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Introduction to Graduate Studies

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Theatre in New Orleans: A Community of Artists

"Don't you just love those long rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn't just an hour-but a little piece of eternity dropped into your hands - and who knows what to do with it?"

*A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams

A theatregoer in New Orleans in 2012 could see everything from Broadway’s production of *Mary Poppins* at the Mahalia Jackson Theatre, *Hamlet* being performed at The Shakespeare Festival at Tulane or the holiday staple, *A Christmas Carol*, at the Southern Repertory Theatre. If that same theatregoer dug a little deeper, they might see productions such as *Kiss Kiss Julie, Balm in Gilead, Loup Garou, The Hunting of the Snark, She Remembers* or one of many shows produced by independent theatre companies. These imaginative and resourceful companies including Artspot Productions, Mondo Bizarro, The NOLA Project, New Noise and Skin Horse give new meaning to what it is to be a community of theatre artists.

Commonly referred to as the “fringe” faction of theatre in New Orleans because of their involvement with the annual Fringe Festival and their boundless artistic choices, these artists possess a passion and drive that is infectious. This magnetic quality and their ability to overcome the struggles of producing theatre in a post-Hurricane Katrina environment, currently contribute to the evolution of theatre in the city. These artists meet the challenges of money, talent, space, and audience attendance to produce their art. If they continue with the same energy, originality and creativity, New Orleans theatre is on its way to establishing itself as an integral voice in American theatre.
Hurricane Katrina left an indelible scar on not only American history, but New Orleans theatre history. It marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. Cities do not often experience catastrophes like Katrina. When they do, their history becomes divided. New Orleans theatre history is now referred to in pre- and post-Katrina contexts. It is important to recognize this because working theatre artists often regard their own history in these relevant but simple terms. New Orleans theatre cannot be viewed with such divisiveness because there is much to learn from the past. In the words of George Santayana, a Spanish-American philosopher, “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it” (Coleman).

**Of a Cyclical Nature**

New Orleans theatre history reveals a cyclical nature. This paper follows the participants of a growing theatre community. History affirms theatre in the Crescent City experienced ebbs and flows, but none as great as the stoppage it endured and the cultivation it is experiencing in its post-Katrina atmosphere.

Throughout its history, the popularity of theatre in New Orleans rose and fell for a variety of reasons. Events such as war, societal paradigmatic shifts like the legalization of prostitution, and the economic distress caused by the Great Depression all occasioned stagnation then subsequent progress for New Orleans theatre. A brief examination of New Orleans theatre history can shed light on the possibility that although current theatre is thriving, there is a possibility that it may only be temporary.

From its beginnings, up until the Civil War, theatre in New Orleans was very popular. The city’s first proper theatrical performance occurred in 1753 when the original script of *Le Pere Indian (The Indian Father)*, by LeBlanc Vleeneufve was presented at Governor de Vaudereuil’s mansion. Prior to 1861, New Orleans thrived and was considered one of the
cultural meccas of the nation. Theatre played a prominent part in the celebrated city. This popularity, though, did not survive the Civil War and its aftermath. It would take thirty years before New Orleans theatre would experience new life (Cahill).

Making a living doing theatre in the 1890s was not practical, thus a neoteric manner of theatre began. Inspired by her love theatre, in 1891 Madame Rosa Soloman da Ponte, founded the Rose Lawn Theater in an old carriage house behind her Rose Land Estate. This is considered by some scholars to be the very first “community” theatre in America. Sadly though, the idea of community oriented theatre soon lost its traction due to the adverse effects of the rise in prostitution in New Orleans.

The famed “red-light district” known as Storyville was notorious for its anything-goes mentality. Storyville deterred any growth in theatre. Instead, it saw more artists drawn to the city to not create or perform, but to experience the city’s nightlife. The Marx Brothers ended their tours in New Orleans as an excuse to spend a week unwinding and enjoying the delights of New Orleans seedy underbelly. In 1917, Storyville shut down and theatre no longer possessed these unsavory incentives for out-of-town artists. Community theatre, though, blossomed from this morality shift and an upswing in the cycle began.

In the latter part of the 1910s, theatre troupes, much like the independent theatre companies later discussed in this paper, began to pop up such as Causerie Du Lundi, The Literary and Musical Club, The Shakespeare Society, and the New Orleans Center of The Drama League. Participants from most of these groups would be among the founding members of the Drawing Room Players who opened the theatre that became a staple of the New Orleans social society and a flagship for the theatre community (Cahill).
Le Petit Du Vieux Carre opened its doors when a small group of amateur theatre-lovers began putting on plays in the drawing room of one of the members. For the next ninety-five years, Le Petit never stopped producing shows. Auditions were always open and though they did regularly work with professionals, Le Petit was known as one of the leading community theaters in the nation. Le Petit endured economic and social hardships throughout the years, but this was not reflective of the overall state of theatre in New Orleans during the first half of the twentieth century.

During the years of the Great Depression to the late 1930s, theatre companies such as the St. Charles Stock Company, the Federal Theatre Players, the Civic Theatre players and many others began and ended. Theaters which saw their doors open and close for various reasons included The St. Charles Theatre, The Varieties Theatre, the second St. Charles Theater, The French Opera House and the Community Theater’s Patio Playhouse. Some of these theatres found temporary success, but none the longevity of Le Petit, with one exception; the Gallery Circle Theatre.

In 1938, the Gallery Circle Theatre group formed. Their productions set a very high standard under the executive direction of the legendary Stocker Fontelieu, but these standards were hampered by the lack of a proper performance space. This is a challenge present day New Orleans artists know well. Meanwhile, Le Petit saw a decline in the quality of its shows due to a steady decrease in ticket sales. But, in 1960, a new artistic director, Lawrence L. Johnson, breathed new life into the Le Petit organization and the Gallery group found a new space.

"There is an air of excitement about theatre in New Orleans that has not been evident in over a decade. Two events are responsible: the move of Gallery Circle Theatre, an in-the-round group, to its new $50,000 home, and the presentation of *Cyrano de Bergerac* at Le Petit Theatre
Du Vieux Carre, the most ambitious production by a New Orleans community theatre since 1938” (Sublette). Excitement for theatre was exasperated even further when federal funding came in the form of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society initiative and a repertory theatre was set to open.

The Repertory Theatre opened in 1966 and experienced marginal success. It was a professional company that modeled itself on the success Stocker Fonteliu’s Gallery Circle Theatre. Their productions consisted mostly of classic theatre such as *The Rivals, Romeo and Juliet, Saint Joan*, and *Tartuffe* as well as light fare such as *Our Town* and *Charley’s Aunt*. The addition of the Repertory Theatre attracted outside artists. Provoked by the possibility of a paid work and an expanding theatre scene, a surge of artists entered New Orleans:

In the mid to late 1970s, artists flocked to New Orleans. Claire Moncrief, the current artistic director for the Shakespeare Festival at Tulane, can attest to this as she was part of the migration. In 1976, she moved to New Orleans and joined an actor’s troupe named the Diversity Players.

At that time there was very much a movement like we are seeing now in New Orleans. There were lots of small hungry troupes of actors who were working day jobs and finding ways to do their (theatre) work whenever they could and wherever in the eighties and nineties because of what was happening with the economy it leveled out. It did not have that excitement anymore or all that energy. (Moncreif)

Once again, the cyclical nature of New Orleans theatre was manifest and the decline began.

June Havoc, a well-known Broadway and Hollywood actress and Broadway theatre director, took over the Repertory theatre at the resignation of Steven Vaughan. In 1980, she resigned noting:
There’s no theater there – at all! There hasn’t been before we were there, and probably never will be. We had two wildly successful seasons, but it’s not a theatre town. People don’t get up from the dinner table until 11 o’clock at night. They will hock their houses to ride on one of those floats at Mardi Gras time with a mask on. I realized there wasn’t a future for theatre there when the Sugar Bowl needed artificial grass. Overnight they raised $450,000 to put the grass down.

All we needed was $200,000 or $300,000 but we couldn’t get it. (Havoc)

Even though lack of money and under-appreciation for theatre lingered through the end of the 20th century, some theatre artists were still drawn to New Orleans.

Through the latter part of the 20th century, theatre companies established themselves and some are still present today. The Southern Repertory Theatre and The Shakespeare Festival at Tulane saw success. Founded in 1963, Junebug Productions, once named the Free Southern Theatre continues to make huge strides in empowering the black theatre movement. Small companies like Artspot Productions and Mondo Bizarro established themselves as a presence in the New Orleans community theatre. Nick Slie, a co-artistic director and founder of Mondo Bizarro states, that prior to Hurricane Katrina, “I don’t think it was just a ‘way things roll’ thing before Katrina, but I do think there was pretty much your boots are in the ground and there’s a little bit of mud around them and we just kind of sludged through the mud if you wanted to be an artist.”

It is essential to know the roots of New Orleans theatre in order to get an idea where it may go. In the summer of 2005, the landscape of New Orleans and New Orleans theatre was changed forever. A break in the cycle occurred in the form of a deadly catastrophe. It is
important to recognize this extraordinary shift, because it allows for the possibility that the cycle could be interrupted, or possibly even cease to exist.

**The Storm**

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Louisiana Coast. This category five hurricane and the subsequent flooding wreaked havoc on southern Louisiana, claiming the lives of over 1,800 Louisianans and displacing thousands. Among those affected were the New Orleans theatre artists and theatre owners. Some theatres were temporarily closed and some closed for good. Artists fled the city, some to return in time and some would decide to continue their artistic endeavors elsewhere. A very moving and poignant account of the days during and after Katrina can be found in Clare Moncreif’s *Shakespeare and Katrina: Observations from within the Tempest*. “Perhaps the most important lesson of Katrina’s many lessons is that the most effective healing comes through work” (Moncreif). The theatre companies that stayed got back to work as quickly as they were able. Many of these artists feel there was a “clean-slate” effect from Katrina that gave way for a new beginning. This was especially the case within the “fringe” community (Moncreif).

**A New Beginning**

A new sense of energy and purpose arose out of Hurricane Katrina. The displaced theatre artists of New Orleans came home to find many of their homes uninhabitable. The instant economic and social changes overwhelmed some, but also gave hope to others:

I do think Katrina definitely cleaned the slate and there was great hope and it was just like wow, what could happen? What could happen? Is there gonna be a city government? Is there gonna be a state government? Like what kind of money is going to come here? What is recovery money gonna do? I mean these questions
abound. And then you start to see the national money come in and the foundation money come in and the private money come in and everybody in many great ways wanted to give a hand, and so for a little bit there you saw a lot of support for people from the outside who did art here. (Slie)

“Artists rediscovered New Orleans after Katrina. The city is filled with these really gifted and energetic theatre artists,” said Moncreif. There are numerous reasons why artists were drawn to New Orleans after Katrina. Many native New Orleanian artists refused to give up their home. Ultimately, the migration of artists into the city and the unfettered loyalty of the city’s current artistic inhabitants caused the creation of theatre of troupes across New Orleans.

There are numerous theatre companies which now comprise the New Orleans theatre community. Artspot Productions, Mondo Bizarro, The NOLA Project, New Noise and Skin Horse are the focus of this study. That does not discount the work of others, such as Junebug, Goat-in-the-Road, the Cripple Creek Players and The Southern Repertory Theatre and all those not mentioned here. For the purposes of this study, the companies were chosen simply because they were responsive, took part in the research process, and are reflective of the New Orleans “fringe” community.

“Fringe” is not the correct descriptive word to use when trying to encapsulate a sense of who these artists are. The theatre scene in New Orleans is often divided into professional theatre, African-American Theatre, and Fringe theatre. Not one of the artists interviewed referred to himself or herself as a “fringe” artist. They do not want to live on the outskirts of society. They produce fresh and original work, but that is not all they do. They are also socially conscious and driven to succeed. As a collective, they will now be referred to as the” independent theatre
community.” The artists that participated in this study were cordial, insightful, intelligent and helpful.

Nick Slie from Mondo Bizarro, Phil Cramer from New Noise, AJ Allegra from The NOLA Project, Joanna Russo from both Mondo and New Noise, Anna Henschel and Brian Fabry Dorsam from Skin Horse were interviewed for this study. The Shakespeare Festival at Tulane is not focused on in this research, but Claire Moncreif’s insight into New Orleans theatre and its history is invaluable. It would be imprudent to further discuss independent theatre in New Orleans without first recognizing its annual celebration of art.

**The Fringe Festival**

Next to Katrina, the Fringe Festival can be singled out as the most significant force in attracting not only artists, but audiences to New Orleans theatre. The Fringe is self-described as a “festival of the wild, weird, fresh and original.” The Fringe started in 2008 and grew drastically. In 2011, over 11,000 tickets were sold at the Fringe Festival up from 4400 attendees in 2008. Phil Cramer acts as the venue coordinator for The Fringe. “Every year at the Fringe Festival, you have four or five more [theatre companies] which pop up then are never seen again.” He added, “This year (2012) we had twenty-four Fringe managed shows and unlimited number of BYOVs (Bring Your Own Venue). “ The Fringe Festival’s influence permeates many aspects of the independent theatre community (N.O. Fringe Festival).

The festival draws artist into New Orleans from all over and inspires audiences to think differently. Kristen Evans, co-founder and executive director describe this:

The New Orleans Fringe has become a national presence. We have troupes traveling from Canada and Mexico. Every year, we have three or four performers who decide to relocate here. We also have been a catalyst for the creation of new,
non-traditional venues --- and we have encouraged a local audience that looks for experimental theater year-round.

As audiences grew so did the number of productions.

The 2012 Fringe Festival had seventy participating groups performing in more than thirty venues. One-third of the shows produced were by artists in Louisiana while the rest of them imports of out-of-state artists. The twenty-four Fringe managed shows are selected by using a peer-review panel. This panel turns over every two years. Some of the 2012’s Festival shows included Skin Horse’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde and *Instant Misunderstanding* from Goat-in-the Road. Both of these shows were held over for encore presentations due to word-of-mouth and the inability of “fringers” to catch every show they wanted to see. Seven of the venues are managed by the festival with the rest falling under the “bring your own venue” category. (N.O. Fringe Festival)

A Bring-Your-Own-Venue show need only register and pay the fifty dollar entry fee to get on the Fringe’s bill. This has allowed the Festival to spread from its headquarters in the Bywater/Marigny to all over the city. For the Fringe managed shows, they have a main tent in the Bywater, close to the Marigny, and all the shows are within walking distance from the tent.

The Fringe is managed well and as the audiences grow, there will be more challenges for its coordinators:

>[The Fringe Festival] reached some growing pains this year, in a good way. It really needs to decide what it wants to be. It needs some bold leadership or some vision in terms of how it moves in the next five years, because it could easily find itself as just the Fringe Festival. It’s done something really interesting for the city and now the city needs to respond with the festival to propel it to another place.
We need to figure out what we value in the work and ask ourselves ‘what is this gonna become?’ (Slie)

The Fringe Festival accelerated the migration of artists to New Orleans, but there are other reasons why these artists choose to make New Orleans their home.

**Why New Orleans?**

There is no other city in America like New Orleans. Its culture and way of life can be both enticing and irresistible. “We just thought New Orleans was a great city. I think a lot of the time people have the impression that we came down as a response to Katrina and that’s not true at all. We just came down because we thought it was a cool city,” explained Allegra about The NOLA Project’s decision to make New Orleans their home:

> The climate [in New Orleans] is gentle enough. You can live on almost nothing here. [In New Orleans] you are surrounded by true madness. New Orleans has authentic true madness which I think is the basis from which all art springs. People feel free to say what they want, do what they want, create what they want and that is an amazing thing…I’ve never seen that feeling anywhere else.

(Moncreif)

Some artists are attracted to the geographical risk of living in New Orleans, which gives them a sense of urgency because they may be living in a city with a finite lifespan. This is attributed to the possibility of another major hurricane or that the surrounding wetlands that are slipping into the ocean and literally disappearing. “Living in New Orleans, by definition, is a very unstable thing,” says Russo, and Moncreif adds that “there is that sense of doom” living here. The low cost of living in New Orleans is also attractive. The folks from Skin Horse said this played a major role in their decision to call the “Big Easy” home. “We can spend time
making art instead of making rent,” says Henschel. The sense of community Henschel found when she arrived in New Orleans was how she knew she was in the right place.

Everyone interviewed never expressed any doubt that New Orleans was where they were supposed to be and wanted to be. Each company, though, has their own story, mission and reasons for producing theatre in New Orleans.

**The Companies, Their Stories and Their Missions**

The independent theatre community multiplied in numbers since Hurricane Katrina. Only two of the companies researched called New Orleans their home prior to the storm. The addition of companies that have their own creative goals was welcomed. As they distinguish themselves they are finding their own voices and places in the community.

I do think we are seeing more definition and divergence among the companies which is a really good thing, divergence in the sense of having a unique individual identity. Not in terms of collaborating less. I think that’s where it’s headed.

(Cramer)

Collaboration, creativity, originality, education, social awareness, inspiration and experimentation are just a few of the words that illuminate the mission statements of these companies. By investigating the chronology of their stories and studying their mission statements one finds what characteristics make them unique but also distinctly a community.

**ArtSpot Productions**

*(Appendix A)*

Artspot Productions was founded in 1995 by Kathy Randels to produce her solo performance work. It is the oldest of the companies in this study. According to Phil Cramer of New Noise, “we are under the wing” of Artspot, meaning that Artspot carved the path for the
other theatre companies which were later formed. Kathy was the first to receive a Theatre Communication Grant (TCG) in New Orleans which opened up the door and put New Orleans on the radar for future grants. Not only did she receive that first grant, but she used the money well. Cramer adds, “In large and small ways every company benefits from [ArtSpot] whether they know it or not. ArtSpot really works hard to get money to produce their shows and I have been employed on most of their shows for the past three years.”

Artspot’s mission statement reveals a company that is socially-conscious, community-oriented and challenges itself with every production. They “practice social justice and shared power” in their processes and believe that “performance is an essential element of collective healing for all communities…and they foster this belief through an emphasis on the process of creation and through the celebration of the moment of performance when artists and audiences come together.” (About Artspot) Mondo Bizarro also officially formed prior to Katrina and shares the same sense of civic values.

**Mondo Bizarro**

(*Appendix B*)

Mondo Bizarro (translation: *Weird World*) was founded by Nick Slie, Bruce France and Bo Harris in 2002. They create original, multidisciplinary art and foster partnerships in local, national and international communities. Mondo works twelve to eighteen months on any one project. Slie said, “[Katrina] changed how we thought about what we are doing and how we are doing it. We grew up fast.” Reflected in their mission is an ability to meet long term goals and work in a multitude of disciplines. They truly possess a no-limits attitude on what their capabilities are. While Mondo creates all original work, The NOLA Project is the most prolific in producing scripted work, but does not limit itself to only that.
Andrew Larimer, a New Orleans native, was a student at NYU when he conceived the idea of bringing a show down to New Orleans to perform. Growing up in New Orleans he felt there was a niche for good dramatic theatre in New Orleans that needed to be filled. In May of 2005, he brought a group of fellow NYU theatre artists to produce *The Cripple of Innishman* by Martin McDonagh at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA) Black Box Theatre. The run of the production was well-received but ended on the Saturday night in August before Katrina hit and the mandatory evacuation was enacted. They left their set standing and when they finally returned in May of 2006 the set was left unscathed, except for small remnants left by The National Guard, who used the NOCCA theatre as its sleeping quarters. The NOLA Project decided to continue its work in New Orleans and has since established itself as one of the premier acting companies in New Orleans (Allegra).

The company enlisted the expertise of James Tripp, Head of Acting at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York, to advise and direct for the company. Additional actors from New York and New Orleans actors were brought in to create a versatile stable of talent to produce, with the highest standards, the great classical and contemporary plays. Their mission states that “through the creation of new works, high quality performances of relevant great works and by serving as a resource to are students and artists, The NOLA Project hopes to be one of the standard bearers of New Orleans’ artistic renaissance, sharing its work in the city and bringing word of the city’s revived arts scene to the rest of the country.” (Mission NOLA) The NOLA Project sets its sights high and Allegra stated that the NOLA Project came to New Orleans because it was a cool city and not as a response to Katrina. Other artists, though, began their time in New Orleans out of the desire to help.
Phil Cramer and Joanna Russo, both graduates of Vassar College, came to New Orleans in 2007 as a response to Hurricane Katrina. “I was looking for somewhere to go, so I thought I would go to this place that looks like it could use some energy. I had no clear intention of doing theatre,” explained Russo on her decision to come to New Orleans. Cramer worked for AmeriCorps for a year as a teacher before co-founding New Noise. (Cramer)

Their mission became one of advancement of the arts, education and collaboration. They create “visually-intense and physically demanding work,” which “works to advance ensemble practice through quarterly community workshops.” The next addition to the community came from a small college in ninety miles outside of New York. (Russo)

Five graduates of Bard College of Annandale-on-the-Hudson, New York, wanted a place to take their art. In 2007, for their senior project they joined together and formed Skin Horse to produce what would be their first original work, Curioser: An Historical Inaccuracy. Upon graduation, they wanted to take Skin Horse to another city that was not New York City and continue to make the theatre they loved. After careful studies of fifteen cities the members decided on New Orleans. They re-imagined Curioser and submitted it to the Fringe Festival in 2009. When they were selected, they made their move. Skin Horse’s mission shows a dedication to theatre as an art form where they view “theater as holistic endeavor, in which performer, space, design, text and sensory experience are all equal and in dialogue with one another.” They are “not bounded by genre or by any particular dogma or mode of performance and enjoy performing “in any space that inspires us” (About Skin Horse).
**Talent**

Allegra stated that there are three things which demand attention when the idea for a production is conceived. These include talent, space and money. Collaboration begins with these three elements. The beauty inherent in a community is that there are people to turn to when these challenges arise. One need not look any further than other artists in the community when collaboration is needed. This is especially true regarding talent (Allegra).

Talent in New Orleans is abundant and the theatre community takes every advantage. The word talent, in the interest of this study, refers to all those people who are involved in the producing of New Orleans theatre. One of the ways they do this is by sharing their actors. Some shows need large casts and it has become as easy as picking up a phone or sending an e-mail to entreat a slew of actors to a casting call. Many of these actors are from New York and there are as many as fifty theatre artists from Bard College, the alma mater of the Skin Horse crew.

For the most part, the actors are non-equity actors, though companies like The NOLA Project, try to pay equity actors when they can. One may think that the current artists might feel that the city is getting oversaturated with talent. This is not the case. “It’s great to draw people, but I want to see them act smart when they get here. The migration will only continue as long as New Orleans Art continues to hold the imagination captive and I don’t see that stopping.” (Allegra) Outside seasoned artists are taking notice of the growth and opportunities.

“What is interesting now is that we are getting more career matured artist moving here,” said Cramer. Moncreif added that “The main difference [for the theatre community] I would say is the new blood that’s arrived and that no matter how wonderful we might have been before, the new blood always makes a difference…you know it’s just chemistry and that, to me, is what’s
changed.” The increase in the number of theatre artists, or just artists for that matter, not only helps in the production process, but also builds a steady audience.

**Audiences**

As is the struggle for any theatre company, getting audiences in the seats in New Orleans is one of the most difficult challenges. In the age of film, television, internet and video games, getting people to come out to see live theatre is a challenge in itself. The New Orleans theatre community is faced with these same difficulties. Skin Horse, New Noise, Goat-in-the Road, and Cripple Creek formed an alliance in an effort to share information, learn from each other, and promote theatre in New Orleans. Though audience numbers are not the sole reason for the alliance, many of their discussions, according to Henschel, are based on asking each other “What are your audiences like and how do you market to them?” They have this information available because they see many of the same faces at a majority of their shows.

Audiences in New Orleans are loyal. If they like the work of a company, it is not abnormal for them to attend every show the company produces. “[The NOLA Project] developed a steady following of people that go to see all of our stuff. The audiences have grown more experimental. The stuff they were used to is gone like the musical theatre at Le Petit in the quarter which is now closed. It’s not just young people anymore.” (Allegra)

There is some discord on whether there is enough of a theatre audience to support the amount of theatre. Russo said that although there is a lot of work being performed, she likes to see it all and that is very “doable.” Cramer says that while the amount of theatre is “invigorating”, he gets invited to about fifteen shows per week. Overall, the increase in the amount of theatre in New Orleans is viewed as a good thing and the more that these companies bring in people to watch theatre, the better. Through their alliance, each theatre company
markets to each other’s audiences because everyone truly wants to see them grow. “There are still large groups of New Orleanians that don’t know that theatre is happening here.” (Russo)

Each of the theatre companies in this study attracts large enough audiences to fund their next shows. They do not pay themselves but they are able to employ some individuals to work on their productions, whether to work technically or to act. The goal is to build an audience base that would be big enough to put some money in the pockets of the company members, but there is a resounding agreement in this area that this is not why they are doing theatre. They are doing theatre because they love it. As audience attendance grows, so does the need for ample space to house sets and seats.

**Space**

One of the most interesting things that Katrina left in its wake was finding space to perform. Many of the theatres were damaged and immediately not usable. “When we decided to come back after our junior year at NYU it was a very different time because there were no theatres available. This taught us how to be creative with space.” Even as theatres have opened back up, this creativity has not been lost. Because of the many abandoned houses, warehouses, churches, and stores, very inexpensive possibilities became available as far as space. This was instrumental in the early days, and still is for the Fringe Festival. All the acting companies have learned how to perform in unique spaces.

The possibilities of space changed the way these artists thought about theatre and became on the distinct characteristics of the independent theatre community. The paradigm shift from relying on theatres to provide a location to perform to the ability and willingness to manipulate any space allows the imagination to run wild. They no longer feel restricted by space limitations.
They are willing to use small spaces and run their shows over several days or weeks. This allows them to take an idea then shape the space to suit their vision.

The NOLA Projects first show after Katrina, *Get This Lake of My House*, a comic adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* by Andrew Larimer, was staged on the beach at Lake Ponchartrain. Allegra directed a production of Connor McPherson’s *The Weir* in a bar. Skin Horse produced a horror piece, *Sarah*, in house and used the whole house as an interactive setting to scare the audience.

Skin Horse says that they don’t worry about the venue when they come up with an idea. They take an idea and then the venue becomes part of the process. Doing site-specific theatre has become their preferred way to do it. At the 2012 Fringe Festival they did *The Importance of Being Earnest*, at the Contemporary Arts Center, which is now housing the Southern Rep. It was nice, but they look forward to doing their next piece in a site-specific venue. Skin Horse also likes the fact that they get inaugurate new spaces when they premier shows. “That is the kind of thing that is happening in New Orleans that isn’t happening elsewhere,” said Henschel, “Finding a space is always a difficulty but would be impossible in New York, there’s a lot of empty space like abandoned warehouses and also a lot of cool people who are willing to provide these spaces to use.”

The NOLA Project has built relationships with The New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) which is located in City Park. They are currently using the outside steps and the great hall as the staging areas for *Romeo and Juliet*. This does not come without a cost, though. They must share in their ticket sales with the Museum. The NOLA project also uses the Black Box at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, which they rent.
All agree that it would be great to have at least one or more theatre that they could all use a community theatre space. “There is a real hunger for space,” said Cramer. Allegra explains that “The only way to establish ourselves as respectable is to have a quality space, it is the only way to attract more affluent artists and audiences, it is a necessity of the arts.” Cramer adds that not having a space is “another limitation. I think a lot of times we are butting up against a ceiling and this is one of those limitations that create a ceiling.” A space can only be built, though, if more funding can be found, either publicly or privately.

**Money, Resources and Structure**

There is a consensus in the theatre community that money and resources are needed for the theatre community to sustain itself and keep the same energy that it has now. As the spotlight that Katrina shone on New Orleans dims, the money is quickly drying up.

If I were to give you an exercise right now, in terms of infrastructure and resources, draw up what you think is the worst financial and resource plan that you could if you were a city for artists, I don’t think you draw up one worse. Considering the city we live in, cause you would go, holy shit, I mean it’s one of the most culturally vibrant places in the world right, so there must just be a shit ton of support here, but it couldn’t be more opposite. The example keeps getting worse. First of all there is no money here for the arts. [After Katrina] people received a little money that they normally wouldn’t. I think it blossomed a little for like three or four years and then I think all that kind of dried up. And then I think it was like Oh, it’s year seven, we’re here. The artistic output must of grown 1000% but the infrastructure stayed the same and then it started to drop off. So now you have powerful creative force of people coming to the city making
stuff. You can’t even keep up with it anymore. Now we are in this weird catch-

22. (Slie)

In New Orleans this year a meager “56,000 has been granted to all art forms, including
the opera,” explains Slie, “from NOMA down to Skin Horse in all disciplines. It’s so far past
nothing. The financial infrastructure is abysmal.”

There is very a little culture of philanthropy. It’s all about carnival. It forces
groups to mature on a national level before they mature on a local level because
those are the grants you have to apply for. $2000 is only gonna get you so far and
they give out fewer and fewer of them every year. And I don’t see that turning
around any time soon. (Cramer)

The money, because we don’t have money in New Orleans theatres, there’s no
money. The arts are feeling this all over the nation and we are feeling this as well.
We don’t have any major corporations in the city of New Orleans from whom you
might in past years have gotten funding. Even the public money, specifically
that’s funded through the state of Louisiana has gotten tighter and tighter.

(Moncreif)

Slie believes that much could be learned from an examination of how infrastructure
works in other cities that support their arts well.

In New Orleans, people are islandy here. You’re an artist, you’re in New Orleans,
you’re poor, you don’t get out of the city much so you’re not a part of other
dialogues that are going on, so you come to think that this is how things roll. And
if you’ve never spent time around other artists, other infrastructures, other cities,
other places you don’t get to realize that this not the way it goes, it’s not even close to way things goes. And you don’t get to realize that there are some really simple systems that people are using elsewhere that are very effective for them.

(Slie)

Cramer and Allegra both agree that an arts administrator would be very helpful to the city. Allegra said, “We need to start attracting arts administrators, people with business savvy and a love for the arts.” Cramer would like to move into this position but there are just no resources to cover it. Allegra summed up the need for money, “The money needs to grow. We need to start getting more non-profit development. We need to get foundational and personal donations. And that needs to supplement our earned income.” Moncreif hopes that lack of money hinders the future of theatre in New Orleans, “I hope that something happens financially so that this forward movement will continue. It’s possible that we could see a repeat of the wonderful stuff that was going on in the late seventies and early eighties that then began to diminish….I hope we don’t see that same pattern happen.”

Recent developments show theatre in New Orleans is making its voice known on the national landscape. Mondo Bizarro and The Fringe Festival were recently awarded money from The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation which chose five American cities to award money to. The lack of resources and funding is not stopping these companies from setting their sights high for the future of New Orleans theatre.

The Future

The goals of the theatre artist in New Orleans differ somewhat, but all lead to one main objective. They want to a part of the conversation. This can be looked at in different ways. First, theatre should be part of a couple’s discussion when trying to decide to do what to do on a night
out on the town. Second, New Orleans needs to establish itself as a destination city for theatre in America. Either way, there is the feeling that what is happening in local theatre is important enough that people should take notice. Henschel said “We would like to establish ourselves as a voice in American theatre, we would like theatre to be a part of New Orleans as a destination.” Cramer, on the other hand said “I’m not worried about people wanting to come to New Orleans to see a show. I would rather theatre companies want to present their shows here.” The future of New Orleans theatre is in their hands and they know it. They are not moving forward with the idea that everything will just work out in the end.

The need for a solid business plan and strong leadership are things they know they need to have. Without that, they know the financial and resource problems that hinder their progress cannot be remedied. The Fringe Festival has been essential to their growth and will continue to attract artists and audiences to New Orleans. Their creativity with space is source of inspiration. Their collaboration with talent and the resources defines what it is to be a community of theatre artists. There is energy, a creative spirit and originality in New Orleans theatre. Hopefully, people stand and take notice.
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Appendices of Mission Statements and Productions

Appendix A

ArtSpot Productions

Mission Statement: ArtSpot Productions is an ensemble of artists dedicated to creating meticulously LIVE theatre in New Orleans. Our productions are a sincere blend of disciplines developed through ensemble authorship, physically rigorous training, original music, interactive sculptural environments, and extended research and rehearsal. We practice social justice and shared power in our creative and organizational processes, and we strive to incite positive change in our community with visually stunning performances and empowering educational programs. We believe that all stories and voices within a community need to be expressed, and that performance is an essential element of collective healing for all communities, especially those whose voices are not often heard. ArtSpot is trying to revive and foster this belief through an emphasis on the process of creation and through the celebration of the moment of performance when artists and audience come together to witness and share their collective dreams, sorrows, joys and lives. (About ArtSpot)

Current productions:
- 2012 Kiss Kiss Julie

Past Productions:
- 2011 Rumours of War
- 2010 Go Ye Therefore
- 2009 Loup Garou
- 2009 State of the Nation: Tipping Point
- 2008 Flight
- 2006 Artistic Ancestry
- 2006 Beneath the Strata Disappearing
- 2006 State of the Nation: Restoration
- 2005 New Orleans Suite
- 2004 Chekov’s Wild Ride
- 2004 To Flee, Flee This Sad Hotel
- 2004 The Maid of Orleans
- 2002-2003 Venus, Vulcan, Mars, and the Dancing Dwarf
- 2001-2003 Nita & Zita
- 2001-2002 Maps of Forbidden Remembrance
- 2001 Rumours of War
- 1998-1999 The End and Back Again, My Friend
- 1998 Lower 9 Stories
- 1995-1997 Rage Within/Without
Appendix B

Mondo Bizarro

Mission: Mondo Bizarro have committed to labor as an ensemble over several years with a goal of establishing a body of work inspired by a particular set of commonly shared aesthetic and civic values. They are a collective of individuals that create, present and produce a wide array of imaginative projects aimed at utilizing art as a tool for understanding what makes us commonly human and individually unique. Our work is intentionally multidisciplinary, ranging from physical theater to large-scale community festivals; from social media to site-specific productions. Everything we do is fueled by the desire to develop brave new works of art that illuminate the beauty and travails of the human condition. (About Mondo)

Current productions:
- Race Peace
- Pchile Goyin
- I Witness Central City
- Loup Garou

Past productions:
- The Little Prince (2003)
- Catching Him in Pieces (2006-2007)
- Flight (2008-2010)
- Loup Garou (2009)
- Race Pace 2009-2010

Appendix C

The NOLA Project

Mission statement: Through the creation of new works, high quality performances of relevant great works, and by serving as a resource to area students and artists, The NOLA Project hopes to be one of the standard bearers of New Orleans’ artistic renaissance, sharing its work in the city and bringing word of the city's revived arts scene to the rest of the country. The company's goal is to create a repertory theatre in New Orleans while developing ongoing theatrical relationships between New Orleans and the rest of the country and world. We also plan to create original works in New Orleans and tour them, bringing the New Orleans experience to the world. (The Company)
• Current 2012-2013 Season:
  • Balm in Gilead (September 2012)
  • She Remembers (Nov 2012)
  • Romeo & Juliet (Nov-Dec 2012)
  • Catch the Wall (March 2013)
  • Much Ado About Nothing (May 2013)

• Past Productions:
  • The Cripple of Inishmann
  • Get This Lake Off My House
  • The Misanthrope
  • Cloud Nine
  • The Lieutenant of Inishmore
  • The Wind in the Willows
  • The Kingdom of Statues
  • What Has This Thing Appeared Again Tonight
  • Assassins
  • Side Man
  • Poona The Fuckdog
  • Taste
  • JB
  • How to Draw the Sun
  • Mr. Marmalade
  • Finer Noble Gasses
  • Love Labor’s Lost
  • Almost an Evening
  • A Midsummer Night’s Dream
  • Art
  • Is He Dead?
  • Romeo & Juliet
  • A Behanding in Spokane
  • As You Like It
  • Balm in Gilead

**Appendix D**

**New Noise**

Mission Statement: New Noise creates visually-intense, physically-demanding original work through collaborative processes and long-term partnerships with writers, designers and performers. New Noise works to advance ensemble practice through quarterly community workshops with master artists and through the presentation and development of works-in-progress by local ensembles.

(About New Noise)
Current productions:
  - Runnin’ Down the Mountain

Past productions:
  - Pchille Goyin (2011)
  - After the War (2009)
  - Maybe You Can’t Tell (2009)

Appendix E

Skin Horse

Skin Horse Theater is a performance collective dedicated to experimentation. Our work is not bound by genre, or by any particular dogma or mode of performance. Our purpose is simply to do what we have not done before, to try something new and vastly different with each project. We are invested in theater as a holistic endeavor, in which performer, space, design, text and sensory experience are all equal to and in dialogue with one another. We believe in stealing inspiration from anywhere and performing in any space that inspires us. We believe that challenging ourselves through inquiry and experimentation is the best way to create compelling work that will keep hold of you long after you have left the theater, garage or air duct where we happen to be performing. (About Skin Horse)

Current Productions:
  - The Importance of Being Earnest

Past Productions:
  - 24 ‘Fanciful Vengeance’ (June 2012)
  - The Hunting of the Snark (March 2012)
  - Sarah (2011)
  - Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2011)
  - Romeo & Juliet (Eating Contest) (2011)
  - Port/Architect (2010)
  - Psychopathia Sexualis (2010)
  - A List of Argentine Films of 1941 (Discontinuous) (2010)