sat in circles, and he thought that groups that ranged from five to forty people were of optimal size. He believed in change through dialogue, and that a dialogue should last until change occurred. The goal of dialogue, however, was not to discuss opinions, nor to move to action, but to aim for an opening of the mind, an expansion of consciousness.

Drawing from quantum physics and the theory of relativity, Bohm emphasized the development of “the whole” in dialogue. He hoped that humanity might transcend individual and even collective dimensions, in order to reach the cosmic, which for Bohm included everything that is, all that exists in this world and beyond, both animate and inanimate. In dialogue, Bohm saw the flow of meaning moving in the direction of wholeness. As Bohm put it, each speaker in a true dialogue brings a part of the story. The inclusion of other participants, with their own part of the story, leads to a fuller, more complete story that ultimately serves all participants better.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “The widespread and pervasive distinctions between people . . . which are now preventing mankind from working together for the common good, and indeed, even for survival, have one of the key factors of their origin in a kind of thought that treats things as inherently divided, disconnected. . . .

When man thinks of himself in this way, he will inevitably tend to defend the needs of his own 'Ego' against those of the others; or, if he identifies

To achieve true dialogue, according to Bohm, we need increased attention, deep inquiry, and collective intelligence. The focus on inquiry (curiosity and questioning) is crucial to Bohm's conception of dialogue. Bohm's emphasis is different from Socratic questioning in that no "truth" is assumed, and different from Freire in that Bohm's work is more in the realm of ideas than practice. In addition, Freire's crucial perspective on power is absent in Bohm. Through questioning and wondering together in Bohm's dialogue, those engaged in dialogue attempt to grasp the whole story and by doing so they transform subject/object relations into relationships of partnership.

Knowledge from other proponents of what has been dubbed the "new science" (which is actually about seventy years old) also sheds light on the subject of dialogue. Another student of physics, Dana Zohar (Zohar and Marshall 1994), writes of ideas similar to Bohm's in her book, *The Quantum Society*. Zohar reviews the early mechanistic thinking of classical, Newtonian physics:

*The basic building blocks of Newton's physical world were so many isolated and impenetrable atoms that bounce around in space and collide with one another like tiny billiard balls. The only actors in Newton's space-time drama were such particles and the attractive or repulsive forces acting between them (1994: 25).*

She links these images to one way of thinking about citizens today—as people bumping into each other in the pursuit of self-interest. Newer ideas emerging from quantum physics focus on waves, particles, and transformation:

*. . . wave fronts that come together tend to overlap and combine. The reality of each is taken up and woven into the other. Quantum systems, with their potential to be both particles and waves, have a capacity to relate on both terms. When two quantum systems meet, their particle aspects tend to stay somewhat separate and maintain shades of their original identities, while their wave aspects merge, giving rise to an entirely new system that enfolds the originals. The two systems relate internally, they get inside each other and evolve together [emphasis added] (1994: 54).*

Zohar suggests that we need to develop a new way of looking at our social potential. Society currently needs "structures that preserve the identities of participating members while drawing them into a larger working whole" (1994:29). She stresses that we must go beyond the individual/collective dichotomy.

Essentially, civic dialogue aims for going beyond this dichotomy to include the needs, desires, and interests of individuals, as well as of the diverse social groups of which society is comprised. This way of thinking about community was strikingly absent in the Amherst conflict. Some residents (more typically people of color) believed that a sense of community had never existed in the town. Other residents (more typically white people) believed that the sense of community had been destroyed by the Puerto Ricans' position on *West Side Story*. One white man remarked, "I never had a problem with the Puerto Ricans before. Now they have destroyed our community."

Another noticeable quality of the Amherst conflict was the conviction and certainty many residents had about their ideas. At the end of the controversy, most people were in the same position as they were in the beginning; they remained certain that the perspective they had about producing (or not producing) *West Side Story* was correct. There was little questioning, very little real listening, and not much constructive learning or attitude change.

From a dialogue perspective, certainty is considered problematic and viewed as interfering with the possibility of dialogue. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, two Chilean biologists and leaders in the new science, embrace

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with a group of people of the same kind, he will defend this group in a similar way. . . . What I am proposing here is that man's . . . general world view is crucial for overall order of the human mind itself. . . . If he can include everything coherently and harmoniously in an overall whole that is undivided, unbroken, and without a border . . . then his mind will tend to move in a similar way, and from this will flow an orderly action within the whole" (Bohm 1980: xi).

the idea that reality is indeterminant and probabilistic, and they invite their readers to “refrain from the habit of falling into the temptation of certainty” (1992:18). They caution that being certain of something does not constitute proof that it is true. In fact, they assert that an experience of certainty is a solitary and individual phenomenon and constitutes blindness to the thoughts of others. Maturana and Varela are neither artists nor dialogue practitioners, yet their admonishment regarding the “sin of certainty” speaks to what is vital to both art and dialogue. It is noteworthy that all dialogue theorists call for the suspending of certainty and a surfacing of assumptions during the process of dialogue.

The new science also challenges notions of objectivity and neutrality. We have learned from quantum physics that an entity, such as a photon, may be seen as a wave or a particle, depending on the methods scientists use to view it. The actions of the observer can change “reality.” Given the recognition that our own actions can change what we see, we can no longer uphold the notion of a truth that is “out there” and separate from ourselves. We can no longer be certain that what we see is what “really” exists; rather, we must acknowledge that we are neither neutral nor objective observers but participant-observers who shape and define reality. As participant-observers we can choose to enter into dialogue, and we can choose to move toward change in a “reality” that is mutually discovered and responded to.<sup>9</sup>

### **Dialogue’s “Holding Environment”: William Isaacs and the MIT Dialogue Project**

Another recent and significant development in dialogue theory and practice has emerged from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Dialogue Project. The psychologists, scientists, consultants, and healthcare, business, and community leaders who were members of the Dialogue Project, led by William N. Isaacs, developed theory, guidelines, tools, and practices for dialogue engagement in a variety of settings. Their methodology combined both clinical and action research perspectives designed to build “communities of inquiry.”

They worked with a variety of groups including: a healthcare community in Colorado, a diverse group of urban leaders in Boston, a group of managers and union workers in a steel mill in Kansas City, the Parliament of World Religions, and a group of educators in Germany. The Dialogue Project also convened several conferences on dialogue.

Not given to overly simplistic or romantic ideas about dialogue, the Dialogue Project encountered in their research both the benefits and the challenges of dialogue. “Dialogue brings people more closely together and enables them to learn to reason and think together; on the other hand, we have seen that the dissolution of boundaries and the reframing of old problems can be deeply threatening and destabilizing” (Isaacs 1994: 2–3).

Despite a sometimes destabilizing impact on systems in which dialogue work was done, the research done by the Dialogue Project still concluded that dialogue is “emerging as a cornerstone for organizational learning . . . a powerful way of harnessing collective intelligence and inquiry,” a potential “breakthrough in the way human beings might govern themselves,” and “an innovative alternative approach to producing coordinated action among collectives” (Isaacs 1993–1994: 3).

Beginning their work with an understanding of many of the theories described above, Isaacs and his team came to define dialogue as “a unique form of conversation with potential to improve collective inquiry processes, to produce coordinated action among collectives, and to bring about genuine social change” (1996: 20).

Like Bohm, Isaacs and members of the Dialogue Project recognized movement toward wholeness as the aim of dialogue, and they helpfully detailed the misdeeds of thought and action that can derail true dialogue. Fragmentation of thought and fragmentation of face-to-face interaction are two frames that they developed to understand the impediments to dialogue. According to Isaacs, fragmentation of thought is a typical way that people think and is

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<sup>9</sup> If the findings of quantum physics are accurate we should reach for multipartiality, the ability to see all sides, all parts of the whole. Metaphorically speaking, we would strive to increase our capacity to see both the particles and the waves.

characterized by “mental mistakes”<sup>10</sup> that unconsciously reduce the world into parts. The characteristics of this fragmentation are:

- **objectification** - the tendency to see ideas as real objects instead of constructs. In Amherst, some may have seen *West Side Story* as a “real” representation of Puerto Ricans, as opposed to an artistic construction;
- **independence** - seeing interpretations of events as existing independently or outside of one’s own thinking and participation. In this way of thinking individuals fail to recognize that the way they think has an impact on what they see; we believe that the way we think does not have an impact on what we see (or think we see) going on in the world. Many Amherst residents, for example, could not see how their own history and experience (race, politics, relationship to the arts, etc.) influenced their interpretation of the play or their conviction about whether or not to produce it; instead, they saw an independent truth (racism, free speech, community control of schools) outside of themselves to which they saw themselves responding;
- **literalness** - believing that what we think correlates exactly to what is out there. Closely related to independence, this mental habit makes the mistake of thinking that the map is the territory;
- **rigidity** - the inattention to the difference between memory and present experience. When we are engaged in rigid thinking, we believe, because of our past experiences, that we know for sure what is happening in the present. With *West Side Story*, past experiences of racism and deeply held commitment to freedom of speech were a mental overlay that clouded discussion of the “here-and-now” issues of the possible production; and
- **violence** - the effort to “correct or alter whatever we do not like.” The Dialogue Project’s concept of violence includes verbal transgression.

These fragmented, unexamined ways of thinking are seen as leading to fragmented ways of acting and talking. Three of these “fragmented face-to-face patterns” are described by Isaacs. One pattern is polarization. As Isaacs comments,

*To the extent that thought creates independent, objectified pictures that are of necessity partial reflections of the world, holds them as literal, and then finds them at odds with other pictures, polarization is sure to arise” (1996: 24).*

“Hot inquiry” is another fragmented pattern. When dialogue participants engage in hot inquiry, they are paying too much attention to the differing and conflictual aspects of the topic at hand. They lose their focus on inquiry.<sup>11</sup>

The third face-to-face error that Isaacs describes is “immunity to changes in self-image.” When this error occurs, dialogue participants are in the mode of resisting self-reflection and become blind to how their own mental models influence their thinking and participation in the dialogue.

Isaacs suggests that one practical response to polarization is to pay attention to the “container” or “holding environment” in which dialogue occurs. Focusing attention on the environment that “holds” dialogue allows participants to “see the water in which they have been swimming” (Isaacs 1994 “Action Dimensions of Dialogue,” para.7).

Isaacs and his colleagues maintain that the “field” is the most important and fundamental level of dialogue. They define the field as “the environment of collective attention, identity images, and dynamic movement of tacit thought in which these are contained” (1996: 24). They assert that in order for true dialogue to occur, close attention must be paid to the psychological environment. Focusing on that psychological environment, Isaacs and his colleagues observed the four-stage developmental process described below:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Similar ideas, described as “potholes of the mind,” are presented in Yankelovich’s readable book, *The Magic of Dialogue*.

<sup>11</sup> I call this focus on inquiry maintaining a “spirit of wonder”—curiosity about others’ ideas and respect for the people with whom we dialogue (Romney 2001).

<sup>12</sup> For clarity’s sake, I have replaced Isaac’s word “container” with the word “environment.”

1. In the initial phase of dialogue, participants are focused on trust and safety in the context or environment. This phenomenon is called instability *of* the environment. In this stage, participants are focused on certain parameters to which the facilitators must attend.
2. Participants in the second phase struggle with *each other*, both getting caught in and trying to avoid the polarization and conflict that emerge when individual's different beliefs and different assumptions are revealed. Groups at this stage search for new rules to guide them and help them through. They reflect on meaning and the question of "whose meaning has more power here." Isaacs defines this as instability *in* the environment. This stage leads to the group's first efforts to suspend personal assumptions publicly and leads to the next stage.
3. In the third stage, participants begin to ask questions about the different ideas and polarizing beliefs and statements. Participants begin to wonder about their own position and those of others. Called the phase of *inquiry*, a deeper level of exchange begins to occur, leading to the fourth stage.
4. The fourth stage is characterized by *creativity* in the dialogue environment. In this phase "members begin to think generatively, and new understandings based on collective perception emerge" (1996: 26).

Another of observation of the Dialogue Project is the "chrysalis effect for social change." They discovered that after sustained, intensive inquiry leading to new collective insights, a "sea change" of new action often emerges in communities—dialogue practices are taught to others, system changes occur, collective governance emerges. The concept of a "sea change" is analogous to the concept of the "tipping point," a phrase coined by Malcolm Gladwell (2000) to describe how little things can make a big difference.

The findings of the Dialogue Project also help us to understand the lack of civic, community dialogue about *West Side Story* in Amherst from another perspective. The residents of the town were not able to get beyond the instability *of* the environment. There was no effective holding environment (no organization, no process, no structure) that was able to contain the fears around trust and safety. The lack of an effective holding environment led residents to vent their ideas in relative safety by writing to the newspapers or by talking to people of like minds. Occasional forays into dialogue with others who held differing points of view often led to blow-ups or quick retreats.

It is important to note that theory development in the Dialogue Project emerged not only from the study of dialogue theory but also from concrete work in many practical settings. Of particular interest is the work on educating dialogue facilitators, and the goal of producing competency among them. Isaacs defines dialogue as "an actionable skill," and reminds dialogue practitioners that a "parallel process" can occur in which the dynamics of the facilitation team reflect the dynamics of the dialogue participants.

Their approach to facilitation stresses modeling the behaviors one wishes to see in a dialogue. For example, the process of appreciative inquiry,<sup>13</sup> one of the experiential exercises they use to teach the qualities of dialogue, involves asking participants to reflect on "extraordinary experiences of communication in their lives" (Isaacs 1994 "Sample Critical Events in the Project," para. 1).

We see in the ideas of the dialogue theorists discussed above the repetition of many ideas that are crucial for successful dialogues. These important ideas about dialogue are stimulating and profound; still, one may wonder about how they relate to the arts community.

## REFLECTING ON THEORY: AN INVITATION TO WONDER

The philosopher Martin Buber reminds us that the act of art making is in itself a dialogue:

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<sup>13</sup> Appreciative inquiry, an approach used by many different practitioners, consists of a series of questions that help people describe their preferred future by focusing on the successes of the past and future.

*To all unprejudiced reflection it is clear that all art is from its origin essentially of the nature of dialogue. All music calls to an ear not the musician's own, all sculpture to an eye not the sculptor's, architecture in addition calls to the step as it walks in the building (Buber 1971: 25).*

It goes without saying, therefore, that there is no imperative for artists or cultural organizations to engage intentionally in civic dialogue. From Buber's point of view, whether or not dialogue is intentionally created, art is a form of "utterance" to which the audience can and does respond.

However, some artists and arts and cultural organizations do choose to present their art deliberately as a basis for civic dialogue. They want to use the power of art to involve audiences at a visceral and cognitive level in the examination of issues that matter. For those artists, cultural organizations, as well as dialogue practitioners interested in employing the arts in their work, the theories of dialogue presented in this paper offer a basis for reflecting on the underpinnings of that work.

Upon launching her Institute for Art and Civic Dialogue, Anna Deavere Smith posed several reflective questions: "How does the artist meet the challenge of mirroring society? Does the artist have something to offer society in terms of civic leadership? Does civic space have something to offer the artist? What happens if an artist determines both to absorb and be absorbed by his or her society?"

The ideas of Plato, Bakhtin, Isaacs, Bohm, the new scientists, and the intergroup theorists invite us to wonder and reflect. We see this invitation in Plato's commitment to inquiry, Bakhtin's reminders to search for possibility, the intergroup dialogues specialists' emphasis on the exploration of differences, Bohm's accentuation of deep inquiry, and Maturana and Varela's cautions against certainty. The raising of questions, what I have called elsewhere the spirit of wonder, is a sine qua non of dialogue. Living in the questions is a good place to begin.

In Lima, Ohio, for instance, the Common Threads Project invited Michael Rohd and Sojourn Theater to develop a theatre piece using his creative method of poetic documentary, writing theatre based on interviews. After interviewing scores of residents in Allen County, Michael composed a powerful theatre production entitled *Passing Glances: Mirrors and Windows in Allen County*. The residents had a lot to say; Michael and his company creatively transformed those words and feelings into theatre. His staging created a dialogue. How could the dialogues help audiences to take another step?

For the dialogues that followed the productions there were different participants, and therefore different dialogue formats were employed. Despite the diversity of form and audience, all post-performance dialogues began with two questions: "*What in Passing Glances most mirrored your life in Allen County?*" and "*What in Passing Glances opened a new window into someone else's experience?*" These simple questions were directed toward the heart of what Common Threads was trying to do in Lima—to create respectful conversations about differences, a conversation that would take people both inward to self-reflection and outward to an exploration of the experiences and attitudes of their neighbors.

Sojourn Theater's art and artmaking process included workshopping the script while it was in process. The barnstorming dialogues on excerpts of the play stirred interest in the wider community and fostered a social context (Bakhtin) in which dialogue could occur both inside and outside of the structured dialogue events. Art and the artistic process, as exemplified by Rohd's work, was well suited to serve as a conceptual organizer or metaphor that encouraged participants to examine their beliefs and experiences from multiple perspectives. *Passing Glances*, as a work of art, enabled a new way of representing the dimensions of leadership, race, and class issues in Allen County. Perhaps most importantly, vignettes from the play, sometimes organized around questions and sometimes around metaphors such as water, got inside the issues differently than a town meeting or newspaper accounting might have done.

Marty Pottenger’s work is another example of artistic production that brings key aspects of dialogue theory alive. In her multi-year project, *Abundance*, crucial questions about money and wealth were explored in artmaking/dialogue workshops and through one-on-one dialogues between the artist and millionaires, minimum wage workers, and people in between these economic extremes. Ultimately, Pottenger will weave these many conversations into a play. Whether millionaires, people on welfare, or average working folk, characters in the production address questions like: “What is the most money you ever made? What is a lie you tell yourself about money? What would be enough for you? What is one thing you’d need to know to make the decision to give it all away? Through the characters, the audience is drawn in to the dialogue as well.

In workshops and on stage, individuals respond to Pottenger’s powerful questions from varying classes, races, and genders. The responses are in word arias and refrigerator poetry (some of the workshop artmaking activities) and, ultimately, drama. In the responses resides the polyphony about which Bakhtin spoke. The multivoiced reflections of participants embody the coming into consciousness that Bakhtin envisioned as taking place in a collective context. The potency of *Abundance* dialogues is the collective artistic and workshop context in which power configurations (in this case connected to class) are both recognized and contained (reminiscent of the safe container about which Isaacs writes).

Power relations are central to Pottenger’s work and yet they coexist with the reaching for wholeness about which Bohm, the physicist, spoke. The holding environment that Pottenger so successfully created in her workshops facilitates the birthing of creativity and dialogue, art and inquiry. All of this has resonance to participants, because the inclusiveness of voice is so palpable.

Art and dialogues take many creative forms. We may be tempted to think that dance companies should engage in dialogue only through movement, or that orchestras should engage people only through music. And yet artists’ work helps us see that in the realm of spoken words, dialogue might employ movement. Dialogue theorists and practitioners help us see that understanding of movement performances can be deepened through verbal articulation.

More than anything, the theories described in this paper are intended as an encouragement to think about the philosophical grounding of dialogue, to wonder what the theories demand of artists and cultural institutions and what they suggest as cautions. My invitation, at the close of this paper, is to ask *you* to “wonder” about these ideas and their relationship to your work.

#### **CODA FROM ANIMATING DEMOCRACY**

As we look to understand principles and practices of arts-based civic dialogue, Patricia Romney’s survey of dialogue theory brings forward useful concepts and frameworks. Her piece moves us to raise and think about a number of questions such as:

How can these theories help to define the intents and parameters of an arts-based dialogue?

How do any of these dialogue theories help to understand the role of artistic provocation in engendering dialogue?

How do Bakhtin and the intergroup dialogue theorists shed light on the relationship between the personal and the public in terms of the intent for art to promote civic dialogue?

What should be considered to determine if a cultural organization has the potential to be, as Isaacs suggests, an effective holding environment for an issue to be explored?

We invite your responses to Romney’s and our questions, or perhaps to share your own questions by going to the OnlineDiscussion Forum on the Animating Democracy web site, [www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy).



## A PERSONAL NOTE

*Reflecting and writing about West Side Story in the context of this paper on arts-based civic dialogue led me to engage in an inner dialogue. The participants in this dialogue were myself as a 16 year-old who fell in love with West Side Story (seeing it four times on Broadway and ten times at the movies), me as a dialogue facilitator deeply engaged in inquiry during the Amherst West Side Story controversy, and me as a fifty-eight-year-old woman reflecting back on both of those times.*

*I found myself tempted to consider what the fictional characters of West Side Story would have thought about dialogue. What might have changed if Maria and Tony, Riff and the Jets, and Bernardo and the Sharks had had the opportunity to engage in a dialogue facilitated by someone, like Doc, perhaps, who was not neutral, but multipartial. Someone who would not choose sides, but, choosing peace, would bring the sides together.*

*Could there have been a dialogue? Could a dialogue have helped the Sharks and the Jets to accomplish a resolution different from murdering one another with knives and guns?*

*Certainly facilitated dialogue would not have erased the issues of poverty, racism, and intercultural misunderstanding. Yet, the work done by the Public Conversations Project with leaders of the pro-life and pro-choice organizations, while not eliminating the controversy or changing minds, is thought to have had an important role in the reduction and elimination of the violence that characterized the years prior to their dialogues. A dialogue between the Sharks and the Jets would have had to include the community beyond the gangs. It would have had to include the issues of equity, oppression, politics, and community. If there had been a dialogue, the facilitators would have needed to be a diverse team, reflecting the diversity between the Sharks and the Jets. One facilitator would have had to be Latino and Spanish speaking.*

*My fanciful ruminations about the fictional characters in West Side Story gave way to questions about the real life people who were engaged in the Amherst controversy, a controversy in which town residents engaged in an unwitting parallel process in which they “stuck to their own kind” and engaged in verbal violence which led to the “killing off” of the production of this classic piece of American musical theatre and the wounding of their own community.*

*When I was sixteen, New York City, where I was born, was burgeoning with the influx of Puerto Ricans. This immigration was the result of “Operation Bootstrap,” a little known U.S. government initiative, which accomplished its goal of relocating thousands of Puerto Ricans from the island colony to the mainland of the United States in order to make room for the U.S. armed forces and the U.S. industrialists who would take up residence there. At sixteen I understood West Side Story’s universal themes of love, interethnic conflict, and the perils of violence, but I was unaware of Operation Bootstrap. I believed, then, that understanding alone would help people to find together a “way of living, a way of forgiving.”*

*When West Side Story moved from the theatre to the movie screen, I rued the casting of the film, in which a “gringa” Maria, with an atrocious Spanish accent, was the star, while Rita Moreno, a gifted and beautiful Puerto Rican, was relegated to a supporting role. Joining “Maria” was a cast of Anglo Sharks with brown make-up on their skin, using a Spanish filled with Mexican expressions.*

*The residents of Amherst who opposed the play had only this unfortunate replica to view and consider. They were left, not with a classic of American theatre, but with Hollywood’s representation of it. Still, even the Broadway event was written, choreographed, and scored, not by Latinos, but by white artists who, however well-intentioned, mediated that period of New York through their own Euro-American lens. As Jews, these artists knew about oppression, but the racism that Puerto Ricans experienced was not their lived experience. If art is about image-making, about meaning and metaphor, the consequences of those images were disastrous for the new potential audience of West Side Story in Amherst.*

*Through dialogue with my Puerto Rican sisters and brothers in Amherst, I re-viewed the production, and deepened my understanding of their opposition. I heard from a contemporary of mine, a Puerto Rican who grew up in New York City at the same time as I did, that his mother had refused to allow him to see this production because it was about gangs. I met with*

young Puerto Rican students who were adamant that this movie did not accurately reflect them or their history. It explored neither the colonial status of Puerto Rico, nor the U.S. policy that placed the Sharks in the hate-filled, poverty-stricken context into which they had been forced to move. As a mother of two adult black Puerto Rican children, I saw for the first time that none of the Sharks were black, belying the racial and ethnic heritage of a people whose heritage is composed of a visually handsome African, indigenous, and European heterogeneity.

The images and messages that reached me at sixteen—the devastating impact of hatred and interethnic conflict, two gangs who unfailingly stood together in opposition against racist police, the enduring importance of love—were now joined by other images unveiled for me by younger Puerto Ricans who had lived other realities and who had arrived at other truths. In the piece “America,” I had heard the words of the Puerto Rican men on the rooftop who gave voice to the perils of capitalism, racism, and oppression. Now, I understood that others heard the “ascendancy” of the women’s voices celebrating the freedom and privilege of living in America. Through the controversy, I came to see multiple sides and to understand that artistic representation inevitably leads to multiple, and at times, conflicting responses.

It is a testimony to the creativity of fine artists like Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim that, after forty years, *West Side Story* still has the power to evoke responses which caused people on all sides of the controversy to answer with their lives for what they had experienced and understood in that production. Decades after its crafting, the work still had the power to evoke passion, as well as to teach those who were willing to open their minds. In dance, song, and script, *West Side Story* was not an exact replica of New York Puerto Rican reality (nor did it mirror the reality of anyone else in that period), but inspired by that reality, artists gave birth to new and unique music, dance, and story. The work of the art was, in this way, well accomplished.

Still, the art of *West Side Story* is not solely responsible for the Amherst response. The longstanding colonial status of Puerto Rico, the ongoing oppression and marginalization of people of color, the struggle for jobs, educational equity, and economic justice, and the racism that still poisons the atmosphere were also essential components of the Amherst “argument.” Art does not stand alone. It is created and viewed in a context. This context, too, shaped the Amherst controversy.

The future work is ours. We need to do the work of dialogue that will help our society explore, critique, celebrate, expose, even subvert, as we search for common meaning and solutions to our differences. We need to engage in the art of dialogue so that as Judith Jordan says, we are able to “listen each other into fuller voice.” We must do as Bohm advised and “get inside each other and evolve together.”

It is time to provide opportunities for the collaborative voice of dialogue to emerge. It is time to create contexts in which we can think and feel and talk together in an ongoing effort to liberate ourselves and to continue to make art that will help to free and lift us all.

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## DIALOGUE ORGANIZATIONS RESOURCES

National Issues Forum Research  
100 Commons Road  
Dayton, OH 45459-2777.  
800-433-7834  
<http://www.nifi.org/>

One by One, Inc.  
P.O. Box 1709  
Brookline, MA 02446-0014  
617-424-1540  
<http://www.onebyone.org>

Public Agenda  
6 East 39th Street  
New York, NY 10016

Albuquerque, New Mexico:  
Contact Person: Stephen W. Littlejohn, President  
504 Luna Boulevard, NW  
Albuquerque, NM 87102-1930  
505-246-9890  
<http://www.publicdialogue.org>

Study Circles Resource Center  
P.O. Box 203  
Pomfret, CT 06258  
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The World Café  
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