



THE HOI POLLOI: An experiment in site-specific, community-specific, affordable theater in Brooklyn

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By Justine Williams

In just over three years, theater director Alec Duffy has made a name for himself in New York downtown theater under the auspices of his company, [Hoi Polloi](#) (which means the people or masses in Ancient Greek). Indeed, the "hoi polloi" are at the center of his work. Duffy's highly original theatrical productions bring heart and humor to exploring the comic and tragic potential in human interaction, or as Duffy puts it, how people "come together and fall apart." [The Less We Talk](#) was a clever and quirky ensemble piece that followed 25 chorus members as they created moments of both literal and figurative dissonance and harmony on stage. Last season Duffy picked up an Obie award for [Three Pianos](#), created with Rick Burkhardt and Dave Malloy, that followed three friends, each at their own piano, who obsessed over Schubert's gloomy song cycle, *Winterreise*, and debated questions both musical and existential. Music figures strongly in Duffy's work as another expression of union and discord between people.



The Hoi Polloi's "The Less We Talk". Photo: Ryan Jensen

Duffy has teamed up again with Malloy for a production of [*Murder in the Cathedral*](#) by T.S. Eliot, which depicts the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in the Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. But, unlike his other theatrical innovations, this project is not Duffy's original conceit. Instead, the idea sprang from the imagination of Kieran Harrington, the Monsignor of the Church of St. Joseph in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. After first encountering Eliot's play in high school, Harrington vowed that if he ever became the Monsignor of a church, he would stage the production for its congregants. Just over two years ago, when he first took up stewardship of St. Joseph, he knew that this was the ideal locale for the production. Billed as a site-specific work, *Murder in the Cathedral* performs Thursday through Sunday from September 18th - October 2nd in the Gothic cathedral and architectural wonder that is St. Joseph. Built in 1912, the cathedral boasts vaulted ceilings and stained glass windows, making it both a majestic and meditative setting for Eliot's play, which at its heart is about one man's struggle to remain steadfast and to do the right thing in the face of fierce opposition. Knowing very little about producing or directing theater, Harrington approached his friend's daughter, Hillary Miller, who came on as the show's producer. Miller, in turn, approached Duffy to direct. Not only a theater director, but also a Prospect Heights resident, Duffy was an ideal partner for the project.

The project is not only site specific, but also community specific. Monsignor Harrington envisioned the piece as a "real community event", drawing in not only the Church's small, but dedicated congregation, but also engaging area residents and the general public. In turn, it was important to Miller and Duffy that the cast represent both the congregation and the neighborhood, therefore the diverse cast is largely made up of performers from the Prospect Heights community. The production includes a mammoth cast and crew of 7 actors, 10 high school age interns drawn from the congregation and surrounding neighborhoods (what Duffy calls a Teen Arts Council), a team of

designers and producers, 4 musicians and a 15-woman choir (of which I am a part) singing Malloy's original choral music.

What does it mean to make a site-specific, community-specific piece of theater? As a theater artist who lives in a neighborhood, but longs to feel part of a community, who sees theater as a kind of community activism but is not always sure how art and community knit together, and as someone who considers herself a part of the "NY downtown theater community", but is not exactly sure where or what that is, I was excited to further explore some of these issues as they relate to this unique artistic enterprise. I began by meeting with Duffy in the Prospect Heights apartment he shares with his wife, set designer Mimi Lien, to talk about how this production could depart from more conventional approaches to making theater in New York, as well as the challenges and surprises that come along with making a site-specific, community-specific piece of theater with such an unorthodox producing partner.

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THE TEEN ARTS COUNCIL AND BROOKLYN ARTS HQ: Prior to working on the show, Duffy had an idea for a Teen Arts Council, composed of neighborhood youth interested in performance who meet semi-regularly to read and see plays, to engage in theater training, to make new work and who might serve as "ambassadors" for the arts in their communities. This production became a means to further develop and actualize his idea. After writing letters of interest and showing up for informal interviews, ten youth from either the congregation or the neighborhood were chosen to participate. They not only act in the production, sing in the choir and run lights for the show, but also meet with Duffy and cast members before rehearsals to read and talk about T.S. Eliot's work, to learn about acting and making theater and to hear professional artists from the cast share the highs and lows of a life dedicated to the arts.

Diana Arreaga, 16, is a member of the Teen Arts Council and a long-time parishioner at St. Joseph. Arreaga's family no longer lives in the Prospect Heights area. She notes, "The area has been changing and a lot of people have been moving to different places". Her family moved to Bushwick a few years ago to accommodate an influx of family from Los Angeles. The family bought three adjoining houses on the same block. But the family retains its strong ties to the St. Joseph community: "I was baptized here, confirmation, first communion, this is my family, my second home". Arreaga was thrilled about putting on a play at St. Joseph and has been working as the assistant stage manager on the production. "We read this play in school and as I read it, I actually imagined the same play in the Cathedral cause it is so old -- it is like the perfect scenery for the play. So I was really excited when Father Harrington first told me about it and he introduced me to Alec. I was like, I am definitely on board, I want to do

this, this is something I have actually been looking forward to cause this church has never really had huge events where a lot of people come, so I was like we should definitely do something like this?. Her entire family ? parents, siblings, uncles ? have been promoting the show to friends, neighbors and other church-goers.

The Teen Arts Council is just one part of a greater not-for-profit entity Duffy has started, called Brooklyn Arts HQ, which will be a community-based arts outreach initiative that engages residents of Prospect Heights and the surrounding neighborhoods by producing plays, offering arts workshops for young people, and hosting a range of community-oriented programming.

THE HOI POLLOI: Duffy and Harrington share a vested interest in attracting large audiences for the show. This aim not only aligns with their respective artistic principles and community-minded ideals, but it is also a practical concern. St. Joseph's Church seats close to 1,000 people, therefore it will take more than just the members of any one given community to fill the seats. As a parish priest, attendance has been an ongoing concern for Harrington. According to the Monsignor, when he became head of the Church just over two years ago, the Church had fewer than 200 congregants and the sacramental life at St. Joseph had almost ceased to function. Gentrification and dramatic changes in the neighborhood led to many families leaving the area. ?There was a sense of people being displaced?, Harrington states. In addition, the formidable building is hidden away on a remote stretch of Pacific Street in Prospect Heights where traffic flow has been hindered due to Forest City Ratner's development site for the notorious Atlantic Yards project. Harrington notes, ?in light of these changes ? how do you bring people together? How do you bring the people who live in the neighborhood together with new people living in the neighborhood?? Harrington hypothesized that ?the arts would be a great way to bring people together ... One way I thought of to bring people into the church was to do a play.?



Murder in the Cathedral Rehearsal, Church of St. Joseph, Brooklyn. Photo: Tom Martinez

Both the Church staff and Duffy's production team have been reaching out to generate audiences for the production. Duffy states, "It would be a shame if it were just the NY downtown theater-going audience who came out to see this play". To that end, Duffy has been running a kind of grassroots canvassing campaign, going door to door with Godfrey Simmons, a lead actor in the production and an area resident, to talk to neighbors. The pair has been talking to ladies in the hair and nail salons of Franklin and Washington Avenues, meeting with restaurant and business owners on Vanderbilt Avenue and reaching out to local churches and cultural institutions. Godfrey reports, "we've been going to cafes, we went to a Dominican nail salon, a bodega we like to go to and we've been going to places around the neighborhood throughout rehearsals to get food and provisions, so we went back to those places—we say, hey, we're doing a play around the corner in a Church!...We went to Kinky Crowns who is the locktition down the street and she was like, I'll come on Thursday!?"

Miller and Duffy, along with the staff at St. Joseph, also arranged an informal "Wine and Cheese Event" in which neighbors and community representatives were invited to visit the Church and to watch an open rehearsal of the show. The production team also hopes that the affordable ticket price will encourage attendance. Prices have been set at \$10, but no one will be turned away. Harrington takes a priestly perspective on packing the house, "Faith is not about numbers — if one soul can be changed by their interaction, by their encounter in this Church, by listening to the dialogue in this play and experiencing this play, then we have done what we set out to do. It really is on a wing and a prayer that we are doing this. Its an exercise in faith."

SITE SPECIFIC/COMMUNITY SPECIFIC: Obviously, a very specific set of considerations arises when working with and in a Church. Duffy reports that before non-Church related activities could commence in the Cathedral (i.e., rehearsals) "the Holy Sacrament, a.k.a. the blood and body of Christ, a.k.a. the Host had to be removed from the Church"; early rehearsals were scheduled around Morning Mass; and, the almost 5-second acoustical delay created by the Church's vaulted ceiling made actor dialogue and choral numbers an additional challenge. Lighting designer, Miranda Hardy, exercised creative problem-solving as the Church is, obviously, not fitted with a theatrical lighting grid. There are, of course, added "perks" to working in an unconventional performance space: Duffy has implemented some inventive staging by using the Church's various spaces — its confessional, pulpit and foyer, for instance — to great effect. While the Church has remained relatively hands off in terms of input on the aesthetics and staging of the production, the staff has been a valuable resource, advising Duffy and his actors on Church protocol and even providing some religious vestments to use as costumes.

Like much of Duffy's work, this project has been an experiment in how people come together. According to Duffy, the project is "an ambitious experiment in large-scale theater production in close cooperation with a church and the

Diocese; in the challenges of site-specific production; in community involvement; in affordable theater?. Indeed, this projects marks a unique coming together of church and artistic staff, local youth and professional artists, community members and cast members, as well as the congregants, neighborhood residents and ?downtown theatergoers? who will play their role in bringing this production to life after the show?s official opening on September 18th. Simmons remarks, ?what?s great is to try to get all the different strands, the professional people? well, everyone is professional if you have a job, but what we would call, the young, urban professionals, let?s just say it, which is a certain class or seen as a certain class. And then, to get the people who are of the neighborhood, who run the businesses here, the immigrant community, who often make a lot more than those ?yups? because they own and run businesses, but the point is, they just bring a different point of view. And to get them all in the same physical structure to talk to each other and to see a play that is about this larger idea...that is really exciting.?

These ?strands? were made manifest at a Mexican barbeque held by the Church for the cast and crew of the production. Simmons states, ?you?d be hard pressed to find a cast and crew more diverse?. As the cast, crew and St. Joseph staff mingled in the Church courtyard one balmy Saturday in September, in many ways, the group represented a microcosm of the neighborhood: a robust mix of races and socio-economic classes were represented (both ?yups? and working class locals), longtime residents and newcomers, artists and professionals, church-goers and non-believers, teens and adults. As people mingled and tentatively got to know one another, the Orange Crush flowed and the cast and crew dined on a veritable feast of meat and vegetable kabobs, Mexican corn, picadillo and guacamole, all prepared by Father Jorge and members of the congregation.



Church of St. Joseph, Brooklyn. Photo: Tom Martinez

The ?physical structure? of the Church has served as a kind of meeting point for all of these strands to intersect. Space, which can be a critical element in bringing community together, is in ample supply at St. Joseph, but for

artists, space is a rare and precious commodity. For theater artists, especially theater artists working in New York City, space is one of the most critical concerns. Artists report limited access to rehearsal and performance spaces, spending the bulk of their limited production budgets on space rental, bouncing from space to space and rarely settling in a location where they can foster and build relationships and connect their work directly to a community. "Community is not necessarily rooted in a place; a community is rooted in love", Harrington argues. "I tell my parishioners, this church is not this building. This building could come down, who knows what could happen?the church is the people who are gathered together?". He continues, "Obviously, it makes it easier if you have a building, but the building can't be the focus?". But while a building does not a community make, space and place *do* matter. Simmons observes, "I will be working off-Broadway?or you do a show on Theater Row and it is not like it means much to anybody in that area, unless they are actors?but then, there is this idea of doing this thing in Brooklyn and I live here?the idea of not having to leave Brooklyn to be an artist is pretty awesome."

While space and location are key components of this site-specific, community-specific project, Harrington makes the point that the relationships that spring from this project take precedence. These relationships have been forming out of the practical demands of working together to mount a play, but the group is also bound by a shared set of higher ideals about art, place and community and how these elements can interact.

When the production ends and the inevitable "falling apart" ensues that is part of theater's ephemeral nature, it will be illuminating to see what relationships will remain, what collaborations will continue, how the individuals and groups involved in the project will have been changed by the project and how the experience of working on this play will have altered each individual's thinking on these larger ideas of art, place and community.

In thinking about a final "outcome" for this project or possibilities for future collaboration amongst these partners, the question of continuity and sustainability also comes into play. Whether one runs a Church or a theater company, one must be concerned on some level with how to sustain one's respective institution or entity. Does something have to be sustainable, i.e., last for a long time to have value or to make an impact? Does one have a responsibility to a given community once one has engaged with it and started a conversation to then stay on and continue that conversation? In this case, a lesson in sustainability can be drawn from Harrington's practice as a priest. He brings the conversation back to the issue of developing relationships. "The focus in this kind of work is?to be very present to each person, to the quality of the relationship you are cultivating, otherwise your relationship with that person is impoverished. In some sense people can almost become like a means to an end...but instead, it must grow organically. That is not to say it does not require work, there's no question about it, but the work is at that moment?the danger is when people start thinking about place in history, whether its their institution or whatever

they do, you can really go off the rails, you have to think about the moment. The quality of sustainability is the quality of relationship. If you are willing to build relationships and to work on the quality of those relationships, then what you are making will be sustainable?.

While the Monsignor's vision for *Murder in the Cathedral* initially came about because he was inspired by Eliot's play and wanted to present the story in a Church before a congregation, the project also engages a number of critical issues of art, place, community and participation that inform Harrington's position as a congregation leader and Duffy's role as a theater maker. In my discussions with both men, they each stressed a desire to gather people together for a moment of meditation on the provocative themes found in Eliot's play and to provide an aesthetic experience, "an opportunity for people to experience beauty" as Harrington puts it, which he imagines will come from taking in the poetry of the play, as well as the play's remarkable setting. But, Harrington and Duffy are also explicitly aiming to use this collaboration to address ongoing issues that affect their respective religious and artistic communities and the rapidly changing neighborhood where they live and work. As such, there are a number of motivations and intentions behind this enterprise.

Have they taken on too much with this ambitious project? Can they mount a play of high quality and artistic merit while carrying out an effective community-building initiative? Or, will one aspect of the project suffer in the face of the other? Why this play? Is this particular play and this model for mounting it the best means to achieve Harrington's community-building aims? How has having a Church as a producing partner influenced Duffy's treatment of the play and its subject matter?

Other community-based theater models have dealt with some of these issues, for instance, Cornerstone Theater in Los Angeles investigates critical themes affecting American communities by bringing community members and professional artists together to adapt a given community's stories and experiences into original works of theater. Cornerstone mounted a Faith-Based Theater Cycle in which the company spent five years creating over 21 productions in, with and for five different religious communities in Los Angeles. On the other end of the spectrum, the Riverside Church in Manhattan takes a different approach, using their space and resources simply to provide the general public with affordable opportunities to see cutting-edge, high quality arts performances.



Hoi Polloi's "Murder in the Cathedral". Photo: Alec Duffy

What kind of community building might take place if St. Joseph's Church had created a theatrical event that tells the story behind the church, the changing neighborhood and the individuals who attend that Church? The Church could have also endorsed a project that worked with and adapted Eliot's text, using it as a starting point to create and stage a story that directly reflects the values and experiences of the St. Joseph's community. Rather than hiring professional artists to bring art to the people, these models might encourage the notion that communities, themselves, contain the stories that make great theater and re-enforce the principle that everyone has the capacity to make art. Whether it is a professional theater production, a community-based performance, or something in between, ultimately, the most effective and exciting work is that which poses questions, rather than gives answers, that which values a diversity of perspectives and voices, and that which encourages critical engagement, while reminding us of our humanity.

Happily, there are many models for how art can take shape within and in turn, shape a given community. The project at St. Joseph's Church and the programs at Cornerstone and Riverside Church are all part of a continuum of efforts to bring art and community together. *Murder in the Cathedral* at St. Joseph's Church is an experiment and it is, hopefully, the start of a meaningful conversation about artistic partnership and collaboration involving local institutions and communities. Duffy's hope is that this project inspires other local institutions and organizations to step up and reach out to artists in their communities for collaboration.

If he can get the support and funding, Harrington envisions handing over a vacant convent building on the Church's grounds to local artists. Initially and "fairly traditionally", he adds, the Monsignor thought to give the space to a community of nuns, but there are fewer remaining communities of nuns and the convent is in a state of disrepair. His thoughts then turned to local artists in the neighborhood; "what if I just opened that space up for artists?", he wondered. "The chapel could be a recording studio, there could be spaces for people to write or to paint; it could be a space for quiet meditation and creativity".

BIO:

Justine Williams is a performer, writer and concerned citizen based in Brooklyn, NY. She founded and co-directs a theater company, [The Glass Contraption](#), through which she has performed in, developed and produced numerous original works of theater at local and international venues, such as The Public Theater, Ars Nova, the NY Clown Theatre Festival, The Kitchen, The Orchard Project, and the National Arts Festival in South Africa. The company has also designed and led numerous arts-based collaborations in partnership with diverse communities both locally and abroad. Justine leads a think tank/working group, Play Mountain, which gathers artists of all disciplines together to explore critical issues of art, place and community and the tensions and synergies between these elements. She received her BA in Theater Studies from Brown University and her MA in International Affairs from the New School. Through her theater-making, research and teaching, she has worked with theater companies and communities throughout the Balkans, South America, the Middle East, Africa and in each of the five boroughs of NYC.